



There is an old Victorian house posing as an office in “The Burned-Over District.” In that office, a giant, a waif, and a child wait for someone who can be shown the true nature of the world.

John is a man with a talent to see what is not there, or, at least, what was not there until that fateful day when a want-ad caught his eye and sent him into the depths of the woods... into the periphery.

In a break in the trees above the street, a start to the sky, there is glowing in the aether. The sky is now a fading yellow as he watches the winged shapes perform delicate motions upon the horizon. He sees a singular bird amongst the flock, appearing more mammalian than avian.

A bird falls to his right, bouncing slightly upon impact with the street.

He looks disturbed as a black shape bounces stiffly on the sidewalk.

Startled, he watches as another falls.

His nerves run electric as yet another bird drops from the sky, and another, and another.

It rains birds...

Periphery
Alexx Bollen

Periphery

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PERIPHERY

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DEDICATION

For the girl in the black dress.

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1. Tangents in the multiverse.

It exists as we exist:

a sidelong glance;
a subtle movement;
a suspicion of being watched;
the periphery.

It sits, silent, as the motions of the collective us move from frenetic to calm, and back again. It is perception, in the rawest form, made tangible by the characters playing roles invented for just that moment, only to be burned upon completion.

We see this through the useless eyes of the universe, forever in fear of observing itself.

The eyes of the universe allow for a story to unfold.

The eyes of the universe grant access to the periphery through their closing.

The eyes of the universe, glazed and unfocused, are looking away in wanton disregard for what will happen, for what is about happen again, staring without thought into the void, influencing only what no longer exists.

What is about to happen will unfold as it has previously:

A story will be told.

Characters will be written onto the universe.

A sequence of actions will be determined by chance, will, or fate.

We will watch them as they create a reality.

We will watch them as they destroy a reality.

We will watch them as they practice a sequence, simultaneously unknown and previously perfected.

2. Portents on squares of paper.

So he is called, by the forces of this unreliable universe, like the others who were called before him. His movements, scripted by that self-same force, to have him arrive at this point. This point, among an infinity of others, holds the proper arrangement of players and pieces to allow for a game, a story, to be played until completion.

They exist in a universe of perceptions over substance; in a universe of Quantum over Newtonian; in a universe where action causes effect without thoughts of distance or method.

They exist in a world where words can be made manifest, and the smallest movements in their periphery can hold the same weight as the obvious motions of life as perceived.

They exist, unbeknownst to them, in a world where thought and vision can be made manifest. They exist in a world of government checks and unskilled labor. They exist upon a tabletop newspaper, its white spaces slowly filling with pencil.

A man, John, and woman, Maggie, sit with newspapers splayed around them like decorations.

They, John and Maggie, abide in an apartment made from yellowing walls, chipped corners, and hope for better things to come. They chatter in hushed words and subtle jokes, reading, searching the want-ads with the patience of rent. They look on in silence as pencil-marks slowly fill the ink-empty spaces.

His search is dying, fruitless since the well of menial jobs had dried. His stacks have dwindled, his energy surcease. The sounds of a paused Nintendo game paint audio upon the scene.

She has been a help to him since the days of collegiate nightmares and drunken movie nights. In those days, before the joblessness, before the sweeping romance, before the calling which will soon occur, they spent hours chatting trivially about the events of film, the happenstances of art.

He is, and was, a proponent of the middle path. He sees, and saw, the world as the expression of something else, not the thing itself. In that expression of the world he finds that he cannot make decisions well, both sides often appearing as equal. Maggie, as the voice of reason, has the innate ability to press him towards those

coin-flip decisions.

This is the world as it has been perceived; until today when an innocuous want-ad begins a set of changes, which will alter the face of reality, as ascertained.

They are currently browsing in a newspaper, the last place to look in a world of electric job finders and e-mail notifications. So it is that the page turns, and so it is that he begins to unravel what came before.

The ad is small, nondescript. The ad finds the man's eye quickly. The woman follows his finger as he reads aloud over the faint hints of the 8-bit orchestration from "The Legend of Zelda."

He reads:

Wanted: Someone in 20's. Artistic disposition. Poor work history a plus. Competitive pay, benefits after successful training period. Bring paper bag. No need to knock. - HJ Bonobus Corp.

John's work history is not the most sterling thing; the last job he held for more than a month was stripping the paint from walls, followed by the adding of new. He is reticent to return to that repetitive life. With a head full of memories of chalky air and the smell of varnish, he finds the ad impossible to ignore. He finds the ad perfect. What he cannot find, however, is the company listed. The Internet provides only vague references and dead ends. He is desperate for a lead out of his current predicament. They both dream of something better. They both hope that the path contains something aside from aging into a desk while wondering what could have been.

He once studied words and music at the local university. His creative push crumbling more and more as the months and years pass. The long days of fruitless jobs have stolen from him his lust for the creative, his longing for impact.

She, before arriving to this place, painted on the walls of her childhood and acted for no money in the hypothetical spaces between diners, bars, and other easy paychecks. They sat, studios

and hopeful at the plain lettering and nondescript locality. They are intrigued.

“I don't get it. How can there be no reference to this place anywhere? How are we supposed to apply?”

“Maybe it's a joke, like one of those groups that all dress the same and run into malls.” Maggie is smiling, leading him towards speaking in his professor voice.

“Those are called flash mobs. But this doesn't seem to fit. Those are all social media driven. I think this place is just old fashioned.”

“Yes,” she placates his answer, “that makes sense. It's been a long time since I knew about a company that can exist off the grid.”

“It has been a few years. How did people find companies before the Internet?”

“Phone book?”

“Great idea! Where can I find a phone book? I ruined ours in an attempt to tear it in half.”

“Wait, what? Why would you even consider trying that?”

“I saw a thing on TV. It's just a trick. No strength involved, supposedly. So, how, other than waiting for its arrival, does one find a phone book?”

“The library?”

“Sunday, closed after Three.”

“Cassiel probably has one. Or at the very least he will have an hour long explanation of how phone books are a government plot to spy on the elderly, and then go into his elaborate plans to expatriate.”

“Well done Mrs. Maggie, he does strike me as the phone book ownership type. Hopefully I won't get trapped into another speech about the secret societies living on the fringe of town which intend on brainwashing us with secret government techniques.”

“Oh god, the dinner party at Eric's! I thought he was going to kick us out when Cass went into the thing about reptiles from another dimension being the royal family.”

She, and this is unknown yet, is having a minuscule flash of memory or cognition at that moment, a yellow thing dusted on a shelf. She looks at John as he struggles into his shoes.

“Why don't you just untie them?”

“It's easier this way.” his face red with effort as the shoe finally slips on. “See, simpler than all that knot business. Care to join me?”

“I have things to get done, have fun. Good luck.”

“Thanks. I can't believe I have to walk to a sundries store to find a book just to find a business. It's so archaic.”

They embrace and lightly kiss. As he leaves, the apartment turns from blue to white, a shade for waiting and the doing of unimportant chores.

He walks, his red sneakers blurring in a half-skip-up-the-curb-as-a-car-brushes-your-heel pace. John nods at the honking annoyance and continues his path towards the block of stores, which demarcate the beginning of the town center.

He has lived in this place's orbit for almost the entirety of the seven years since first arriving at college. His postgraduate work of playing video games and producing no great works has dominated his life since those auspicious days of three years previous. To the fanfare and glowing happiness of no one save for the disintegrating rags of his shrinking social circle, he spins his wheels across years.

And so he walks through familiar streets in the afternoon light, remembering and dreaming of the places he could be if only the impetus and the means strike him.

He sees a toy laying in the gutter, a tiny orange dinosaur next to a wet leaf. Smiling as he walks past, hoping to give that sight to someone else before it is swept away to the place where insignificant things like that are left to be forgotten.

The store at which he arrives is a place of ancient periodicals, sundries, candies, and dusty shelves full of bad records and cracked cassettes. Cassiel, a tall and lanky man with poorly sized glasses, greets John as the bell chimes his arrival.

“Mr. John! How goes it?”

“Not bad. How are things at the ol' five and dime?”

“Slow, as per usual. People don't care about useless objects nowadays. Thank god for your kind with the perception enough to see these objects' intrinsic value. Sad really.”

Cassiel is an old acquaintance of John's, a friendship formed over novel drinks and obscure records. Two years previous, Cassiel

had found himself in ownership of a small curio shop half a block off the main drag. He has slowly turned that shop into an enclave of dusty ephemera suited to artists and hipsters. He makes his meager living off of John and the few other liked minded sort that linger on after College-Up-The-Road's season comes to a close.

“Yeah, well next I get a few dollars to spare I'll take those old educational 45s off your hands. Anyway, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Yeah, ask away.”

“Do you have a phone book lying around anywhere? I need some info on this ad I found in the paper.”

The man behind the counter's eyebrow rises quizzically. The man behind the counter has an inkling to John's inquiries.

“Why not just look it up on the computer?”

“Well, that's the thing. I can't find any reference to it. The company has literally zero Internet presence so, naturally, I am curious. Seems like an interesting place to work... I think.”

“I'll give a look. I believe there is one around here anyway. So, you don't like the Internet?”

“No, the Internet is fine. However, in this day and age, to find out that a company can exist without reference to its existence anywhere on-line is intriguing to me.”

“Ah! So happens you are in luck! I happen to have a phone book from about four years ago. It should be pretty up to date concerning a business unavailable to the Internet.”

John thanks the bespectacled man and takes the large yellow book. Opening it to find an index, or a form of primal glossary, he sees in the opening pages a tiny, altered, advertisement.

Unreadable through marker scribbles, the square, once an ad for another company, has scrawling handwriting across its face:

*HJ Bonobus Corp. We bring ourselves and expect the same.
Follow the dirt road until we appear. 23 Mill Way*

“No phone number... of course. Thanks Cass, much appreciated.”

“No problem... if he's still there, tell the fat man I said hello.”

John looks at him puzzled.

“There aren't many companies that place phone book clues in advance of needing new employees. Good luck, check back in if

you can.”

“I will. You know the place? What kind of job is it?”

“It's not for me to say. Keep your eyes open and be honest. You will do fine in the interview.” he says, walking towards a back room, waving over his shoulder.

“Thanks.”

As John opens the door to leave, the bell chimes and he faintly hears a giggle from the shelves.

'Onward and upward,' he thinks, 'at least this place should prove interesting.'

On the walk back to Maggie he muses on the possibilities this place could offer. Would he be an administrator, an office drone, a secretary? His footsteps fall faster as he approaches closer to the vortex of home. Would he even get an interview? He nods to his extinct plastic friend as he walks past. No time for reunions, there is news to report.

3. Insect Life.

There are no pronouns, as of yet, but he is waiting, bristling in an as yet unknown corner.

If the universe could perceive without influence, it would watch him crawl and scratch in a dark and lonely place.

A time of changes is, yet again, set upon the town and the players held therein.

The pieces move in clockwork madness, inscribed in years gone by, and recited, by rote, as the night swallows the day.

There are no pronouns as of yet, and the camera of the universe needs servicing.

John walks from a small shop, half a block off the street, wiping his hands on his pants as he jogs the sagging steps leading up the side of a featureless two-story building.

4. Returns

“So, I just show up? I mean, I don't even know if this is a real business, or if I'm even qualified for the job.”

“Well, what's there to lose? Worst case scenario you don't get the job and you waste a few hours, which you have more than enough to spare.”

In an apartment above a long defunct Laundromat, John and Maggie discuss the events of the day. They sit on a disintegrating couch, held together by hope, and a patchwork of cloth remnants. John fidgets for a comfortable place as she sits stoic, waiting for elaboration.

“Yeah, I mean, it could be fun to get a job which I don't have any preparation for and run with it. What if it's some kind of serial killer's trap? The address puts it deep in the outskirts, those old logging-roads in the woods where the cults used to form.”

The ideas of dead ends, horror films, and a maniacal plan to enslave him in a basement flash through his imagination.

Maggie, on the other hand, is founded in a more rational world. However, she is also fond of John, and lets him go off on his whims and flights of fancy.

“John... listen to yourself. Do you honestly believe that an organization would go through all that trouble just to kill a random job seeker?”

“Fair point, but stranger things have happened before. Remember Waco?”

