

Visions of a Dying Mind

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I

Stephen awoke in the gutter, his mind clouded by the haze that often comes with a drinking binge of Olympian proportions. He rubbed his temples gingerly and wondered at the activities within his skull. He felt very strongly that the substance was dripping languidly off his brain. He attempted to sit upright, and found the pain that greeted his head as he did so to be too great. It was as if his brain were a saturated sponge, and his skull the cracking fish bowl that held it. As he pondered this development, Stephen pawed at a small hole in his jacket. Although he couldn't see it, Stephen determined from the charred feeling of the hole that this must be a cigarette burn.

Suddenly his mind flashed back to the night before. He had met a man named Gallunthorp underneath the screaming red lights.

An uppity bastard if ever I saw one. Stephen had thought.

Gallunthorp was the sort of chap you might expect to meet at a gathering of Old Money in upscale New York, a spectacle over one eye and nose held ever over the dog he was deigning to speak with.

Aside from the addition of an extra lens that formed the pair of spindly glasses perched atop Gallunthorp's nose, Stephen though he fit this image perfectly.

Stephen remembered that he had been trying to talk his way into a young Brunette's bed chamber – he forgot the girl's name, which was unimportant to begin with – when Gallunthorp had come strolling up with a young bubbly Blonde on his left arm, puffing away at his cigarette, and clacking to the Blonde about some business transaction in an obvious attempt to woo her.

“Well hello there my young lady, and how fare thee this fine summer's eve?”

As he took her hand the young Brunette smiled and blushed sheepishly. Her eyelashes fluttered as she giggled like a schoolgirl who's teasing a boy she has a crush on.

“You know, I really do find that people often ask the same pointless questions when they meet.” Stephen calmly interjected.

“Is this man bothering you my dear?” Gallunthorp asked hotly.

“Oh don't worry about him. He's nobody.”

“Indeed.” Gallunthorp agreed. “Care to join us?” an inquiring Gallunthorp asked, extending his arm to the side.

The girl simply fluttered her eyelashes and beamed before taking the man's arm in the crook of hers and waltzing away from a dejected Stephen.

As she walked away Stephen thought of how her dark brown hair bounced, and of how it would do so were she in a more compromising position as well.

Finding no other such treat that he might suckle, Stephen had begun to stroll through the hallway towards the increasingly louder sound of a riotous jazz band and insane laughter. Somewhere up ahead they were breaking the spines of snakes.

“GET UP YOU LAZY BASTARD!”

came the shout from an overweight policeman standing directly above Stephen. His recollection of the previous night's events having been broken by the policeman's screams and altogether shattered by the swift kick to the abdomen which followed it, Stephen turned his thoughts towards the matter in front of him. He felt as if he were going to vomit. He did.

II

Officer John Edward Livingston had been dealing with drunks like the disgusting specimen in front of him for years. He always wondered why they felt that it was so hard to check into a cheap motel, or simply sober up enough to drive home. He thought he knew the answer. *The savages can't control themselves.* He thought. Being no stranger to the bottle himself, Officer Livingston knew how easy it was to go a tad overboard on the drinking. But he had always had the brains to put himself in a good position before bingeing. And that's what it really came down to. These drunks he found lying in the streets in the wee hours of the morning did these things out of sheer fucking *stupidity*.

Even that didn't bother him so much. It's when they fucked with him. That's when he snapped.

Stephen's vomit burst out of his mouth and onto the officer's shoes. Chunks of food and bile splashed onto the officer's pants as well as onto Stephen's hands. Stephen barely had a chance to breathe before the officer grabbed him roughly by the throat and lifted him into a face-to-face view.

His voice heavy with barely controlled rage and his thick English accent, Livingston slowly sputtered out "Now listen to me lad. You know what you just done here?"

Though the vomit, the horrific hangover, and his general fear of the situation made talking difficult Stephen managed an "I..I'm suh..suh soor-" before he was cut off by the viscous "You're fucking SORRY!" of Livingston.

Suddenly the officer's head was flying towards Stephen's skull. Stephen barely had time to envision a fish bowl shattering before Livingston's skull collided with his.

The remaining contents of Stephen's stomach came spilling out onto the street as blackness mercifully overcame him.

Stephen came to in a prison cell. The walls were a filth-caked cream color, and were riddled with holes from insects. He was given only a toilet, which was more of a metal bowl than anything else.

His head was propped up against the wall so that he viewed his newly acquired shitter at a rather peculiar angle. One that made it seem rather slanted. Stephen imagined himself trying to relieve himself while constantly sliding to the right.

I suppose I'd at least have the wall to push myself against. He thought.

"Like what ya see do ya?" a tough black cop asked Stephen.

Stephen didn't reply. To say what his on his mind was to invite persecution. He simply stared dully at the toilet, noting the flies that were hungrily looking for new fecal matter to devour.

He thought that was what businessmen ought to look like when they hunted for money. But then, deep down Stephen knew he would wallow in wealth should he ever be given the chance.

"Hey fuck you!" came a muted shout from somewhere else in the prison.

As Stephen listened to the shouts and the sounds of blunt objects pounding into an inmate, he remarked upon the blows he had himself received in his lifetime. Emotional rejection mainly. Oh the gorgeous women he'd seen. Not many wanted to be with Stephen, however.

"Not my type" they'd say in their horribly polite manner.

Stephen was no stranger to pain.

"Oh DO quit your whining Stephen!" his mother would often say to him when he would complain that it was too hot or too cold. Or when it was so damp in his room that he contracted a fever. At least he thought that was why.

But digging his nails ever deeper into the scabs that lined the roadmap of his life was Stephen's specialty.

In truth, Stephen would have admitted he wasn't good at much else.

"Hey, you're free to go." The guard said as he turned the lock in Stephen's cell.

III

What was I drinking? Stephen thought, going back to the night of the party.

Let's see, there was the Green Fairy of course. That was Stephen's favorite. Couldn't afford it very often, of course, but then Jack had taken care of that.

Jack Wellington was the reason Stephen was at that party, Stephen now remembered. For it was Jack alone amongst the snobs of his clique who enjoyed the occasional conversation with a destitute nobody like Stephen.

Gave him a look into the window of a diseased madman he said.

Stephen hadn't much cared for that, but he figured he could use this Jack all the same.

A lever to be pushed.

He hadn't expected the moths to eat his invitation.

"Now, when you get to the party, be sure to present this. OK Stephen old chap?" reminded Jack. Stephen had muttered "of course" and nodded, stuffing the invitation into his coat pocket. This was a few days before the party.

Each day as he toiled endlessly at his monotonous job Stephen thought of the party as an 8 year old daydreamer would during school.

He had constantly made sure that the invitation was still in his coat pocket, for Stephen only ever had the one dark brown frayed and stained coat.

Then one day Stephen reached down and found nothing but a hole. The invitation was gone.

He looked down in horror to see his long, emaciated fingers poking through the space left by the hole in his pocket lining.

Stephen let out a piercing shriek as a lone moth fluttered effortlessly by Stephen's ear.

Stephen had a feeling then much like that of being robbed of one's heart and soul by a venomous apparition. It was as if some unseen figure had sold the entire lot of Stephen's life for a trinket. Somewhere he could swear he heard someone sardonically laughing at him. Laughing so hard that Stephen thought the invisible assailant's organs must surely burst.

What the fuck was he going to do now?

Stephen had pondered this question at least 3 times every minute until the hour of the party. It was a warm and slightly humid summer night in the city. Equally perfect for sitting in one's garden sipping tea or fucking a whore in some rotting apartment. It was as if even the god's shit would come out gold this evening.

Yet none of this touched Stephen's rapidly beating heart. He approached the doorman with his stomach in knots, sweat upon his brow, his head hanging as heavy as lead, and what felt like a thousand worms in his stomach.

"Invitation Please." Requested the doorman curtly.

"Well, you see" Stephen began hopelessly when suddenly he saw his chance to gain entry.

Stephen recalled that the host of the party was a man named Northrup, but more importantly that this man had a taste for the white of H.

After a few guests who had arrived directly behind Stephen presented their invitation, Stephen leaned in close and whispered in the ear of the doorman:

"My invitation lies within the flame and below the tourniquet."

While usually quite staunch in his position at the door, the short man whom Stephen spoke to asked few questions when it came to Lord Northrup's more exotic activities.

"Very good sir." Concluded the doorman with a nod.

And with that, Stephen entered the house where he was to first meet, amongst others, Gallunthorp.

IV

Actually, that isn't exactly what happened. The moths did in fact eat right through Stephen's coat pocket, but the invitation was a mere formality. Stephen was allowed in because Jack had announced he was attending. All was well between Jack and Northrup. Stephen simply possessed an imagination; an ability to create reality out of pure thought that was so powerful he was forced to suppress it in order to exist. At least he told himself this, deep in the dark of his subconscious.

No matter how his unconscious beauty screamed to be let out, Stephen persisted in his mundane idiocy. For it was fear that held the day within Stephen's soul, as is the case with most men.

Stephen thought these things to himself, for he often liked to play these types of games.

Unlike Gallunthorp, who found truth and delight in such readings as *A Message to Garcia* and *The Bible*, Stephen found his utmost joy in placing himself in the gray lives of destitute artists, starving cowards, and madmen. He didn't even think about reading. For what true pauper really read literature except as a child?

Stephen did, however, attend the party, and it was this that his thoughts returned to.

I remember a small fish fighting out its last moments in a saucer by a fireplace. No one else was in the room but myself. He flopped helplessly, his eye questing for anything which would extend the agonizingly few moments of his life. I remember slanted doorways bathed in red lights. I

remember the tasty girls who walked the halls and I remember suppressing my homoerotic urges when young boys dressed in fine velvet walked past.

Stephen didn't care much to remember any more. He simply wanted to go home and rest his aching body.

Stephen's apartment consisted of a small musty room with paint that flaked off constantly, which was the master bedroom, and a seemingly ancient kitchen with pipes that leaked constantly.

There were 2 bathrooms per floor in Stephen's complex, but no matter which floor you were on, you could be sure to find the bathroom in immense decay.

Still, a place to rest my weary head is more than many have. Stephen thought to himself as he turned his rusted key and pushed open the door to his dark apartment.

The cans flew down the line, and Stephen finished every one.

The endless pounding on industrial machinery got to most people. Stephen hated it too.

The aristocrats' goddamn tuna cans always flew down this rusted assembly line.

Sometimes he just wanted to stick his whole arm into the mass of machinery and be done with it.

A simple excuse not to do anything, to be absolutely worthless. That was all he wanted.

As long as he had arms and a brain he was useful, even if for nothing more than a paper pusher or a drone in one of the world's endless chain of hives.

The scary thing was that Stephen couldn't see the head of this beast. He had no idea where it ended or began, or what 'it' even was at all.

A tangled blur of loathing, filth, and deceit crept about the fringes of his id, but he couldn't really see anything.

Can you?

If Ms. Beech's dog shits on my doorstep one more time I will end its life. Stephen thought grimly. *I don't want to end up like some poor disgruntled fuck who thinks that murdering some cat is going to change anything though. That only happens in movies.*

So, Stephen simply put a bullet into Ms. Beech's head, and left town.

But he forgot about the child.

V

Stephen Joseph Hawkins awoke on the morning of August 12th to the sticky mess that was his nocturnal emission. In the bathroom, a faucet was dripping.

Drip – Drip – Drip

The sky was a dull gray, but Stephen knew this to be a farce. *Soon*, he thought, *the summer sun will burst through that gray haze like so much dust.*

And he was right; as Stephen went to work that day, the sun was a constant companion to the top of his head.

The day, as well as each of the 16 which preceded it, passed in an uneventful stupor. Stephen acted out of reflex, higher-ups paid their dues, and machines sweat. Stephen would end each night with a shot of cognac before his head hit the dirty rectangular fluff he called a pillow.

Stephen had very few friends at work. In fact, he would probably call the few he did have acquaintances rather than friends.

Stephen sometimes wondered why it was that so few friendships developed as a result of a workplace relationship.

Perhaps it's because we were not meant to work. He sometimes offered as an answer to this question.

Stephen didn't waver from his daily routine once. In fact, it would be fair to say that he was even more focused than usual.

Shit again. Stephen thought as he stared at the small hill of dog shit on his doorstep.

Stephen was going through a typical bout of summer depression. The weather and temperature excited his allergies, and he generally didn't care to be trapped in the grind of the workplace during a period that was famed for adventure and vacation time. A general malaise could be felt throughout the city and Stephen often wondered that perhaps it did not center in the pit of his heart.

That isn't to say that Stephen had any grand plans for his life. It was just in times such as these he felt particularly useless. When things such as these happened, these feelings began to mingle with feelings of intense resentment for all that was wrong with the world in which Stephen lived. It began as a simple black dot, tingling in the back of his mind. Soon the blackness would grow and it would begin to infest the smaller sections of Stephen's mind, choking them out in fuzzy darkness.

After a while Stephen felt as if he were seeing the world through a black fog where shapes of red sometimes came through and murmured senseless insanities to him.

Absolute disgust was uppermost amongst his feelings.

Then, one morning he awoke in a wash of bleached bone light and felt that he knew the cause of these feelings. It was then that he decided to murder Ms. Beech's little dog, Biko.

The black cloud then receded slightly as he dressed himself and left for work. It wasn't gone, however. In fact, it almost never left during this period of Stephen's life; but it allowed him to see the world more in shades of green and in muted tones than in objects of hatred and dissonance.

The little black dot that was his ever-festering disgust never left him, however.

He thought of many ways he could perform the deed – poison in the food, or a swift stab to the side of the creature. Or he could simply kidnap the fluffy beast and drop it in the nearest river. In the end, he found that he should treat poor Biko as one of his own kind. For really what were most humans other than dogs?

The next day – this would be the 23rd in the string of days bent towards murderous obsession – Stephen paid a visit to a local gun shop.

“Here you are sir, your own Dan Wesson .22 revolver.”

Stephen paid the shop owner and stretched out his hand to take the gun from the man behind the counter.

“Now, you'll be wanting to use this carefully you understand? And of course you'll be needing some ammunition...”

Of course Stephen thought *how could I be so stupid.*
“Of course.” Stephen replied, trying to hide his embarrassment.

Guy looks like he hasn't showered in years. Thought the shop owner in wonder. *But his eyes look like the color of desolation.*

The shop owner smiled helpfully and handed the gun to Stephen after ringing up his total. He didn't much care what Stephen did with the gun, only that he paid.
Cash's the only thing what makes you welcome here, fuck.

The object Stephen held in his hand felt quite foreign, almost alien. Its long black shaft reminded him of the smokestacks of England's industrial era.
My, how far we've progressed. Stephen thought.
Although he knew little of how to use such a weapon, the moment the gun entered Stephen's hand he could feel the power behind it.
He just imagined little Biko's face being torn away by the bullet that would undoubtedly spin from the gun's chamber.

After Ms. Beech leaves for work then. It shall be done.

Stephen didn't care at all about missing work that day. It didn't seem to matter. And he doubted they would really miss him anyway.
Then again, one cog goes missing in a machine and the whole thing is likely to grind to a halt.
This pleased Stephen, despite the auditory hallucinations he seemed to be experiencing lately.

He often heard someone in his kitchen making coffee. The utensil drawer would open, the spoons clacked like metallic ghosts, and he could feel the vibrations of the percolation in his skin. This was strange, as Stephen soon remembered that he didn't own a coffee machine. In fact, he didn't even drink coffee.
Having always known he was quite insane to think that anyone or anything existed at all, Stephen wasn't bothered by this. Although sometimes he wondered. He did seem to exist, as did the others. And really, what was reality except what one made it to be? It was a complete conundrum, Stephen realized, but it was interesting to chase his mind in its own maze from time to time.

The gun was totally black. This was fitting with the cloud of Stephen's loathing – although he didn't realize it at the time.

Fuck analyzing things. So it's not the most poetic thing in the world. It's not very philosophical. Yet somehow, I think that everything boils down to a single idea.

Walking on the edge of insanity, he felt the pulse of this idea. It swelled in every living thing. Even the malaise in his heart.

Ms. Beech awoke on the morning of the August the 19th with a feeling that perhaps this was the day her daughter would finally speak to her.

God how I miss her. She thought solemnly as she smoked her menthol cigarette.

Ms. Beech's daughter suffered from what the doctor's called *Mundcoreicis*, or what Ms. Beech and most of the rest of the laymen thought of as "the Gaps" because the disease created gaps in a person's mind so large that they often forgot that they were human at all.

This, so the doctor's said, was so terrifying to a person's psyche that they usually shrank away from all existence. They didn't go outdoors, they ate only when forced, and of course, they never spoke to anyone.

It would have been lunacy for them even to consider the existence of another.

That's what the shrinks tell me anyway. Thought Ms. Beech with disdain.

Heaving her bulbous body upon her toilet, Ms. Beech relieved herself while sucking the remains of her cigarette into her already partially crystallized lungs.

She's so very quiet these days. Beech thought. *So awfully quiet.*

If a photographer had been in Ms. Beech's bathroom to capture the moment forever, he would have marveled at her seemingly endless store of fleshy folds. They cascaded endlessly outwards and downwards, perfectly clean except for the odd stretch mark and acne scar.

The fumes coming from seemingly everywhere and nowhere would also be captured on the photographer's reel. The image alone was enough to convey the stench of the place. Chemical manufacturing had done wonders to enliven the smell of Ms. Beech's urine.

No one knows how smells and feelings are conveyed in pictures. The photographer would have thought. *But there they are all the same.*

Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain

The sound of her door crashing into the hallway was the only sound besides her daughter's voice that could have stirred Ms. Beech. And it just so happened that one Stephen Hawkins had decided to kick in Ms. Beech's door the instant she had let go of an exquisitely tender turd.

VII

Stephen dared even to look inside the barrel of the gun, having already examined the outer parts of the instrument.

Abandon your fears.

As for fears, Stephen had little. The terrified thing that was his spine had dissipated into the hot steel of his unshakable belief that he would indeed kill today.

All his life came to a head in one swift move of a trigger. He had the patience, obviously. He had never doubted that. His resolve was unshakable.

Today, the bitch dies.

And so, Stephen had slowly but forcibly loaded the gun, chamber upon chamber. He was drunk as usual, but he did his best work after he'd had a few.

After loading the gun for what seemed like an eternity and nothing all in the same space, Stephen looked at the clock.

He was not at all surprised to see that it read 7:06.

My god, the smell! Stephen's unconscious cried out. But not even the foul odors of the burning flesh of those unfortunate enough to enter the sixth circle of Dante's Inferno could sway him

from his purpose. The doctors who had constantly analyzed little Ana Beech would have said Stephen was possessed.

Stephen's foot crashed through the door.

The old oak door fell with a loud CRASH upon the floor.

Stephen's face appeared after the dust settled. Insatiably grim, it was the face of murder.

Time to die bitch.

Stephen looked through the cloud of dust that appeared after the oaken door crashed onto the apartment floor and saw the simple arrangements of a pointless existence. He glanced left, then swiftly back right and took his first step into the apartment in which he intended to kill Ms. Beech's prized terrier.

Stephen's face appeared after the dust settled. Insatiably grim, it was the face of murder.

Time to die bitch.

He pointed the barrel of the gun across several pictures of Ms. Beech and her daughter situated upon a mantel to Stephen's left. For some reason, the second to last picture of Ana Beech was scratched out where her face should be. It was as if someone had run their fingernails over and over again across her face.

Stephen noticed this only in the depths of his mind as he trod slowly but ever forcibly deeper into the apartment. He heard the disjointed flicker of a light somewhere towards the back of the apartment. This sound was quickly shuffled away into the depths where Ana's scratched-out face lay and Stephen concentrated on only one thing: the sound of a small animal feeding from a bowl.

Stephen smiled grimly. The same photographer that would have witnessed Ms. Beech's enormous and pick-pocked buttocks would have seen Stephen's face and swore it was Lucifer, or at least a lesser daemon such as Moloch come to seek penance from a sinful earthly soul.

Stephen rounded the corner from the living room and stepped directly above little Biko.

The little dog's eyes gleamed at Stephen with that "Who me?" look that so many canines have when they gaze into the eyes of a strange man.

Biko's eyes shone with a melancholy cuteness that only small puppies and babies seem to possess, but Stephen simply filed this information away into the bowels of the organ betwixt his skull.

He only wanted one thing.

Time to die bitch.

"And just what the HELL do you think you're *doing*?!?" Ms. Beech proclaimed as she burst from her depository.

Stephen took one glance at Ms. Beech and decided she looked rather like a bag of sucked-out fat must look when it is stuffed between mountains of garbage at a liposuction clinic.

My god, the folds on this woman have no end. Stephen thought, without much interest.

“And just who the *hell* are you ANYWAY??!?” Beech further enquired.

Time to die bitch. Stephen continued.

Suddenly, he was struck with absolute clarity- the kind that only comes to fortunate individuals maybe two or three times a lifetime. This was what he came for. Fuck the dog, this was his kill. This was what his whole life had built towards. He only understood it now because he was at its apex. And better to act now before he came down without a release and was stuck forever in the waiting room **of** contentedness.

