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The Hole that Must be Filled

I: Absolute Vacancy

The roof is open above us and grey doves float from wall to wall, gliding against the blue like ashes held by a water's languid current. On still wings, they drift before settling atop the building's high walls, its desolate concrete shores running vertical and intruding upon the sky.

At my bare feet, pigeons bob along the floor, stepping closer and pecking at my toes. They do not bother Vee. Standing in the shadows of the cement stairwell, she seems as abandoned as the expansiveness of this warehouse. Only half of her face is discernible, her skin splotched shades of mangled green and brown. A single bloodshot eye observes me, twitching as it blinks. She has been curious like this for months, appearing each morning and remaining until the light wanes and stretches across the cool cement floor. It is then that she gradually recedes, as if the progression of dusk's shadows has skilfully pried her loose.

Darkness breeds a sense of dislocation, further inciting the grief-stricken of Slattery West. Frantic bellowing and the disgruntled stomping of feet compels them toward action. Below the broken windows that gape like mouths stunned by a blow, footsteps slap the pavement. Crazy sounds carry up to me as if through a tunnel. People continuously running, alone or in clustered groups. They are wordless and fleeing; one solid clot of fear wresting their bodies out of shape.

Vee does not return at night. Although sometimes, when I am forced to swallow a handful of Corium to sleep—deep and dreamless—I have

felt a body climbing into bed beside me, holding me closely around my shoulders and crying. Hiccuping. Giggling hesitantly.

My mattress is pushed off into a corner of the building. A minor section of roof remains in the space above me. It covers approximately eleven feet square. I am protected, but the risk of collapse remains a concern. When it rains, I can sit with my legs pulled up close to my chest and watch the water strike the smooth grey concrete, collecting in shallow glassy puddles. The rain rarely blows in on me. There is little wind. Although, occasionally, I sense a few stray drops coolly dabbing my skin, cruelly hinting at the haphazard possibilities of spiritual refreshment.

My wife does not know where I am. I telephone once a week to blankly inform her that I am healthy and alive. She seeks comfort elsewhere. Our bond has been afflicted by the most tyrannical despoiler of contentment. Her mother, a retired loans officer, has moved into our house, and they console each other over the death of Vee.

I do not require consoling. I have discovered this place, and its stark surroundings mirror the absolute vacancy of these feelings that have overtaken me. It is as if I have propped this structure up around me from the sighs and regrets that have become my preoccupation.

Standing from my mattress, I move toward the window nearest me. The steel grid—once set with small square panes—is bent and rusted. Tiny points of glass protrude from the edges. Each window casing is rectangular, and all are set in rows along the extended walls. Pushing my face flush to the grid, I glance eastward, brace the great distance where Slattery Street runs into the city, night leading toward faint light, which purposefully connects to neon colors, punching the darkness. To the west, Slattery dips into pitch blackness, the rutty asphalt only vaguely lit by firelight before vanishing. I have walked in that direction, ebbing as far as despair will allow before the rubble blocked my path. Filthy chunks of cement, and oily swamps, sandflies buzzing, ghost-like and spirited in their invisibility. Black hearts strewn everywhere, faintly pumping, stogged by their new drug-like lag of anguish. For weeks after the death, I lived in the numbed self-absorption of that wayward region, slowly working my way up Slattery, toward this vacant building, to find my niche in the ruins of a more comfortable desolation.

II: Dream Vacation

One knows where one belongs; the massiveness of this abandoned warehouse pins me to the smallness that I accept as mine. I am insignificant in its hollow and remain here for as long as possible before I must walk toward the city for medication. Sleep in the form of tiny capsules, green and smooth in my hand, almost metallic in the way they roll against each other. Additional supplies are required. Tins of corned beef, Irish stew, green peas, corn, bottled water. I secure a bundle of outdated newspapers for the nightly fires. Rotten beams of wood are torn loose from the collapsed walls. Rubble is despair's fuel. It is unattached, dislocated and belonging no where. Only the raging brashness of fire can alter its form, the blossoming of flames. The body breathes, the brittle frame of skin and memory is granted warmth.