“You've been spending too much time around that sundries shop. And, to further the point, if you went missing there would be a trail a mile long pointing at that place.”

“So, you think I should go?”

“Do as thou wilt. That's all me and Aleister Crowley ever wanted of you.”

Her arcane humor lifts his head from the conspiracy of maniacs in the woods.

“Thanks for the Thelemic blessings, but, I don't know. It can't

be legal can it? It's too hush-hush to possibly be legit.”

“If that's the case, don't take the job. No one is going to kill you for answering a want ad. If they wanted you dead, there are simpler ways. Christ, give me a few grand and you're dead, kid,” smiling, she mimes slitting his throat with her thumb.

“Wow, that's nice of you. I'll go... I'll go. It can't be any more dangerous than here.”

The next day John will prepare for the walk to the newly found HJ Bonobus Corporation. It exists two wooded miles from his apartment. He will wake, and walk. So John prepares for the interview, for the fat man, for the slowly growing feeling that the coming days will bring something unexpected.

5. An office in the woods.

John, walking down a desolate road in his poorly fitted gray suit, hat held next to the handle of an aged suitcase, looks like an antediluvian salesman. He leans slightly back as he walks to stare into the boughs of the overhanging trees.

John walks and sings wordless songs. He mutters simple nothings to himself and tries to remember the name of a certain philosopher from a certain class, taught by a long forgotten professor.

The office is centrally located in the middle of a wild forest three streets from pavement. Through the desolation of the walk, he ponders the approaching scene. Would he try to impress, or act humble? Would he be better suited as casual, pretending to know the work to be done, pretending to be the only man fit enough to do it? Alternatively, he thinks, as he approaches the address, would he be the only one with the temerity to apply?

He spots a mailbox. Its latch rusted open, flag melted into the dirt years before his arrival. Through the grime and rust John can make out the initials HJB, Co.

He has found it.

The grounds of the HJ Bonobus Corporation are a grassy field encircled by forest, a path of tan, arid soil bisecting. The house is of an older Victorian, purple, black, with random white trim, and bare wood banisters thrown throughout with little intent to satisfy architecture or physics. The house sits out of place, nearly incorporeal. It is as if a painting were hung from the aether, having gone unnoticed for long enough that it came to pass as reality.

There is no sign, or sign of entrance. There is no signal that business, of any kind, is done here. The dirt path splits, one side fading to grass, the other moving around the house. He is lead to the back of the dilapidated two-story Victorian on a dusty patch of earth, dead from infinite footfalls.

Sitting on the side of the path is the shell of a shapeless old thing. The thing, without definition, may have once been machine,

may have once been plant. The viral grass springing from the earth is slowly swallowing its rusted/rooted visage. John's walk veers wide and right, crossing the visual boundary established by his frontal assault.

Beyond the corner, he sees a small child, no more than eleven. The child holds a clutch of balloons, letting go of one at a time; letting one at a time get caught in a large tree standing solitary, away from the mass of entangled others.

The boy looks to him with eyes half focused on something internal.

“Hello, I'm John. Is this the HJ Bonobus Corporation?”

The boy smirks and speaks in gravel, “This is in fact the property currently referred to by that name. Hephaestus will not be here for another few hours.”

“Oh, well, may I wait with you while we wait?” John is fond of children and likes to talk to them in such ways.

“Would you like to feed our friend?” The Child with a man's voice asks as he hands over a balloon and head-gestures to The Tree.

John looks confusedly at The Tree. From somewhere within him, a forgotten room of memory, he recalls the games he played as a child. He recalls a game: of jumping fences; of scaling trees; of avoiding parents. John knows this game, this ritual.

He walks to the base of The Tree. Its bark reminds him of scabs, the leaves of a black hole.

“Let it go?”

“Indeed. The wind and The Tree will decide its fate. Now let go.”

He releases the balloon. Watching it float and seemingly disappear into the branches, he looks imploringly to The Child for explanation.

“Where did it go?”

“It goes as all things go, towards entropy. It is ingested and forgotten. You may know this over time; or not, so it will be.”

He thinks this strange child must be older than he appears. John think that he did not know anything of entropy at that age, as perceived.

“Sounds reasonable, may I sit?”

“Indeed.”

They both sit on the grass, in lotus position, and pick at random grass. The wait will be pleasant.

6. The Tour.

From the road the sound of a dying machine approaches, with coughing exhaust and random explosive blasts.

The child sits unaffected; the man turns to the demon growl.

The car exists more as chrome and rust, as smoke and noise, than something intended for movement or for use.

The car exists as statuary, honoring the days of the internal combustion engine.

The machine turns from the arid ruts and stalls to a stop upon the faint stirrings of grass.

From this statue a figure emerges, Hephaestus James Bonobus, a profoundly fat man dressed in anachronistic English professional attire. The obese Sherlock Holmes rises to his full height, looking just shy of seven feet. He speaks with a voice as booming and large as his carriage.

"Hello Child of the yard! Hello man sitting idly. I am Hephaestus James Bonobus. And I suppose you are the one who has been lately searching for my company. The Internet has been a-babble over this grand quest."

He wonders how this exaggeration of a man could have known that he was coming. "Yes, I saw your ad and wanted to find out what kind of work there was to be done."

"You see, young master, the computers of the world are the ears of the new society, like the Brahman, the telephone, and the mushroom before that. We use computers so they will notice us, like that pretty girl across the bar, or the loving arms of your mother.... I know...oh, here is the thing! And please, call me Hephaestus. Now, come along, we have much to do now that we know the way in. Child, I assume you will remain here, though the invitation is still open?"

"Yes. I will remain. It has been good to sit with you John. Until the next."

John waves over his shoulder as Hephaestus leads him by the arm. They approach a small cellar door, of the style used as a slide when you were yet innocent enough to forgo shame. The larger man and the smaller enter the slide. The stairway is dark. The

smaller man follows the giant with a measure of trepidation. He has the sense that he faces no harm, but, for the life of him, cannot place from where this faith could possibly spring.

They walk through a square of light and into what can only be described as a reception area. It is larger than the furniture should dictate, gaps of hardwood marking distance between carpets and mismatched chairs.

Hephaestus waves his hand in a meaningless gesture, "John, let me show you the reception room."

A waifish young woman sitting at an absurdly large desk staffs the reception room. She, appearing no more than 25, is thin and attractive, with a pale face framing large, innocent, blue eyes. On her desk sits a brass lined computer monitor connected by random cabling to a typewriter with pink paper sticking up, half covered in text.

John thinks this looks more like a film than real life.

The woman squeals and hugs herself when they enter.

"Oh my friends! I am so glad and happy to see you again. The loneliness has had me staring sadly at this screen all day."

Waving her hand to the window behind her she says, "the things that shouldn't be there, but are, have been maddening as of late, all screaming and making a din."

With a slumping motion, she crosses her arms about herself and petulantly stares at Bonobus. In turn, he bounds faster than seems possible and grabs her face, looking into her eyes with a mix of whimsy and fury. She seems hypnotized, and then, like a mechanical doll fresh out of turns of the key, slumps down upon her absurdly large chair, behind her absurdly large desk.

"Oh, thank you! I needed that more than you could ever imagine...well, maybe not you, but someone else...who..." she trails off and looks at John. "Who is this handsome young thing?"

"Why Kali of the desk, this is John, a man of less than 30 years, with obligations to no party, save for his own self and lovely group of compatriots. We shall be showing him the compound this day...and, if all goes well, getting him a badge."

John tries to speak and is interrupted by a squeal of delight.

"Oh grandness! John we are so glad to have you! I'm Kali!"

"Hello," John pauses, overwhelmed by this onslaught of

energy, "nice to meet you, Kali."

They stand quietly for a moment as if to settle into a new reality, a new set of principles. Hephaestus leads John by the shoulder with his hand.

"Come, I will show you around the campus of this, the HJ Bonobus Corporation."

The first stop on the tour, inexplicably to him, is the bathroom. In calligraphy, 'W.C' is written across a yellowing index card tacked to the top of the doorframe. The bathroom is a sprawling affair, covered floor to ceiling in once white tile. It is humid, greenhouse like in atmosphere. The tiles of the walls are creeping with vegetation, subtly pulsing in unnoticed breeze.

On the ground of this greenhouse is a half-inch of 'water', brown, thick with algae and shapeless plant life. John looks hesitantly at the great creature he follows, questioning what he is entering into.

"Shoes must be removed before entering this sacred spot. Please, no argument from the visitors... rules are made so they may fit the name."

John finds his throat filled with the lamentations and arguments of wet socks. However, seeing the massive man holding up one leg, without wobble, and removing, without effort, a shoe and sock, gives him the impression that this is a normal activity. It shows that the removal of shoes before the entrance to a bathroom will repeat a multitude of times, as repeated before. John leans heavily upon the empty doorframe removing his Converse and black socks.

He enters behind Hephaestus. The liquid floor appears viscous, gelatinous. He shakes his head at a vision of a fish in the water at his feet. He hopes, for the sake of the tiny fish, that it is a trick of light and not, in fact, an aquarium of the lowest and most disgusting variety.

Hephaestus notices John's look, nodding smugly. Finally, escaping his shoes, the water greets him warmly with the comforting memories of summer.

"Be wary. Be calm my boy. The world I describe can startle easily."

Bonobus walks to a sequence of urinals, stopping before the

middle. He motions with his hand to have John join him. John, despite himself, does this and notices the bottom of the urinals have a kind of long grass growing in them. If he were more aware of botany, John would have seen Japanese reeds.

Hephaestus, noticing John's awareness, explains that this is a terrarium for grass and things to be explained later.

The smaller man begins to question the larger.

The smaller man is silenced by the larger man.

The smaller man's statement shrivels in the moisture-weighted air.

The larger man explains:

“Questions are for later. These are the rules. Let us show you the records room and get you an ID. You have the trial if you want it son.”

“What exactly...?”

A fat hand rises to the thin mouth.

“Later...your words will create greater realities towards the evening.”

7. The Hermitess.

The records room, as seen by John and Hephaestus through the textured glass window, looks like the nurse's office from any given elementary school, complete with the standard dull green canvas screens and matching gurney.

It is staffed by Dura, now sitting patiently at a square, metal desk designed with no thought of appearance. Dura, an elderly woman, slight in frame, with a ponytail of stark white hair looks up to the glass window in the door upon their arrival. She looks burdened by excess age, yet her movement from chair to door is fluid and effortless, the motions a woman more than half her perceived age. Her trembling, nearly transparent hand steadies to stone as she opens the door to Hephaestus and John, a subtle bow as flourish.

"Hello, John, my newest friend!" moving with alarming speed, she pulls on his arm, taking him bodily from the doorway. "We must get your picture on a card, in order for you to see the rest of the campus. Hephaestus, please leave us to our affairs. I will return him, in full or better, within the span of 45 minutes. Beyond that, we shall worry, will we?"

Hephaestus leaves the room, and with him leaves sound. The elderly woman and the young man stand, for half a beat too long, in complete silence. John shifts his weight from one foot to the other. She looks at him with cloudy, yet aware, eyes.

"Now, Mr. John, we shall introduce you to the kaleidoscopic eye in the brass machine. Be not afraid of the wonders held therein. You will come to no harm, as I am sure you heard me promise my lord and manager."

The examination of the kaleidoscopic eye in the brass machine consists of sitting in a leather-bound chair and facing the machine. The kaleidoscopic eye in the brass machine, as it is called, is in a variant form of reality an old accordion camera, gutted, and rebuilt for a modern purpose (if words like modern and purpose can be used here). It sits lined with purple velvet to be pulled over the head of the photographed, opposite of rational (if a word like

rational can be used here).

John is slowly starting to get the gist of this place, taking it in stride that they would have an old style camera called 'the kaleidoscopic eye in the brass machine'.

“You must remain still for 20 seconds or face the consequences.”

Her aged face like a rock standing vigil to a statement made, and made again long before his arrival. Her stance, motionless, reveals nothing of the ages which have passed before her once crystal blue eyes.

John nearly asks what those consequences would be, but thinks better of it, knowing the answer would be something incomprehensible. Questions, after all, come after the tour. He sees his face in the lens reflection, younger and much less glassed. He holds his expression as best he can, as the velvet hood begins to heat up. His look of approbation is held for 20 seconds, no more, no less.