He pulled the trigger, and Ms. Beech stared stupidly at Stephen as half of her head fell to the floor with a plop that would remind our immanently invisible photographer of a bowl of Jell-O striking wood.

VIII

Stephen’s urine was clear as he pissed into the way station’s filthy toilet.

He had driven nearly 100 miles in less than an hour.

His dick, at times, felt long and hard. The thrill of driving was extremely appealing to him.

Something within him had ached for this his whole life.

Sweetheart, you’ve got one bee-yoo-ti-ful set of tits.

The note he found on his hotel pillow had, nonetheless, disturbed him.

The blackquilarmjoiiswatchingyouStephen.

Getoutnow.

Sorrytostartleyouoldchapitsjustthatthewindowsillissmissingandwelli’mquitefondofmyorgansyousee.

NOWNOWnoneedtogethasty.wehavethewholebleedingjumpinjehovahswitnessdaytotakecareofthings.

Screaming landmines won’t dous any good oldchap.

They only clog the bowls of the machine.

Wouldntwanttodothatnodeelodeenodeedo.

This is dangerous Stephen.

Then again, I love you. And I want you to always know that.

What did it all mean? That, Stephen could not answer.

Nodeelodeenodeenodeedo.

His old life had been fixed by one bullet.

How easy it was!

Remarkably so. Stephen couldn’t understand why more people hadn’t tried it.

Then again, maybe they had. Stephen puzzled.

No way to tell. Certainly no way to tell whether it was right or not. To even begin to consider what was right at all was absurd. That would be akin to questioning one’s existence, and to do so

was to invite utter insanity.

He simply drove for hours, days, weeks - he couldn't tell. It felt as if his hand never left the wheel. He blazed through in white-hot red flaming Technicolor. Leaving only ashes behind. Smoldering with decay.

IX

Ana watched as a tall, emaciated man burst through the doorway. He looked much like a scarecrow that had donned the clothes of a destitute artist and had come looking to kill.

Ana didn't think any of this.

She was lost in a great swarm of blackness, totally unlike that which currently engulfed her mother's future murderer.

Ana barely registered the bursting of the door at all. Her mind was totally bound to obscurity, much like every other child her age.

No one shall come for me. She thought.

She tried to claw against the wall of darkness, but it was no use. She was absolutely terrified of what lay beyond, but her basic child-like impulses told her that she must flee the thing closing around her.

It would rape her virgin flesh, and leave her a hollow nameless shell.

The man in black had promised to go to bite into her milky white skin if she tarried long enough in his halo of flies.

And that halo of rape never ended for Ana.

She had been enduring a world of blindness amongst the flies when her mother had torn her face out.

Her large pink nails scratched across Ana's face in a fit of hilarity.

The flies buzzed endlessly around her head as her mother's pink polyester pants ruffled uneasily against the green velvet of the couch.

And then she was gone. Ana didn't know how but her mother was gone.

The one hope she had been snuffed out, taken away.

She caught an excruciatingly fleeting glimpse of her mother's face torn in two and bloodied upon the floor before the halo resumed.

Is this heaven, God? Ana wondered helplessly.

She felt utter loneliness, although she was never alone.

It was as if only those who would rape and abuse her could ever enter this world.

She was an abandoned child, and she sobbed desperately as the halo of flies ran through her raped body once more on their endless tirade.

X

The fly sitting at the bottom of Stephen's drink had finally slowed the pouring of drinks down Stephen's throat.

He had ordered a slew of drinks sent up to his motel room- Pink Ladies, Internationals, Kamikazes- all delightfully potent and sweet. The sweetness made him lust for a young girl's thighs, but he thought it best to lay low for a while.

Besides, who needs youth when you have substance?

He thought of the possibility of arrest as well, but he decided in the end that this was an unnecessary worry. The police wouldn't miss one incredibly overweight middle class woman any more than they would the crack dealer in Harlem.

Stephen had never met such a man but of course he knew only what the television told him. He knew this was inadequate knowledge but what else did he have to go on?

No one will ever unravel this tapestry. Stephen thought.

The television in Stephen's motel room blared on, but he paid little attention. He was sipping one of the delectable green drinks that the waiter had brought him.

It's not quite absinthe, but it will have to do. Just as the waiter wasn't a waiter, but I can't seem to remember the name of his function. And what does it matter anyway? He is one of the drones I used to be. I now serve a different master.

Stephen's drink spilled onto his naked legs, but he didn't mind. His legs would be sticky when he woke up, but did that really matter?

Of course, Stephen knew that nothing really mattered, but that he may as well focus on his own will. Somehow this seemed to be completely insignificant while simultaneously being the most important thing in the universe.

This paradox, like all paradoxes, was inexplicable and profoundly interesting to Stephen.

Later that night, at a seedy little club close to the motel, Stephen sipped his Manhattan and thought of the brunette girl from the party.

Her scent seems to be everywhere. Stephen marveled.

He saw her curls bouncing on the shoulders of every grade 'A' piece of ass that passed his table en route to the bar.

Stephen's dirty brown jacket stuck in places to the squeaky brown plastic of his booth. The table was brown as well, but it was a lighter shade, and it was dotted with green splashes of what was presumably paint.

A red candle wavered towards the far right corner.

As Stephen progressed onto glasses of Absinthe mixed lightly with water, and of course the infamous sugar cube, a band struck up a tune on the stage slightly to the right of and several yards away from Stephen.

The band consisted of a drummer, a large man with heavy-set shoulders on the contrabass, and a thin man dressed in a gray and brown pinstripe suit playing a Theremin.

The piece began with the low rumbling of the contrabass. As he played with his stony face bent towards his instrument, the contrabassist was joined by the high-pitched, nearly alien sounds of the Theremin. The sound waves of the early electronic device then began to garble and squeak as the drummer entered with a slow rolling jazz beat with his brushes.

The music reminded Stephen of what a trio of withering corpses would sound like if they tried to play a dirge. The Theremin, which Stephen realized was being processed by other electronic devices somehow, was stroked erotically as the thin man who looked like a scarecrow slid his hands through the device's invisible controlling fields. The resulting sound was an absurd combination of the highest beauty and absolute terror.

The music seemed lighthearted at its surface. In fact, most of the others in the club had begun to laugh and sway across the dance floor to the wash of the music. But somewhere deep down, Stephen knew something was wrong.

There was a deep malevolence tucked away in the wash. It was almost like some atonal horror lie waiting between the surface of the trio's pulsing tones.

The Absinthe was now positively flowing down Stephen's throat as more and more of the beauty of the band's music began to crumble away. Peeling layers of a dead man's foot fell from the ceiling, just underneath an enormous inverted field of crosses. The band barely seemed to notice as layers of dead skin fell upon the stage.

Nor for that matter were the guests moved in the least by this unusual development.

They must have gone mad. Stephen thought as he filtered another round of Absinthe through a seemingly miniscule sugar cube. The Absinthe was now devouring the sugar before the glass was even full. Yet Stephen knew that if he did not continue to drink he would be as lost as the poor souls that were doomed to forever wander this maligned dance floor.

Stephen shrieked as an attractive young blonde woman's head rolled across his battered loafers. The worms were eating away much more than the green paint of the table now. Stephen barely managed to keep his glass from falling as his table slid ever faster into their hungry mouths.

This is much worse than the moths. Stephen assessed.

"Yes much worse indeed, my friend." The Theremin player/scarecrow agreed.

Stephen stared stupidly at the figure that somehow now stood directly in front of him.

"Say, you're looking a bit pale old friend. Perhaps you should have another drink?" The scarecrow suggested.

Yes, of course. Anything to keep these damn worms away from me. Stephen thought.

"Oh you needn't worry about them. They only eat the dead or the blind." The scarecrow offered helpfully.

How is it you're reading my thoughts. And how-

"Oh I'm still playing in the band. Take a look for yourself." The scarecrow/Theremin tickler pleasantly replied.

Stephen looked in terror at the stage; where indeed the man was still sliding his gracefully thin hands through the air around the almost alien device.

"Another drink?"

Stephen agreed by silently engulfing another batch of the green stuff. Suddenly, the dead foot began to actually peel backwards as the crosses were replaced by all manner of brightly colored flowers and butterflies. One such creature even landed in Stephen's glass. "Well hello little friend!" Stephen pleasantly greeted the butterfly. The butterfly waved its right wing back rather cheerfully at Stephen, who happily let the butterfly slide down his throat with the rest of his Absinthe.

The scarecrow was now brightly dressed and holding a balloon in his hand. Stephen gazed up crookedly at this development, his coffee-stained teeth beaming at the balloon. Just as he was about to ask the scarecrow where he had got such a wonderful toy the scarecrow reached out a long green claw and popped the thing. Its red pieces fluttered to the floor, revealing the hidden treasure within the balloon.

"Why, it was there all along!" Stephen gasped excitedly.

The scarecrow simply nodded and smiled as he handed Stephen a small tiny jar filled with bright green powder.

You'll be wanting to use this wisely now. The scarecrow advised Stephen.

"Yes, of course! You can be sure of it." Stephen proclaimed.

Stephen was still clutching the bottle tightly in his fist as he exited the club and walked into the empty and darkened street.

XI

The green smokestacks were still pouring their acrid fumes into the blazing sky. Their desolation was only matched by that of the look in the eyes of the other hotel guests. The shrieking, gibbering thing under Stephen's bed was also a problem. The only thing that made these things stop at all was another dose of the bright green powder that Stephen had determined was known as Sluff to the dwellers of this city. It was the 3rd city Stephen had been in since he left Ana alone to clutch at her filthy pale green dress as she clawed hopelessly at the flies that formed her prison cell.

Stephen didn't mind relying on the Sluff for comfort in this world that could only ever be alien to him. It was much like taking aspirin to relieve a minor headache in his opinion. Except this cure seemed to have the added benefit of swallowing Stephen in a fluffy pink cloud which was just big enough to hold him and no one else.

The gibbering thing was still there, of course. Stephen knew he would never shut up. He'd stabbed at it, pleaded with it, and screamed back at it himself until he finally realized that the broken record that was the screams of the gibbering thing would cease only if and when the thing itself were to die.

Stephen was quietly trying to determine a way to accomplish just such a thing when the maid returned to fluff his pillow again. Stephen looked up from his newly fashioned line of Sluff to shout at the maid that he in fact, did not “Need my pillow fluffed anymore, thank you very fucking MUCH!”

She only stared at him blankly.

Stephen promptly unzipped his pants and proceeded to urinate on the floor directly in front of the maid.

Her gaze drifted slowly down to the puddle of urine slowly creeping towards her feet then back to Stephen’s face again.

She shrugged and then began to push her cart filled to the teeth with cleaning supplies back down the hall towards the other guests.

Stephen grieved quietly for the many other residents of this hotel room as he watched the maid glide slowly into the next room.

“Another line?” The little green fairy hovering by Stephen’s earlobe offered.

Why thankeesai. Don’t mind if eye do.

Stephen eagerly snorted the bright green powder arranged on his bedside table. He jaw was now clicking. Clack clack clack goes the railroad track.

ThewholeskyisblackeningoutmygoditeesssopreetymakeitstopmakeitSTOPSTOPSTOP!

The press wheel turned on, and shat out another newspaper.

“Ah the morning paper, right on schedule.” Stephen proclaimed.

15 MEN CHARRED ALIVE. BURNING FLESH SMELL LINGERS FOR DAYS

Yes, Yes I suppose it would. Stephen thought quietly.

Cricketswillleapinsilentflamesdon’tyouseeit!bybogsgreenHANDiwillendinruin.thehorroroftheburningcampfireringmajesty!

Damn gibbering thing. Stephen thought, ever more sure that it would never cease its prattle.

Quatsch mich nicht, bitte. Der Zug ist fast hier.

The train ran screaming outside Stephen’s window. Its vigilant and singular smokestack penetrated the cool velvet sky as a well-lubricated piston pushes through the heart of an automobile.

The green fairy insisted Stephen take more of the Sluff. Stephen was, of course, happy to oblige his new friend.

“Up the chimney!” Stephen shouted merrily.

Stephen then turned his attention to the small plastic bottle the waiter had brought him with his room service dinner.

‘Cough Syrup’ it stated plainly on the front of the bottle. The bottle was blank except for this statement. Red syrup filled the insides of the container.

The goo slid easily down Stephen’s throat, coating it as it went towards its inevitable end in his stomach.

Ghastly sweet, it seemed to compliment the Sluff quite well. It was the best Christmas Stephen ever had. Andy Warhol would have been pleased, no doubt about that.

A few lines later, Stephen began to feel a small stone forming in his bowels. No, it was more like a giant gel capsule, he soon decided.

Suddenly, the capsule burst and Stephen ran frantically about the room until he was seated in front of the typewriter at his desk. He felt himself suddenly awake in an existence completely unlike his own world.

This was no motel room, it was a gulag, but he was not a prisoner here. Nor was he chief. He was a simple traveler, but he was on their side.

At least that is what he wanted them to think as he typed out a message he hoped would at the least be read by future generations.

Then they will understand. He thought as he solemnly pressed the keys of the typewriter.
The Russians must not triumph in future worlds.

A grim Russian soldier who looked much like an oil painting of only red and browns stood at attention at his door.

“Just here to accompany you in your work, *Señor.*” He had told Stephen.

If you think I believe that, surely you are insane, mi amigo.

And so, he had sat down to write. Of course, to the untrained eye it would appear that Stephen was simply writing a general letter filled with the usual banalities to a colleague of the Spanish army. But those destined to receive the letter – should it clear the Red Army Customs – would immediately see the hidden code within.

Stephen finished the letter, folded it in two, and placed it within a dull manila colored envelope.

He stroked his mustache as he sipped his Sherry after watching a second guard (this one an oil painting of reds and yellows – he was of higher rank, but less importance) swiftly take Stephen's letter away.

Now it was only a matter of waiting.

So, he sat quietly in the courtyard, sipping his sherry, and listening to the birds flutter through the vines which hung across a blanket of the setting sun's soft yellow light.

XII

Peter took another long drag of his cigarette.

The smoke blew lethargically across the room in much the same fashion as a lion that has just finished eating his woman's kill.

The majority of the smoke simply hung in the room, for it had nowhere to go except through one window the size of a small melon.

He couldn't possibly say how long he'd been here. He only knew it must have been sometime towards August, as his adobe prison walls felt quite hot during the day, but more often than not as cool as the underside of his pillow would have been if he had been given a pillow.

Fuck them. They cannot break me. He thought stubbornly.

The remains of Peter's smoke were now wafting out of his window, and as he gazed to watch the last wisp of gray smoke go he saw it meet instead with the bushy mustache of his once close companion.

Valerie's mustache twitched as the smoke blew through its thick black tendrils. Valerie, for the moment, ignored the burning sensation in his left eye, which filled a good portion of the little *cobaka's* looking hole.

"And how are we today my little *cobaka*? Fucking terrible I hope?" Valerie asked with a chuckle that filled Peter with indifference.

"You'll never break me." Peter said softly.

"Yes perhaps not like you broke my wife, dear Peter. But we will break something in you all the same." Valerie said in his thick Russian accent.

Valerie's wife was what he thought of as a *Zegadka*, or enigma.

"There IS no understanding you women!" Valerie screamed many a night in their small home provided to them by their government for "Your many long years serving the great Communist Brotherhood." said the man with the mustache blacker and bushier than his own – perhaps the only Russian to be able to make such a claim was this man.

Valerie silenced the screams of his daughter during these times by placing his large and

unusually friendly – to Illyana – cotton mitts (also govt. iss.) gently on Illyana’s ears. He would then cock his head and say “Now, now my little дорогой papuchka. What’s the trouble?”

She would stare at him wide eyed, her jaw beginning to drop rather than form a screaming wet hole.

“Ho Ho Ho! Now then, we don’t want to cry do we my littler дорогой.”

And as he continued to beam at her he began to chuckle her frown in a great big smile.

And The End, God Bless.

XIII

Stephen awoke to a pair of soiled slacks in his dark motel room.

Everything was gray, meaning it was

Nighttime. He thought, his left eye still held mostly shut by some adhesive or other.

And probably sometime just before fall too.

June Gloom?

No, it was *sometime in August*, judging by the walls.

Where had he heard that before?

<Cut in> to shot of hot-shit anchorman gleaming stupidly and giving a, “Well Hello there you little fucks! Hope you’ve haven’t been talking to any BLACK people today. Why’s that? A new study tells why at the top of the hour. “

“In other news, I fucked my 7 year old stepdaughter in the ass for the first time today.

I could tell it was her first time, <read from cue-card> By the way her ass gave that little pop sound as her cherry burst.”

“NEXT! After these brief messages.”

All you can eat Giraffe. Just \$7.99 llama’s ass whoop! Porno is on the left, Pyromaniac sex toys on the right. If you roar like a piece of bread with the clap you can eat some clam dip later on! TCBY, it’s the country’s frozen yogurt store. “

“Assshhess” Stephen spittled out.

The TV in the corner was now just a low static wash of white noise. No answer came to Stephen’s question.*

**Figure it out for yourself*

The show was over at last. But what was this new hellish development? Was he in the land of the dead?

The Necronomicon told him this was surely not so. But still he marveled at his current situation, much as he must surely have done frequently during the past few months.

Had it been that long? He could not say for sure. For in his dream state things crawled across his eyelids. The busy street had engulfed him in the hot land in South America. He was a guest there, sent on a mission by his government.

“To Listen! Report! And Return!”

The “Three Rs” they had called them. That had made Stephen wonder.

But now, with his hand sticky and blanketed in gray ashy stuff and what seemed like green pixie dust, Stephen was unsure of everything. Some things he was sure of. The 19 cigarette holes in his pillow, he could not account for, however.

Nor could he explain why his eyelashes were bleeding. What was most disturbing about this was that they bled in black and white. Not dark gray like his xylophone as a child, but a color which you could tell was red although it was coming through a screen which you knew broadcast only black and white.

It seemed to Stephen that he had lost the majority of his world. He had hit down somewhere. Hit *Hard*.

He was surprised he remembered the Sluff. If it wasn't for the powder on his filthy hands he would most likely have chalked the entire rush, plateau, and addiction up to hallucination.

Solid states had fallen, however. Times were very bleak under the dark undertones. Underneath darkness was too terrifying to comprehend. The Abyss barely does it justice. It was a color and-worse- composition - different from anything Stephen had ever been able to comprehend before.

”The abolishment and destruction of redundancy must push forward and ahead!” Was the reason he had been sent, but still this was unforgivable. This was probably against the law in most Arab countries.

And what is this SHIT in my pants? Stephen argued with newfound elasticity.

His duckbill had been cut off in an abandoned shed down south. The man with the face of a bull had carved off that much of his face. The rest remained intact, horrific to behold, as a warning to other children who might think it wise to travel to a far away land and embrace another culture.

He was listening for weird quirks now. He heard nothing but the steady waves of ambient noise coming from the television. Even the gibbering thing was gone, remarkably.

And Stephen knew that had not been hallucination. Nothing that terrible could exist in Stephen's

imagination.

Perhaps you are possessed? Stephen's mind offered.

“Buggr ophhh...” Stephen retorted groggily.

The quagmire they were in was unmistakable. A train was running even now outside his window, its smokestacks ever vigilant as they penetrated the blackened cunt of the sky.

About 300 Billion people were at the show. And it was finally over.

Empty bottles were nowhere to be found in Stephen's apartment, which made him wonder further.

*The Sluff? Could it have broken our
(your)
addiction?*

No answer. Just the wash of the underbelly. The seedy layer caked over the streets and the neon whore lights shone between the elephant's tusks.

Stephen tried to roll over, couldn't. Again, he tried. No Dice.

Rock it to Russia.

Stephen tried thrice, and triumphed.

Was he a criminal or a victim in all this?

He had no idea. He was sure he had acted rashly to the others, but perhaps they were simply not as alive as he. Not living as much though he was always deteriorating below the surface. This was seen in a single patch of his worn brown coat or the enormously emaciated look in his face. His sunken cheekbones further led to this impression.

Birthely Deformed. A glorious failure; fists pumping madly against a burlap sack. The scarecrow never lost. He only hung onto a fragile reality just outside death's door. Many enjoyed their art, although many more detested it. They were the Odium in the filthy elixir provided by the would-be Artists in the nation's capital.

I sing a song to put myself to sleep. My father has left me the lord's poor abandoned sheep.

XIV

Stephen closed the door to his motel room for the last time as he brushed one last bit of ash off his coat and strode out into the motel hallway. His long dangling limbs brushed the sides of the hallway as he stumbled in a daze to the elevator. He groped for its faded oil based paint buttons,

but they slipped away from him.

He stretched out his right arm as far as he could – he was unable to bend his knees since the age of 9- and finally was able to push the Green Button painted “Up”.

Stephen wanted out of this place.

Of course the buttons were painted backwards, so Stephen descended slowly into the undermost bowels of the motel.

The dingy red elevator, with its velvet lined walls and flickering light bulbs, slowed and eventually stopped all together, kicking a little dust up as it landed with a *whooooosh*.

Stephen stepped out into darkness and knew no more.