In the city, the doctor asks me how I am. I tell him I cannot sleep. What else is there to say? Awake, always. A constant insubstantial companion to myself.

"You take these," he says, writing a script for the proper medication. "They won't hurt you as long as you don't take more than the prescribed amount. One every eight hours."

"Certainly," I tell him. "Of course," I insist, my fingers extended for the white paper that will surely purify, alleviate the heaviness that has formed like an insidiously slow-cracking black stone in my soul.

In the pharmacy below his office, I charge the script to my wife's health plan. I charge my supplies to her grocery account. We owe each other nothing, but everything as well, and the vacuum inspired by such extremes hugs and shoves at our distant bodies, disparity evoking our retarded slur of love.

At dusk, walking back toward the abandoned buildings, I listen to the bleak harmony of moans emitting from the three-storey hollows. Their pleas are brutally suggestive, as if night is a mere underling to the truer pessimism they desire.

I lean out my window. Fiery shadows pulse beyond the black windows across from me. Orange and red shadows flicker among the many melancholic shades of bruised hearts, spitting out what ails them, the crackle and snapping of wood. Smoke rising languidly. The sedentary moaning. I lie flat on my mattress and tilt back my head, allowing a clear passageway for the release. Self-condemnation prods like a slanderer into

my sores, and I moan in unison with the others, the voices seeming so different, yet absolute and identical in their intentions of loss.

Vee watches me eat my lunch, a tin of cold mushroom stems. I drink the juice. It is murky and rich with sodium.

Vee rolls a cola bottle toward me. It clinks along the concrete floor and slows beside where I am sitting. Inside, there is a rolled up note with adolescent hearts drawn across the paper. I pick up the bottle, grip it around its neck, and briskly toss it for the window, where it twirls through the hole and descends in a slow arc. Moments later, I hear the faint flat explosion.

Vee gasps, her single bloodshot eye jerking with fright.

"It's not working," I angrily explain, holding firm, attempting to reason with myself. Vee points a rotting finger my way, her arm slipping from the shadows, lifting into unforgiving light.

"Sweetie." I force the words through hard-edged teeth, "You're dead, baby. Dead."

The air cools off at night. I take a breath and my teeth sting. The air is shrill against my cavities. It jabs into the tender roots like needles. One tooth came out last night in my sleep. Something jagged against the back of my throat woke me and a coughing fit traumatically ensued as I struggled to sit up. My heart punching the sweat through my skin.

There is also an infection in my right hand. A week ago, I scraped it against a piece of rusty steel sticking from the wall. I kept it in my pocket while in the doctor's office, wanting the infection to take its proper course. It has a purpose, a dubious life all its own that wishes to mirror mine. Now, the wound is green around the edges and smells like nothing that has ever struck me. Ingrown toenails swell pink as they inflame the skin, fluid leaking away from me. But I am deserving. My body has sketched the blueprint for my downfall. It aims to turn me out, wanting to break clear of me. I am a traitor, limping through this heart-wrenched limbo. There is a hacksaw beside my bed should anything need to come off. I comfort and nurse the thought: There is no way, ever, of leaving here whole.

Physical realizations slowly displace the debris that is my flimsy inner self. The ignorant and assuming portions of my soul dim, and only the sturdy truth of biological heritage remains to soundly outline the complex.

Newspapers blow around me. They circle in slow intriguing whirlwinds. A broadsheet catches against my feet. I read a headline from the travel section: DREAM VACATION. Smugly, I wonder about these words, knowing how they mean so much to me, and an anonymous laugh nervously escapes my chest. It comes unexpectedly, the sound rolling and booming as it fills the warehouse, crackling off into the corners, then bouncing back, as it rushes up to face the sadness of my suddenly sorry expression.

Tonight is a night for sleep. Absolution from heart-racing dread and cold sweats. Five Corium and, in time, my eyelids sink, drag me briskly under. I descend and rise toward a pleasant thoughtless suspension. The dark is warm, deadening my lips. Vee kneels into the mattress and kisses me. I am certain of her position, her chilly hands carefully placed onto my chest. She is everywhere, her breath like fingertips, tingling. Eyes blind but searching, her frigid tongue pries into me. Her hand down my trousers, nipping at my sex with her sexless touch. A mockery made of all, as her tongue throbs and swells against my lame tongue, numbly taunting my lost virility.