She grabs his arm, and squeezes with preternatural strength.

“Here it is, your passport to the wonders of this horrible place. Walk carefully John the Younger. I have seen better men than yourself fall to the novelties held here. I have seen greater men than you invent more inventive worlds, more secretive doors to hide within, long before you came to bring life to this place.”

Dura releases him with a sepia card saying, in an antiquated script: 'John the Younger.'

Upon the card, his hair and eye color are both listed incorrectly.

His picture, though flattering, lacks glasses.

He is, and always was, a wearer of glasses. This fact concerns him greatly, as does the dire ramblings of this ancient attic woman.

“Why am I...?”

A massive man bounds into the room, interrupting John, bellowing, “John the Younger will be released immediately! You shall poison his already fractured mind with your tales of worlds and doors yet to be known!”

Dura smiles knowingly at Hephaestus, “I have honored my agreement, he is yours, unharmed and unaware. Please leave me be until I am needed again. I shall sit and die slowly until then.”

Hephaestus leads John out, whispering, "That was closer than I intended. I am sorry for any discomfort you felt."

John tries to respond but is shushed by the waving paw of the beast. He is lead through a side door, almost indistinguishable from the hall.

Inside, a foggy greenhouse, the mist forming vague shapes, Hephaestus holds John's hand. In a stage whisper he speaks.

"We must be quiet in here, for the residents are usually asleep and always hateful."

They approach cautiously, two doors, side by side, one belonging to the style of the house, the other of rusting metal.

"I insist, Mr. Younger, that you use the right, and I left, for fear we won't meet outside."

So it is that their destinations are weaved. Then, the yard becomes apparent.

"John, please let me introduce you to The Child in the yard. Boy in the yard, this is John, John, boy in the yard."

"I've already had the pleasure of his esteemed acquaintance. It is good to see you again, young Master."

Hephaestus plucks a balloon from the bunch nearest him and offers it with a gesture to John.

"Oh, I'm old hat at this. I enjoyed this game earlier."

Hephaestus looks surprised.

"He let you free a balloon?"

"Well, yes and no. He let me give a balloon to The Tree over there."

John starts to point towards the large elm, destroyer of balloons. Hephaestus lightly smacks away John's hand.

"Please do not point at The Tree. I'm sorry, office policy."

The child nods back and looks up to the small man.

"Please show up tomorrow at 10 am sharp to start this new, and I'm sure fulfilling, vocation."

"May I ask questions now?"

"Yes, you could always ask questions. But I wouldn't, and will not, answer them until tomorrow."

"Fair enough, I'll see you tomorrow at 10 am sharp."

"No. I will not be here for three days. Nevertheless, my faithful staff will accommodate you until the time of my return."

Thank you, John the Younger. Thank you for the hope of continuing my important endeavor. And please refrain from giving away the intimate details you shall encounter to your lovely Maggie.”

“How did you....?”

“Not until tomorrow, three days hence. Goodbye John the Younger, please do well. We have faith in you.”

8. A brief interlude for dinner.

In the evening, John returns home.

In the evening, he tries to explain the nature of his new work.

In the evening, Maggie says things such as:

“You didn't ask...?” and “Who is he?”

John is patient in his answers, in explanation, saying things much to the effect of:

“I tried to, but he wouldn't let me”; “Hephaestus”; “Yes, I agree it's strange”; and finally “It's a long story. I could really use a beer.”

Over dinner, in the evening, they talk.

Over dinner, John comments that his beer is stale.

After dinner by the TV, John shows his ID and explains his confusing glasses-less state. On the couch, by the TV, she asks why he took off his glasses. He comments that the TV is terrible tonight.

He repeats things. He again states that he did not remove his glasses, that there was an anomaly.

They quibble. They almost fight.

They nearly let the indiscreet moments of storytelling cause turmoil. Eventually, as their voices quiet, they let themselves metamorphose back into the jesting, joking pair of times previous.

In the evening, John pantomimes letting a balloon go into a tree.

Into the night, he pretends to be both a little boy at play and a large man grinning. In the dark, they are forgiven of the day.

9. Surprising doors.

It is now evident that the night has ended and it is again day, as the believers in predictive cycles foresaw. John is following a gravel path to an unknowable future. Unless, of course, predictions can be more believable, and less apt to fall to the whims of entropy and the eternal sense of wrong so pervasive these long years since the fall.

Walking down an old logging road to the office, the sun providing light company, he whistles on a dusty path. Maggie rolls languidly through his head as he paces an odd rhythm on the yellowing road, reflecting on his good fortune to find such odd people to call his coworkers. John, upon aforementioned reflection, is mystified by the speed at which his life can sometimes move. Years were spent in editing, waiting, every day the same routine. Then months of video games and want ads, the slowness of hours sacrificed in the pursuit of being idle. Now, walking to a job, one for which he has no training, no skill set for, he thinks, slightly whispering to himself, that this walk would be made better by purchasing some form of portable music when the paycheck arrives. John remembers from school that this area was called “The Burned-Over District.” It was known, years before, as a place where cults formed. He cannot recall their nature, only that it had something to do with Pagan rites or the foundation of a new Christian sect.

Upon his arrival on the familiar dirt path leading around the familiar Victorian office, he notices the front door. He feels a familiar and growing disbelief that he could have missed such an obvious means of entry the day previous. Upon approach, he notices a rope hanging to the right of the newly discovered door. He pulls upon the rope thinking it an odd thing, not so much the rope, but his confidence in the rope as a method of bell sounding, that style of ringer long since replaced by its electric cousin.

Kali, the girl from behind the desk, answers the door wearing a dress of black silk and white trim, fit for prom or funeral.

“Hello, I am John, from yesterday.”

“May I see your picture please?” she asks in a mock professional tone.

He hands over his newly minted Hephaestus identification. She reads it carefully and jumps into him, giving an enthusiastic hug.

“Oh, John the Younger, you are most welcome here today!”

They enter a sitting parlor, velvet chairs and one giant couch with huge wooden arms on both sides. The arms are too high, he thinks.

“Say hello to the front room. We were shy yesterday and didn't show you.”

John gives a tentative arm raise of a wave, an almost inaudible 'hi'.

"You should be happy to know that the room welcomes you!" she squeaks. “Please stay away from the couch, that is for the manager and no one else. He has ways of knowing if it is disturbed in the slightest. Now, let us get you an employee manual and fresh cookies. You will find quite a bit of reading ahead of you.”

Sitting in the parlor room in a seat across from the couch, John is holding a thin, yellowed paper pamphlet no more than 20 pages, canvas bound. He opens the book, scans the first page followed by a floating middle paragraph. Having gathered enough information to guess satisfactorily the nature of the text inside, he begins with the cover and then in sequence, he reads.

Periodically looking at the couch, he thinks that someone had sat down while he read, that he was so deep in trying to decipher, someone joined him. Each time he looks, he proves his theory of company wrong, the empty room his proof. He pushes back his hair in a primal gesture of thinking and dives into the mysterious pamphlet.

It reads:

As you already have surmised we are a good people with important ideas, ideals and a family atmosphere becoming to a large outfit, which we are, as you will soon discover. Your objective in the coming weeks will be to learn the ins and outs of the office, and our satellite localities as well. Should you be honored with a permanent position in the main house, where you currently sit in leisure, you will be rewarded with a greater knowledge of our

workings, eventually attaining the level of overseer, a position of great prestige. Soon you, John the Younger, may achieve this level, if our hunches prove filled with the verisimilitude that seems to portend most decisions of this quality.

John looks confused at seeing his name in a book as old as this one appears.

It continues:

Our policy is harmony through intelligence and proper awareness... safety is always a concern in this ever more dangerous world. Please obey all written and verbal commands to the best of your ability. Should your ability prove insufficient you will be, at the best, summarily terminated. Only through perception is glory found. The yard is yours, for any use. The boy shall not be bothered. Do not touch the balloons unless ordered otherwise, this is a primary company directive

Pages flip. Words are briefly ascertained, time shifts.

Your job will be learning to observe the interior of the office, finding inventive, and time honored, ways of improving productivity and removing all non-essentials parts which do not contribute to the overall health of the company and the world at large.

He tries to set the book down on the table at his right and encounters a sudden plate of cookies. He is sure they were not there when he first sat down. Shrugging, John places the book next to the instantaneous cookies, salutes the couch across from him, and takes a bite. The cookie does not know it, but John is changing brain chemicals in response to its sacrifice.

Kali enters the room, and the room fills with her. An awareness of the vagueness in his recent life occurs to him, a fairytale-like cloud hanging over his actions. He looks to Kali, a princess of sorts in Hephaestus' kingdom. The scene is set for something entirely ordinary. Something ordinary as far as the world of his office is concerned, which as discussed, is far from.

“I'm glad you're getting along so well, most applicants do not fare so well on this portion of the exam.”

“Exam?”

John does not ask of 'the', being very aware of the word, and its varied and lovely usages.

“Yes, you passed with glorious colors and energy! We are pleased. If you could follow me to the yard a certain little boy would love to hold your hand for a moment and contemplate the meaning of what has transpired since you last breathed the air together.”

Blessed be, they that live in the yard.

At that moment, in the yard, a little boy stands with his balloons while a man watches in blissful confusion.

At that moment, in the yard, a woman with child's eyes watches over a man and a Child with saint-like grace.

At that moment a child smiles, mimicking on a deep and perverse level, the ways of something that more naturally takes his shape. The female is amused on levels unknown to John, at that moment.

“Oh, I miss seeing him like this!”

Kali hugs John from the side, The Child runs to the other. They hold his hand, smiling in ignorance and joy, respectively. The child hands a balloon and nods to The Tree. John releases the balloon and watches as it floats into the boughs. He winces as a glimpse of movement startles him from the branches. Searching upward, he finds nothing.

The child takes John's hand again saying, in a much sweeter voice than he had previously used, “Patience, you will see it soon. We have one last bit of business, with our friend The Tree.”

The child walks John to the base of the massive thing, and plucks forth from the bark a small, round object, shining in the autumnal light.

“Is that a berry?”

“No. A branch bears berries. This is the representation of the soul, the permanent thing in this fleeting world. This is the fruit, awareness made manifest. Take this and eat it, for the flesh of the great tree is rare and only suitable for those of our flock.”

The child motions to John to kneel next to him. John does so obligingly, out of an instinct the origins of which he cannot trace.

“Open your mouth please, and receive this gift. The awareness of the spirits of our forefathers is with you, from this moment forth.”

John opens his mouth and the child places the sphere on John's

tongue.

“Swallow it whole, and become as we.”

He chokes down the bitter sphere, his face puckering with the effort.

“It is done,” Kali and the child speak with one voice.

Listen.

Kali of the desk, the boy who is a man and John who is still learning, walk to the room with the too-large desk and Victorian computers which left John so befuddled earlier. She looks astonished as she turns her head to John, seeing The Child’s hand latched onto John’s.

“My! What fun! When was the last time you were inside?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Time is rarely on speaking terms with me in these awful years. I would say that which takes my gifts was but half of itself back then.”

Kali’s eyes roll up into a doing-math-in-my-head pose, “That must have been 30 years ago! You were missed!”

Kali hugs him with glee. The boy looks both uncomfortable, but ultimately relieved at the touch of his coworker, so distant these long years behind her too-large desk, so far from his Tree.

“30 years? That would make him, what, negative 18 at the time?”

John the Younger is still learning. John the Younger thinks in ways that worked in his previous reality, one that is still linear, less fractured.

Kali switches her tone to professorial, business-like, “Time is a funny thing sometimes. We will make sure Hephaestus tells you all about it when the time for telling is perfect. Now, it’s about time to clock you out.”

Her job is important, she often thinks, and her attention to the details therein has led her this far. Kali thinks about work a little too often. She finds John amusing when she thinks about work and John’s attendance there. Kali will think about John too often, and find him amusing when they share attendance there.

“But I just arrived, how long is the work day?”

“Oh, the standard eight hours, you will receive a better lunch tomorrow; I hope the cookies worked out this time,” Kali likes when John asks questions which she knows the answer but cannot

let him understand quite yet. Kali is slowly becoming convinced John may work there permanently. Kali is becoming convinced that John is the one for which this place was created.