XV

When little Kyle went to bed that night, he hugged his sister very tightly.

He did this lest she be “taken by the fallen ones” Kyle’s mother had said.

“Aw mah, hugging your sister’d be terrible.”

“Oh?” His mother had asked in feigned curiosity.

“Yeah Mah! Like, worse than licking your asshole!”

With a gasp Kyle’s Mom proclaimed “Kyle Vincent Lamoy! I’m surprised at you. You lick your mother’s asshole right now and say you’re sorry!”

He had done so of course, and then he had held his sister tighter than grim death – of course.

But he still could not stop the really dark man from taking her away night after night. She would always be returned in the middle of the night, bloodied and battered.

Kyle would scrub for hours trying to get the blood off before his mom saw it.

There was no way to hide the many shallow cuts on Samantha’s arms and thighs, but Kyle’s mother never seemed to notice them.

“Maybe you’re mudda hates mulattoes just like the rest of us!!” the school’s bully, Bobby Jenkins had shouted across the play yard.

When Kyle asked his mother what a mulatto was, his father had, in one of his rare but eventful moments of speech, injected firmly saying that Kyle was “Never to speak of such things *outside of or in* this house!”

Was there something different about Samantha? Kyle wondered.

“Let’s see” he began “she’s got two eyes, two ears, a mouth just like the rest of us, and a nose as normal as any girl’s I’ve ever seen!”

“Hmmm, well sometimes Mom did seem to feed her a bit more of certain foods, but that wasn’t terribly unusual.”

Diet Pepsi. Uh-huh

The clouds on his bedspread were being covered by black swastikas again. She was taken away once more into Fields of Rape.

XVI

One night, Kyle followed his sister’s tormentor out through the window and into the abysmally dark grass of his Parent’s front lawn. He ran for miles and miles chasing the dark thing that had kidnapped his sister. Soft dark blue light hugged Kyle’s shoulders as he ran on and on following the horrific shade.

Finally after hours, and days and weeks and months and years: Kyle had come within reaching distance of the thing.

Yet before he could do anything with this newfound power he was struck dumb by the four simple objects that now lay before him.

Four dark walls, each about seven meters high and made of soot stained stone, stood silently in front of and to the sides of Kyle. The walls were not attached. In fact, it would have been very easy for Kyle to simply run around them and still caught the dark thing that must any minute now begin to rape his sister.

In abject horror, Kyle looked at the still and terrified faces of thousands of infants trapped within the stone walls.

This was all the more terrifying because Kyle knew (how, he could not say) that those children were yet alive.

Kyle turned his head slightly away from the wall in time to see the dark thing standing above him with a burlap bag the size of a small 9-year-old boy in his red right hand.

XVII

Stephen watched all this in stunned fascination in the span of a gnat’s life a minute before he is swatted forever into oblivion.

He had a frightened glimpse of the horrible device they strapped him into before they clamped his head straight in front of the television’s screen. Stephen’s penis felt as though it were being

ripped through his pants, and Stephen felt sure his eyes were bleeding profusely in drab tones of black and white television.

The thing had lasted only a very short time, each image a shock to the mind.

“Would it surprise you to know that some people didn’t even flinch?” A voice behind Stephen’s shoulder asked.

Stephen wheeled around in time to catch the face that the voice belonged to speak again
“Yesssss... Some people don’t even notice the things they are witnessing are atrocious at all. And yessssss it’s quite disturbing!” The man in the white lab coat said queerly.

His voice was somewhat high when he became excited, but it was never really a shout. It was more like the bumbings of an old bird dressed in human clothing.

Stephen eyed this thing until he saw the thing behind it.

It blinked at him.

Stephen stared fixedly.

Again, it blinked.

This continued for some time, until finally Stephen blurted out. “SWEET *FUCK* WHAT IS THAT THING?!!!!?”

The thing blinked again. Its eye was set in a small pile of burnt meat. This strange combination was seated atop a crooked pile of colored blocks (reds, greens, blues, light tans, and of course yellow) which formed a brick road which had been turned 90degrees to the right and was now more of a wall with the top few bricks bent upwards as if suspended impossibly in space. This whole thing then lay seated atop the form of a man ridden with spinal bifida dressed in a purple and green leisure suit.

It blinked.

Sweet music played, as if on some form of electronic harp. The tones that wrapped themselves hauntingly around these were absolutely beautiful, Stephen thought.

It made the blinking of the thing in the leisure suit seem entirely erotic and engulfed in a sea of deep blue light.

It hid back in the corner, bent over in terrified solitude, gazing in paranoia at Stephen between fits of blinking and shaking.

Stephen reached out his hand as he moved to touch the thing, but it flew far out of his reach before he could caress it.

Stephen called out once before running after the creature into blackness, with the man to which the voice belonged muttering insane advice after them.

XVIII

I must continue my writing. Benjamin thought.

His large and soft brown hands pounded the typewriter's keys once more as line after lines was stamped forever upon the world.

Words, paragraphs, whole stories within stories flew from the man's mind to the typewriter.

He sat alone in his darkened corner between Algol and Orion and wrote onward.

I must continue writing. I have no time for silly games. Games are for the young.

Stephen crept up to the tree stump that was Benjamin's leg and rapped his blue slacks softly with his fist. The man kept typing until Stephen shouted out for the fifth time:

"EXCUSE ME SIR! CAN YOU HELP ME?"

Then Benjamin slowly stopped his writing and peered down at the little brown thing tickling his leg.

On closer inspection, Benjamin found that the thing was whiter in skin than brown, for that color belonged to his dress.

"May I help you?" Benjamin said softly and deeply in his soothing voice.

"Did you see a green and purple thing go by here? Might've been carrying some green powder?"

"Hmmm" Benjamin considered. "No, I don't believe so. But what might you be wanting with such a strange fellow anyway my little friend?"

Stephen was in a hurry but the man was so pleasant to speak to Stephen decided it was a worthwhile risk to stay and chat a while with this old black man.

Stephen described the wondrous music he had heard and the beaming visage of The Beautiful Thing, as Benjamin listened patiently and thoughtfully.

"Well, I think that may just be the most amazing thing I've heard in a long time." Benjamin said after what seemed like eons.

After a long pause, Stephen said, "You wouldn't happen to know anything about Sluff would you?"

Benjamin's smile faded into a frown as darkness and sorrow filled his eyes.

“I must continue writing. Excuse me my little friend.” Benjamin said gravely.

He turned to go and not one shout hurled by Stephen prevented him from reaching his typewriter and pounding line after endless line into invisible paper.

XIX

Here come the crosses, bloody from the last messiah.

Sensually young, I thought him apt to fill the head of the corpse of my father.

I caressed her golden sun drops which lay across brown bourbon curtains and let each pink wave crash against my feet still touching the light brown carpet and pointing towards the light yellow walls.

XX

Two crosses arose, and sat once more. Their blighted eyes were eaten by the peasant folk who were at once inhabited by beings of terrible light.

Children’s music played around the heads of their elders and they did not wonder that the nightmares were true.

They saw a thousand dolls fall and go missing or broken in this ruined wasteland too many times. The reptilian filth was engulfing whole sections of their nest now.

The children were no longer safe.

The desolate one had come.

XXI

Stephen now had The Beautiful Thing squarely in his sites.

It was once more crouched up in terror, this time hiding underneath a table set for a tea party.

“It’s Alright, I won’t hurt you.” Stephen offered as he held out his hand.

The Thing simply shook and blinked back.

Stephen sat down slowly at the table, his hands held up in a gesture of peace.

Just as he was about to begin to cautiously lower his hands The Beautiful Thing appeared sitting calmly across from him.

There was absolute silence then.

This silent moment deep in a fold of the deepest black velvet was shattered by the voice of The Beautiful Thing.

“Hello Stephen. Would you like something to eat?”

Stephen stared in disbelief at The Beautiful Thing’s still twitching eyeball.

“How about something like this?” The Beautiful Thing offered.

Stephen shifted his gaze downward to find that a small pink pastry had suddenly appeared on the covered table in front of him.

After a while, Stephen reached out timidly and placed his hands on the sticky pastry. This test having been passed, Stephen slowly raised the pastry to his mouth and bit into the most wondrous thing he had ever tasted.

Greedy, he ate the thing. Whole chunks of it were devoured in an instant. Any decent person who hadn't eaten what Stephen had would have immediately thought him a mannerless scoundrel, but by gods they'd never tasted anything like this!

"I'm so pleased you enjoy it Stephen. There are many who would not." The Beautiful Thing happily stated in his soft-spoken, yet somehow inhuman voice.

Coffee appeared as well, and after initially flinching from the heat, Stephen greedily ingested this as well. The stuff was wonderful.

"Now," The Beautiful Thing began "I want you to listen to something."
"Take that receiver there to your left..." Stephen did so.
"...and place it to your left ear."

Stephen did this and as soon as he nuzzled the receiver into his left ear, out poured garbled messages, bursts of static and noise, and again and again horrible mutterings and gibberish.

"Oh good heavens." The Beautiful Thing said slowly, its voice coming out more like text on a screen rather than actual sounds. "I must have forgot the Key."
"Try some of this."

XXII

Stephen eyed the little black ball of what looked like a kind of gummy paste curiously. The pipe and lamp held from the fingers of either hand on The Beautiful Thing made him all the more curious.

"Try some. Then you'll understand."

Stephen was sure that anything that had food and drink that had tasted so exquisite and would share it with him must know what they were talking about.

Stephen cocked his head to one side as The Beautiful Thing had suggested that he do, and let The Beautiful Thing place the mouth of the pipe gently into his.

Stephen sucked slowly from the black ball that The Beautiful Thing had placed into a small dish in the pipe. Smoke filled his lungs and exited in wondrous purple clouds from his lips.

He soon understood what The Beautiful Thing had meant, and Stephen wept.

XXIII

Stephen was now seated in a palace of pearl. He felt completely at peace, despite the sudden change of his surroundings. He could hear the low murmurs of an angel's choir in the distance. He saw red cherries floating in the center of the room and knew they were for him.

"Welcome. My name is Man Chan." The squat and handsome man who floated just above the cherries announced.

"Greetings Man Chan" Stephen said as he marveled at the man's beautiful eyes.

"You have traveled far, and though you must return home for now, we will call you once more to our world, should you so wish it." Man Chan proclaimed warmly.

"If wish it if Opium wishes it." Stephen answered.

"As it should be." Man Chan agreed as he nodded his head and smiled benevolently.

Stephen was now wafting far, far away from that place. Drifting effortlessly. Everything was right and well. It was the only way it ever could have been.

This warm and pink couch shall be my new lover, and I shall journey to the land of Mnarthobt, where once my ancestors surely must have traveled.

"For I feel it deeply in my soul that it should be so" Stephen said as he fell asleep on the vast pink and purple landscape which soared out all around him

XXIV

His deeply stained and soiled clothing no longer bothered him. Nor did the fact that he knew his ultimate demise was near.

Death of his body meant nothing now, he knew.

He simply inhaled more of the sweet green smoke from his ebony pipe, and let the harmony of this place wash over him. He handed his pipe to the woman lying next to him, who batted her eyes in thankfulness. She then smoked from the delicious pipe.

An incredibly sensuous high. Stephen had thought when he first he rode the dragon.

A terrible army came marching in bursts across the dreamscape cloud terrain. The puffy blue of night did little to hide their advances. Their drums beat loudly though they were muffled.

Stephen simply let this battle unfold as he lay upon the couch of this new and wonderful den.

The velvet of the couch was a wonderful contrast to the hard wood floor he had last smoked upon.

Vile stuff it was. I hesitate to call it Opium except for the dreams. Stephen reflected.

The dreams of black wheels of fire spinning endlessly in the white void always amazed Stephen. He would often stare at them for decades in silent wonder. Until finally he would awake, and was again chained and screaming next to the gibbering thing which he now knew much more intimately.

XXV

Unfathomably hideous. Stephen thought as he shivered in disquiet remembrance.

The choir had called then, and lifted him into an expansive cloud of light and purple smoke. Lavender flowers were thrown softly around him as he was lifted ever upward. Lilacs and sweet herbs followed them to their death.

Stephen gently tore the head off a passing caterpillar and ate it fondly. Its sweet green liquid filled Stephen's innards with warmth and satisfaction.

He saved the rest of the creature for later, and turned his attention to the newly found limbs he had acquired.

He knew not where they came from, but he had found quickly that there were many wondrous things that could be done with them. His Will was progressing to its inevitable blossoming.

The stink of the oils filled Stephen's nostrils as he listened to the King of Light speak.

"You are a child of the moon." He stated flatly. "You must forever be banished from these lands so that you make take up your damned way in the eternally darkened sky. "

The smoke of his incense in those desolate lands that populated his new sky was enriching to Stephen. He was constantly imbibed by it. It gave him the strength and Will of ten men. It gave him sight and sound everlasting.

Here the worms were bigger than he, but they were at peace with Stephen, and thought naught on his demise. They were united in their vigilance and determination to destroy those of the hinterlands. Their cloud world must be de-peopled so that it could be raised anew by The Darkness.

The Darkness would finally open eternity's door, it was said.

Incredibly bizarre and threatening sounds washed across the blackness from time to time, instilling fear and strength within the people who followed The Darkness.

Everything turned in its order, even the wheels of Black fire in the White Void, Stephen quickly discovered.

He did this through direct communication with the darkness, something too terrifying and mind engulfing that it was not possible to live through such an encounter for most men.

The darkness spoke to Stephen in an immense but soft voice. Terribly deep and somehow coming from everywhere and from directly inside Stephen's head simultaneously, The Voice of The Darkness filled Stephen with absolute knowledge of the harmony and purpose of everything. Love is the Law, Love Under Will And Every Act is An Act of Love.

The Darkness would make it so.

Absolute terror engulfed the cloud realm that Stephen now viewed only as light waiting to be engulfed.

XXVI

Stephen was quietly pulling shards of glass out of his arm and tossing them into the pile of dead squid in the corner of his apartment room.

He was bleeding rather badly, so he proceeded to wrap gauze around his entire left arm. When this task was finished Stephen shot up another bit of the stuff his new friend and roommate had cooked in the spoon.

Jake was a bit of an odd fellow, Stephen had to admit. But they got on well enough, and Jake had been as interested as Stephen in exploring this vast and wonderful Universe.

They shared a small studio in the projects of some blue and gray city in Japan. Stephen didn't know the name of the unusual city because he couldn't read the words on any of the signs that the boat that had carried him from Europe's shores took him across.

Stephen instantly recognized this new drug as Heroin, and his body seemed to be a perfect receptor for it. His veins swallowed it hungrily as Stephen nodded off on the dingy mattress they had to share.

The constant inquisitions of the Landlord into their affairs left them exasperated and longing for justice and security from this cruel world where everything was blue, except where it was gray or soot colored.

Saw blades turned endlessly in the basement beneath Stephen's apartment, and he sometimes wished to hurl his newfound companion upon them.

At first Stephen ignored these feelings, because he could not understand where they had come from.

It would be unwise to destroy one that was so knowledgeable of The White. Stephen decided.

Yet as the months passed cooped up in that apartment room, Stephen slowly built up an intense hatred and fear of Jake. He would sit and wonder in the hours between waiting for his next Fix to come popping out of the metal chute in the wall whether or not today would be the day Jake came to kill him. For certainly that is what he had announced he would inevitably attempt when he spoke of riddles and a translucent sky set with opaque red cubes.

A funeral march had already begun in Jake's head, for could Stephen not hear him scratching countless new lines of notes and chords into parchment paper while he thought Stephen sleeping or dead?

The small plastic bag filled with Heroin arrived as it did every day, and Stephen breathed an internal sigh of relief.

Jake calmly opened the bag and began to fashion a line of the stuff so he could snort it. This was the other thing that had disturbed Stephen so terribly.

Why am I the only one taking the needle? Stephen wondered as he brought the hypodermic to a pale blue vein in his arm.

Stephen had begun to amass an array of interesting tattoos across his arms – 50 alone the last week.

He would awake in piercing gray light to find himself newly marked by wondrously complex carvings. He suspected these too were the work of Jake.

Suddenly everything sucked backwards as Stephen tilted his head back and saw millions of lifetimes pour out from his widened mouth into the ceiling.

Children played happily in a park. An old woman silently wept for her lost husband of 50 years and many lonely beatings.

A businessman trembled from a Heroin withdrawal and Stephen saw his father wither into nothing in the span of 5 minutes.

1,100 and 555 seconds passed of this, before Stephen collapsed into a heap and knew no more.

He awoke to the sound of a record needle playing endlessly on one small section of an unknown disc of blue vinyl.

Strange sounds came from the speakerphone and Stephen bent his ear towards it. Suddenly Stephen noticed out of the corner of his eye that Jake was no longer in the room with him.

Must have gone to the store. I am hungry...

Stephen remembered then that there was no exit from this place, or not that he knew of.

With this thought Stephen sat bolt upright and began to search around the room for some sign of his roommate's exit.

He slowly came upon a small section of cracking blue paint in the upper left corner of the ceiling that was usually above Jake's head. He looked up at the crack and noticed an even smaller hole. Coming from this hole were strange drones that seemed to echo from somewhere extremely far away. Yet they were loud enough that Stephen heard them with ease.

He was now clawing violently away at the paint in the corner, forcing the hole wider and wider until Stephen could first peer inside and then fit his hand through.

As he groped for some form of lever, Stephen felt the skin of his fingers being sucked towards the depths from whence the sounds came. His arm was pulled soon after his hand disappeared down the ever-expansive hole and soon after that his head was no longer visible in the apartment room that had contained so many scarring lines. Only Stephen's shoe remained hanging from the ceiling, and then he was falling endlessly down into the darkness of infinite space.

XXVII

The beating of Stephen's heart was the only sound to be heard in the blackness that stretched throughout time and space.

It seemed to fill the entire void with its slow rhythmic beating.

Stephen lay naked in that blackness, curled into a fetal position. Stephen had not slept so peacefully since the time in his mother's womb.

His dreams during that time were extraordinarily vivid. All thought as he would come to think of it had been exterminated. He simply let the dreams wash over and through him in waves of consciousness. Had he a term for it then he would have surely thought he was lucidly dreaming. Fantastically slow drifts on ships through calm seas of black took him to places marked only as faraway stars by ancient travelers. He let these points of light pass by him as well. He passed through Super Novas, the Horse Head Nebula, and entire galaxies without a word. Black holes engulfed his not yet infant spirit as he came to know their depths.

As he lay naked in the darkness where only his heart could be heard, he again had dreams of this caliber. Again, rational thought had been removed to allow for his more advanced faculties to account for his surroundings. The dreams began much as they had in the womb. He would drift for hours through many untold numbers of deep space phenomena, many unknown to mankind even in telescopic witness.

However, now were added the wonders of man and other space faring races. Machines of slow moving and intricate parts dotted the cosmos. Stephen understood at once their function, but it was impossible to convey in words of any kind.

He would often fall for days then through blackness until he awoke on a beach of white sand. A still lake met the beach, yet somehow Stephen knew it held malevolence underneath its dark waters.

Across the lake stood a large house, which also appeared calm and peaceful on first glance. Yet this too had been claimed long ago by some ancient darkness.

Stephen simply stared out across the lake, looking at times into the dust-covered windows of the old wooden house.

His naked body would then slide effortlessly forward into the murky waters of the lake.

Underneath these waters Stephen saw many globes of light that seemed to lead him ever downward. Stephen followed these disembodied lights as his arms pushed him silkily through the water. At times he would sense the forms of various apparitions that lived in these waters, though he could not see them with his eyes.

Soon the water melted away into a deep blue sky lined with passing clouds. Stephen watched these as his heart beat out into that blackness in which his naked body lay.

Dilapidated buildings stood slanted and tottering on ruin in the city. Whole blocks of desolation where wild weeds grew served as battlegrounds for stone-faced soldiers. They marched like so many lemmings into pools of blood between shining blankets of snow.

Weird stars of the occult had been drawn into the sky in arching white lines. Symbols, which Stephen saw as the voices of the Deep Unknown, paraded endlessly on the floor of shamans in quiet villages shut off from the world.

Silent eyes stood ever watchful as they turned their red pupils slowly towards the stars. They lay embedded in wooden walls rife with the decay of worms. Pick pocked and bloated corpses lay scarred in a burning heap. Smoke danced and Stephen watched in wonder as the faces of those corpses shifted in muted agony.

Clouds of yellow dust mingled with the sweet strumming of a stringed instrument played by the tribes that wander the watery deserts of the lands between the dry continents. Stephen sensed an unspeakable evil in this too, lying just beneath the hoary surface.

The beating of his heart, he now realized, was slowing. The heart itself was beating in tune with a slowing march into its own tomb. The blackened soil of the corpse heap from that enchanting dream matched perfectly the disease in Stephen's heart.

Something was very wrong, and Stephen struggled to wake. This he tried in vain for he could not seem to reach the sane part of his mind which held the truth that he was now dreaming, that if he did not wake he would die.

He longed for some comfort, any of the array of drugs he'd been abusing since the visions came.

These thoughts shocked Stephen, who at his core still believed it all to be a worthy experiment steeped more in reality and adventure than anything he'd experienced previously.