Good morning, I think, awaking in a blank state of mind. One thought, Good morning. I do not remember sleep. Instead, I recall a lack of sensation, a friendly, yet vaguely perilous, void.

The space next to me holds the indentation of a thin body. A fossil set into the mattress, soft and continuing to form. I slip my palm into the crevice. Somewhere, Vee closes her eyes and purrs, longingly.

"Alive," she whispers like a girl with two wet lungs, sunken cheeks, swollen eyes, struggling for air, gurgling, a thickly fluid, inquisitive tone glazing each bubbled breath, rounding out, slowly popping, huge transparent membranes snapping open, but offering nothing to claim as reasonable, nothing inside to claim as mine, merely the energy-succeeding systematic release of air. Christ! The marvels of life.

III: Infection

A man in a forest-green raglan and a beige scarf tucked inside his lapels walks along the warehouse flooring. His hands are in his pockets, his hair freshly clipped and stylish, trimmed short along his neck.

Tipping back his head, he studiously analyses the open hole above us, the sky as one huge blue ditch. He does not see me in the far corner, on my mattress, carelessly watching him. Stooping, he picks up a stone and tosses it toward the grey doves.

"Yaaaah," he shouts. "Move it." The doves flutter up, swim against the sky, then settle on their shores again. They do not worry about a man so far below, a man so uselessly small. He strolls forward, stares down at the floor where a wide bar of bird droppings has collected. The man steps back and curses. As if in a gesture of retaliation, he whips a short cylinder from his pocket, uncaps it and coaxes out the roll of brittle paper. His hands unfurl the parchment and he holds it up, glancing from wall to wall, whispering to himself. Counting steps, one foot after the other, he walks, the sound of his smooth soles sweeping the concrete.

I stand slowly. Still, he does not see me. Bending forward, I pick up the hacksaw and confidently hold the handle. It fits smoothly into the crevices of my palm. The man's sense of purpose disturbs me to no end. Off with his head. This is what Vee would say. Even in adolescence, she quoted from her favorite fairy tale books, announcing these ideas as if to playfully salute the stubbornness of childhood simplicity.

And this is what she whispers now. Behind me, in her place in the derelict stairwell, she whispers, Off with his head. The easiest solution. I turn to regard her and she is nodding; face half in, half out of the shadows, bloodshot eye burned a deep glossy red by sea water. A tangle of greenish-brown kelp majestically draped around her lovely pale throat. She spits up water and a tiny red fish slips out, flapping speculatively like an untried tongue as it strikes the concrete, inches from the greenish pallor of her toes. Vee's T-shirt is shredded across the front, torn by edges of the most elaborate coral, one cadaverous nipple extending from the fabric. With her steady fingernail, she slices the material. Mangled patches of flesh split open, marring the idolized teenage fullness of her breast. Two words set across the T-shirt: DREAM VACATION, the letters slowly running in a blur.

The man's footsteps fade. I look down at my hand and the gangrene is spreading. The gangrene is the color of the man's green raglan. Perhaps he has stepped from my wound and now plans to take this structure down; the man, like my hand, threatening to displace me. He will destroy my comfortable desolation. I lift the hacksaw with a start, having momentarily forgotten its presence. Drawing it low and close, I press the wide razor teeth against my wrist and tug back. The steel points tear into my skin, catch and briskly pop open the surface, until the entire area is raised and red, swelling as I work through the white sweat and the sizzling in my ears. Hacking unsteadily, I find sloppy disappointment in what I am telling myself, how the strokes must be deliberate and forceful, but I find it impossible to accomplish even this measly chore. I am halfway there, dissolving into unconsciousness.

The bones splinter, bend and dangle. I see my skeleton somewhere else, an instructor with a pointer, tapping, far away, this hand the only thing covered by skin, this hand connected by a flimsy section of discolored tendon. My flesh appears white and empty; the greater unmuddied body of another who has built me. The instructor cracking the pointer across one knee. Cracking it. Cracking.