“Wait... what time is it?”

“As the crow flies, five *post meridiem*. No lunch so you leave early, it's a rule we abide by and adore.”

“It can't be five. I just got here.”

“Oh, time is a funny thing sometimes, especially when reading such engrossing material.”

She motions to the pamphlet on the desk. He takes it up.

“Please, study when you have time at home. You will see things better in the light of where you sleep, where you are John. this sounds off. Return as John the Younger at 9 *ante meridiem* tomorrow. Do not over indulge in alcohol. These are good phrases for you to hear. There are more tests tomorrow. But the child thinks you will do very, very well.”

She tussles the youthful thing's hair and he shirks back with a face like murder. Kali smiles at him and whispers something only he can hear. He smiles back and they look to John.

He turns to leave, saying, “Well, I guess I will see you tomorrow morning.”

In unison, they respond in a gleeful tone, “No, but maybe by the afternoon you may.”

She lifts up on toes and kisses John on the cheek. John mumbles a thank you and shuffles away, waving at the child. The slightest shadow appears over the boy, giving the appearance of something larger. Johns finds it par for the course of this day. He walks through the parlor, looks at the couch, and tells it goodbye.

As he closes the door, he hears a white-noise-like whisper:

“Thanks.”

It is time to stop thinking and get back home he thinks. This day, as abbreviated and as it seems, has done its damage.

10. Conspiracy Theory.

“This isn't good John. This place is not healthy for you.”

The growing incongruity between John and Maggie's view of the office in the woods and the work done therein, is exponentially widening. They stand with a messy table between them marking distance. The apartment sighs and groans with the tension of the lovers' quarrel.

“It's fine. We are a group of people who have decided to concentrate on thinking differently, nothing to be concerned with. It's like a government think-tank, just without all the horrible killing machines,” he smiles wryly as he reaches across the cluttered table to place his hand on hers.

“I want to believe that, truly I do. But, you know better than me, that you have a history with this stuff. I just want to make sure you know where the fantasy ends and the real begins.”

“I know what's going on. I swear that reality is the same today as it was yesterday, and the day before. This is nothing like the thing after Tyler, this is controlled, fun. I'm here, alive and well. I know who I am. I'm good. I mean, this place is for real.”

“It sounds nice when you say it. But I filter it in my head and it sounds like you're training to go insane... again,” she speaks the ‘again’ with a lithe deftness, defusing the tension building.

“Hey, I never went insane. I just went to the same place as insane people,” he chortles. “I may not be able explain the things I'm starting to see at the moment, but I will eventually. It's really rather magical.”

John finds no solace in argument, no end game to be found.

Maggie finds no solace in the repeating and contradicting words thrown back and forth.

Maggie is disappointed in her furor but at a loss when confronted with other options.

She finds little solace in the humor offered as a cease argument.

“It says John the Younger in your book as well as your ID. So what? It's a coincidence; they named you John the Younger

because that's what the book has in it. Do you think that the novelty key chains at Disney were made only for you as well?"

"I hadn't thought about it like that. You have to admit it's strange though."

Her voice rises in a mix of anger and humor, in loving tones formed as cutting retort, "No, I do not have to admit that. I have to admit that you've acted like a rube since you first found the place."

At this moment, a distant star did nothing spectacular; its light will reach earth shortly before the approaching asteroid, which will mark the last in a series of near-extinction events for the small blue orb.

She continues, "It's a religious sect posing as a business and you're buying it. Honestly, do you expect me to believe they have a magic camera that takes off your glasses... floating cookies... a couch that says hi? John, please, this is, I don't know, but it isn't like you..."

Her tone gets less severe as her speech gets longer. If John had counted he could have extrapolated that anger decreased at $1/3^{\text{rd}}$ argument length. John rarely counts.

"Well, it is like you. But it used to be that I could tell when you were off on a fantasy. Now, I don't know if you believe it or not. And if you do believe, is that belief based out of some sense of boredom, or anxiety; or maybe even out of a need to be accepted?"

Her logic does speak to him, her eyes, plaintive.

"I think I believe it. I think it comes from somewhere I didn't know existed. A void in me is now showing itself because it's no longer demanding to be filled."

"That sounds all well and good, finding something to make you whole. Nevertheless, I would simply ask you to look at it with some logic: A weird book of rules and a shadowy child with a handful of balloons. It's odd."

"But, it's that... it feels okay there. It does. They aren't a group of religious nuts... I think... I need to figure this thing out. Hell, maybe I can write a movie about it and make us rich. I always did well in creative writing. Of course I could be making us rich right now. I kind of forgot to ask what I get paid."

He smiles, and reaches across the table to her hand. She smirks back.

“Okay... John the Younger. You can have your fun but be careful. In addition, please refrain from more details about the secretary's outfit... I have enough worry without that coming into play.”

“Deal. And if I fall into a Christian-Illuminati-Masonic conspiracy and they brainwash me into shaving my head and singing, I give you full permission to bust me out of that place, guns blazing.”

“Blazing guns, check.”

The neurochemicals of the room shift towards the darker spectrum. They sleep until sleep must end.

11. You've killed the birds haven't you?

It is the morning, diurnal: bed, and noise, and awake.

The two, who slept too late, too often, are now awake, and awake again.

He moves left. She moves right.

They collide in front of the bed.

They embrace and wish the other well.

He leaves with unexpectedly graceful movements in stocking feet.

She sits back in bed and tries not to think about his office, his work. Then, as the door is shut upon the night and its continuance, they are distinct.

He walks on implied paths.

John is moving, bipedal, to the office. He hums something indistinct as his gait settles into one approximating the end of a journey, ruminating on the office and the work to be done.

In a break in the trees above the street, a start to the sky, there is glowing in the aether. The sky is now a fading yellow as he watches the winged shapes perform delicate motions upon the horizon. He sees a singular bird amongst the flock and it seems more mammalian than avian. It seems impossible to have been given the art of flight.

In a patch of grass, a dog stands frozen, looking half-opaque, wavering in its consistency. It looks as if secret maths had been applied, as if a new geometry is forcing its altered shape and intangibility.

If, previous to this moment, John had thought about sepia skies, shapeless birds, and dogs of arguable transparency, he surely would have assumed he'd be terrified by their sudden onset. He does not have that leisurely moment to pause and reflect, to truly let himself become horrified.

So his pace increases, his eye line driven to the cement.

A bird falls to his right, bouncing slightly upon impact with the street.

He looks disturbed as a black shape bounces stiffly on the

sidewalk.

Startled, he watches as another falls.

His nerves turn electric as yet another bird drops from the sky, and another, and another.

It rains birds.

John's brain fires chemicals rapidly. An instinct to run screaming to somewhere safe swells within his chest. To fight a murder of already deceased crows seems fruitless; to battle an army of indistinct dogs seems like a loss in waiting. He reaches down into the primal motions of ancestry, and runs.

He is now dancing, skipping; running terrified though the black mounds lying motionless upon the macadam. He feints left and ducks at random, a dance designed on the fly to expedite his escape from these flightless monsters, the imagined yelps and growls of animals increasing in volume with each step.

Followed by a trail of avian holocaust and wavering animals he rushes over the arid path to the office.

Breathing deeply, he runs into the office in the woods. His face is wet with perspiration as he storms through the room with couch, and into Kali's office. His suit is remarkably unwrinkled as he comes to a full stop, and Kali looks at his pale face, glistening.

“You've killed the birds haven't you?”

John looks at her and sinks to the floor, holding his knees, “I... I don't... I guess”

In a moment of mercy, she interrupts his stammering, “Don't worry, they are only stunned. In fact, they are probably flying again by now. It has something to do with new seers of the periphery. It will pass. You learn quickly... John the Younger. Please, look at me the way you looked at the birds.”

Although John has never been what would be described as an animal lover, he would have been guilt-ridden at the massacre of a flock of innocent crows.

Calmer now with the knowledge of his innocence, he asks in a sheepish tone, “So, they really aren't dead?”

“No, far from dead. Please look at me like I am one of your birds.”

“Will you be hurt?”

“Ha, no I will not. Now please, this is important.”

She is radiating from an unknown source. Her face begins to take on the aspects of the child in the yard's. John is reminded of the peace of mystics, the stillness of meditation. He sees her as a subtle gravity, a nuanced physics, concept over reality. John tries to shake off the hallucination.

“What the hell is wrong with me?”

“Nothing my dearest John, nothing is 'the hell' wrong with you. You are simply seeing the world for what it was, what it can be again. We're so proud of you.”

Kali jumps to her feet and rushes John. As she leans forward for a quick embrace, her lips brush the side of his. He thinks that he has enough to think about and lets it pass as an accident of movement. In his near-kiss revelry, Hephaestus walks in through the door facing John. Bonobus smiles at the entwined pair.

"I hope upon hope that I am not interrupting anything important! Oh my-my! How my little workers have come to get along so well!"

She screams, “He killed the birds then saw my face!”

“Already? John the younger, you are a dream.”

"Yes, a dream. I certainly have that quality lately."

"John, Kali of the desk, I would beg your company in the lower library. I think we have things to discuss now that young master John has started on his way into the mysteries of this place."

12. We're really quite dead at the moment... back in a jiff.

Once upon a time, there was a land of flying reptiles; of buildings hewn from fresh marble; of fantasy made tactile through the utterance of words; of fantasy made tactile through the slightest of glance.

In that world a man had a small notion at the base of his spine, at the sides of his vision.

In that world a man realized that there was no world.

He sat upon the ground, and felt the ground as sacred, and so it was.

He looked upon the trees and found them sacred, and so they were.

He looked upon the works of man and found them lacking, and so they were.

Once upon a time, reality was dictated by the visions of men, the idea of idea, the slightest of looks, and the precision of whims.

In that time a concept was formed, and formed again.

In that time, a concept created a reality that was unfit, that was too advanced for the people therein.

Once upon a time, fantasy and philosophy combined in the Eden-lands of youth to produce a horror. The energies of fantasy, philosophy, and whim, slammed together in one atomic push, shearing the world in twain; one atomic blast which made Eden self-aware, and forced the truth to the periphery.

13. I suppose we should have that talk we planned.

The library is a lavish affair in the northeastern corner of the basement level. It is red leather and gas lamps, deep cushioned seats and ancient oak. The library has the smallest hint of opium on the air. They enter as a group: Hephaestus as leader, dragging behind him Kali, and following is a skittish John, still anxious from bird comas and implied kisses. They sit in a triangle, Hephaestus the seat of the eye, Kali and John the base.

Hephaestus's voice is now soft, comforting, "John, I should very much like to know your thoughts on your adventure this morning."

"Honestly it's hard to take. If the past few weeks weren't so clear, so linearly stitched into the narrative of where we are now, I would say it is a dream, or a drug delusion."

John does feel, in fact, drugged. His suspicion is furthered by the ornate pipes and lighters placed as if by ritual on the tables and shelves of the room.

"Well, John, I could assure you that it was not a dream. However, as you so eloquently put it, the linear nature of your observations would make that assurance null, for I would be of your dream, and therefore untrustworthy. But, having assurance from my own linear awareness of not being your dream, I can tell you that what you have experienced this morning was very much real, and very much a part of what we do here at the HJ Bonobus Corporation."

"Well, that's little comfort in light of the fact that I've recently turned into sleeping gas for birds."

"John, you should know that when I was but young here the same thing happened to me. It was hard to take, but I believe you will learn the control and insight to be useful in this important endeavor."

Kali, leaning across the hypotenuse of their improvised geometry, touches John's arm, her dress revealing some of the previously hidden. He places his hand over hers and looks to the beaming Hephaestus.

"Kali is a sight my young friend. Now, aside from your lingering doubt in regards to your awake or drugged state: How do you feel about today?"

"I need time to think. This is a rather strange way to start a new job. Maggie, my girlfriend, thinks there is something disreputable about this place. As you know sir, I feel at home... like I have always been here. I need time to think."

"And think on it you shall," Hephaestus' words melt in the air. He speaks with hypnotic fluidity. "Other eyes which have seen the birds fall did not take it so gracefully. In fact, if I remember correctly, and I do, your predecessor ran for his life upon seeing them fall. He shook for days. Though, that was before we figured anything about this out. That was back when we experimented daily with the periphery, with our perceptions. I found the dogs, if we may call them that, first. After that, the rain of birds was no real cause for concern. However, I ramble on too long about the old days. Kali, John, would you care to join me in an impromptu convocation?"