My faculties have been greatly increased it is true. Stephen thought to himself.

Yet he did not wonder that some sickness from the world of dreams had indeed attached itself to his physical self. Stephen shrieked at his sleeping self to wake and save itself from utter insanity, but it would not move from its dream state.

It's hopeless then. Stephen gloomily conceded.

I am forever trapped in this dream of schizophrenia and delusion. Smoked mirrors and false promises lay in each dose, and I can take it no longer. I fear I shall go quite mad if I am to stay here much longer. Still, I cannot wake.

As the darkness faded slowly into walls that were browned with age and in sore need of repair, Stephen simply felt a new transition coming on.

This is to be the first of my new visions, and the one to initiate me into whatever black order I have been given in this terrifying new plane of dreams.

"I'm afraid this is no dream Stephen. Welcome to The Hospital."

Book Two:

THE HOSPITAL

I

The hospital stood ominously overlooking a bleak field where once roses grew.

Large red crosses graced the sides of its once white walls, which now had faded and cracked to a stained off-white that more closely resembled the color of dust, their corners that of smoking tobacco.

Its doorways and silent fields gave the impression that it had been abandoned for a long time. Stephen could affirm otherwise.

The man who had suddenly spoken to Stephen certainly looked real enough. And Stephen hadn't encountered any beings since leaving his dank apartment that referred directly to the Dream State in which he had so often plunged.

"Please, don't be alarmed. My name is Doctor Shivers," The man in front of Stephen said "You were brought here by the woman who found you. Her name is Mrs. Tilly, and you'd do well to thank her that you're still alive."

"Who are you and how did I get here?" Stephen demanded, ignoring the words of the doctor. Stephen clutched at the pain that now came throbbing up from his left side.

"You've degenerated into an awful state Stephen. Please try to remain calm." The doctor

reasserted.

Stephen tried to respond but felt that the pain was too great. He decided it best to lie down after all, until this newfound blackness of pain subsided.

After a while, Stephen spoke again: “What...what’s wrong with me?” The words came out as from a man whose mouth was filled with ash. Another bout of pain seized Stephen who took it as quietly as possible.

“We’re not entirely sure just yet.” The Doctor replied. “We’re going to have to run some more tests.”

Anything! Stephen’s mind screamed *Just get rid of the pain!*

Stephen watched as a small man came into the room holding a metal bucket in his left hand. The little man was dressed in a soft black suit that seemed quite out of place with the surroundings.

The doctor bent his head down towards the man, who could not have stood more than three feet tall, so that he could listen to his whispering. The face of the dwarf with the bucket conveyed a sense that he was relaying grave words of the utmost importance.

His message having been delivered, the dwarf smiled at Stephen, handed the bucket to the doctor, and shuffled quickly out of the room.

Stephen’s eyes shifted from the darkened doorway where the curious man had just exited to the bucket that Dr. Shivers held against his chest. Thoughts of what the bucket contained and if it had anything to do with his condition began to creep into Stephen’s head. He strained his neck forward so that he might peer inside the bucket but could move no more than a few inches.

Stephen was about to ask what exactly was in the bucket when he noticed one small eyeball now protruding over the lip of it. This eye quickly began to shake almost imperceptibly upon noticing Stephen’s interest. It was more of a controlled shuffling than a twitch, Stephen decided.

“Now Stephen, I want you to lie back and relax.” Spoke Dr. Shivers

Stephen did so, although he kept an eye alert and fixed on the bucket and the thing that lived inside it.

Stephen watched in fascination as the eye grew into a small pink head as the creature in the bucket began to crawl upwards. Soon two hands gripped the lip of the bucket and Stephen could see that the mouth of the thing was absurdly too large for its head. Stephen marveled at its swollen purple lips that were touched with dull red in places where the skin had cracked.

Dr. Shivers then gently tilted the bucket forward, so that Stephen could see that a small reptilian body thick with withered brown scales was connected to the pitifully small head of the creature. The thing was now beginning to crawl slowly out of the bucket and onto Stephen’s covered legs,

yet for some reason he could not explain Stephen was not alarmed. Quite the contrary, he felt a love for the thing that was now creeping slowly towards his abdomen.

The thing seemed to return this love as it bent its head neatly up towards Stephen's face. Without warning it then proceeded to open its ludicrous mouth, revealing thousands of black fangs, and bite deep into Stephen's side.

Stephen was entirely calm as he watched the beast tear open his flesh and devour a chunk of his side. As the thing ripped a piece of char-black tar from the hole in his body, Stephen was once again sure of the boundless love between them.

"Soon we shall gain much greater insight into your condition Stephen." Dr. Shivers proclaimed happily as the creature gnashed upon the blackened cancer it had taken from Stephen's body.

Stephen assured the Doctor he was thankful for their efforts, and that he had full confidence that they should restore him to health in no time a-tall.

"A good attitude will get you far here Stephen." Dr. Shivers said. "Oh! It's just about time for another dose of your medicine."

Stephen watched as the Doctor tested the syringe with a small flick of his fingers before inserting a needle the color of cherry cough syrup into Stephen's arm.

II

When Stephen awoke he found that the strangest thing had happened. A new and strange emotion had come to him. It was all around him and slowly he began to recall such a feeling from his childhood. Stephen thought of the picnic he had gone on with his stuffed Teddy Bear friends when he was 5, and knew what that feeling was.

Stephen was happy.

Stephen smiled then. Smiled ever so wide at the powder yellow walls covered in flowers of all shades of pink and purple.

He watched with utmost glee as paper drawings of children in green crayon danced in a circle about his bed.

Stephen smiled at them. He handed them a flower also of paper the color of The Hospitals walls. The petals had been filled in with pink crayon and the stem a green slightly brighter than that used to color the dancing – and now laughing- children.

A music box started up and seemed to fill the room with newfound happiness. The children whirled ever faster and Stephen clapped his hands with joy.

"I'm happy as a lark now! And everything is just FINE!" Stephen proclaimed to no one in particular.

The children then departed, whirling as they danced out of the door to Stephen's room. Stephen turned his attention to the pink mobile above his head. He spun it around as he watched with all the fascination of a young boy.

Stephen suddenly let loose with a violent cough, but not even the blood which burst onto his bottom lip and chin could sway Stephen's happiness.

He was positively giggling now as he began to hack and wheeze. More blood came spewing from his gagging mouth. Some of it landed on the stuffed brown Teddy Bear with the missing eye in the corner. Most of the blood, however, ended up covering Stephen's bed sheets depicting airplanes that now seemed to be flying in a thick liquid crimson cloud.

III

"45 I believe."

"45!" The little man in the puzzling black suit excitably agreed.

The tall man wearing glasses and an extremely expensive suit bent to take the ticket marked '45' from the little man's eager hand. The dwarf nodded as the other man walked down the hallway towards the elevators with his nose held high in the air.

Stephen was very sad now. They hadn't even remembered his dessert today. Stephen missed the sweet chocolate of the brownies that came with the disgusting greens the nurses brought him. Especially broccoli.

Just then, a knock came on his door, and Stephen lit up, thinking the nurses had returned with his much-deserved treat.

The sight that greeted Stephen's eyes, however, filled him with fear. Stephen shrunk away from the well-dressed form that stood in his doorway. He hurriedly pulled his bed covers up to his face, hoping they would provide some measure of protection from the disdain reeking out of the man's visage.

Gallunthorp had come once more.

"Well don't just sit there shivering old chap! Pull yourself up like a man and pay me my respect!" Gallunthorp suggested hotly. "After all, I have traveled very far to see you."

A nurse suddenly appeared from behind Gallunthorp. She was wheeling in a tray filled with needles and bottles of sickly sweet red medicine. She proceeded to bend over to reach a syringe and Gallunthorp gave her a swift slap on her exposed behind with his open palm.

She cooed in surprise and smiled back over her nurse's uniform at the bespectacled man who had had the forwardness to molest her in her own hotel.

She then turned back to a now even more terrified and increasingly upset Stephen and gave him his medicine. The red syrup flowed into Stephen's vein and he seemed to relax a bit.

"There, now isn't that better my boy?" Gallunthorp asked Stephen.

Stephen nodded as the nurse bent down and ran her hands over Gallunthorp's pants. She slid her fingers nimbly up to his crotch and unzipped his pants. Gallunthorp continued to beam at Stephen as he said, "Now, to business!"

"I would like to make your sir, a proposal."

She was now running her soft hands across his flaccid penis.

"I'm talking bonds here my boy, pay attention!" Gallunthorp snapped as he noticed Stephen's gaze wandering to the nurse's bouncing breasts. She was now sucking him thirstily, and Stephen wondered how this man could speak of such things with his hand on her head as it were.

"Now, I've got a sizeable quantity of C-shares and B-shares – no A-shares of course, far too pricey these days- that I need to unload." Gallunthorp continued as saliva dripped down the nurse's chin "and I'm going to need a good man to assist me."

"I'd do the work myself, of course, but with the FCC regulations as they are, my hands are quite tied I'm afraid. You understand I'm sure."

Stephen nodded dumbly as the Nurse quickened her pace, now reaching around with her left hand to help speed the delivery of her medicine.

"Good. Very good. Good boy." Gallunthorp said softly as he pet the head of the nurse.

He was now gripping her hair quite tightly and forcing her head back and forth along his engorged penis, Stephen saw.

After he finished, the nurse smiled, wiped her mouth with one hand, and left to continue her rounds.

"Oh and uh, mum's the word, eh my boy?"

IV

Stephen was dying, of that he was sure. He had been for weeks. The cancer had never been thoroughly removed, no matter what the doctors told him. The beating of his heart was not well, and Stephen knew it was because of the blackened cancer that choked his arteries.

Smoke drifted endlessly outside his bedroom windows. Far in the distance he could see vast towers rising and belching forth pollution after pollution into the skies. He knew this was not the cause of his sickness. Nor was he ill from the brown glass that held his food when he visited the

cafeteria on Thursdays, nor the linoleum that squeaked soundlessly of cleaning solvent. Yet all of these things ate at Stephen with profound bitterness.

This hospital held him like a piece of rotting fruit inside a rotting wooden apple barrel.

Accursed and pointless elevator music seemed to pour from every speaker of the building. There was no escape from its endless torrent of major keys and sweet words of girls he would never know.

And you know, my darrrrrling, how this world can beat you down. But I'll be there right by your side my BayyyyyBee.

Except it was instrumental. Even the dark undertones of Billy Holiday songs were taken away because of this. It was impossible to sense heroin addiction and hidden lust in a few synthesized keyboard noodlings.

Stephen was now very depressed. This was no summer depression. It was the great mother depression that fostered all others.

He would often walk the hallways, searching for a way out, but he was always met with bars and decaying plaster. Each room was different yet terribly alike with their not white/not cream walls and browning corners. He wondered what machine was creating the moisture that must be causing this decayed growth.

Every third Sunday they would let all the inmates out into the courtyard to gaze at the polluted sky and walk amidst the wilting flowers that clung to life in the otherwise empty gardens.

Stephen thought of suicide most on these days, when the roving band of gibbering lunatics was allowed to merrily hurl their ugly bodies against the dirt of the desolate flower beds. He could not connect to anyone here. He felt a terrible loneliness.

He would have killed himself too, had he a gun, or other easy method of transportation into the next life. For had he not been assured once that he could so easily be reincarnated into the next life by wondrously beautiful demons?

He did not know, but anything was better than this. His heart was dying, no matter what the doctors told him.

His depression spread out like a cloud of blackness threatening to ensnare even the beloved memories of his childhood. He knew that if he did not die soon, he would be too lonely and embittered to comprehend anything. He wanted not peace. He wanted not for love or for comfort. He wanted not for understanding. He wanted not for the warm place he knew had existed as soon as it had died. He longed for an end. He longed for an end to his ruin more than anything he had ever longed for in all his god-smitten existence.

On an unnumbered day during his entrapment in that foul place, Stephen felt the blackness overtake him. Absolute depression had set in, and there was no return.

Yet what he expected did not occur. He found that he loved the flies which now circled everywhere about his head.

He was now a thing that men would fear and flee in their ignorant ways. His childhood had died, and he hoped much more had died with it.

Seeing his blackened and decayed flesh, like that of a piece of burnt meat which has been tossed to the dogs for it is not fit for human consumption, he knew much more had. He would rise now, and spread his halo of flies across the plains of this barren world. He was not its master, but he would surely drag untold numbers into the mire with him.

The blackened swamps he now populated as he bred with unspeakably ugly things grew apace.

They cannot kill me. Stephen thought For I am already dead.

Stephen smashed through the glass that made up the front door of The Hospital and flew into the night.

VI

Mrs. Elaine Gertrude Smith sat in her wheelchair and sipped from her vitamin bag. Her almost two-dimensional arm sucked pleasantly at the nutrients as they filled her bloated and wrinkled body.

Mrs. Smith's curled gray hair lay upon her naked shoulders, and she thought of Henry.

Her husband had died long ago, in one of the many wars of her country. He had died a hero, but that hadn't made things any easier on Mrs. Smith.

But that was long ago, and now only the tattered yellow of her dress remained to speak of those times.

Elaine was a god fearing woman during those days when she and her husband made love in their creaking bed. They would sit and drink dark coffee as the waves swelled and crashed upon gray rocks, and they would grasp each other's hands in motions of affectionate affirmation.

Then one day she had caught Henry in bed with another woman, and everything she had ever known had proceeded to steadily unravel.

We, the citizens of Fort Worth, Texas, find the defendant, Mrs. Elaine Smith guilty on all counts for the murder of her husband, Henry Fitzgerald Smith.

There was so much blood. The other woman had screamed, but it seemed to Mrs. Smith as if she

had screamed with a sock in her mouth. The blood had burst all over the walls, sheets, drawers, clothes (even those of the naked screaming woman who her husband had come inside of not five minutes earlier), and alarm clock.

Mrs. Smith had taken just a moment to take this in before she loaded another bullet in the chamber and watched as the whore her husband had given their love to fall away when her belly split and emptied onto the Smiths' bed.

She wept only in the darkened corners of her prison cell then. Everything she had ever known had been shit upon by the man she loved.

There was no starting over. She had to face the inevitable emptiness of her existence, and had found that she couldn't.

Soon she was a permanent resident of The Hospital.

VII

They had brought in Mrs. Elaine Gertrude Smith on charges of murder, but it was her periods of abject silence and stone-faced coldness that had made the other inmates shudder.

Once, when she was raped by four of the larger guards, Mrs. Smith simply let herself be tossed around like a rag doll until they finished. She had not uttered a word as they violated her and left her bloodied body in the washroom.

She remembered none of this.

Then, when The Blackened and Dead Thing had rushed past her window in a cloud of flies, it all came rushing back.

She remembered the screams, the blood, and the rape.

She remembered coming to the sunken and foreboding Hospital and she remembered when she had first been given her IV.

Among the wreckage of her life she remembered the coming of the man who had become The Blackened and Dead Thing, and she sobbed uncontrollably for hours in the dark corners of her room.

VIII

The ambulance had arrived in the wee hours of the morning. Its siren lay silent, but its red lights spun slowly, telling of the dying passenger within.

Two men had broken out of the van and opened its back doors, revealing a darkened room that soon produced a bleeding and unconscious man on a stretcher.

“What is your occupation?”

The nurse asked.

(They wheeled him inside, and brought his stretcher screaming down the halls.)

They always ask the same questions. Mrs. Smith thought somewhere in the depths of her frozen mind.

“Not talking, eh handsome?” The nurse decided.

“Alright, doctor, please have a look at this man, there’s nothing I can do.” The nurse said as she covered her breasts with her white nurse’s uniform.

Patting her softly on the ass, Dr. Shiver’s consoled her: “That’s alright, we’ll take over from here.”

She had scurried off, bouncing past Mrs. Smith’s doorway.

They didn’t care that she could see all of the strange goings-on of the hospital, for they knew her to be mute, and semi-catatonic.

“Knock-knock? Anybody home?” one of the interns had teased her as he rapped upon her withered gray forehead.

“Aw John, she can’t hear you. Let’s get out of here. This lady gives me the *creeps*.” His naïve and buxom girlfriend had pleaded.

I’d like to show you just who the fuck is home in here. Elaine Smith’s unconscious mind growled.

That was when they had first brought her, and treated her much like they had this strange new man, whom she had learned was named Stephen.

“My god, his organ’s...they’re...they’re *hideous*.” The doctors had said.

“It’s as if Spirochetes have eaten away his entire innards.” They decided quietly.

Soon, however, Stephen was walking about The Hospital just like all of the other blithering idiots. But he didn’t ever seem to enjoy it as much as the others.

Mrs. Smith’s subconscious filed away this information for later use.

Perhaps this was the reason the man who would become The Blackened and Dead Thing (black death itself Elaine now thought) had suddenly become so depressed.

Elaine had seen much suffering in her life, but it was rare that she saw one so visibly stricken with grief as this man.

His sunken cheeks boasted of more pain and sorrow than the millions of dead from the last of Henry's wars. But even this was incomparable to the limitless depths of loneliness and despair that were the man's eye sockets.

It's like gazing into pools of endless black. Elaine Gertrude Smith had thought.

His condition had steadily worsened all through the rounds of the sticky red medicine they continued to feed him.

She had wished that they could somehow reach out and save each other. But there was no breaching the silence that had caked Mrs. Smith's soul over the years.

She would often gaze down upon Stephen as he lay in a reverie of emptiness on one of the old couches that lined the recreation room of The Hospital.

Neither had said, nor could have said anything. Even if they themselves wished it (which they hadn't and couldn't), all speech was forbidden in the recreation room.

Stephen and Elaine had both watched happily during the times when this rule was tested and another of the vast number of shaking lunatics which peopled The Hospital was taken away to be slaughtered.

All this had changed when the man she had formerly known only as Stephen had awoke and risen as The Blackened and Dead Thing.

IX

Stephen flinched but for an instant as swamp water filled every orifice of his body.

X

Mrs. Smith silently smoked her cigarette and let the smoke pour down around her.

She felt the color in her cheeks go with it, leaving her gray and lacking the third dimension. She too was cut of the paper of children, but colored with age.

Her thoughts were locked away to all but herself, and she had taken in that entire sea in one breath.

She desperately fought for one brief moment before the torrent took her and left her in the sagging cunt of reality.

Her pink painted fingernails that once held an umbrella over she and her dead husband now gripped the faded faggot and trembled with secrets.

Henry would be using the walking stick now. She supposed. No use wonderin'. Time has done you very wrong Mrs. Smith. Very wrong indeed.

Orange clouds passed overhead from the ceaselessly toiling factories.

Orange never did gel quite right with me.

A rash had developed on the man's arm in the later days. Large red boils formed on his wan back.

He would pick at them from time to time, and she would wordlessly voice encouragement.

He would pace back and forth, wandering between rooms as his rotted teeth tottered dangling on the brink of falling.

He would slowly brush his hair as it fell out in ever-greater clumps into the spotted sink.

Surely, he was dying.

Anyone can see that.

Yet it seemed as if no one did. Or they didn't care.

The outside world will never know of this.

This destitution will lie just beyond the skin.

"And I care not wither this blackness comes."

XI

They were married in an old chapel by the green and brine filled sea.

(we are going backwards now; it shall only take a minute)

She had looked so lovely then that absolutely no one that beheld her three years later would have believed it to be the same person.

A shattered life doesn't transition very well.

The record player lay broken in a heap amid the Las Vegas hotel room.

Sweet cherubs were caressed in their innermost sanctities by the maddening couple. Their lust heaved until it broke in bubbling orgasm.

Softly now. Lest you waken her.

Don't worry, it's all in the cards. Two heads are better than one they say.

He smiled at her naked body.

Such a pretty thing, and so small a wonder that it should be prized as high.

Yet sometimes a man wants for the more bruised of the fruits, and he cannot help but pick them, though he be driven from the garden all the same.

XII

Stephen was now slowly descending through the muck of the swamp. As he passed through that bog which seemed to drain forever down into the pit of the earth, he saw many strange and beautiful creatures swimming and walking about.

Some had very long and thin necks that stretched out into black stalks with one searching eye at the end. Others dwelt in small mud huts stuck to the ends of rock formations that sometimes jutted out into the swamp. These were much more stout and frightened than the lanky things, and Stephen wondered if perhaps the thin things were predator and the stout things prey.

As if in answer to Stephen's unvoiced question, one of the lanky things suddenly reached out a flowing purple tentacle and rolled it back along with one of the stout things into its gaping jaw.

On Stephen's left there now appeared a group of 12 hooded figures, each no taller than the midget that had brought the creature that had feasted on Stephen's cancer. They were holding some form of ritual meeting, but when Stephen saw one of their hoods fall back he gazed upon a face much like that of an eel, and knew they were not of human origin.

Further and further he descended through the ever-darkening mire until he came upon a small outcropping of rock upon which were a group of pigs that were standing upright and talking in a tongue Stephen did not understand. They were half dressed in the clothing of business, yet they lacked trousers altogether. Stephen did not think this very surprising given what he'd seen in the swamp since he first entered it.