I hear the hacksaw strike the floor, reach with a weightless hand to seize hold of the twitching fingers I am dismantling. I tug them until the hand snaps free, something clicking, the sound distantly buried in me. I swallow. Thick disconnected fingers jerking against the living fingers that hold them. Blood spurts from my arm.

Rushing as it does, the red fluid fills the pool of sparkling whiteness that presses in on me, eating up my eyes, then blaring into my ears with a ferocious sound—buzzing and ringing at once as the building tips sideways, slowly, nicely. One final home run crack into unconsciousness.

IV: Providence

I awake in a hospital bed, my stump wrapped in a bandage. For weeks, I will not say a word, finding no comfort in the packaged sterility of institutionalized answers. They settle nothing. But then I ask the doctor, "When can I leave?" He tells me I can leave whenever I choose, but he does not recommend an early departure. He suggests a course of physiotherapy, just two floors down. He tells me I should telephone someone close to me. He is happy to see that I have spoken. My words

have made his day. He explains the availability of professional help. Guidance. Counselling. Nutrition. Exercise. He is calm and patient as he talks about the mind, so that I smile at the importance he entrusts in his shaman beliefs. I understand more than he could ever dream of systematically storing on his clinical chart. My thoughts reeling with the undefinability that lurks forever out of reach. No pencil tip. No paper. No synoptic connection. Simply the spirit excreting another chewful of waste.

"Hands-on experience," I want to say to him, but the irony of the thought is much too bitter to expel.

I regain my strength walking the corridors. Three days later, I change into my street clothes, and leave via the stairwell at the end of the hallway. They did not tell me who was responsible for notifying the hospital. They simply said they found me lying in the street toward the end of Slattery. I prompt my own scenarios, imagine the hospital receiving several anxious, yet anonymous phone calls. Bland voices impressing the need for my well-being, so I could rejoin the stricken of Slattery West and further torture myself. I imagine the muddled calls of those who reside in the buildings surrounding me, those who have felt the death of another, my partners in the tragedy of flesh voiding its soul.

Or perhaps it was the man in the forest-green raglan who notified the hospital, wanting to integrate me into his plan, to salvage what little remains of me and claim my inners as a work of industrial resurrection. There was a certain brash clumsiness about the man with his cylinder of blue-veined plans. I call him "Providence" for his caring mechanical guidance, his struggle to efficiently reshape the world through the physical and chemical workings of man's ever-wobbly ingenuity.

The man in the forest-green raglan carefully arranges the marker pins on his map. My face is drawn on the head of one such pin. He has stuck me here, and I realize that his heartbeat is rampant and pounding from the concentration of his task, the jerking as a surge of manipulative power, or to the beat of a heartfelt, pitying rhythm. I try to concentrate within myself, to discern the truth, but the images are infinite and evasive. I must admit to myself: thoughts have no focus. They are merely brief insubstantial shards to which we wrongly, pretentiously, apply depth.

In the concrete building, on first sight of the man, I noticed the furious pulsing behind his raglan in the space above his heart. His plan was not to save the building, but to rescue me from my own neglected body. By condemning and wrecking the structure of my comfortable desolation, he would cast me out into the street, and quickly construct another building to house a variety of stabler lives. Day by day, this man called Providence is wishfully revealing his architectural plans for a new spirituality—clean, livable space that is certain to (and so simply so) absolve and re-shelter the morally bankrupt such as I. One thought. Fleeting. I stomp it with my foot.

Someone has swept the floor clean in the building while I was away. Someone has straightened my things: my hollow shell of a radio, my tins of food neatly stacked in a pyramid against the wall. My bed has been covered with fresh sheets—the straightest white and pale blue stripes running down the length.

I glance behind me and see the concrete floor, my footprints wet in the faint dust that has settled. It is raining outside, but it is dry in here. Dark with only a vague wash of light through the windows. I look up and see that someone has constructed a makeshift roof of wooden planks. Someone wants to rebuild my life, and I sadly assume it is Vee.