Her movements are slow, deliberate, drawing a harsh parallel to the giddiness of her voice.

"Of course, my darling!"

Kali looks imploringly into John's eyes; he looks back into an abyss; Hephaestus looks into them both. They are locked in a geometry of shared contact, shared perception. They are as if from one mind, one mode of vision layered into three angles, broken from a line and grafted through eye contact and the faltering minds of a man moving from past to future.

Then, suddenly as it began, the convocation ends. They shake off a collective hypnagogia and the room comes back into focus. John and Hephaestus take one last moment to share eyes. John sees himself looking back; he sees the microscopic fissures in the narrative of Hephaestus and the work that was done, and will be done again.

"Grand," Hephaestus turns back from subtle to ringmaster, "now let us make our way to the yard. I believe we will spend much time today in communion with The Tree, the child, and the ancient in the attic. Let us return here, when once again leisure is demanded."

John, turning to follow Hephaestus, sees a previously unnoticed door between the shelves. Befuddled he walks to the newly minted door. He has a vague recollection of a door like this one in a half-forgotten basement only existent in the shadowy memories of childhood.

The large man and the tiny girl walk through into streaming daylight. The smaller man follows with trepidation. The smaller man finds himself in a yard, facing a tree with a strangely animal aspect. The architecture of his exit seems both impossible and unavoidable, given the location.

14. Worriedly pacing.

In a fairer universe, one slightly to the left of this one, Maggie would find herself happy and content with the state of her relationship.

In a fairer universe, she would have found a man to love who is stable of mind, lithe of body, and full of prospects for the future.

In a fairer universe, there would be dinner parties and subtle hints to friends about possible children/marriage/housing.

In a fairer universe, John would be home looking for a new job.

In a fairer universe, John would find a job without trees and demons, without birds, and without ladies in pretty dresses.

However, that universe is telling that story, unbeknownst to us; as our universe is telling this story, unbeknownst to the characters moving within it.

Maggie walks under the boughs of suburban trees, subconsciously avoiding stepping on cracks, a preventative measure for her mother. She is moving towards a job which provides the means for rent and the provisions of life, no more.

She is moving towards her job where she may duck her head and dodge the responsibility of caring.

Maggie thinks of John as she passes the ice cream shop, remembering their last summer, sharing sherbet with no thought to the universe outside of themselves. Now, she thinks of him with great anxiety. She remembers John finally telling her about the pain that occurred to him in his distant past. She recalls the fright in his face as he spoke in detail about a lost child and the later invention of a world where no children would go lost. She thinks of her elated John, many years since his trouble, falling madly for her, and her for him. She thinks of John as a momentary flash of orange catches an insignificant part of her attention.

Maggie paces her steps and her breathing in a rhythm designed to soothe souls and forgo worries. Maggie sticks her hands into her coat pocket and looks up at the changing leaves.

'The world will cycle,' she thinks, 'I suppose it's up to me to follow suit. Let John be John. Let his world cycle and I will simply

hope I can hold his hand through the process.'

On a one lane street in a nondescript town, a petite woman with mousy hair and an awkwardly paced walk enters a glass door adorned with concert promotions. In a purposeless shop, she masks her face in a shroud of polite banter with faceless clients. In a moment she is changed from casual to faux-professional, from Maggie of wild youth and limitless potential to Ms. Dee, of register one.

15. Staff meeting.

They stand in front of The Tree: Dura of the Attic, The Child, Kali, and the giant. They turn to face John the Younger.

"John the Younger, welcome to your first staff meeting!"

John nods in an implied bow, "Thank you for the warm reception."

"It is good to see you again, Master John." Dura, looking markedly older than at John's introduction, still speaks with force. "The higher reaches have been lonely since your visit."

"Hello Dura, it is good to see you again. The picture you took treated my face well."

"You are kind. Hephaestus, my love, may I sit upon your grass? My old bones have been wearied from the descent."

"Of course Miss Dura, your health is of the top importance at our esteemed locality."

The ancient woman struggles to sit upon the grass, her arms and legs shaking from the effort. The Child offers his hand for support. Together they sit.

For the moment of a camera flash(if only there were a camera) Kali, Child, Dura, Hephaestus, and newly minted John, sit stationary like a poorly lit watercolor against the blended paint of The Tree. The Tree sits as focus of this artificial painting that is life at the offices of the HJ Bonobus Corp. It stands as an idol in the eye-line of the staff, a golden calf in the shape of a tree.

"Now, to business!"

He raises his hands above his head, screaming comically. The group feels a pressure abate.

"As some of us know, John here has taken a significant step towards joining this office in perpetuity. Today, not but two hours ago, he killed the birds."

He claps John on the back and The Child and Dura inhale in surprise.

"I know, I know, the alacrity of this momentous feat has not missed even these old eyes. Today we spend time in great happiness for John the Younger. Therefore, for the rest of the day, I

would like John and The Child to work together in silent meditation. I feel that some time with such like minds may go a long way to soothe the rift caused by this morning's pulsations. Kali please escort Dura back upstairs and join her in whatever activities she would enjoy. As for I, the world is broad, and the time is short. I shall be out for the remainder. Good blessings on you all."

Waving away the floating remnants of his speech, he turns and walks to the dilapidated car still sitting as if dead on the side of an arid path. The Child looks to John's hand as the elder is helped to standing by the young. The workday begins in earnest.

16. The warping of space-time.

He thinks it a cold thing, this sitting alone at a table, the light from the refrigerator having gone dark along with the hopes of satiety. John sits and fingers the chipping paint of his second-hand table. He stirs at cold tea, the spirals of milk making odd faces, producing a dream from a place of warm summers and the innocence of youth. He thinks of Maggie and her trip home. He is jarred from this dream by the creak of a door. From his dream, Maggie arrives in the apartment. He hears her breathing heavy from the climb.

They exchange small greetings as the food is moved from bag to shelf, from shelf to heat, from heat to mouth. They avoid talk of the office until the needs of the belly are sated.

Maggie is not in the slightest bit at ease. Those weighted sighs, shifts, and throat clearings are signs, as John well knows, of forthcoming battle.

"So, how was work?" she begins with a tone of conversational interest, a mask for inner turmoil.

"It was odd, again, odd. I think I might be having flashbacks."

"Your brother?"

"No. No. Nothing like that. I mean acid, that sort of flashback. It's just, to put it bluntly, this morning I killed birds."

Maggie is, instantaneously, confused and disturbed by his statement. Taken in context, she worries of serial killings and an excess of JD Salinger books.

"You what?"

His eyes speak of worry.

"When I walked to work today, something happened with the birds. I was looking at this dog and it turned transparent. I shook it off, figured it was a trick of the light. Then they fell. It was like rain. It was raining birds on me."

"It rained birds? How exactly does it rain birds? Define 'rain' for me dear."

He exhales into words, a fade in from the reaches, "Well, I was walking to work, down by the old logging roads. I was looking

over at this dog and it was standing there, more like a statue than a real animal. It looked half-opaque, wavering in consistency. I was afraid. So I started to walk faster, and for some reason my eye line was drawn to the cement. Then it happened. A bird fell to my right, bouncing off the sidewalk. I was obviously disturbed. Then another bounced stiffly on the grass."

He pauses, and she looks scared.

Continuing, he says, "Then... it rained birds. So I ran. I was dancing, skipping, running terrified though them lying dead on the ground. I fainted left, and ducked at random, just moving like a lunatic to avoid being hit. So I ran to the office. Then Kali told me that it happens to people that work there all the time. So, I calmed down a bit and tried to practice in my head how I could tell you about it."

"Oh god John, maybe you should get some sleep. Are you sure it was real? Maybe you did have a flashback," she struggles for a foothold in the maelstrom of John's recent insanities.

"I'm sure it was real. I've hallucinated before, but it was nothing like this. This was real. I could have touched them if I felt like that would prove anything."

"Let's take a second to pretend that you were correct, and actually saw something. We would have heard about it. There is no way a localized bird die-off via half-visible dog attack would go unreported, no matter how far into the woods it was. It's probably stress plus imagination, plus the falling leaves. You're not used to being up so early; you imagined it. This will be fine... I know you will be okay."

In Maggie there is a picture of straitjackets and losing her love.

"Christ, I suppose that could be true. But the secretary knew what I was talking about. And so did Bonobus... the fat man."

"John. There is something very wrong about that place. You're in over your head. You can find another job."

"Not likely another job, but you're right about that place. It's not negative though. It's off somehow, like it's halfway next-door to a real office, with real people and real work. All I did was enter the wrong door, and no one noticed, myself included."

"What?"

"When I'm there, it's like another universe, nearly identical, but not. Like it's sitting half a shade over, you'd never notice it unless you got lucky, or looked softly enough."

"Maybe we should just go to bed and ignore the whole thing till the morning. It could be that they are no more than an odd group, no malevolence at all. They could be pampering someone who they see good things in. You do have a wonderful lump of brain in that rock up there."

Lovingly she lightly raps his skull.

"You're right. Occam's razor, the simplest solutions, etc...Bed sounds like just about the best idea ever right now."

17. A disproportionate amount of plastic dinosaurs.

Kali's voice is of whimsy, anticipating joys in place of information.

“No, John the Younger, I do not believe that I've seen or heard of plastic dinosaurs having any relation to what we do.”

“Strange, I seem to stumble upon a disproportionate amount of plastic dinosaurs lately. I saw this little guy sitting in a gutter outside of Cassiel's Sundries and it just stuck out; it was almost shining in the leaves. I thought maybe it was a sign, or symptom, or something.”

“No, no my dearest John, dinosaurs and the periphery have very little in common with each other. I have not had the pleasure of that shop's commerce. Next I walk the ways of the town I shall visit it, and maybe your plastic friend.”

"Must have had a sale."

"Sometimes a cigar is a cigar and a small plastic dinosaur lying in the grass is simply a small plastic dinosaur lying in the grass.”

Listen.

There are vibrations in the fields of the peripheral vision. Those vibrations produce some odd and seemingly pointless side effects. One of which is a rather strange predilection to coincidence. This manifests as glittering things in the grass taking the shape of dull objects in the office; moments of similar words from dissimilar places; and in this case, small plastic dinosaurs. John vibrates differently in the situations where it is warranted to do so. The people from his past are revealed as cogs in the complexity of this machine. The relationships, forged before his birth, circle back upon him as pictures on yellowing walls peel and fade into nothingness.

Now, he sits mercy seat to The Tree and reads from the book of phrases from a once great man. Filled with a form of death too common to the passengers of the other sight he falls to the entropic pull of mystical thinking, daydreaming portends.

Hephaestus' voice rattles windows and jump-starts normally calm hearts, "What do we speak of now, my children of the lesser gods? Dinosaurs are chasing our dear John?"

John and Kali spasm at his bellow.

"Yes, John the Younger has had run-ins with dinosaurs, of the plastic variety."

"Plastic you say? Much easier to deal with than the flesh and blood variety, I suppose. John, we should talk about this in detail. Please, follow me to the drawing room."

"We have a drawing room?" John says.

"The drawing room is one of the most important spaces in the hallowed building. John my boy let us go there and speak of false reptiles."

"Sure, but it's just a coincidence. I'm curious mostly."

"I know my boy, but that coincidental perception does point to something much larger. When one is entwined with the peripheral awareness, coincidences tend to follow. Where we find coincidence, we see signs of the periphery. Now, please, follow me."

The drawing room is a hidden antechamber to the living room. It has two chairs, bare walls and a small cabinet for bottles of rare liquor and unlabeled bottles of wine. The room, as it sits, shows no purpose save for a conversation between two, and only two people.

"John, we arrive at a crossroads," he pantomimes the sign of cross upon his chest, "the past and the future entwined. You are starting to notice the existence of the other things, even invented ones like small dinosaurs. This is a good sign. But, there are concerns."

"Concerns?"

"John, your growth of awareness is directly related to your speedy path into and around the awareness of the other place. Your, let's say, unique situation, could turn South if not thought out fully before walking further down unknown paths."