Stephen knew the pigs would not harm him just as he'd known the 12 men of fire and ritual would not lay ruin upon his soul. They had been told of his coming for many years, and they knew the price of wishing destruction upon a one such as he.

The pigs grunted at Stephen in their foreign language in seeming obeisance. Stephen accepted their offering of one of their kind roasted and placed upon a silver platter with grace. After hungrily wolfing this down and impregnating the youngest of their larvae, as was custom with their kind, Stephen began to descend once more.

Stephen passed a few more odd and curious creatures. Some with webbed hands that burned bright green, others with pulsing eyes and houses of pure oxygen. Soon, however, there came a point when there were no creatures at all but he, and then the swamp was so thick it was impossible to see if anything could live in these depths.

Stephen continued to fall for what seemed like aeons. It was no slower going at these depths, but there was no determining their end. Countless days were spent falling through this invisible terrain until at last change came.

Stephen felt firstly his toes coming upon empty and dry space. A few days later his fingers began to tingle with this new development. It seemed that he was slowly coming out of the swamp from the outside inwards.

Stephen knew this to be impossible, yet were any of the marvels he'd seen in this swamp possible?

Stephen's lips hung then in the black as all the rest of his body had surfaced into dry air. He could not move his eyes around very far due to the unfortunate position of his tongue, and all that he could make out was a fuzzy brown surface in front of him, as if of a cave. He waited like this for several hours when suddenly a voice from below called,

“Password sir! And Make it Quick!”

XIII

Stephen searched frantically for some possible answer to this. What could the voice possibly be talking about?

“Who's there?!” Stephen tried to shout back, but from his clapped lips it came out more like “Foo Der?!”

“What's that sir? You'll have to speak up! And this time it had better be The Password!”

Stephen was terribly frightened now. Had he traveled all these depths simply to die at the hands of a raving lunatic (and disembodied!) voice asking for passwords he'd heard nothing of?

Stephen tried to struggle out of his position and drag his body back into the blinding swamp, but it would not budge.

Think! Think! THINK GODAMMIT!

Stephen kicked his legs frantically, not caring what they hit below.

“You have three seconds sir!”

“THREE!”

Stephen thought hard. Nothing happened.

“TWO!”

Stephen clawed at the far reaches of his mind for an answer. None came.

“ONE!”

Stephen wet himself in overwhelming fright.

The voice stopped.

SILENCE

Stephen slowly began to move his eyes again. They were tear stained, to balance the darker stain on his pants. His legs began to move again as he pathetically grabbed for something to pull himself up by. Defeated, he began to weep again. Tears fell down his body as he was still hanging vertically due to his imprisoned tongue.

“I’m sorry about that.” Another, smaller voice said “How impolite of me! Please, sit down.”

XIV

Whoossh. : Air released somewhere below.

WhOOMP!: A door popping open.

*WooooommmmmumumumumuumumKEERRRRWHWIKWKWKWKWKWKJKWKHWKHW
WKHZKHZKWHKZWVKHZKWHKHW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

The muck around Stephen’s lips began to fall away and soon he was tumbling through a mass of mud and stone.

He landed with a hard *Thud*: his body hitting the floor.

Stephen groaned in pain and misery. The wind had been knocked squarely out of him.

He then began to slowly take in his surroundings with his roaming hands.

It seemed he was on a smooth wooden table. He checked again with his hands.

Ehwoooont: the sound of Stephen’s hands discovering they were on top of a smooth wooden table.

Stephen screamed as a rabbit politely said to him

“It’s good ta see ya” in a voice like an Italian mob leader. “Please, sit down.”

The rabbit was roughly half a meter high and wearing a gray Stetson hat. The hat complimented the rabbit’s black and yellow checkered jacket sharply. He looked good, like a cross between a great fuck of a Don with a voice like an Italian Bugs Bunny and The White Rabbit of Louis Carol. He was alternately smoking a cigar and moving his arm in a sort of mock punching motion.

Stephen rapidly tried to scramble to his feet, but he tripped and his jaw slammed into the tabletop. He ignored the pain as best he could and scurried off the table and into a small leather chair seated across the table from the rabbit.

“That’s better.” The rabbit said matter-of-factly “Now, go fuck your mother.”

Stephen turned around. There was a giant fish like thing wearing a pink apron and a glowing neon sign that said “YOUR MOTHER” in large green letters.

“Go on, go on.” The rabbit motioned.

Stephen was new to this, and the going was slow. However, at last Stephen came to soil his Fish Mother’s eggs with his flies pupae, and he was able to return to the table.

“You wouldn’t be trying to fuck me would ya pally?” the rabbit said as he glared at Stephen.

I HAVE NO WISH FOR SUCH A THING

the voice came out booming and inhuman in its character.

“Yeah I suppose you’re right.” The rabbit said “It’s just these fuckin’ Micks you know? Hard ta trust anyone nowadays.”

OF COURSE. WE MUST BE CAREFUL

“So glad you knew the password. You can be sure of that. I need you for this kid.”

Silence from The Blackened and Dead Thing.

ARE YOU REALLY HERE?

Of course stoopid

“Why of course pally. I wouldn’t steer ya wrong, now would I?”

“Of course not” the rabbit said, answering his own question.

“Now I’ll have you know I didn’t want anyone else in on this. ‘It’s gotta be the Man’ I tolds em.”

<cut to shot of sexy young coed on a beach, playing lightly with a beach ball. She is a natural blonde (*upstairs and down- ed. Note*) >

<a young athletic man (also tan) rushes in to pick up the girl’s fallen beach ball.>

“Oh! Thanks!” she replies giddily.

“*Say*” she begins seductively. “Why don’t you come pack to my place? My *roommate* and I have a 6-pack of beers, and we love to have our guy friends come over and watch TV with us.”

<the young man smiles and rushes off with her, arm in arm>

<the young couple bounds up to a doorway of a small white picket fenced house. The girl's breasts bounce perkily. She rings a doorbell and another young attractive girl, this time dressed in a Catholic schoolgirl's uniform, answers the door.>

“What is it Sandy? I've got lots of studying to do.” The catholic girl asks, annoyed.

“Well I was just hoping I could come in and uh *talk*” The blonde girl says sexily.

“Sandy you know how I feel about *girls*.” The catholic girl says.

“I know. Noooo girls without boys too. Well look what I got silly!” The blonde girl replies, pulling the Young man in front of the catholic girl's face.

<the Catholic girl quickly opens the door and comes outside to touch the Young Man's chest.>

“Well don't just stand there you guys, come on inside!” The catholic girl eagerly urges her two friends.

<as they are being pulled inside by the horny catholic girl, we go to a close up of the blonde girl's face. She is beaming and winks at us as a voice announces over a red and yellow logo in a star shape:

“Bisexual Girls. It's *gotta* be the Man!”

end.

>

Stephen was back with the rabbit now, and they were shaking hands. Clocks went off and gave farewell salutes and blessings of glory to Stephen with their asymmetrical hands. Small green balls hanging from a chandelier clicked into each other, causing Quantum Mechanics.

The rabbit's ears barely moved on top of his Gray Stetson hat as he furiously shook Stephen's hand.

“Godspeed my boy!” the rabbit said, “Your country needs you!”

I WILL PERFORM MY DUTY

The rabbit let go of Stephen's hand and waved goodbye to him.

Stephen collected his Halo of Flies and began his ascent.

Stephen thought many things on his journey back up through the dancing of the 12 and the shaking frightened looks of stout creatures.

Know a lot fucking more than you think.

He feasted hungrily on the remaining pigs as he passed their darkened shantytowns. His lust for death was insatiable. It tore at him far worse than any cancer ever had, but he loved the taste even of his own filth-clogged blood.

Their screams gave life to the long and searching things of the Right Bank of the swamp.

Life itself, salvation from The Hunger of The Blackened and Dead Thing.

This is getting absurd.

Notice anything special?

Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain as he screams encouragement to you.

Stephen's deformed and hideously black body suddenly burst upon the surface of the swamp that was sometimes a lake (always obscenely filthy). He stood naked and raving with his Halo of Flies and elongated arms.

He could assume any shape, he found. Just now he was a deep blue three-piece suit, and wore woman's makeup.

<Children playing games by the side of the lake.>

Crun-ch!: The Children's bones break

Munch!: Lord Stephen eats their shattered spines.

<fade to an old woman laying in her home. She grasps for life as her relatives look at her worriedly. They are scared that she may be dying. She gags and chokes, and for a moment they think the worst is over. But she simply stops breathing and slowly passes on. [Close up of family's faces. They are very sad.]>

Stephen's Halo feasted long that day on shitheaps innumerable.

XV

Why am I not surprised? Mr. Molloy thought.

When he had told them he would "prefer to fuck himself than eat one more bowl of the cafeteria's wretchedness!" he was being facetious. They must have missed this important point because they had now strapped into a machine that was very surely about to forcibly fuck him and feed him simultaneously.

Mr. Molloy's legs quivered as his gob was stuff full 'o the taters he had so bitterly rejected.

I AM THE DEAD

Russell Kamp resided in the other wing of The Hospital from Mr. Molloy, but he and the other 2 young boys who shared his room still heard his horrified screams as The Machine brutally sodomized him.

They were all urged by the nurses to take another dose of their medications.

"I thought they were for girls!" Russell had protested.

"No, no, read the bottle little boy! These are for growing boys!" The nurse had said a bit too cheerily.

Russell turned the bottle around and slowly read the small black word

'a-m-p-h-e-t-a-m-i-n-e' aloud.

The nurse smiled, patted his head, and turned and left him and the others alone in their Hospital room with no lights or heating. They had but one bed, and this was barely large enough for two of them. So when the pills wore off long enough for them to sleep they were forced to fight for the privilege of slightly more comfortable sleeping arrangements. They would often pummel each other with their almost infant fists until they were all bloody and bruised. Eventually, however, someone had given up (or been beaten unconscious) so that the other two boys were able to claim possession of the bed for the night.

Russell had won again tonight.

On some sort of lucky streak I guess. Russell had told the nurse who patted his bloody head after she heard the news.

Many other inmates were also on speed, and nearly none of them knew what it was they were being given. Most would have taken the drug no matter what it was.

"Nums de pain don it?" Elderly Mr. Jenkins had retorted when Bertram Freeman had proclaimed his apprehensions of the drug.

The Pain was all that mattered to Mr. Jenkins, and most of The Hospitals inmates were like Mr. Jenkins.

DEATH WILL COME TO YOU ALL

Death was coming at all speeds in that impossible and accursed Hospital. Track lines ran down every little girl and mother's arms, and puffy purple bags hung under their grandfather's sickly blind eyes.

Terribly thin grew little Rose.

Charlie fell, like an Angel.

Little Boggins' son took and took and grew ever fatter.

Death was coming indeed.

Elderly couples held hands as they shivered. They would clasp their gray and wrinkled hands upon some Percosets and renew their ancient and deteriorating wedding vows.

They were just statistics now in the long and ever heavier record books of The Hospital.

Still, those ill-fated Syrup-Red Crosses stood brightly on The Hospital walls.

A chill wind began to pick up and throw itself at the inmate's walls. The inmates stupidly turned their sluggish faces towards their barred windows and shuddered.

They had been idling all their long stay, and in that fashion they would die.

All The Hospital heard a buzzing somewhere in the distance.

Mrs. Smith turned her head nervously towards the sound. The sound reminded her of the little girl who lived in fear, who had been diagnosed with *Mundcoreicis*. She had had her own special Halo of Flies. That halo had tormented her till the day she died with grief everywhere in her heart and bewilderment at the ruined life which lay before her now that mother was gone. She died 47 days after her mother, empty, alone, and terrified.

TIME TO DIE BITCH

Stephen rose and smashed through The Hospital's glass doorways. Not one shard of glass touched his blurring body. The last thing the receptionist saw before a Halo of Flies swallowed her head was the scratched out face of The Blackened and Dead Thing.

The Blackened and Dead Thing flew through all manner of rooms then, bringing immediate and rapid decay to infants and the old alike.

All God's creatures have to die.

XVI

After the alarm was sounded the inmates were moved out into the courtyard. They were told it was time for their weekly Sunday walks 'outdoors'. They had rose as a mass of jellyfish for a brief instant before clouded memory swept across their faces and they complied with the prodding of the nurses.

Outside, old Ragtime JellerHead was playing a great brand fucking ditty on the piano. The inmates shuffled about aimlessly to the music, occasionally asking absurd and vague questions of the nurses.

The doors that led into the Hospital were now pushed outward by a swarm of flies and when that Halo had parted, the inmates saw the man of their collective nightmares, and they grew wise for one more terrible instant before they were torn apart by The Blackened and Dead Thing of which they had so often dreamed of in their misshapen slumber.

Sand poured from Stephen's asphalt body and onto the desolate plains of wilting flowers in the courtyard.

The inmates were no more, and there lingered but few in the Hospital now.

A HALO OF FLIES EATS THEIR WITHERED HUSKS

The Blackened Dead Thing rose once more and re-entered the Hospital. He spread out across every floor and space of tile in that old and crumbling building. His black cloud was swallowing them in a sea of filth and abandonment.

Showers filled with naked and emaciated corpses. Screaming hypodermic needles and broken prescription vials. Test tube babies shaken and stirred. Rotting smiles of the old smashed by blunt force trauma. Nausea causes many vomiting nurses. Their glamour is made all the more beautiful by their disgusting innards. Exposed lies leave vacant looks on the masses. Like words lost on a dog and time fluttered away with soup and hard living. Words spun chamber from chamber. Holes through the dog's head, blood soup. A meal fit for a King. 40 ounces of pure cocaine, rolled up into a heroine's vein. Wrong tie. Tourniquet lies broken. Chances are good you will fall. Be betrayed lest chaos overtake you. Sleep and never dream, it's worse that way. Your luminous eyes scratched out of an old Polaroid depicting Mrs. Smith and her two children. They lie dead at the bottom of a lake. Pushed in a car and down a hill. A small hand seen pressed against the glass. Trapped and abandoned. Everything ruined. Water filled lungs no bigger than Man's kidney. Pie no more, letters no more. Everything still and no longer talkative. Raped less, molested more. Simple way children are raised he said. His hands worked that way. Always downward. Something is terribly wrong.

The Blackened and Dead Thing stood face to face with the dying, balding, and weeping form of what was once Stephen Joseph Hawkins.

XVII

Stephen had been crying ever since he heard the droning buzz surrounding the Hospital mingled with the choked out screams of the inmates. He knew all along what had killed them, and now it had come to his door.

Stephen ceased his crying as depression was replaced by immense fear. He did not want to look

at the Blackened and Dead Thing that stood silently before him, but he could not help slowly raising his head to face what amounted to no less (but possibly much more) than his impossible corpse. Stephen struggled against the madness rising within him as he gazed long on putrid sagging eyelids and swollen purple lips. Each breath that passed from his (its) lips seemed full of loathing. Thousands of deep cuts, many rife with infection and bloated pustules, lay scattered across its body like so many trenches in a ruined battlefield.

Stephen stared directly into the empty eyes of The Blackened and Dead Thing and waited for it to speak.

IT IS TIME

Stephen now wept anew as his hand clutched at some terrible secret underneath his unclean bed sheets.

“Only one of us may exist in this world, is that it?” Stephen asked. His voice was quivering.

THAT IS CORRECT

Stephen’s face was stretched in a mixture of pain and tears. He surely was going mad now, for he was crying, laughing and grinding his teeth all at once. His vision consisted only of a choking red fog and the terrible secret that he clutched in his trembling right hand.

Stephen slowly raised the gun to his head.

The beast before him bore remarkable resemblance to a corpse plagued with leprosy that has had its organs turned inside out. Yet, it would have been difficult to tell that Stephen had not already perished, judging by the decrepitude of his wretched body.

Suddenly, The Blackened and Dead Thing let out a piercing wail that seemed as if it contained the screams of thousands of agonized souls. All his weird insects rushed madly about in confusion as Stephen cocked the gun back. Stephen’s ears were bleeding from the horrifying screeches now. He felt as if his eyes would surely burst from that disembodied multitude of shrieking voices. The cacophony soared ever higher, the Blackened Thing shook in one final terrible spasm, and it seemed as if it had spread its limbs through several areas of time and space at once, blanketing the Hospital room in blurred lines of needled blackness.

It was impossible to hear the gunshot as Stephen pulled the trigger, and blew a hole in the back of his head.

XVIII

The Blackened and Dead Thing threw its being over the room as Stephen’s brains slid down the hospital room wall. Its Halo of Flies and schizophrenic limbs stripped the flesh and clothing off of the empty shell that was once Stephen Hawkins, leaving only a corpse so black it was the antithesis of bleached bone.

XIX

Wuh-wump: The sound of a single heartbeat echoing throughout infinity.

Stephen was dreaming of his mother. The day they went to see the animals at the Zoo. They were visiting the penguins. The penguins had always been Stephen's favorite as a child.

"Look Honey! There he goes!" His mother laughed.

Stephen laughed back, but both their words sounded muffled and distant, as they often do in dreams.

Stephen was in his warm place.

The sound of his heartbeat rose as joy spread across Stephen's face. His mother looked down at him and smiled from beneath her curly light brown hair.

Stephen watched the penguins jump into the water, playing out some wonderful game that Stephen did not understand and did not care to. It didn't matter.

Wuh-wump: The sound of a disembodied heart in a metallic chamber.

Soft yellow light shone on Stephen's heart as it filled the world with its rhythmic pulsing.

The dreams were so extraordinarily visual. Everything smelt of powder and candy.

The dream of he and his mother at the Zoo replayed itself, starting from his Mother's pointing and laughing in unison with Stephen. When it was finished, it replayed itself again. More words filtered through, subtly changing in texture.

Scuttling stag beetles frolicked in a bed of sawdust. One kicked its legs merrily as it burrowed its head in the dust.

Moths ate at Stephen's small brown coat as flies filled his child's mouth.

They ate steak in an Irish Pub of times past. England sagged in victory.

A beatific decapitation took place, and Stephen clapped. His mother embraced him.

Light fluttered away, leaving Stephen in darkness.
The beating of his heart slowed and its sound grew dim.

Now it too was muffled and filtered through dreamy light.

His heart withered away. The soft yellow light faded slowly into darkness.

CIRCLE THREE

Visions

I

The Dying are Still Dreaming.

The words lay carved in an old wooden floor in a dark room. Shafts of moonlight struck the floor through a cracked glass window. This window was held inside the steeple of an antiquated wooden church somewhere in the South.

Night placed strange shadows across swaying grass in plantation fields near the church.

Below this creaking and crooked steeple was the church's attic. It is here that Stephen sat cross-legged looking at the cryptic words carved there for some arcane purpose.

A small stuffed bear entered the circle in which Stephen sat. The bear looked worn out by time and he held a glowing candle between his light blue paws.

The bear set the candle down and a fuzzy pink rabbit entered from Stephen's right carrying a book. He was wearing a priest's collar and wore dignified button eyes on his face.

Stephen watched these things silently.

"It is time for the Mass." The rabbit said "Please be seated, and remove your hats."

Stephen complied and took off his top hat. The bear sat down cross-legged across from the rabbit.

The rabbit opened the book he was carrying and cleared his throat.

"Mid Haven. Chapter I, Verse. 3. And God said unto the beetling and benighted ones, 'fear not, for thou shalt move on as thou art moved upon.' And those in the valley saw that this was good, and gave new praise onto the Lord." The rabbit spoke with reverence.

Decisions lie with stupid men. Stephen thought.

"Amen." Said the bear.

Stephen saw spiders crawling off in the shadowed corners of the attic. They were spinning intricate webs depicting occult symbols of fallen ages.

The moon shown brightly on the circle, highlighting the triangle the trio formed across it. Set inside this was the waning light of the candle. Stephen eyed the flickering flame as if entranced.

He thought for a moment that he could see worlds without end and strange creatures undertaking woeful deeds within that flame.

When the vision receded Stephen felt a deep sense of loss. He felt guilt when the bear placed a fuzzy paw on his arm in sympathy. No suggestions, only guilt and regret.

Stephen dwelt in that place many days. He learned much from his new companions and each night they performed the sacred ritual of Qabalpla'uth and gave praise to their God.

“Apocrypha 17 ‘Glory and woe be unto you all men of color.’ Spoke the Prophet Paul.” The rabbit said.

Stephen listened to these words and each time gained a greater sense of the love within this place. Yet at times he felt a deep coldness there and he longed to leave.

As if sensing this, the bear would often console Stephen by singing him one of the songs he learned in church school as a child.

One such song in particular never failed to delight Stephen.

*“Oh sing to me, my Shepherd.
In quiet places in the night.
Keep me safe from Angel’s harm, I ask thee*

*Oh sing to me, my Saviour
In swirling voids of black
Lest Devils drive me to your door.*

*Oh sing to me, my God of Mercy
Sing to me of light.
For I lie in places dark and cold.
In shadows. “*

II

“Elysian Fields! Elysian Fields!” The tubby red thing shouted happily as it jumped up and down.