My left hand opens and closes. The fingers stir. They startle me like this, without the presence of their symmetrical twins. My pinky presses awkwardly against the finger beside it. It irritates me to the point of nervous stutter. I wonder where my right hand is at this moment. Being forced to use my left one, it seems as if my sense of focus has been magnetically redirected. I bend the fingers of my left hand and my right-sided thoughts wander elaborately.

Someone is making an appeasing home of this place for me. Or they are attempting to drive me out. My new home beautiful has come to resemble a theatrical stage; a play of utter confusion where I cannot locate a single gritty prop.

All of these things done for me, for or against me. Death of another inflating my sense of identity. My ego threatened by this trauma. Me. It is not the death of Vee that I am mourning. Rather, it is the brilliant light that her demise has cast upon my certain mortality. Snatched from the air

as she was, Vee's body has left a gaping hole into which—I realize, one day—I must step.

Kneeling onto the fresh sheets, I rub my palm along the fabric and stare into the concrete corner. I lie down and notice a rat standing on its hind legs; still and watching me with pink infinite eyes. I am tired, my body heavy from the long walk back.

"If I could just get inside of you," I mutter from the woolly clutches of sleep. "Be you."

My eyes are closed. They want to open, but new left-handed dreams tempt me. I see the rat in my head as it chatters humorously, and turns, casually sweeping its thick ribbed tail.

"To be hated so," I sleepily plead, the weight of my exhaustion pleasantly confounding me. "To be despised."

The rat curls its soft, grey body and scampers toward the safety of the crumbling wall. It sniffs there for a moment, then stops, nervously regarding me.

"To be touched by such ugliness," I quietly cry into my clean pillow slip. And so goes my dream. Lovely seclusion as my lame ego draws in. The startled penis as all of me.

I understand that the sadness I feel is pity for myself, for why should I feel sorrow for Vee? Quite simply, she is dead. She is nothing. Gone. No sadness. No happiness. I am not sorry for her.

I am sorry for myself. I am pounding *my* own heart and drowning in *my* own pain. I am so afraid of her hollow sacred breaths that pursue each of mine. I dream belief. I dream a warm hand on my cold shoulder. And I awake with a start to see the closeness of the ceiling. The unbearable beauty of two bugs mating there. One black dot atop the other. My blunt eyes through which I cannot cry.

That night, I hear them moaning and stomping on my roof. Planks are shoved away to tumble down, heavily crashing and clattering against the floor. The roof opens up to uncover their disfigured outlines staring down, some of them without hands, arms or legs. Hobbled, awkwardly shuffling, limping slightly forward and back.

They whisper stale phrases to each other, words of standard issue, pronounced flatly in guilt-ridden drones.

"No, no way," whispers one of my neighbors, "He tries, thinking now to rebuild his life. Dumb . . . misdirected."

Whispers another: "Forget it . . ."

An eight-foot plank crashes down. Dust languidly rises. I can smell and taste its blandness, or is it the siftings of decay, mingling in my blood? Vee's ashen powder losing its fragrance, settling on my lips.

Whispers: "Could he have saved her? Could he have . . ."

Long, thick planks of wood collapsing inside and beyond me. The black sky opening up, its oppressive weight further encouraging my sense of apathy.

Whispers: "She was young, beautiful girl, growing. And she resembled him, much resembled. Not growing now. No one growing."

Quick laughter.

Dust floating in the air. Brown shovelfuls of dirt settling in my veins. Vee through the haze. Swollen and naked. Round along her belly and thighs. Her throat, her wrists, bloated by death's pregnancy, the splitting of all skin, wider, when black labor hits.

Serious spastic whispers: "Yes, guilt. Smother, dismiss, no concern. Guilt. Life . . . a single point, one focus, loss of, only of, itself." The solemn voice fades, rushed by a pack of gleeful shrieks, slowly deepening, husky and volatile, saddening against the flimsy thought of hands that now touch nothing. A monotone of dull idiot sobs.

Hands over her crack, Vee pisses through her fingers. Black Juice.

"Daddy," she says, coquettishly, biting her lower lip. Arms slowly, mockingly swimming through thin air, she teases. "Rescue," she says, whimpering, tittering, showing me her perfect teeth.