John's tone is aggravated, graveled and losing focus. He grows tired of confusion, "What makes me so unique? Is it that I learned quickly? That I bothered to respond to the advertisement? That I am patient enough to deal with falling birds? That I can inexplicably accept the story of invisible forces trying to destroy

our barely visible ones? Is it that The Child lets me feed The Tree? What?"

"In a word, yes... You are special for all those things, and many more. However, what I was referring to is your perception of the past, and its influence on your perception of the future. That future being today. You invented a life to cover up for the transgressions of your past. We all do this. Now, your awareness is such, unlike the rest of us, that you may pull down those veils and see your world in the stark light of truth and reason...this would prove horrific, maddening. You are unique in that you can take yourself apart far more quickly than most others. But, that speed of deconstruction comes with the cost of possibly not being able to gather back together your constituent parts. "

John speaks with a voice suited to prophecy and the giving of last rites, "And that's unique? That sounds like being human. We are all one revelation away from having the ultimate existential panic. We are all one tiny truth from screaming madly at the sky and walking home mumbling about trees. Hephaestus, I'm not unique; I'm awake."

"My boy, you are correct. You may be better equipped to handle this than I previously thought. Remember though, not all coincidences are revelation, and not all revelation will lead you to better places. Let us not forget the lessons of the past, as we slowly write new meanings. Be careful John the Younger, or the world will quit making sense. Be careful or all of this will become a tool of destruction. Remember the lessons of the hill."

"I'm not sure what lessons you'd have me remember. But I will be careful."

"You will be sure of these lessons, eventually. Now, let us take to the yard, I long to see The Tree."

As the room ceases to be occupied, the door swings shut, and a bolt is heard echoing. As they approach Kali's desk, John turns his head in the direction they have walked. He thinks it normal that the wall is unmarred by a doorway. The house shifts back to one permutation as John moves forward to yet another.

18. Strolling Heisenbergs.

It has been wished, and wished again, for there to be a governing force, of any kind, behind the universe.

It has been wished, and wished again, that the universe could hold perfect moments in perfect memory, the clearest remembrance of things left behind. Alas this form of memory is not possible. The camera of the universe affects the actions therein. The ultimate quantum cat scenario, the fates of all mankind walking a quantum plank from a multi-universal ship, blindfolded and screaming for release...or so it seems to certain flawed observers.

John is walking, ostensibly, hand in hand with a beautiful woman he calls Maggie. John is, without a perfect camera, a perfect book to scribble him down in, an attractive man walking with an attractive woman. They, if it can be reliably reported, speak nothing of the office. The straggling passersby, an even more untrustworthy set, nod to him; the straggling passersby do not see them at all.

They, if this is to be believed, are walking to a certain store of sundries. They, if this is a true narrative, are to peruse vagaries and nick-knacks under the auspices of purchase. They arrive to find a door covered in plywood, a plank of heavier wood affixed across its center.

Maggie speaks with empathetic tones, "Oh, poor Cassiel! He must have had to shut down!"

Maggie is glowing in John's eyes, her sympathy a vision from somewhere lost within him.

John mumbles back indistinctly about Cassiel telling him something about money troubles. John grasps the air near his waist, miming a comforting squeeze. He recalls a half-forgotten time in the basement of the shop, the shelves toppled over, the stock strewn across the floor, the floors sticky with neglect. He thinks it must have been when the shop first opened, yet to be organized.

"You would have liked my father, you know?" Maggie says

out of nowhere, breaking John from his mumbling revelry.

“Would I have?”

“Yes. Before he fell ill, he had this habit of half listening and responding back with mumbles. But when you questioned him about it, he could recite book, chapter, verse of whatever it is you were talking about; like he had a split in his mind where he lived in one half and existed in the world with the other. You're like that at times.”

“Wouldn't that mean we'd ignore each other and live in our own worlds?”

“Yes. I think you two would have had very nice and quiet walks together, never bothering the other with trifling things, like conversation or directions. You would be simply two dreamers in a wood, making up stories for the void.”

“Sounds nice, I wish we had met and gotten in some walks before it got too bad.”

“The getting too bad is what I'm concerned with. I'm afraid one day you will start to mumble like him and never return from that half of your head. I don't want to watch that again, John.”

“You won't have to. I'm fine. It's nothing to worry over; been like this since...well, since childhood. I'll always come home in the end.”

“Good. See that you do.” She lightly punches him on the arm on the way to locking elbows.

They continue on past the shops and into that shapeless country ever full of untold stories. If the camera of the universe were perfect, and tuned in correctly, it would see him disappear into the darkness of the back streets, happily holding hands, happily whistling a wordless song.

19. The girl from Ipanema.

The office often reminds John of elevator music.

At times, he sits and watches Kali as she hums tunelessly, her hands moving languidly across a rusting typewriter.

Hephaestus often enters, and demands from her a dance about the room. In those moments, the record player is dragged in from wherever it currently exists. The record player is an imitation of an old Victrola, its massive horn jutting out uncomfortably into the vibrating air. John will sit and watch, in good times like these, the giant and the waif move with practiced skill. The iron of the ceiling fans will reflect like candelabra, diffusing light in wheezing sparkles through the particulate air. The dance will only last one song, no more, no less. Hephaestus will bow deeply as Kali curtsies. John will sit and watch, feeling like this has played out before.

It all reminds him of elevator music.

In one such time, the iron fan blades are moving papers with no discretion, while the record player sits quietly. Hephaestus turns from his dance, and with demanding eyes, forces the attention of John.

”John, I would ask that you join me for a moment. It's a matter of some import.”

“Of course.”

They move from the now silent Victrola and the silent Kali, in the front room, of couches and past-tense mysteries.

“First, and this is the least important part, as far as time is concerned, I must give you yet another book.”

He leans across the carpeted void to hand John a book. On its cover the fading words 'Dispatches From the Periphery' can be discerned.

“Please read this at a time of peril. These words will wake you from the vertigo of looking too deeply.”

“I'm sorry, when shall I read it?”

“You will know when it is time, time being a malleable term. I remember the clay tablets on which we first learned to press

awareness into descriptive. I recall our feeble attempts to chisel into the world something to pass along our perceptions, to move adjectives down through the generations. I still smell the ink wafting from drying scrolls. The world was simpler then: no computers, no Internet, no immediacy. I miss it dearly."

"You miss scrolls?"

"It is of no importance. I am sorry to have forced you to listen to my nostalgic rambling. John, I sit you here so we may talk of your past, and the tiny heresies harbored within," Hephaestus smiles at him like a cartoon snake.

"What heresies do you speak of? My life, although not chaste by any means, hasn't been marred by anything as dramatic as heresy."

"The heresy I refer to is your brother."

As they speak the house shifts on its foundation. It knows the importance of the scene being played out within. The house knows of the schism in both of them, of the growing want for reprieve from weight carried for too long.

"That is not up for discussion," he growls. "The past is exactly that."

"Well, John my boy, you don't have to speak. Leave the speaking to your friend and manager Hephaestus James Bonobus. Let us start with the significant part. Your brother died while under your guard."

He is perplexed at Hephaestus' knowledge of his past, "Sir, honestly, this doesn't have much to do with what we do here."

The house warms. The people within wait, *in situ*. This has played here before, and will again, with ever-changing faces and plastic stakes. The bridges in the mind cross and mend.

"What do you know of the work done here?"

For the first time, John sees anger within the giant.

"John," Hephaestus roars, "you are a minuscule cog in a much larger machine, a machine for which a purpose has yet to be found. For now, if you can please give me leave, I should like to find out what you learned from that day; what was taken away from the disaster that left your brother broken and you, presumably, as well."

John sinks into his seat, sighing in realization that he has been

waiting for this moment, that he has been wishing for a forceful confrontation with his past.

"Please continue."

"All I have is the story of two brothers playing in a place where they did not belong, a derelict factory on an accused hill. I have the tale of a child shattered on the detritus of industry. In addition, I know that you were quiet after that; that you were brought in for help; that you shut down and learned humor; that you drew rhythmic lines in the margins of notebooks; that you created worlds to hide your anger and grief. John, you have never faced your failure as a brother, much less faced your grief at the loss of him."

John feels himself breaking, the cracks revealing his inner self, still raw and full of misery.

"Enough. That's enough."

"No. I will finish."

Inexplicably John sits quiet, ready for another emotional onslaught.

"John... I forgive you."

"What?"

"You are forgiven for the death of your brother. Children die. Mistakes are made. It is an unfortunate thing, of course, but one that is to be expected in this line of work. Now, let it go."

"Let it go? How could I let that go?"

"You have been judged for his loss. You have been blamed. You have punished yourself for these long years. Let it go John. You are forgiven."

John shatters. He breaks.

"Oh Christ..."

He runs as the start of weeping takes over his face.

He runs as Hephaestus smiles.

Hephaestus knows that the work will, indeed, be good.

20. Sleeping dogs.

“Maggie are you seriously telling me that I'm changing?” John sings with a light smile on his lips and a flourished gesture. “So the kid is a little weird? We watched that special together about the child who drew a detailed New York from memory. He's just like that... but with balloons... and a somewhat unsettling voice.”

Maggie nods in exaggerated agreement, “Yes! Of course that must be it! Ask the random child in your office's back yard to draw you a cityscape. We can film a sequel!”

“Yes. I'll draw up the paperwork immediately. Anyway, I'm not sure that documentaries get sequels... and, more importantly, it's just a silly job! The only change I've undergone is getting used to an early wake up and a morning walk.”

“I'm not saying you're changing. I am simply concerned that you're losing sight of what you actually have right now. You're focused on what's to come. I get the romance of this all. I get your fascination. Maggie's voice takes on a darker, more desperate tone. “I just worry that you'll forget this place, forget me.”

“I'll never forget you...wait, that came out wrong. I mean, you know I'm over the moon for you. But, also, I'm excited about the office. It's new, and weird, and magical, and, you know, kind of like home, if that makes sense at all. But, you should know, that I'm still here for you.”

“I love you too. But, I think you should take caution with the excitement. I don't know how healthy it is to work 40 hours a week at training yourself to see the world as a fake. You know?”

“Yeah, I know, but we don't call the world fake. It's incomplete, only a sliver of what is operating. At least that's what I think we teach. Either way, you're as much a part of it as I am.”

They will continue like this until the apartment spins its webs.

They will go back and forth until the apartment, working as proxy for them, speaks silently in waves of peace.

Eventually, when everything is tied in a silken bow they sleep.

The galaxy spins faster, but slightly. A particle slips past an asteroid it was meant to hit. A particle freed from the whims of the

blinded god embeds itself into an innocuous landscape of rolling hills dotted with cottages. The inhabitants of that landscape pay it no mind, since they have no means to comprehend such a microscopic thing.

Within that landscape a reaction is catalyzed by a small particle.

Within the landscape magma is shifted, land rises, but slightly.

Within the landscape the tectonics shift up, and up again, creating a mountain, shifting homes.

On that new landscape a mountain begins to erode into an insignificant hill, waiting patiently for new residents.

In a shared bed, asleep and entwined as only young lovers can be entwined, John and Maggie share dreams of the past, and what is to come. In a bed, in an apartment, in a town, in a space, in a universe unable to perceive itself, they sleep in comfort with the illusions of the day seeping into the unknowable reaches of the subconscious. They sleep until the blaring alarm of morning is called forth and he must rise, to don clothes and move, yet again, to an expanse of woods and a house with an indistinct nature.

21. Nothing like a fracas to show a man's character.

In the weeks that follow, the office works with a precision that would not be expected of a place with such plastic notions of what, exactly, it is that they do. John and Kali sit across a desk, making illegible marks on darkening paper, as if mocking the idea of language. The false letters squirm from their pens as the days drift by in a haze.

He asks questions. She responds with words that seemingly pacify, yet make no headway into understanding. They repeat actions until they are interrupted with new demands. He approaches.

Bonobus is bounding into the room.

Bonobus has eyes like prophecy.

"John the Younger! Kali! Good Morning to you both!"

John speaks, ignoring the emotions of yesterday, "Good day, Hephaestus."

"My love!" Kali bounces to him and gives a jumping hug.

"Hello to two of the most trusted in my employ. We have much work to do today, as we all know. But first, a trial of sorts. John, please follow me. We have an enemy to vanquish."

Kali looks terrified.