It stood and wiggled slightly then. It stood atop of rolling green hills and stick-on fake flowers. Rabbits wandered to and fro. A fluffy white cloud flew over the tubby red thing’s head. It appeared vaguely femalian in nature. Oddly, it seemed as if it were set apart some how from the background. It was like it (she?) was standing in front of a barely noticeable green screen.

Stephen looked down upon this expansive scene. The landscape was amazing. Everything looked as if from a dream.

“Again! Again! Again Again!” A larger purple (and possibly male) version of the red bouncy

thing said giddily.

It tried to hang mittens from its knees. When the man in front of him would tell him this was wrong, the purple fat thing would laugh as if he were stoned.

Stephen looked down at small plastic flowers, all in pastel shades. They were making all kinds of clamor, which seemed at first to be gibberish. But soon Stephen saw that they were actually communicating *in English*.

“This astounding discovery was made by Hubble in the later part of the 1940s.”
Stephen looked in stone-faced indifference at his brother.

“Well Hello Stephen.” Stephen Hawking replied.

The ‘G’ came with Stephen II’s second wife.

“You are now at the far reaches of the Universe, of course.” Stephen Hawking said. “I do hope you enjoy your stay, but don’t get too close to the GUT’s Event Horizons.”

He chuckled at this supposed joke.

Guts! Ha!

An old man lay off to the side of the two Stephens. He was hacking up great gobs of clotted blood. He clutched at the pavement as he belched out another ball of bloody spew.

Stephen looked back to face Hawking.

Suddenly, the old man sucked up his hardening pools of blood and he grew younger and younger as he was rewound in time until he jumped up and straightened the folds of his business suit.

“Tip Top!” He shouted dumbly as he marched off to some god forsaken business battlefield.

He clopped like an otter as he ran out to meet his enemy swine.

ALL HAIL THE MUTANT FIST FUCKING FEAST!

The crowd shouted woefully. The bouncing things were being raped over and over again by the soldiers now.

When the tubby ones had been sufficiently sodomized the soldiers turned on themselves. Lopsided orgies ensued with the males being horribly castrated.

Stephen saw all this and knew it was lies.

This is not my Thelema.

III

Something was slowing Stephen down. He ran as if he were in a dream and were being pursued by invisible monsters. Beasts too terrific to describe even using our entire Lexicon.

The sky sat opaque and yellowed. Tinted yellow saran wrap clouded with brown food coloring.

Towers of flame burst up around him. Demons lurched and spun terrified victims onto pikes and each other.

Stephen saw many men ripped apart and tossed into swamps by twisted vultures.

He followed the path of sorrows ever forward and down, until at last he came upon the 5th circle and the towering city of Dis.

The city stood flaming red, its flag of everlasting fire flying high into the night. Devils criss-crossed the benighted sky; the city's gates stood high and fast.

Stephen descended down a long, slippery stairwell carved out of chipped rocks in the soaring Cliffside. The area around the city was blackened and smashed.

Thieves turned into snakes, Heretics lay imprisoned in tombs of flame, and The Suicides formed a vast and darkened wood in this cruel and unusual place.

The Gas Chambers were nothing to this. Stephen thought.

As he came upon the gates of the city Stephen stretched out his naked eyes and took in the vast sky above the blighted city.

He called out towards the demons and demanded entrance. They obeyed at once, for he was a permitted traveler in these lands.

Stephen walked slowly, carrying his amulets and top hat about him.

He strode solemnly through each circle as had the poets Dante and Virgil before him.

He paused a while in the wood of The Suicides, savoring the whispering of the branches and the moaning of the damned. With time he entered that forsaken forest, passing arm over arm through the gnarled limbs cum branches of millions of grief stricken souls.

After a time he came upon a clearing in the forest of Suicides. Towards the south of the clearing was an unmarked ebony door, framed by the branches of Suicides. Stephen knocked three times upon the door, and was permitted entrance by the host of that dwelling, a demon who acted as guide and messenger for certain spiritual vagabonds.

The demon pushed on his muscular black legs, propelling himself back towards the inner chambers of his home, and Stephen followed.

The demon carried no candle in the pitch-black depths of his dwelling chamber.

Stephen followed as fast as was able, but were it not for the awful stench of the demon in front of him, Stephen would have surely lost his guide.

The demon led further through narrow passageways shrouded in darkness for a very long time. At last they came upon a low clearing and the demon stretched its leathery black wings out to the east and to the west.

Stephen felt a horrible emptiness within him then. His insides felt as cold as ice. As if mirroring his emotions, stretched out for miles before him lay black ice, shimmering in black flame.

Stephen descried a small opening in the ice before him. He walked cautiously into its perimeter, and plunged into the murky depths of the black sea.

Stephen emerged in an ocean of ice deeper and more piercing in its cold than anything he could have imagined. Many corpses lay forever frozen in that ice. Many others lay writhing and praying their time was at hand. Desperately praying that this new stranger dressed all in black save for several weird symbols would destroy their maligned souls and bring them salvation.

Yet Stephen heard not their pleas, for his gaze was fixed hypnotically on the mammoth beast of fur that lay submerged before him, ten thousand miles away.

My God, if it looks that big from here. Stephen thought in subdued terror.

Freezing winds swept across the icy plains as Stephen traversed through miles and miles of tortured screams as the hoary and unfathomable thing grew ever larger.

With time the curved rams horns of The Great Beast alone marked out half the sky, and Stephen shuddered.

As he approached the frosted strands of dirty hair that hung from the head of The Great Beast, Stephen prayed once more that the Beast would not awaken.

My God shall protect me. Stephen thought with determination, *Amen*, as he grabbed a lock of the Beast's hair and began to pull himself towards the heavens.

He scaled The Beast for years, camping every few months and searching vainly for some sign of others bound to make this accursed journey.

God has forsaken me. Stephen thought in despair.

Still, he climbed ever higher, and the hole in the sky that Stephen first spied 18 years ago was

finally growing to be quite large.

Stephen thought of nothing but reaching the apex of The Beast. Suicide was considered many times, but somehow Stephen knew that he would not die were he to attempt to end this horrible journey. Instead, he would be doomed to forever traverse this hairy mountain, started each lifetime from the bottom of the biological twin to legendary Babel.

Finally, Stephen was reaching the tip of The Beast. An end was in sight, and Stephen knew it would be less than 10 years before he reached it.

Though he was steadily going blind, Stephen felt the first 9 years go by as if in a flurry of motion. He was now only 3 days from the hole in the sky.

Stephen was extremely perplexed by how long these few short hours seemed to last after all the ceaseless aeons of nothing but filthy tangles of hair and emptiness.

Stephen longed for more of the Absinthe that had given him such wonderful visions long ago. Now he was blind, and ending his enduring journey of pain and torment.

Yet he feared terribly, for he felt that what lay beyond the hole was much more terrifying than anything he'd seen in this terrible realm.

IV

Stephen gripped the final shag of hair before the hole in the sky. He was deeply troubled by this. He wasn't sure if he'd ever be sane or whole again. Still, he had no choice. He slowly raised himself upward and slipped into the unforeseeable depths of the hole.

Stephen tumbled over and over again falling down gently to the tune of magic. When he neared the bottom of this musical shaft of darkness he slowed as would a feather and landed softly on a bed of strange and beautiful flowers. Vegetation of all colors ran in all directions before him. Haunting music of string and woodwind instruments could be heard far off.

Stephen rose and walked towards the music. He was entranced by it. As he walked through fields of oddly colored flowers he saw nothing, and heard nothing but the sound of that impossible music.

Suddenly he entered a forest. Soft shafts of light revealed small and darting creatures in the underbrush of the wood.

“Halt! Trespasser! Who goes in the wood of Her Damned Virgin Cunt Majesty?” A tall figure with pointed ears and haggard face demanded.

An arrow was already held against Stephen's neck. He clicked six times with his tongue and was released by his would-be captors.

“Hail Satan?” one of the elfish ones said.

Stephen shook his head firmly, revealing the sign of the Beast.

Many bowed before Stephen as he entered that fair and raped city.

Blessings were bestowed upon him as he kissed the genitals of babes.

At the darkened mass of the circus of the elves, Stephen stood terrible and mighty in his position high atop the freak show.

V

The man with the twisted arm and etched-out eyes moved aside so that the bearded lady could step by.

The bearded lady wasn't as you'd expect. She was quite thin, as if on the brink of starvation. She was old and wrinkled, and scarred over her entire body. She was burned from the waste up. And what was also abnormal was that she possessed no beard.

All that the bearded lady wore upon her face was a thick and bristly gray mustache.

She pounded her grandfather's face in with her bare fists. Her father had one and a half legs, with the stump of the half leg resting on a wooden prosthetic. The old man often used a crutch to get around, for better prosthetics were not available to the Freaks. He was blind, wore a blindfold, and he was very feeble.

His head had split after it bruised under her small but vibrant hands.

The strong man licked her asshole many a night in their traveling circus. It wasn't just an act – it was their fucking LIFE.

“Maximalism!” The Ring Master always said.

So he would wet his tongue between her buttocks.

This was as American as it got back then.

Black and white horror films played in between performances at the freak show. Strange pictures of bizarre acts and even more bizarre perpetrators. Nails shoved into children's eyes for fun, and then ‘poof!’ they are fine once more.

A trick of the eye they said.

Insane cabbage-smelling webbed feet were sold at the Freak Show. Those who bought such a foot would receive 13 years good luck and would also be able to feed the foot to one of the geeks in the circus.

Stephen was hired as an organ grinder for the traveling circus.

One of the freaks in particular caught his eye.

She was short and fat, and she suffered from sever hemorrhaging. Her face was slashed across with streaks of vaginal blood. During her show she was excellent. The most extreme and frightening to behold of all the freaks in the show.

She would place burning poles through her arms and mouth. She would bleed from her diseased cunt and smear more of her bleeding of the weaker sex on her face.

She would fling herself about then, endangering everyone.

These performances thrilled Stephen, but he found her blotched body to be very ugly outside the show.

She was a drug addict, so much so that she would pop open scabs to recycle the crack deposits within them.

Stephen visited countless other worlds after this. Worlds full of death. Worlds of 30-second anxiety attacks. Whole planets where stars would devour unsuspecting supermodel celebrities under the microscope drifting by a current cast cloud magnify the storm awaits me underneath the weeping tree of blood.

Tears flew out from Stephen's fingertips, and he came upon that clouded plain that is unspeakable.

VI (6) (six)

I Kyrie.

His First glimpse of the heavens.

Rolling pinkish clouds stretched out in all areas of the sky before him. White and yellow orbs coalesced with black and they burst in distances untold. He did not move. There was no need. He could stretch out his mind for leagues and leagues and never reach the end of this vast Kingdom of Light.

He was a child of God, and as such he had a special privilege. Hooded figures glided across the skies, singing silent muttering praises in the name of their Lord. His Love was filled with an open-handed slap to the face. A gentle love tap. Your sins forgiven.

Electro-static vibrations scorched the painted pink sky. Radio frequencies dropped and rose once more as waves of color.

Baphomet sat in quiet meditation on a pillow of smoke. He inhaled from an Opium pipe and led

his drug-addled followers in worship of the God.

Ever cheerful needles walked the streets as needlers and nosers lined up for handouts.

Small black men infected with Parkinson's disease toked on rocks of white and hallucinated.

Others with shrunken heads made their way through crowded and mad streets with 40 ounce beers in their muscular hands. She-it mah bro-fa. Beautiful creatures they were.

Stephen admired their courage greatly.

Truth, Justice, and Beauty shone all around him. God smiled and spoke to Stephen.

“Step Forward my Son.”

Stephen drifted forward across an expanse of clouds and into the gleaming white mouth of The Cave of the Lord.

Stephen stood before God as an equal.

He looked grimly upon God's bleached and scarred face.

The Lord smiled back with a mouth full of rot. His eyes were spotted white balls. Spotted with red. Clouds of disease poured over God's ears.

Stephen spoke of his journeys, and his visions, and the Lord listened with a crumbling ear.

“You are dying.” Stephen said. It was more of a statement than a question.

Questionably, God was dying. A hole in his head revealed a rotting brain, peeled back several layers and obviously of poor health.

“I am the rotting fruit that smells yet sweet.”

Stephen nodded, and produced two small cloth sacks from his coat pockets. He held one sack in each hand. Stephen suddenly emptied the contents of the sacks and sweet smelling aromas wafted out towards the Face of God. Magick herbs and smoke filled The Lord's nostrils and punctured skull with light. The festering sickness in God's mouth was dying and he was being made whole again.

Three minutes later, the God standing before Stephen was as he should have always been, blindly white, obscenely ugly, and with 666 X's carved into each eye.

VII

The real God is both blind and mute.

Men are unbelievably stupid these last few millennia. God muttered to himself.

Not like their ancestors, who once stood proud. Now so few transcend worlds. So very few.

They are like ants. Catalogued, divided, and slaughtered.

Many more die before they even reach this point. The rabble of men often destroy themselves, making butchery unnecessary for the especially inept.

The slate must be wiped clean. Everything must change.

I have broken my promise Sodom and Gomorrah, and to thee as well Noah.

Forgive me.

VIII

Stephen observed the celebration of the winter solstice from the bough of an apple tree.

Children sang and laughed as they wrapped yellow ribbons around colored poles. Their soft and cheery voices were interrupted by a large marching band that had just struck up a number. The music dripped with high-wired thrills and suspense.

Dramatique!

Stephen thought this was all very beautiful, and he smiled. Stephen witnessed many burlesque shows and trapeze acts on that day of celebration in the clouded lands.

Fat mother gripped their children tight and beamed their rosy cheeks at their faces. Large swarthy men strode gallantly through the square. Wild beasts galloped in circles within entranced corrals.

Many men and women marched, twirling their batons and drumming contentedly.

Everything was in profit. In the green, so to speak. Ticket sales rolled in then. The start had been squashed into a monster, as all of heaven pulled together as a team.

The Big Top added new life to the old and young alike. Grandfathers hugged their sons close and placed gentle kisses on their foreheads.

Shaggy green vines hung from Stephen's place of resting. Stephen's legs hung down with these as he read from many strange books filled with wisdom.

The bands were still marching down below far into the night.

Stephen sat alone viewing this army in its entirety. He was in complete division with the others,

but he was neither friend nor foe. He felt more like a quiet observer.

And once more he thought:

This is not my Home.

IX

Stephen watched as the last of heaven's army marched out of its Golden Gate and into the land of men.

Then all became untied, flipped back into nothing.

Stephen came into being once more in the form of a young man from his past.

He had met him during his college years. He was one of those queer fellows who wore makeup and liked to go outside to watch the moon at midnight. A very peculiar sort, most at the college agreed.

Stephen and the young man, who was an artist, and (Stephen soon learned) quite the smoker of cannabis got along well, however.. The young man taught him all sorts of things about drugs – which legal ones to take, how to get illegal drugs, which were the best drugs, when it's OK to OD, and much more. Stephen was constantly being warned to "*Watch out for the Pigs man!*" by his friend.

“SLAUGHTER THE FUCKING PIG!”

Those days were long behind Stephen but it all came back to him now like a warm gust of air. He had just returned from a protest of the Vietnam War, and he had wanted to smoke.

Back then you didn't think of smoking as in 'cigarette'.

His father was struck dead by the aftermath of Agent Orange exposure. Half of his head had been mutated into twisted forms.

In Texas, everyone drove beat up Cadillacs and wore belt buckles nearly the size of the Lone Star State itself.

At this point in his life Stephen was now thin with black hair down to his shoulders. He had several piercing and tattoos, one of which was fresh and still sore.

Stephen took another hit from the bong and handed the psychedelic lighter which read "*Leegaleyez It*" to the young girl he was trying to fuck at the time.

Her name was Tracy, and she too had black hair down to her shoulders, although it wasn't as straight and she took it with blonde highlights. She would drive him wild with her pouty lips and

milky white legs dressed in fishnets.

She wore mostly black, although Stephen himself had been branching out into all sorts of colors within his wardrobe by this point.

They would visit the circus or watch Saturday morning cartoons together after rounds of tequila and wet kisses.

They were watching *Howdy Doody Goes Swimming* (an unpopular underwater version of the classic TV show.) the morning after Stephen finally got her into bed.

“Wanna jump between the sheets?” Stephen asked as he nuzzled his drunken face in closer.

She nodded in small movements and took Stephen’s hand and led him to his bedroom. She undressed in front of him, turned and bent over.

She looked back at Stephen over her shoulder as if waiting for him. Stephen quickly unzipped his pants and proceeded to sodomize her soft and milky white ass.

“Ah yes, these are the fuckin’ days.” Stephen said wistfully.

“If only we could live forever. Although I would like to see that other world of death some day.” Stephen’s smoking buddy Matt had said.

This shit ain’t bad! Stephen thought to himself.

Jethro Tull played in the background. It was their hugely successful *Auqalung* album. It was Stephen’s favorite by the group. His friends thought he was crazy.

Strange beats led Stephen once more into her bedchamber. He hoped his roommate would not find out.

He really wants to hit this bitch too. Stephen thought.

And who could blame him? Who wouldn’t wanna nail this sweet piece of ass?

She was at the beginning of the gothic movement, although she did not feel it in with her punk sensibilities. The two were so close together back then, many people forget it now. We are in strange new days.

Stephen was in between munching on more *Nilla Wafers* cookies and making out with Tracy. The goal was to try and wrap his tongue around a chunk of *Nilla* and her tongue at the same time.

These were the salad tossing and beer days.

They would light sticks on fire and flick them at each other. They would laugh hysterically during these titanic bouts of small-stick-tag and fucking.

His tongue would be raw after days like this, but he loved sucking the blood from her wrists. She was a cutter as well as a loner and arch prototype Goth.

Fucking her was like fucking the entire mass of his college years.

X

In his next plane of existence, Stephen was in a glass chamber. Its shape gave it the look of a green house, and it did in fact have many plants in it. Exotic and fearsome plants with sunken heads and removed organs. Their bog was clouded in orange spikes. Spears and needles of gnats stung into Stephen as he lay in this beautifully dark place.

A boy was sobbing in the far corner. Stephen heard much loneliness in those sobs. The boy was shrinking further and further away from his acutely withered hands now. Stephen must have been hallucinating. Everything around him seemed to grow incredibly small. Even the chains and gleaming silver buttons on his coat grew short and stubby. His fingers were of dwarves. His nails were plain and no longer opaque. He crawled slowly across the floor of vegetation and into the darkness that had swallowed the child.

He was going blind once more. A terrible stone was upon his heart. Its weight was immeasurable, and Stephen knew that he was dying. This was the final terminal point of his life. No more stops after this, no more tears, no more visions. Everything goes dark and silent. The mind is left glazed and docile. Sharp points stick from your throat into your mouth. You own body turns against you as you decay and die.

He coughed bitterly in his resting place for all future worlds. He laughed sardonically then as he turned one bloodshot eye towards his old friend, whom he would betray.

XI

The clear waters seemed to be driving him mad. He had urinated not five minutes before in the Holy Water, thereby defiling it with his liquid waste. His close friend betrayed him once again. He would never let that happen again. He planned to kill those close to him before he let that happen again.

All her kind were but a pox on the earth. They did not matter to him, and least of all did her new lover. A swooping gnat would have been more noteworthy than his boring and empty palate. His palace was made of cheap shopping malls and catalogs of useless junk, ½ off. All deceivers, all gross.

They had stolen his belongings. Even his shoes that he desperately needed in the drizzling world of Seattle during those days. The city drove him insane with its sense of *unrightness*. He never found places where he was welcome.

Until one day he met the best friend that would change his life. Apart from introducing him to his future wife, Stephen's best friend had given Stephen his shoulder on many nights when he felt hopeless and would cry. All the lost chances and mistakes. All the lies and suffering, all from betrayal.

Self betrayal, perhaps. He only knew how much it *hurt*.

When Stephen finally saw an opening for happiness and a taste of the life he so envied those days, he stabbed his old friend in the back, and coolly wiped the blood off with his friend's face.

Stephen thought of the Hospital then, and wished he could have put his friend into it.

Or better yet, the asylum. That would be a wonderful place to keep her.

XII

Strange hounds of heads seven roamed various rooms of the asylum. When they came upon an inmate they would surely tear them limb from limb.

But no one in that place ever died, they simply lived with the demons and formless shapes of the asylum and experienced pain after unending pain.

They would be forced into marionette's costumes and were pulled from large strings tied to crosses and held by strong hands. There was no escape from this. Every word of encouragement told to the inmates turned puppets was a lie. No one ever escaped the asylum.

Many inmates were forced to look ever downward at their feet. When they would attempt to raise their heads to glimpse what hideous things screamed all around them, calling for their souls, they would be cracked upon the head by a large winged demon holding a large wooden cross.

Things that never should have been: bloated, terrible, and fat, slithered on stone floors that creaked with every motion of the creatures' giant bodies. These would suck the legs of other prisoners of this enchanted and nightmarish Asylum. A sanitarium lost in a sea of ashes.

No one noticed when one of these poor damned souls would scream in agony at the hands of things never seen by eyes of the blessed.

They need not know.