Laughter high above me. My crippled neighbors expelling their amusement. A rumble of mongoloid disjointed stutters, over-lapping and feverishly bucking out of sync, "Wuh-wuh-wee. Nuh-Nnknow."

V: Moving Back

Rain streams down on me. It patters against the concrete flooring like childish laughter. Children playfully circle me and my wife. We stare out at the ocean where Vee had been swimming. The children hold hands and skip around us, their shrill carefree sing-song deprived of the dense

calamity of mature knowledge. Their tone makes them hurtfully one as their words grow more and more insistent. Sweet ocean accompaniment guides their lyrics. Waves. They are singing for our compliance, wanting to bury us up to our necks in sand.

Moving back. The beginning of our vacation. A time of rest from the culmination of stress and work. Outside our hotel room, along the hallway of the fourth floor, I can look down, through the huge pane of the glass compound, to see Vee silently swimming in the pool on the second floor. She glides, expanding and retracting under water, as if each stroke is a breath, drawing her forward.

I watch her re-surface at the end of the pool and pause, buoyantly holding onto the edge as she runs a hand over her sleek hair. Seconds later, she gracefully turns to dip back under. She is strengthening her stroke for the rush of the sea. She will swim in it tomorrow. To test the current, she tells me. Enough pretending. Do or die. Sink or swim.

The treason of womanhood prompting her. The extending of her body beyond itself.

"What's your point?" I remember asking her.

"I just have to, Dad."

The ever-popular something to prove. How often have I fallen victim to such social pressures? But Vee was not prepared for the fleeing from all that can and will go wrong.

It is a trick for us to live beyond what we have proven. Sometimes displaced by death, other times reprieved. It is only the spineless character named Providence who carelessly covers his eyes, thus leaving chaos unattended to manically divide the lot.

I stand on the beach with the warm sand between my toes and the full sun blazing on my forehead, my cheeks and arms. The heat is delicious and giving to every inch of my skin. My wife stands beside me, holding my hand. We watch Vee swim out into the rising white foam. She bobs in the grey tumultuous waves, turns and lurches toward us, awkwardly signalling as her mouth open and closes, spitting out what wants to enter her.

"Look," she calls. "Look how far I can go." She shouts, swallowing a mouthful of white frizzling sea water. Coughing, she appears stuck,

wanting to pull free, to know the openness of alive now. The liquid mass surges and settles, holds her as she gasps, her words so small, but seeming free and smooth for an instant: "What do you think? Look at me. Look what I can do. I love you. Do you love me more?" The undercurrent tugs her body down, only her fingertips above the crests. Moments later, she reappears, panicky, water gushing from her stiffening throat. Waving her arms frantically, "I'm . . . fine," she attempts, shouting. "I'm okay." Coughing and sputtering, she is clutched by a force far beneath her. Yanked under again, her eyes still open. Salt water stinging and filling each hole. One vast spilling pool of tears, rolling over her.

We watch with the sand between our toes, the sun beating on our faces. My teeth are clenched and my wife's fingernails cut into my soft palm.

Vee has made it on her own. She has legitimized our fears, and we will never see her again. We are speechless with disbelief; unwilling to understand that only through this bleak, doubtless separation is it possible for a child to embrace absolute and unconditional liberty.

"Why" is the word of the moment. It is printed on the calling card of grief.

"Look at what I'm doing," Vee calls down.

I stare up at the sky to see her standing on the lip of the concrete wall. She lifts her hands and grey doves flutter, attached to her fingers by guide wires.

"What are you proving?" she implores, walking, as if on a tightrope.

I shrug and pull my legs close to my chest, hold them for fear of how hers are stepping so close to disaster.

"I'm dead," she says and shrugs as well, equally unresolved in her passion. "I wanted to prove something."

"What? What is there to prove?"

"Who knows!" Vee laughs light-heartedly and watches her fingers move. Spinning on one heel, she carelessly shouts, "There's no point in anything when you're dead."