"Hephaestus, are you sure?"

"Yes my darling one, I am surer now than I was when I sent you down there. And you see how you turned out."

"But I was here for months before that!"

"Some need less training. Some require more. We had no training when we found the first one so long ago. I survived."

"Yes... but his namesake did not. And he was as experienced as they come."

"I am aware of that."

"John my boy, first we eat, then we move to the basement!"

Hephaestus pulls from his waistcoat pocket a velvet case. John watches as the giant's fingers open the tiny latch upon the box.

The smell of death issues forth from the velvet box. The room

fills with putrefaction.

“Oh god. Is that a part of a body?”

“Hah! Yes! It is a part of the body which lives in the yard! This, my newest friend, is the fruit of The Tree. Its smell is rather pungent at first.”

“To say the least.”

“Hah! Yes. Well, its flavor is actually rather nice. Please, before we make our way to the lower reaches let us three share a bit in convocation. Let us three taste the flesh of The Tree and celebrate our luck to be here, to be of the site.”

“I thank you Hephaestus my love.”

Kali takes up a piece of the putrid fruit and places it lightly onto John’s hand. She takes up another for herself, and for her manager.

John tries to hold back a retch as he moves the fruit towards his mouth. His eyes bulge in delight as the flavor explodes into him.

“Oh! It’s wonderful!”

“Hah! My John, always willing to jump in, both feet at once! Now, let us make haste.” he places his hand gently on John’s back. “Thank you for joining us Kali, we shall see you as soon as this little adventure ends.”

John looks puzzled. He follows Hephaestus out of the room down the steps to the basement.

“What was that fruit?”

“It is the matured fruit of The Tree. You have tasted its more youthful form. It’s much like the durian of Asia, but having other more mystical properties. My old friend, your namesake, tried the first one.”

“What happened to my namesake?”

“He lost sight of an enemy. John, you must understand that you could lose your life here today. Or lose, at least, a facsimile thereof. However, I believe you will conquer. All you need to do is use the sight that stunned the birds and stained the sky. If you see that way, you will thrive.”

“What? I don’t even know who our enemies are, or how to fight them... and I don’t have a weapon.”

“The enemy, today, is an it. It is a member of an unnatural

order. You fight it the way you unintentionally fought the birds. Your sight is your weapon. You will understand when you enter. If you do not, you fail.”

“But, why am I fighting it? What did it do to us?”

“They destroyed the previous world by invading this one. They took the perception of the one who previously held your name; they left him a snarling vicious thing until he was taken below the ground. They killed many before we founded this place and developed the perception to send them away. Those things can see our world for what it appears to be to the non-sighted. They hate the non-sighted. They are offended by their scent; their look, or something else intangible to our senses. Our purpose has always been to hunt down the things before they hunt the unknowing innocents. They live in the periphery, in that small space of half sight. They live in the spot where we are training you to look.”

“But they have done nothing to me at all, I've never heard of a thing like that killing anyone. And I don't even know who my namesake was. I've only had this name for a few weeks.”

“You hear it all the time! You just haven't been able to perceive it as such. I can show you thousands of examples of their vicious attacks; where you see newsprint and television, we see reports of slaughter and a river of violence running into the periphery. And, let us not forget, they destroyed your namesake, your ancestor, John the Elder...”

Hephaestus James Bonobus screams out from the inner most depths of his being. His pain made vocal. “Never forget the one who gave you his name! Never forget what caused this polluted mess!”

“I didn't forget! I never knew. Hephaestus, I never knew him. Mr. Bonobus I'm not informed enough for this, yet.” John's voice slips into more and more passive tones. In a dulcet voice he pleadingly asks. “How can I risk my life for something I've never actually seen?”

“Thank you for your patience, John the Younger. Your power here often overwhelms us, the walking marionettes of your periphery. Please, think about it this way: if you believe there is nothing there, that there is no denizen of the other side, it cannot hurt you. If you perceive the truth of the situation, then it cannot

hurt you, for it fears our kind. They are hurt by our perception of their true nature. So, John the Younger, your time here will end unless you enter, and decide the end of this day. And decide you will.”

“Hephaestus, I don't want to leave.”

“I know. You can see the situation, but not all of it yet. Enter. I will be here when you are victorious. Remember the spaces you looked between to see The Tree, the birds, and the sky for what they truly are.”

“I just try to perceive that same thing I saw when the birds fell and The Tree moved? It can't be that simple.”

“Of course it's that simple, John the Younger. The one thing I am not is a liar. I swear to you, as someone much wiser in the ways of things, you will not come to harm if you see properly. Walk into that darkness, John, and look upon that space with the eyes we have nurtured together.”

“Good. This makes sense. If there is nothing there, as one part of me sees, nothing can hurt me. If you are correct, and there is something malevolent there to see, I have the skills to beat it back. What the hell; logic is logic. I'm in.”

“No. Logic is not logic, but that will become clear later. I will be out here upon your return. I wish you a good battle, John.”

“Thank you Hephaestus. I'm banking on you being correct here. I guess I'll see you after it's over.”

“Indeed.”

John has learned, since his arrival, to look past tautology and contradiction, to embrace the intangible. He looks to the door, it shimmers, a contiguous line drawing of flowers and crop circles appear.

Hephaestus holds back a laugh, knowing the nascent abilities in his presence.

John tests the handle.

It gives to his turn.

The light inside is low, the room fogged to the point of solidity. Framed by the doorway, he turns his head back to Hephaestus.

“How am I supposed to see in there?”

Hephaestus smiles broadly, “You better figure that out before

it does.”

He shoves John into the room and slams the door behind him. Taking out a half-smoked cigar from his pocket, humming a wordless song, the fat-man sits in a chair across the hall from the door. The smoke begins to circle him in rough shapes, humans and birds created and destroyed as motes of dust pirouette in the cigar air.

John walks in thick fog. The air is dry, yet the room spirals in fog and shadows. The room is all outlines, fragments of monochromatic lines in a sea of nothing. He knocks into a chair, steadying it with his trembling hand. He nearly tumbles as he enters an area of room be-rugged in heavy shag; he trips into another chair and laments the frequency of furniture.

He hears a scuttling.

In fear, he jerks his head towards the noise.

In darkness, there is the sense of movement.

In the darkness, he lifts the chair into an imitation of a lion tamer. In his terror, he finds pause to smile at his idiot circus posing. More noises echo through him as he searches with motions of his head. A shadow skims across the floor, too fast and fluid for his eyes to register.

He looks desperately into the ethereal smoke for any visual purchase, finding none. John breathes in a deep pull of air, calming his shattered nerves as best he can. His heartbeat slows mildly as his breathing grows more regular. He looks to the seat, held comically in front of his chest.

It attacks.

It exists, at that moment, as a liquid shadow, pure motion not yet having substance. From that shadow a form takes shape hurling itself onto John, the chair knocked from his hands. He falls, with the shapeless horror mounted on him. John's hands find purchase on what would be a neck, if such words could be ascribed to this darkened fog. He presses with all his strength, fighting against fangs, or so he would call them fangs for lack of a better word. It is then that John makes the realization of the inner transparency of the monster. He sees this shadow as a break in the trees, a glimpse of something unnatural. He remembers what Kali told him about seeing the birds. He remembers the sky, the birds falling, the

panicked run, her glowing, his relief, the sense of staring into something new. He looks up at the creature and lets go his effort, dropping his hands.

Now a yelp, and a wavering in the animal's shape.

The shadow thing becomes something familiar, but thoroughly new. A homunculus of tumorous growths with a human-like face sits where once there was shadow. A dog-shaped form, mutated, ugly, shivers upon the concrete, impotent under the duress of his vision.

John stands, shifting his vision back to what he knew as life the week before. The thing lifts up what could be called its head, turning back into the darkened ephemeral canine of the moment before. He looks back to the thing with pity, and through the periphery it squeals, falling upon the floor. The room is clear of fog, radiant. The creature lays motionless in a far corner, it is smaller now, disgusting and harmless.

John sees greenhouse enclosures, the remains of the chair. He walks over to the creature and picks it up by the scruff. He turns back to see Hephaestus in a chair smoking. John lofts the cancerous thing at him. Hephaestus's massive chest contracts with the impact.

"I need a cookie," John walks past Hephaestus proclaiming over his shoulder. "Also, I broke your chair."

22. The Lovers(torn).

In the darkening skies of his walk home, John kills no birds, no incorporeal canines.

In the darkening skies of his walk home, John talks to himself about foggy fights and his disintegrating sanity.

He thinks of Maggie, longing for her to be by his side. He thinks of Maggie and wonders if she will ever understand the nature of his new path. He walks under the darkening sky as the fight in the basement begins to slip into memory.

He arrives at the facade of a dying building, and climbs the steps leading into what was once his safe haven from a world unfit for him. Now, he walks from those steps into a waiting Maggie, her eyes burning with a mix of fury and anxiety.

He starts to tell her of his fight with the thing in the cellar. He regales her with sweeping gestures to indicate birds, and low movements to show a canine stride. He paces and sweats. His voice rises and drops with practiced drama. He starts to tell her of his new found wonder. She begins to see that her life with John will soon be over.

"I can't listen to this anymore! I cannot sit and listen to you crumble. You need serious fucking help."

Maggie is less than enthused with the story John has told her. She cannot understand phantom chairs, balloon children, and dogs that are not dogs.

"Well, maybe you can try to fucking support me in my endeavors for once!"

"John. This isn't something to support. This is a mental breakdown in the form of an office in the woods. John, you know you are predisposed to this. You need help."

"Christ. Yeah, I need help. That's always your solution. Why can't I have a religious experience? Why can't my life be revelatory for once?"

"Because you're talking about killing animals in the basement of your office, not finding Jesus. Can't you see the difference?"

"Fine. Fine. But I'm telling you, it happened. Jesus or not."

"It's fucking peculiar John. Odd. Nonsense. Impure."

"I know it sounds odd, but hear me out... I saw the thing, both as animal and something else. I mean, wait, allow me to look at you that way. It didn't hurt Kali when I did it."

He reaches for her face, to mimic his interactions with Kali.

"No. You will not. And you can look at that girl all you want. I'm fucking done here. Go feed your demon trees, I can't be around for this again. I cannot sit here and watch you fall apart."

Maggie has slammed the door as John sits down at the table. An untouched meal sits as a reminder of her existence. He decides that the local pub is a better option than cold tacos and introspection.

23. Sometimes, even the beatified need a drink.

The pub at the end of the street.

The pub which he has, years previously, drank away evenings singing with women and yelling with friends.

He enters, despondent. To him, the room looks the perfect shade of dark. To him, the bar's wood paneled decor is the exact companion for him on a night like this.

"Whiskey, neat. Beer chaser."

The bartender nods in that bartender-y way, a recognition of lost women and other painful errata. The saddened one watches a careful pour and thanks the nameless man who provides the liquid.

"I didn't know this place reopened." John questions, not caring about an answer. He is filling the void with noise, blocking his thoughts of the events of the day.

"Reopened? Been here as long as I can remember."

The bartender is uninterested with John. The bartender is wavering slightly in the metaphysical wake of this moment.

"Oh, I could have sworn this got shut down... no matter really. Just making conversation I suppose."

"I get the idea. We all move at the speed beholden to the path. Can't just decide to take in the whole world in one fell swoop, that's libel to make you go a little crazy."

The bartender looks younger than before.

John nods, feeling at home in the empty room.

"But," the middle aged man continues, "I suppose trying is all we have to hang our hats on. I figure as long as you're still upright, and you keep your eyes open... just enough... you can get through this place." The bartender gestures broadly to the empty bar.

John coughs on invisible dust.

"That sounds good to me, tomorrow. For now, I think I will drink and feel sorry for myself. I will see how the light affects my eyes in the morning. Cheers."

As John perceives it, his beer turns to a swirling mass of faces, laughing, falling, screaming, cascading in the dying foam like carnival rides and LSD.

As the world perceives it, his demeanor moves from depressed and alone to frightened and anxious. He places his beer back down and sighs heavily, finding this normal for the last few weeks of his life. He decides the decidedly non-demonic whiskey shot may prove a more fruitful endeavor. It screams in pain as he attempts to drink from the brown liquid.