The Lord of the Asylum – insane, shouting, dying host of this house eternal standing at the edge of time. Frayed ends of clothing swirled about him as he looked down with his new artifact of death. An object that fastens to the hand and is set with three sharp curved blades. Maddeningly fast and sharp, it was said.

He tested it on a cow, which promptly split in twine. Spinning red chandeliers hung over Stephen's head as the delirious man stumbled towards him.

He brandished his clawed weapon and missed by a fraction the lip of the abyss.

He tottered terribly on its brink. The sea rushed forward endlessly downward below him. He was unsure to where he would be taken were he to fall, but he felt impending dementia in those ruddy depths.

He was torn in two at the mind, and he lay slumped into a bloodied and sobbing pile at the edge of sanity.

Stephen was being held in solitary confinement. The Asylum had held him long in its steel and padded walls. He would often look out of his singular window and strain to see some bit of the sky. If he tried desperately enough he could descry some far away portion of blue amidst the ceaseless dull brown walls of the asylum. Nothing ever seemed to change there. It was always as beautiful and deformed as it had ever been.

Always as maddening, always as full of dreams.

Visions of his own death clouded Stephen's mind constantly. He simply wanted respite from all this world's hidden pains and darkened corners of emptiness. He longed for anything other than the long and unmoving plateau of his life. His future was stolen even before he ever plunged into hell.

They felt that they knew better than he, for he was unlearned in their world, and they mostly in his – though they would not speak of such to anything human.

It was like they could tell you countless indescribable things about the world but you could not tell them one single thing about yourself or your world because you held the key and did not even use it.

“We are lost and wretched creatures here in this blackened and limitless landscape. There is never any safe haven from any of this. We shall wither and wither ever more.”

The loudspeaker called into the void.

No one heard, for all were dead or dreaming.

XIII

A world of dreams and broken children.

“It - has - ared roof.” She said in spurts.

She cut the chicken's head off and placed it on the child's plate to eat. The old man's head lay

rested in the cream corn as he soiled his fresh diaper.

Screams in the next room. Must hurry.

She was digging quietly in the back yard. An old man in a cowboy's hat stood next to her and said.

“Guess we won't be mowin' today.” Between wheezes, “Looks like a storm's comin' in.”

“Yep.” She agreed matter-of-factly.

A small head was stored in their pantry in a jar filled with molten green glass.

A helicopter searched overhead for the missing girl and her captor. They spotted them below, and shot them both dead. Her body was found by two boys years later, and their thoughts turned to silent wonder of the whispers coming from behind the infant sized skull held in the fist of a dead man.

Her grandfather- the only remaining relative- was a mixture of the Marlboro man, Santa Claus, and a man older than dirt.

The runaway was deeply involved in a world of drugs, sex, and death. She flailed her wrists madly as she saw the body of her dead friend Susan.

“SHIT!!! SUSANNNNN!!!! SUSAN”S DEAD! FUCK!! WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER! SUSAN?!?!?!?”

Blood trickled slowly out of Susan's nose, but the runaway knew she was dead. The runaway's pimp slapped her and she slumped away, crying, bleeding, and wishing she were home.

They would look back on these times as if they were the worst in their lives because they would look back on them when they were old and remember when they were young.

7:08 and the water is running across my bare feet. Can't think about that. I am urinating into a stream. Sunlight cascading off of the dark palm trees and night descending on the man in red.

Stephen thought to himself:

“You will grow old into acceptance. You don't ever understand the mysteries of this world, you simply come to accept them as they are. When you're dying, if you're old, you are either beaten into submission by time, or clawing desperately to whatever misused life you have left if you are young.

The injustice of this strange world to which I do not belong. It stares at me and judges what it knows not. Oh they know of the experiences, the acts themselves. They know nothing of the inner light, nothing at all of my deformed and beautiful visions.

I am a stranger in this land, and I must return to the place beyond the stars. A world shut apart forever by some unseen curtain.

I am tormented by their laughing faces. I am tormented by my innermost thoughts.

Perhaps I should simply accept it. But I am infinitely stubborn, and I shall fulfill my dreams and struggle until I perish. Until I am thrown into the vast cosmos and am no more.

I justify it to myself like this: If nothing matters. Than why not try.

But perhaps that is simple justification, simple self aggrandizement and patronization. Perhaps I should simply let go.”

XIV

Stephen was a terribly tragic figure, thrown into the wash of life without a chance. His being lay engulfed in darkness, in complete and utter obscurity. Irony sardonically laughed at him throughout existence, throughout his insect's speck of a life. And in the end, he died as a thousand other unblessed and tragic souls in this blighted universe.

Part IV/4

The voices called for help far off in the distance. They were trapped within small and unreachable places. I heard all this as if lording over their cells.

I sensed hidden meaning in the messages as I passed from room to room. I was a man set far beyond time and space. I thought for a moment that the voices calling out were my own terrified pleas from some future nether. Some horrible future vision of hell in which I was choked by my own life. Swung low over vast plains of silent grass. I saw my own death and knew it was not the end.

A rap tap tapping at the door beckoned me.

I have returned now. I have clung on to as much of the vision as I have been able.

This is what I saw:

I

You can never go back to when you are young. No matter what you try you can never go back to that. And now instead of running and playing in countless unknown worlds we stay in the same place day after day doing drugs and writing out endless stories. Musing over our own demise, and somehow missing it all the while.

The crowd all ran like rats in a maze. They were pushed onward and onward by some unseen force. A large fat, and greedy tycoon smoked fat cigars and thought of his son.

His son had vanished when he was 5, and had wound up in the seedy world on Minnesota St. The man smoking who now smoked a cigar had grown up tough, like leather. He ate snakes raw and cut many a man with his knife after consuming barrels of Jack Daniels. The man was as tough as nails. As bad as they fucking came. He would cut through 50 young pussies just get to his one fat, snaggle-toothed whore. The bloated cash cow that he'd always milked so fucking sweetly. Her titties were old and fat now with age, but he still drove her onward. The bitch had some more milk in her yet.

No body understood Jack Ramsey. No one.

They thought him as tough as fucking iron sometimes. But he knew better. Somewhere deep down he longed for nothing more than his brother, whom he had lost so many years ago. He longed for his Mom and Dad that had been taken away in a terrible cloud sent by some spiteful God. God did not exist here. All he wanted was to be with his family again. No one understood any of this.

Why he had to keep on killing whores just to feel a bit of security. If they understood, they would have pitied him.

Jack Ramsey threw back another shot of Jack Daniels, and drove out into the night to search for more hungry pussy to gut with his jagged Bowie knife.

II

It was all finally revealed to him. The warmth he had lost, the despair he felt. The reason he could speak aloud to no one about his terrible secret. He saw it snapped away as a corpse's broken neck. He had thought himself smart, but he saw his complete folly when The Desolate One walked out the door.

He saw no more, but sat down and resumed saturating his brain with television waves, and yard after yard of endless drivel. The tape played endlessly in his head, and he could not say exactly when his body died. He was trapped forever in an endless loop of pictures and sound of stupefying sameness.

Commercials blared. This was the untimely demise of his mind.

III

The circle of flowers opened wide, and accepted his passport into their hearts. Praise god almighty for giving us Constantinople. Mana and another wifey life giving poison.

The afterlife had been a busy place with all sorts of choking smoke and pollution. She engaged in incredible orgies with young women and men while her husband wrote on and on. He had purpose, she the life.

“There’s something I must say before I go” the eyeball said.

“I’ve a sea of bourbon, for you to drown in.”

Skaneckdtatee. The land of circling and swooping trains. Patterns of pygmy boys in the dirt and meaningless circumstances.

Meat and grapes sat on cheese crackers. He goobled them hungrooily. He was incredibly dangerous, trying to revise long dead stories and visions like this.

“YOU CAN’T LOOK INTO THE PAST FOOL!”

This is dangerous. An oxypletyl crawled across his mind’s eye. Cacti prospered and re-sewed harvests of corn flower.

A fell wind sweeps over the rain in Spain, which of course, rapes the goat in his slurtittily greenness.

“Gooble gobble riddle robble, what is a fish?”

“Something to eat! Life is just a situation. And this fish is no more than a game.”

Astrology bred two very different mothers. One red, one blasphemous. The world spun on its head and endless hallucinations chanting away down the mine shaft. Too many words spoils the broth.

“But this tastes just right!” the fat Italian man who was soon to die said.

“A joke! A joke!” Shakespeare proclaimed happily.

Squeaking and squawking, they never came back. It was all lies. Damn them all in eternal blackness. They were sown in a pie with a dozen blackbirds. Burned alive, for old time’s sake.

“My back is troubling me greatly. He keeps asking for a handout. I tell him no, but he shouts and shouts and cries of things I cannot see OK?” the question mark pleaded angrily.

Circles, circles, and something’s blowing. Mother must be home. Time to eat. Time to lie with sister, even though God says not to.

Big Black men with strong hands encircled our swollen necks. We pop like jelly. Splattering our final testament upon obscure walls.

The end lay in blackness, with every imaginable color falling into its void, and coming out incredibly desolate.

IV

The star had fallen. They found his bloated body in his mansion, cocaine on his nose and a dead hooker in the bathroom.

“Everyone in Hollywood is on drugs kid.” His agent had told him plainly as the star warily eyed the lines of cocaine on the mirror in his agent’s home.

They had to bond first, he had said.

A good agent should always know what he’s pushing. The details of the product are paramount.

“This is probably one of the only times you’ll be hallucinating from now on.” The Agent told the star as he went to snort another line of cocaine.

Shouting the truth to millions of idiots is a hard thing to do.

Ha h ah ah aha ha ha ha ha ha ah ah ah ha ha ha ah ahha ha ha ha ah. Hat!

A good actor is a good liar.

And each good act necessitates an equal lie. A lie that covers the entire spectrum of reality. A lie to the self. A lie to others. A lie to one’s friends, and a lie upon the entire identity of existence as we see it.

Lies turn the wheel of chance, intersected by the wheel of fate.

She is gone.

V

As always, the curiosity to see drove them onward. It was a terrible mistake. They looked long into their future, and came away old and withered.

Those who wished to witness death up front bought front row tickets with their personal sacrifice of their children and prosperity.

VI

The heat was unbearable. It was sweltering heat that seemed trapped within the poorly ventilated camp. The travelers lay naked and poured ice water down their bodies. The cold fluids pooled in their navels until it evaporated or rolled off.

It was too hot even to move a muscle. The batting of an eyelash upset their gang. The tent flaps were held open by gusts of burning wind. They downed pills that were spoken of in many secret communions. They were told to bring moisture to those who ingested them. Even moisture for

the dead it was said.

Every now and again the travelers had encountered an oasis lined with stuffed scarecrows along their path. But now it was so hot that every mirage was foreseen simply through attempted slumber.

Children waited till their fathers returned home from long pilgrimage.

“Take us now father.” They would pray at dusk each night, though their father never came.

They oft wondered if they had ever seen the face of their wholesomely poisoned father. Entrancing oils mingled with bizarre perfume from other far away worlds. The dark book foretold all, but few listened. The masses were wise in their caution, for those who did pursue followed rolling barrels to their demise in a burning and acutely dry desert.

The travelers drooled intentionally, letting more of the precious water spread across their body. These were not graceful acts, but more acts of savage simplicity.

They hoped to one day find peace in their time, but for now they trekked endlessly in stagnant tents of camel’s skin and dusty canvas.

VII

A statement of the act itself does not alone provide for justification for not performing said act.

These words were spoken by a lunatic, but you shall decide this for yourselves in time.

He seemed to be speaking to the congregation now. A man named Stephen sat at a low table and sipped Chai and smoked Opium.

Being naked seemed to help ease Edgar’s fears. Time was out of balance. Strange creatures from the distant past unknown were walking the soil again. They pilfered and feasted upon jagged medicine. Excising complete lack of caution, Edgar dipped his small toe into the water. He found it rather pleasing, unlike excursions on exercise. He was trying to keep his head above water, not accomplish infinitesimal games. Grasp for that pail my dear, dear friend. You are too icy to the touch.

Edgar thought these things, and he thought they were enough. It was very cold in this place. He feared the hydrogen more than anything. He knew what would happen when it began to converge upon the zither and gobble up zinc lozenges. Catastrophe was sure to follow, and Edgar wished not to look upon it.

VIII (infinity)

Stephen sat within the hollow place. He lay waiting for another lifetime. All time was locked within his pocket watch, with its tick tick tick.

He waited for some sign to tell him this would cease. Nothing came. Just the tick tick tick of his pocket watch and the secrets of the universe that it held.

He gripped the microphone. It was cold to the touch of his feet. Or foot, alternately.

He bent slowly and breathed into the microphone. A breeze of feedback crackled out of the small amplifier Stephen held in the crook of his knees.

The cook had fed him odd fish heads that smelled of coincidence. He wore strawberry shorts and hacked off their heads with a cleaver. Stephen thought back to the trash bins filled to the brim with decapitated fish and he breathed anew into the microphone.

The feedback sung innocuously. Dissonant chords hurled themselves out of the amplifier and into the harmonious air. Incense burned and Stephen smoked from a hookah. Stephen breathed smoke of jasmine into the microphone, and the resulting tone was extraordinarily vivid and discordant. He barely had to think which notes to play next before he selected them and watched the mixture spread in vibrant waves of light.

The voice that suddenly burst out of the speaker, however, was dripping with omnipotence and disdain. It sounded as if detached, mechanical, like a recording. But it contained elements of emotions much stronger than those of human hatred and malevolence.

Stephen quickly hid the rag doll with the stitched eyes in his bag.

“she is gone.” The mechanized voice grated **“and you too shall be gone with her.”**

Gone like the surrealists. Stephen thought. *That would be most serene. Such beautiful pain.*

Suddenly Stephen heard the sounds of men marching in heavy boots from outside the hollow place wherein he sat. He was gripped with terror, for he recognized the sounds at once to be those of the French secret police coming to his door.

He frantically opened his bag. Inside were a number of contraband books, newspaper clippings and protest posters. Stephen hurriedly grabbed these and set them on fire in a nearby waste bin. When this was done, he closed the lid to the incriminating propaganda and turned to his rag doll. He knew he could not simply burn it. It could not be hidden from the secret police. They were highly specialized and ruthless investigators. They were absolutely brutal in their thoroughness. Stephen saw only one conceivable way to hide the doll. The way he had been taught by the leaders of the Revolution: he must swallow it.

Static continued to crackle out of the loudspeaker, with more of the harsh voice blaring through.

“You would do wise to reveal all counteractive measures and devices presently.” The hostile voice said, **“We will be upon you very soon Mr. Hawkins.”**

Stephen tore off the leg of the doll and forced it down his throat. His gag reflex had been extended greatly by his training, but it was still very difficult to swallow the stuffing, stitches, and canvas of the doll.

“You have 5 minutes to prepare your defense.” The loudspeaker continued as the thick-soled boots of the police drew nearer.

Stephen was painstakingly swallowing the right arm of the doll. He choked on it half way down his throat. For a moment he began to turn a light shade of purple, and he thought all might be lost. Then, with one final burst of muscle Stephen sucked the doll’s arm down his esophagus and into his digestive tract.

“Four minutes remaining Stephen. Step lively son.”

Stephen was now rolling the stomach fluff of the doll into a fist-sized ball. When he finished, he stuffed the ball of fluff into his fist and force-fed himself the doll’s innards.

A stomach within a stomach. Stephen thought with a light chuckle.

“Three. There shall be no more warning after this.”

Stephen had come at last to the final portion of the doll. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he had a good two minutes before the secret police were upon him- three if the door withheld. He knew he had better prepare for the worst, however.

Stephen eyed the button-eyed face of the rag doll he had carried for so long with intense worry. He wasn’t sure he’d be able to sew the doll back together once it worked its way through his internal organs, and even if he could, he wasn’t sure he would ever get the chance. The police were extremely thorough.

No time to think. Act.

Stephen removed the buttons from the doll’s face, and began to compress its head as much as possible. He swallowed this with some difficulty after what he thought to be a minute.

One minute left, two if luck is with me.

He gave the two shiny black buttons in his hand only a cursory glance before tossing them back into his mouth.

Suddenly, an incredibly loud burst of harsh white noise came from the amplifier.

Stephen was fortunate enough to be able to swallow one of the buttons without difficulty. But the second button had gone in wrong, and Stephen was now wanting desperately for air. He motioned many times for air, but he could only mouth silent pleas for oxygen. His face grew a deep shade of blue.

Stephen flung himself at the wall out of sheer panic and hit his spine hard on the concrete. The button came flying out of Stephen's mouth and into a pile of dirt in the far corner of the room.

Stephen paused only for a moment before lunging at the pile of dirt. He had no time to worry about the cleanliness of the button. He simply swallowed the shiny black button along with a small handful of dirt.

The police were rapping fiercely at Stephen's door and shouting for entrance. Stephen simply sat back and watched as the door flew off its hinges and five heavily armed men in fur hats and green gloves entered his room.

A cloud of dust was kicked up into everyone's face. The armed men rushed forward in a flurry and jerked Stephen up to his feet. They held him dangling as if he were a carrot from a string and took turns spitting in his face. Then they dragged him out of the doorway they had so recently torn open and left the amplifier to crackle out its non-repeating series of arithmestatic noise.

IX

Stephen sat alone, in a bare room of concrete. He could see a dull metal door straight ahead and to his left. Towards the top of the door there was a small opening with bars across it. Beyond this lay darkness.

The Green Police, as they were sometimes referred to, must have taken him to this place many days ago. Stephen could not say this for certain, but it seemed likely. The men in black fur hats, green gloves, and matching coats liked to handle things their own way. It was the only way they could be sure the job would be done right. Their polished black boots had stomped upon many a man's face in recent years.

Their brutality was not limited to men, however. Women, children, the sick and the dying fell under the fire of France's secret police in shocking numbers as of late.

If the statistics of the Green Police were tragedy, the personality behind the beast was the utter annihilation of man's soul itself.

The police work quite well in interrogation and confinement after all. Stephen thought Perhaps even better than I was taught.

Stephen felt this way because he had started to do that which he never thought he would do again. He had begun to question his actions, to think them over again and again and subject them to meticulous analysis. Before he had acted on pure instinct, inherently sure that his first action would be the best approach to any given situation.

Any man can be broken of course. It is only a matter of time.

Both sides knew this. The rules of the game had been clearly laid out long before their time,

before the days of their father's failures and betrayals.

Stephen heard a knocking on his door. He found it strange that they should ask for entrance in a place such as this.

Stephen did not answer the knock at his door, but he heard its steel frame swing open anyway.

Stephen heard the sounds of several men shuffling their feet and entering the room. Four men moved into the room. Three of them took up positions around Stephen while the fourth stood directly in front of Stephen with his hands behind his back and a sizeable smirk on his face.

For a while afterwards the men around him stood silent. Whether they exchanged glances or some secret hand signals, Stephen couldn't tell. These men were also very efficient.

"Name." The man directly in front of Stephen demanded calmly.

Stephen said nothing.

"Give us your name, boy." The man repeated.

Stephen smiled at the man with a sardonic grin and replied, "fuck you."

Suddenly the man's fist smashed into Stephen's jaw, breaking it in several places. Stephen unintentionally spat blood and phlegm onto the floor.

"Why you little *SHIT!* How dare you spit on our floor!" The man screamed into Stephen's face.

Stephen simply laughed through his bloodied teeth and hoarsely gave another "fuck you" in response.

Two of the other large men rushed forward on either side of Stephen and began to punch into his ribcage while the first interrogator spat into Stephen's mouth, which was now gurgling with blood and saliva.

Stephen coughed up another batch of blood to go along with several of his now missing teeth. Together they formed a picturesque landscape of pain on the cold concrete floor.

The fists then ceased as suddenly as they had come. Stephen was positively shaking with laughter now as the first man screamed a long string of obscenities into Stephen's face.

Stephen continued to laugh as the other men pummeled his tender muscles with their fists and steel-toed boots. Stephen never stopped laughing once through the hailstorm of blows upon his face, chest, ribcage, neck, and – worst of all- genitals.

When the men finished their grim occupation, Stephen had few bones that weren't broken or shattered altogether. He was a bloodied pulp of a man now. He lay shaking and laughing in

solitary confinement until he passed out from a dazzling combination of starvation, exhaustion, and overwhelming pain.

X

The men did not return for ten days, by Stephen's judgment. It was difficult to keep track of time in his delirious state. He was not fed during this time, but he was able to wrap his tongue around a few insects that crawled too close to his open mouth.

He was unable to stand or form fists with his fingers. This may not have mattered, however, as he was unable to feel 3 of the fingers on his right hand. Stephen was no longer sure he would ever be able to use those fingers again. Being left-handed, this was not as significant as it might have been, particularly as the only source of nourishment in that nauseating place of emptiness crawled with its belly not far from the floor.

Stephen was quite lonely and depressed during this time. He caught not a sound nor glimpse of anyone outside his cell. Neither guard nor fellow prisoner could be seen, heard, or even sensed. Stephen had no way of knowing how many others were held in this place, or indeed how large the building was at all.

When the men did return, they quite ironically came bearing an overwhelming array of foods, drink, and medical aids. This filled Stephen with amazement, and he wept at whatever strange twist of fate had bestowed this bountiful feast upon him. Stephen tried to right himself so that he could approach the food, but he could not.