Geography of despair. Dank and dark furrows. Black dirt that gives way behind each progressive footstep. Depressions that I sink into, sink

deeper with each step until the ditch's lip can close above me, but refuses to do so, always allowing the slightest murkiest glimpse of light. The geography of despair is a vast, intangible sense of climate. The weather never changes. It is heaviness with a hole cut through the centre, only the hole is much denser than what it has been cut from, and you fit into it so perfectly.

The man in the forest-green raglan struggles to overcome this geography. He is concerned with reshaping emotions out of steel, bulldozing all crumbling structures of faithlessness well beyond human sight. Providence prays for crossbeams and foundations to become my nature. Once the land is cleansed, the spirit harbors the immaculate. It is simple mechanics. Reductive spirituality.

But Providence does not realize that the geography of despair is undefinable, without longitude or latitude. Its plottings become the form that is the soul's disgruntled outline—a theological product of man's ever-changing morality—struggling to fit beneath my skin.

VI: Resurrection

Dusk drives Vee farther back into the shadows. Receding, she says, "I'm rotting. I'm no one. Remember me alive and with light in my eyes. That's all."

"I miss you," I tell her, knees against the stone-cold flooring as I cry the warmest, fullest tears of my life. "I want you back. If only I could . . . if only you were . . . if only I was . . ." I tempt myself with such crippling questions. They occupy me, shadows cast from greedy selfish abstractions. I strain for discovery of answers to a dilemma I secretly realize is hopeless and futile.

"You're silly," says Vee. "Just watch." In the final soulful light before darkness, she bends her tongue with her fingers, tears it loose in demonstration, and playfully tosses it. "Catch," snaps her tongue in mid-air, slowly curling down, tumbling toward my open mouth to lodge there and tangle with mine, so I cannot even speak.

I cannot even say to her, "You leave me so lovingly speechless and choking."

I lift a thin piece of splintered wood from the rubble swept into a corner of the building, crack it across my knee until I have four pieces.

Before searching for a top, I make certain each strip of wood is the exact length. Then, I stand and nudge through the chunks of cement and broken beams along the edges of the warehouse. A section of glass catches my eye. A reflection of the fire I have lighted behind me pulses in the glass, flickering to pass on its reassuring, conspiratory warmth.

I grip and lift the sharp edge to see it is a perfect square, one of the small panes from a window that had tumbled out and landed on a tear of cardboard box, unshattered. Returning to my place beside the fire, I kneel and awkwardly attempt to stand all four wood pieces on their ends before carefully placing the section of glass atop the short posts. The structure remains in place when I nervously guide my hands away.

Rising to my feet, I toss another piece of wood onto the fire. Sparks scatter for an instant and the flames lurch and hang. With uncertain interest, I wander around the model of the tiny house that I have erected, questioning the ease with which the task was performed, the flames from the fire longing so desperately to lull me toward revival.

But it is not until the fire ebbs that I hear Vee's words. The recognition of her voice is painful, for there is no other who will ever speak as she: "I have that piece of you to keep me warm," she says, "That place inside of you that feels so empty; it is the part I have taken away from you. I'll sleep with it forever." She would cry if she could, but the release of tears requires a body to enviously mimic the elements, "Your love is keeping me warm."

VII: Forgiveness

The man with the green raglan pays another visit. This time he walks straight for me, briskly and with purpose. Pulling open his raglan, he displays the tiny man fixed to his chest. The miniature crown of thorns on a festering head. The squirming puny body like a worm puppet.

"Get the point," the man says sharply, forcefully drawing closed the flaps of his raglan. "What could you possibly know about pain?"

"Nothing," I admit.

He snaps open his raglan again and stomps forward with one foot as if to startle me with the sight. The tiny figure—secured to the place above his heart—weakly opens and closes his tortured bug-sized eyes.

"The equipment is coming," croaks the tiny man, his head resting on a weak angle. "To take this place down. Your will is in jeopardy."

"How can I understand?"