He stares into the whiskey, searching for a mouth, vocal chords, or any other sign that his head did not invent a scream. He sees no means of vocalization. He sees no sense in the day that has transpired.

That's enough, he thinks, deciding that escape may prove more sensible than falling into further alcohol traps. He throws uncounted money on the bar and stands with obvious purpose.

"Thanks. I must be going."

"No problem. Good evening, young master."

John half jogs to the door, and out, walking straight into the massive shape of Hephaestus James Bonobus. He is surprised at the relief he feels seeing the behemoth.

"Hephaestus?"

"John the Younger, I hope upon hope that no alcohol has touched your lips this day."

"No, I didn't feel much like drinking."

"Please, no more lies. We will be open from now on. I promised you answers to your questions, and now they will be given. Consider this the third day. Join me for a brandy."

"I don't know that I feel like drinking right now."

"Of course you do, that's why we build these places. You have yet to see how this works. Please, trust your new father. No more faces and demons in the bubbles."

"How did you...?"

John has lost the urge to question. He will follow the large man's lead for the evening. Reentering the pub, the bartender screams.

"Hephaestus! Welcome most esteemed customer and proprietor! I had no idea he was with us. I will immediately provide brandy and peanuts. Your table is now existent, please, please, join us in comfort."

They take drinks and sit at a table in the back corner, shrouded

from the light of the main section of the bar top. They sit as the light shifts to that familiar office sepia.

John, dissolute, stares at his drink, glowing, radiant.

“I have no idea what is going on anymore. The office did this to me. Please. I have no specific questions anymore. However, I have multiple pages of them written in the apartment. Please tell me this will be okay, or that I am unfit for the position. I think I need what this job is showing me. But it’s making Maggie leave. I need her. Either I’ve finally gone insane, or there is something else operating here. Hephaestus, please, just tell me what’s happening.”

“John... the Younger. Do you know why you have your name?”

“You've mentioned a predecessor. Though, Maggie thinks it's because you had a book with that name in it already and reused it for me.”

Hephaestus roars with laughter, the brandy forms circles in its wake.

“She is a perceptive one! Well, that is the answer... but far from the solution. We wrote that book years before we knew you, years before your birth. You see, we know our potential employees well before they become able to be so. I gave you that book, and that name, because I was shown that you may be able to be in my employ. The Child tells me you see better than he's seen in many years. He, having been in this company for longer than I, is someone I trust.”

“How long have you been with this company? Honestly this time. I know the child cannot be more than 12, yet Kali tells me he has seen over 30 years with the firm. This has to be some kind of long form joke that I'm not getting.”

“Yes. This is some kind of joke. I described it the same way when I founded the firm, many more years ago than I count for this body. You see the joke is that most cannot see the joke, the operative principle of the goings on around us. We hire those with the potential to see the joke, to see the periphery. You can see my fish; the enemies of the way to the back door. You can see properly without much effort or learning. Most can see if aware enough, but it takes years, decades. We cultivate those that can become aware enough for use. Your initial training is over, or so I assume by your

untouched drinks on your way out... you saw the faces, you stunned the birds and danced with the periphery in the basement. You are part of us already.”

“What does that mean? I think I can somewhat control this vision at times, but I don't understand what it is that I'm seeing. What was that thing?”

“That thing was a vision from the other place, the world that was.”

“I've heard that phrase before. You said you'd answer me.”

“I will answer all, but some answers can only come later. I am sure there will be a later between us.”

“This is too much. Can I ask a simple one?”

“I said I can answer all that you can listen to.”

“Why can I drink Brandy?” Hephaestus laughs. The tension seems abated. John seems to trust this situation.

“Because, my newest friend... brandy was made for people like us. Now, let us lift drinks and spirits... there is much to discuss.”

24. Iterations in the dark.

In the darkness of the yard, The Child and Kali sit on dew-covered grass. They, like stone Buddhas, sit unmoving under a great tree.

In the darkness of the yard the smell of moldering leaves and the faint whispers of autumn flavor the air.

In the darkness of the yard, the archetypal forms of a child and a girl speak as elders.

“Child, do you recall how you died?”

“Girl, I do recall this. Do you recall the last time we went through this place?”

“I do. We spoke in ancient languages and answered to forgotten names. I think fondly of those that we once were.”

“I think on them fondly as well. To see us die again, and again, is something too much to ask of such entropic husks.”

“You speak wisdom. The Tree will fruit soon.”

“He will die soon.”

“The motions are their own. We move because of those simple forces set to work so long ago.”

“We move as reaction to that which was done to this place.”

“Child, I should like for you to look into my eyes again. Let us celebrate the uncertainty which we know exists in these trivial decisions.”

“Girl, I will look upon you with the vision of our former selves. Let us find a room with electric light and join in convocation.”

“So it was. So shall it be.”

With alternating shapes, and motions they move from place to place, to take communion in the name of what was and will be. They exist, for that moment, both as past and present, as realized and unrealized, as Newton and Quantum, simultaneously alive and dead. They exist(ed).

25. Libations.

Meanwhile, in a theoretical pub on the edge of a maybe-town, a giant and a young man sit.

In that theoretical pub, they speak with Latinate roots and Germanic grammars.

In that theoretical bar, they raise glasses to the void.

They drink. This is not a simple thing. Hephaestus drinks like it were the entirety of life condensed into small glasses. John stares at emptying glasses, fighting back the drunken forces of revelry.

Hephaestus speaks like water, gesticulating wildly, drawing figures in the air, drafting geometry in the spaces between words. At times, he leaves few pauses, and in others, he leaves voids and oceans in which to think and respond.

In one of those chasms, John chooses to speak.

“I don't feel guilty.”

“My, what a fine statement.”

“I thought I'd feel guilty right now, but instead I'm drunk and having a good night. My life is broken. Maggie is gone. I have no idea what I do for work. I have no idea what is going on with birds and dogs. Everything is terrible by any accounting, yet I feel somewhat content. No more guilt than I had yesterday, if yesterday even happened.”

“Yes, yes, I'm so glad you said that. John the Younger has never been, in all his incarnations, an alcoholic, but in most, a drunk. It's a wonder it took you all so long to figure this out.”

Hephaestus smiles and turns to the bar. The barkeep prepares more drinks. John looks to Hephaestus in anticipatory silence. The bartender leaves a bottle, a bucket of ice, and a jar of peanuts on the table.

“John, let me illuminate a few things for you. The HJ Bonobus Corp was founded by someone much like myself... so much so I call him me. We are an older thing in possession of the words of something even older. We can see, you included, into the world that was, the world that sits upon the periphery. It is gone to most people now, leaving in its stead the yellowing wasteland you've

seen glimpses of. It will become perfect again, in union with the world of frontal vision, the world that you've known."

"Are we a religious sect?"

"Oh, lord no. We are simply the last few human denizens of the periphery. We are the heralds of a better day where we all can return to where we belong. For now, we feed the Trees and make grand circles. Think of the world you have previously perceived as a prism, pure, white light enters and is refracted. The world is a splintering refraction of something more pure, more complete. The periphery is something closer to the source. It is the world as perceived without a prism. It is the world as observed with the notion in place that true observation is impossible."

"Sounds like one of those Masonic conspiracy theories. Next you'll tell me we run the illuminati."

"Alas not, those groups exists purely in frontal vision. It is often that imagination mimics what we can see, though falsely. We're no more religious than that pestering notion at the back of your spine when you're about to get punched, or the lingering electrons after a kiss."

"I'm beginning to see the shape of it. Nevertheless, it's still vague; it still feels without actual substance, like air, or lunacy. Let me ask you one more thing."

"I promised answers."

"Can we have another drink?"

The fat man's laugh echoes through the empty bar. John begins to understand that he will soon, if all goes to plan, be very, very drunk.

26. The Universe.

The Tree is almost finished, beckoning to Hephaestus to join it again. The pulsing of the ground is exponential; root systems feel the change approaching as limbs move in sync.

Hephaestus looks on from the balcony watching John and The Child mill about the yard, drawing figures in the dying grass.

To Hephaestus, John is a glowing pillar, a wild flame of light and imagination.

To Hephaestus, John is himself as a younger man.

To John, Hephaestus is an aged version of himself overlaid on top of a construct of father.

To the perspective of Hephaestus, The Child is as he once was, reclaiming a lost aspect through the imagination of John.

Hephaestus sees them as the incarnate future, the way that things will be when set right; He sees in them the future, the fissure closed, the scars healed.

From his balcony, he sees that The Child has come to the same conclusions about John. The time of the old pairings is ending. He wonders, if one such as him can still wonder, how John sees all of this. He wonders how he, as a proxy father, can make this transition go any smoother. The smell of ancient charcoal and smoke is in the air.

Hephaestus remembers the days of new religion, new beliefs, in “The Burned-Over District” of his earlier years. If one such as him could reminisce, he would be waxing philosophic about that place and the inventions therein. However, one such as him, one invented by a time and a person long gone, does not reminisce often. Hephaestus breathes deeply from artificial memory, grinning as The Child below prepares the meal.

In the yard, as sure of a location as one gets in a world of half perceptions and moving fables, John feels compelled to watch the Keeper of The Tree do his work. The child, with his balloons, now appears as an adult, through the lens of the periphery. His eyes are radiant, his face flawless, angelic in its aspect. John, content in this moment, in the comforts of this sideways universe, sits and

watches with relaxed vision.

It is then that he sees what The Child holds.

It is then that John recoils from the balloons.

What was seconds previous a balloon floating in the intermediate area between ground and sky, a childhood token of love and innocence, is now a naked, jaundiced, hairless thing, writhing on a bloodied cord.

It looks wrong, not meant for this world, for those eyes.

It looks as if created for another environment, another planet entirely, ejected from the subconscious of a maniac.

John feels a kinship with the horror, this reject of the universe. He notes to himself that he feels no need to approach it for further study. He has known this creature before; he has seen this heresy in dreams.

He has watched this monster from within waking nightmares.

He has run from its kin under a rain of birds.

He has battled its brother in the recesses of an office.

The Child's face is as inexpressive as John's is repulsed.

Hephaestus looks on from his ivory tower, only to see John's world.

Listen.

The Child releases one of these squirming, writhing, things, and it floats through the air by some unknown aspect of physics.

It floats as if it were still a balloon.

Now, it is no mere balloon.

The doors in John's mind, now open, will no longer shut out these terrifying visions.

The screeching horror rises higher, in doing so fills John's perspective with more and more trunk, more and more tree. He follows the monster on the morbid string as it rises into the branches, if only they still were branches.

It floats into the upper reaches of The Tree.

Oh God, The Tree.

His eyes follow its transit from the base, each new inch a new horror, until the tendril branches begin their dissection.

The Tree now appears as a twisted thing, a reptilian-mammalian-chimerical monster, with a base like piles of rotting leather. The top is slowly shifting to an amorphous, bile spurting

horror.

John wishes it could go back to the way it was, a nice tree in a nice yard, nothing squirming, nothing sinister. As the animal reaches the boughs, the “tree” bends forward, fast, the balloon pops.

A mist of blood rains down upon the child and the man.

A sound of cracking bone and swishing flesh mixes with the echoes of creaking branches and a slow breeze.

The branches snap back into place, the chimera becomes chameleon, again becoming tree. The Tree stops its motion as one last drip on red falls as if in lesser gravity to the abattoir grass.

John is frozen, in shock, and in blood.

John looks to The Tree, to the grass, to The Tree, to the grass, and finally to the others in the yard, shaken.

The Child smiles broadly. “You do learn quickly. The Tree saw you arrive and was nervous. It will be okay now.”

John looks to the glowing form in front of him, now both man and child, and bites back a question. He knows this is something best left to another time for an explanation.

The Tree looks to John and decides on something.

John looks to what is now a child again, and a tiny hand wraps around his own, sticking together with bile and blood.

“Please. This is necessary. This is the way things circle, and again. Please.”

“I trust you, but please tell me to look away before the next feeding.”

“John the Younger,” the child speaks with a voice like gravity, “the next one will be something you need to see. The next is one of rebirth. We will feed three days hence, and remember him that will be again.”

The sway of the trees mimic the laughing of reptiles as the boy skips away. Hephaestus nods in approval from his place above. The man who is new sits down and hopes the bloody grass holds no new secrets.