"Religion," squeaks the voice, twisted dry lips scraping painfully over each other, "is the fiercest of bulldozers, ripping through human uncertainty. What are you harboring?" he pleads, weeping, "I forgive you. I forgive Vee." Gasping in agony, he tautly dangles from his cross and stares skyward. Wailing: "I forgive each and every one of you, again and again. How much must I endure? How much forgiveness? Centuries. Centuries. I am filled with the cancer of excuses. Forgive those who murder, the grim illness of men who rape thy neighbor's wife, thy neighbor's children. To pardon the sloth-like progression of foolish thoughts, of petty sins. And above all else . . ." He hesitates, seemingly fearing the paramount wisdom of own his words. "I unconditionally absolve myself for kindly permitting the continuance of this massive, over-budgeted string of funerals."

Providence pulls closed his raglan. I see the blue crosses tattooed onto the backs of his hands.

"You're just another grey dove," he says, pointing upwards, "moving without bearings. A rat with clipped wings, huddled here.

"Find direction," he insists, "that will close your opened body." His knowing eyes stare down at the house that I have built, the glass roof covered with soot from the extinguished fire alongside of it. "Clean it up," he says. "So you can see through your roof again, down and into your true workings."

I smile at him.

"Hey!" he snaps, slapping at my arm. "That blasphemous smile!"

"See through my roof again?" I say, amused.

"See down into your life," Providence commands, "instead of this remorseful slum that confines you, glorifying your own anguish, your own fraudulent self-importance. What do you feel? Guilt. Self-pity. Regret. This powerlessness you sense is your uncommitted love of God."

"This is my home," I offer.

Providence stops himself from slapping me again. He holds his raised hand in the air for a moment, then steps away. "Tomorrow, the workmen come. The walls will be beaten loose. The space cleared. You will see

everything come apart. All the pain exposed. The circuits of nervework beneath the shell of this dwelling. Mere flesh. Like teeth being pulled, you will feel new skin and sense the clearing."

VIII: Translating Despair

With hesitation, I step from the building (the deciphering of an urge prompting my departure). Fearing the demolition may result in my literal collapse, I nervously edge away from its impending and consumptive certainty.

Turning one way, there is light, the other way, darkness. I can move toward sight, toward the company of others, or to the west, into the darkness that is my mono-self.

People are standing on the rooftops watching me. Limbless, blind and crippled, their souls gashed open and glossily dangling below their knees. I unwind the bandage that covers the stub of my right arm to discover the stump is healed over. The fingers that lifted Vee from crib to childhood, gone. A huge scab covers the wound. I begin to peel its edge loose and it comes away freely, the new skin suddenly fresh, alive, pink and breathing.

I turn for the lights that flicker tentatively, almost foolishly, against dusk. The city draws me with the promise of sight, however shallow. I am seduced eastward, despite moans of objections, despite the barrage of limbs that are tossed at me. Hands, feet, fingers, impotent cocks.

"It was your fault," drone the voices. "Or it was our fault." They moan louder and viciously beat themselves until their bodies are one throbbing, purplish-black tattoo.

My right hand, the hand I used for many simple things has been severed. I regard the blunt limb and think of Vee, her bloodshot eye closing. My missing fingers guiding shut the lids. Left-handed fingertips sensing textures with new-found perception. I must switch the sides of my brain. Simple grey understanding and acceptance of the wound. My fingers trace the scar tissue like braille, translating despair into sensual invigoration. A series of rising bumps that will guide me back toward sensation, toward the touch of my wife, the fusing. Wedded bliss.

I stand amidst this slum and pray to Providence. I snap his hand away from his careless eyes. But he simply laughs and lifts his other hand,

making himself blind while he prods the figure beneath his raglan with his free hand. I attempt to mimic his carefree smile. But he does not see me any more. His eyes are covered as he steps backward into the ominous west.

And I must wonder if I am cursed again.

My sense of direction is imbalanced. I stare down, at the carnage of severed limbs that tremble around my feet. I lift a hand from the road, hold it to my stump and twist it one way, then the other. It will not fit. It is a woman's feminine hand. I let it drop, watch the fingers bend against the pavement, cushioning its fall, but the fingers do not straighten. A partial rigor mortis has set in. A stiffness to be worked against. And I can only guess at the years that must be endured before my thoughts begin to loosen.

My fingers sense momentum as I reluctantly step away, but they are ignorant and out of sync, knowing little of what they must touch to be forgiven.