Nor could he move his legs or arms so that he might crawl towards the food.

"Oh, I'm very sorry brother." One of the men said, "Here, let me assist you."

Stephen couldn't tell whether these were any of the same men from before. He was sure of almost nothing these last few days.

One of the police gently lifted Stephen's head upward with his hand cupped under Stephen's chin. The man then slowly filled Stephen's mouth with what tasted like wine, and placed two small objects in that sea of gold now in Stephen's mouth.

Stephen swallowed all this eagerly, for he was extremely thirsty and hungry.

Stephen could discern no taste from the objects he had swallowed, but he supposed it didn't matter. *Anything* at this point was a godsend. The guard fed him a few pieces of bread then, and Stephen realized he would not be able to eat any more.

"What, not hungry?" The man holding fresh beef over Stephen's wet yet cracked lips asked sarcastically.

Stephen would not open his mouth to let the deliciously greasy meat enter. He tried to describe to

the officer what would occur were a man that has been starved for days suddenly ingest large quantities of food. The guard looked at Stephen with a puzzled look and shrugged in a gesture of misunderstanding.

Auschwitz would teach this man a great deal.

When he realized Stephen would eat no more, the guard lifted his hands to the ceiling and cried, "Have it your way brother! When you are hungry, there will be plenty to eat right here in front of you. Oh and don't hesitate to ask if you need anything!"

With that the heavysset men turned and left Stephen alone in the room.

Stephen indeed was hungry, extremely so the following days. But to his horror he realized that the majority of the food was quite perishable. More than half of it was meat and dairy products that would not hold for longer than a few days at best.

Stephen ate these first, saving the breads and other grain products for later. He felt very strongly that he would need them.

Stephen spent the next few weeks ascetically rationing breadcrumbs, bits of cracker, and moldy scones.

When this stockpile was finally gone after many agonizing days of waiting for some change, some sign that anything at all would happen, Stephen groped out across the floor and felt for a small plastic bottle he had encountered sometime earlier.

He gripped the bottle, and ran his hand across its face. He could not raise his head to look at the bottle, so he instead used his hands as if the words embossed on the plastic were written in Braille. Stephen's fingers discerned words that filled him with realization.

The words read: **ANTI-BIOTIC. TWO DOSES TO CURE ANY INFECTION.**

Suddenly Stephen realized why he had been given two floating objects with his numbing wine so long ago. He was dumbfounded that he could not have noticed it before.

Why hadn't he noticed he wasn't becoming infected? Of course any man with as many broken bones (though many were now healed or healing) and wounds as he had would have become horribly infected by now without treatment.

Stephen saw quite clearly that those men had meant for him to live a very long life in this desolate place.

Stephen did not wish this, nor did he wish death. He wished for nothing other than change. Some blip on the radar screen of his endless, steady gray life. He wished for insanity. He wished for visions of death and murder, for dreams. He wished for companionship or solitude in some distant wood. He wished he had the power even to adequately envision these things, for it had been long since he had seen other than darkness in his mind's eye.

Stephen's cell was steadily becoming the great crowned King Anathema of Stephen's life. For those four walls of concrete, the floor and ceiling of the same, the steel door, the barred window, all of them fashioned together were neither more nor less than Death itself.

XI

Surely ANYTHING is better than this! Stephen thought.

At least now he had been given somewhat regular meals, and was allowed to occasionally bathe in a small plastic tub. A guard would enter, always with the same dull thud of boots, and would place the tub filled with water and a sponge towards the front of the cell. Stephen was allowed 5 minutes to bathe, and these five minutes were the most exquisite of his day.

When he compared this to his past excesses, Stephen was thrown into a deep disquiet. For had he not soared across clouds of long dead gods? Had he not witnessed the black wheels of fire turn forever in an unending sea of white? Now the simple cleaning of his body with an encrusted sponge was the highlight of his existence.

Stephen's withdrawal symptoms grew apace with his madness. He would scratch madly for hours at heroin tracks on his skin, and the twitch in his nose that ached for just a pinch of the sugary Sluff rarely ceased.

Stephen would attempt to alleviate these unfortunate side effects by masturbating frequently with his bent and gnarled hands. Each round of self-gratification was less fulfilling than the next, and Stephen yearned for anything other than his clenched fist.

I'd rather I could fuck myself. Stephen thought grimly.

He would envision all sorts of new and enticing sexual situations with various people, but this soon grew tiresome. He would often attempt to envision new and wondrous beings with which he could copulate and races of wise and immortal beings, but it seemed his imagination never quite came to blossom as it had in the time before he had been locked in this place.

What was worse, he had not dreamed for months.

When he first slept in his then unfamiliar prison cell, Stephen dreamed of a small boy. The boy was sitting on a log and feeding breadcrumbs to pigeons.

The boy looked sad, but when Stephen asked him what was wrong he simply sighed and continued to feed the pigeons that circled and pecked at the gifts thrown at their feet.

Over the boy's shoulder, Stephen could see a circle of young girls dancing and singing around a basket of roses. Each girl was dressed in white and held a rose in her hair. They held hands as they moved in a circle and sang.

*1,2 all this world is blue
3,4 all doors shut for you
5,6 no more crucifix
7,8 in this world of hate
9,10 your mind is dead*

Stephen screamed at the girls what they meant, for the words shook him to the core of his being, but there came no answer. They seemed not to take any notice of Stephen at all. Stephen screamed at the boy and shook him, but he too was silent.

Stephen ran towards the circle of girls, and raised his fist as he screamed at them to acknowledge him. When no answer came, Stephen struck the nearest girl on the face. She did not cry out as blood squirted from her cheek and she fell to her knees in the dirt.

Stephen continued screaming at her, but still she did not answer. The other girls were now huddled around the fallen girl and were cheering and clapping their hands.

Stephen never stopped screaming at the girl in the dirt as her kicked her over and over, just as the little girls never stopped clapping their hands and cheering with joy as their fallen friend lay coughing up blood through her tiny lips as her rib cage broke and her lungs faltered.

Now no dreams came. Stephen thought back on the circle of children around the broken body of that little girl and knew now without a shadow of a doubt that those girls were right. His mind was indeed dying.

XII

Stephen sometimes thought he saw, or at least hoped he saw, that little girl hunched up in a ball in the corner of his cell. Or the boy with the breadcrumbs sitting on that log, still feeding a group of pigeons. Then the image was gone and Stephen's hope vanished, leaving him with brooding monotony.

Stephen's clothes were quite filthy at this point. For although he was still being granted the occasional bath, he was never allowed to wash or even change his clothes. His underwear was entirely soiled and he smelt powerfully of filth and human waste. He felt as if he carried the stench of one of the more puissant odors that hang about the despicable corners of the city where men have no identity and no purpose.

He had no idea if he could ever exit from this place, yet he had no desire to die just yet. Perhaps they would let him free, or perhaps the Green police would one day meet with internal bickering and downfall. Or at least he could hope for transfer to a prison where there were others to converse with. Others to look upon. Others to affirm that this was not all some terrible illusion created by his sluggish mind.

Stephen often felt drugged, sedated. He felt as if he were a caged dog on Valium, fed regularly and visited by people with no real interest in him.

Once Stephen had tried throwing himself against the walls to see if it would improve the situation.

I must be desperate indeed to think of such a possibility! Stephen thought wildly.

Stephen only got through one mad charge at the wall before guards rushed in and prevented any further attempt at self-inflicted pain. The guards had to hold Stephen down and eventually administer a sedative to keep Stephen from throwing himself against the wall.

Stephen had also tried breaking his wrists, gouging his eyes, and scratching at the roof of his mouth. But each time he was stopped short of repeating attempts of injury by the guards who must have had him under constant surveillance.

The pain was such an interesting sensation compared to the sameness of his normal physical state. Broken fingers and pierced skin sung of delight and exquisite exploration of the senses.

After repeated warnings from the guards, and repeated beatings from the heavy-handed gloved ones, (*ironic, to beat a man for inflicting pain upon himself*) Stephen was warned one final time.

The guards entered quietly that day. Stephen slowly raised his head so that he could see whatever new torture they brought. The guards moved meditatively forward. Each was holding the corner of a straight jacket in his hand.

Stephen shuffled quickly backwards in terror. His hands and feet brushed furiously at the floor, but it felt as if he were barely moving at all. Stephen tried to scream out, but he was choked up in fright. He tried to swallow, but was given only a pinprick of a click in his throat.

The guards were so close to Stephen now that the straight jacket filled his vision. Stephen's organs drooped. Sweat poured from Stephen's cheeks. He tried to call out, to resist one final time, but he could not move.

The guards forced the straight jacket upon Stephen, and began to strap him in. At last Stephen broke his paralysis and gave a jab with his knee. He pulled back to strike again, but one of the guards kicked him in the face.

Stephen bit back ferociously as if rabid. He had all but become an enraged dog. The guards struggled to hold Stephen back, and to bind him in the straight jacket. Stephen fought them till the end. But eventually the guards wore Stephen down, and now he was completely ensnared by the straight jacket.

"Looks like a change of scenery's in order, my boy." The guard said in a thick French accent.

"le mord se cerabeau!"

Oct. 17th was the day set for Stephen's transfer. He had been told by a reliable source that the present day was Oct. the 13th. That put his transfer at just four days.

Stephen's blood boiled with uncontrollable excitement. He could not stop laughing, and he never frowned during those four days.

When compared with the agonizing mundane nature of his cell, these four days filled with hope and visions of some possible other world (dim and unfleshed as they might be) seemed to fly by.

Stephen imagined he was being transferred to a mental hospital, or at least another prison with more people like himself. People no longer treated as criminals, but half-wits to take pity on.

He wasn't sure, and this doubt finally took its toll on Stephen the night before his transfer. When Stephen went to bed that night he had been filled with a strange anxiety over his imminent transfer.

What if I am being transferred to something even worse? Stephen wondered.

Perhaps he had been given too much time to think about it. But perhaps he was finally seeing things clearly?

Why would the police want to give me any pleasure? Stephen reflected Why give me any assistance at all? Were they not the ones who first brought me here? Where they not the men who kicked my teeth in and broke my now useless fingers? No, they would not deign to move me from the road should my disheveled corpse lie in their path.

When he finally fell asleep after shivering and tossing in his sleep, Stephen dreamed. He dreamed about an empty gray field. The field stretched out for miles, with nothing but gray and weakened corn shaking in the wind. Stephen cried out in the dream for anyone who could hear him. It seemed as if his voice carried to the far ends of the earth. Stephen waited for what seemed like days but there came no response. And the field would remain gray always, except when it was night. Then the fields would take on an impossible ash color shaded with darkness. There was no adequate way Stephen could describe this. It was if the field was covered in the dark of night, but still the corn was outlined in light gray blocks of color.

Stephen then thought he saw a figure far off in the distance. He called out to the figure. Stephen grew alert, as he seemed to see the figure wave back over their shoulders. He couldn't tell for certain but he had to find out.

He bolted across the fields after the figure. Stephen ran for miles as fast as he could. His lungs burned from the depleted oxygen. His skin felt tight and dry as he ran after the figure.

It seems to... Yes! It's growing.

Finally he neared the figure. It stood beautifully in the shadows underneath a gray oval punched into the sky in front of the figure. It was the only visible end to the field anywhere. Although

Stephen had ran for many miles the gray corn stood on all horizons as if to infinity.

Stephen came to an abrupt halt when he stood but a few yards form the figure.

“Hello?” Stephen said to the figure.

But the figure did not respond. They only stood there, staring into the oval which seemed as if a doorway to another world.

Stephen walked cautiously to the figure. He crossed a small patch of withered corn and now stood directly behind the figure. They stood terribly black and ominous in front of Stephen. Stephen was absolutely terrified that this was what he had come to find. He ventured a hand slowly towards the figure’s shoulder.

Finally he gripped that black shoulder. The figure snapped its head around at Stephen. The horribly disfigured thing that Stephen saw filled him with absolute terror. It was too terrifying to comprehend, with its crooked teeth and darkened eyes. A combination burn victim, mutant, beast, and corpse’s face could not approach the atrocity of the face on the dark figure which stood now staring back into the impossible portal.

Suddenly everything was sucked backwards and Stephen awoke, cold and covered in sweat.

XIV

Stephen waited only for a few more hours before the guards came to open his cell. There were 3 guards, one of which was given the job of blindfolding Stephen.

“For precaution’s sake.” The guard explained, “You understand.”

Stephen did. They didn’t want him to be able to map this building. They feared he might remember something about the layout of the floor and attempt escape. Then they would have to act, might have to kill him.

Stephen had complied, and the guards slowly began to march Stephen down long hallways. Sometimes it seemed to Stephen from the sound of their boots that they were in larger openings, at other times, in very narrow corridors, or shafts. Stephen thought that many of these passages must have been taken simply to throw off Stephen’s sense of direction.

If so, the trick had succeeded, for Stephen was sure that if he were to be so ordered, he could not find the way back to his cell with the blindfold removed. After a while one of the guards would announce that it was time for a rest.

The guards would disperse rationed food amongst themselves and Stephen. Stephen chewed quietly on this dull stuff as he grimly thought of his dream and today’s move. When everyone was finished eating, they packed up the rest of the food and moved on. After traveling for a long time, the guard moving at the head of the procession announced that it was time to set up camp

for the night.

The guards rolled out four sleeping bags, and it was decided that one man should watch Stephen at all times. It was also decided that this man should be well armed should the prisoner try and escape.

Stephen tried to sleep that night, but rest did not come easy. His head pounded, but he found that he could not focus his mind on anything other than his thudding brain. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and clammy skin.

The guard in charge of the second watch, on witnessing this, asked Stephen, "Hey, you alright?" "Need anything?"

"ca-cant...sleep" Stephen replied as he shivered.

The guard nodded and resumed his sentinel.

Stephen desperately wanted to remove his blindfold. He asked the guard why he could not remove it now that it was dark.

"Your eyes will adjust to the light." The guard explained.

"But it is dark, and I would only see but a small portion." Stephen argued.

"You might remember this place later." the guard returned, "Your memory of this place could be very important."

"I couldn't possibly image remembering a place like this, much less all the twists and turns we've made getting here." Stephen continued.

"You'd be surprised what the human mind can do." The guard replied.

Stephen argued further, but the guard would not speak. Stephen wanted to explain that his mind was dying somehow. That he could not bring forth even the most intricate image, let alone fragmentary memories of seemingly irrelevant events.

No one can understand this. Stephen thought.

With that, Stephen finally fell into a weary sleep.

That night he dreamed again of the circle of girls. They were before him once more, dancing and clapping in circles. Again they sang that song of dread and again the smallest girl lay battered at Stephen's feet. Again the other girls laughed and were joyous.

Stephen awoke at the nudge of one of the guards. The party ate a light breakfast and was off at

once.

Soon Stephen felt cool wind on his cheeks, and then came a change in sound. It sounded like wind. Like wind swirled through trees and around leaves, not wind that blew indoors. Not long after that they emerged into an area which most certainly had to have been outdoors, for Stephen could feel leaves rustling beneath his feet, and he could hear wind rustling through the thin branches of trees.

Stephen also felt a stronger and somehow grayer light through his blindfold. It was cold in this clearing.

One of the men handed Stephen a blanket, which he gladly accepted.

Stephen also accepted a cigarette from one of the men. He smoked it greedily and blew rings of smoke.

The cigarette shook in Stephen's hands, more from constant pain than the cold.

Stephen scratched at his arms and twitched his nose between drags on his unfiltered cigarette.

When all were finished smoking, the party moved further through the trees and gray sky, God only knew where. They trudged for many miles through fallen leaves and dirt lined with gravel.

Once the guards stopped and turned Stephen to face something. The guards removed Stephen's blindfold, and standing before Stephen he saw a statue of a man.

The man stood proud and defiant. The man was dressed in a military uniform and he wore a face of grim determination.

"Why have you shown me this?" Stephen asked as he eyed the statue.

"So that you may learn, and know of the pride of our people." One of the guards responded.

Stephen supposed that was good reason to allow him this small, yet possibly important, glimpse of their present path.

After a moment the guards blindfolded Stephen again and they continued on their way. After a time, the party stopped and camped for the night. That night Stephen dreamed only of a waning moon far up in the sky.

They traveled through the trees and cold for many days. Each night they would huddle together in blankets, with one man watching Stephen at all times.

Stephen's hair pricked up as the deadly cold of the frost came at night. It felt as if many small insects made of ice were traversing his skin.

Finally they came upon a place that was indoors once more. The four men walked on a hard and slick surface now. After a few short minutes, the guards stopped, and one of the men branched off from the group.

“Wait here.” The men told Stephen.

The guard had gone off somewhere to the right, and he did not return for several minutes.

When the guard did return, he was out of breath and extremely pale.

“What is it?” one of the guards said under his breath to the one who had just returned.

“We must leave this place.” The guard white with fear said in an icy voice.

So they had hurriedly left wherever they were and marched onwards through many turns in an elongated maze of hallways.

Finally there came a time when the guards stopped again. And again one of the men left. For what purpose, Stephen could not say.

This happened several times along the way.

The guard would always return, struck with fear. Disappointment began to fill the men.

Dreams came now to Stephen that were filled with burnt and dying things that moved almost imperceptibly across landscapes of ash. In the dream, he too could barely turn his head. It seemed as if the entire world were stuck in extreme slow motion.

These dreams were always ended by one of the guards shaking Stephen awake so that they could march further and visit new places to receive the same troubled answers.

Stephen often heard worried chatter amongst the guards not on watch during the night. But he could not make out anything definite, and was left clueless as to the meaning of these events that so shook the other men.

One day, the guard who left the others alone with Stephen didn't return. The others waited for a long time and called out loudly for the other guard, but the man never came back.

Finally, the others decided they could wait no longer, and so they gloomily marched forward, leaving their companion behind to some unknown fate.

The remaining two guards frowned constantly, and when the one was on watch, the other would mutter in his troubled sleep in indecipherable speech.

Upon the next excursion, Stephen was left in the care of only one man as the other went drearily off to his doom. This man too never returned, and the party was left with but two members.

The last remaining guard was forced to attach a collar to Stephen's neck and drive a steak through a chain in order to keep Stephen from escaping. Stephen was now able to remove his blindfold, and he happily did.

To be able to simply go without that thin strip of cloth was heavenly delight itself.

Stephen eyed the guard as he chattered ceaselessly in his sleep.

Stephen's eyes too grew weary, and he eventually fell asleep.

When he awoke, the guard was warming his hands over a small fire.

"Put your blindfold back on. We reach a door today. The guard told Stephen.

Stephen did so, for now the armed man was awake and threatening even in his obvious nervousness.

A door! Stephen thought.

Stephen knew there was some important significance to this fact, but he could not ascertain it.

The guard stamped out the fire, and told Stephen to rise.

The two men then proceeded to walk steadily forward. After a time, the guard bade Stephen halt.

The guard turned to face Stephen.

"I hate to do this. But just in case."

The guard then pointed his handgun into Stephen's abdomen and proceeded to collar Stephen. The guard then chained him to the ground again, turned, and walked off.

Stephen sat, wondering what would become of his last visible captor.

Stephen removed his blindfold and opened his eyes.

Before him stretched many trees. When he peered into the distance, however, Stephen saw a small green doorway far away. Before the doorway stood the guard. He seemed to be arguing with someone.

The conversation was growing heated. The guard was now shouting.

Suddenly, blood burst from the guard's chest and he fell dead.

Stephen stood back in horror and clutched at the steak that bound him to the earth.

A thin black arm then appeared from behind the green doorway. This new appearance filled

Stephen with dread and he began to claw at the steak with reckless abandon.

Small pieces of dirt went flying as Stephen clawed at the ground.

Looking over his shoulder Stephen saw the arm extending into a chest and finally into a huge and shaggy head from behind the small green door. One red eye stood like a lighthouse in the sea of black on the thing's head.

Stephen was still frantically digging at the area around the 3-foot spike. He had opened a sizeable portion of the ground now, but when he looked over his shoulder again he saw the black beast walking slowly towards him.

It will accelerate...I must hurry. Stephen thought.

Stephen began clawing whole fists of earth, though the ground was tougher deeper down. Sheer panic overtook him as he tore and tore at the soil.

The thing with the enormously disproportionate head was now gaining pace, and headed straight towards Stephen. Each step it took caused it to move a little faster, until it was moving at a brisk pace, and finally a mid paced jog.

Stephen almost had the spike exposed now. He tore mightily at the ground.

The thing was nearly upon him, and given its current acceleration, Stephen did not have long to escape.

Stephen could almost see the end of the huge steak now. He wrapped his hands around the cold steel and heaved with all his strength. The steel spike moved, but it did not break free. The hideously disturbing thing drew ever closer, ever faster. Stephen pulled once more at the steak. He was sent flying as it broke free of the earth.

Stephen scrambled to his feet and ran as fast as he could while dragging the steak in the direction the guards had been traveling all along – North.

Stephen narrowly avoided the thing that bore down on him, and he did not look back again to check if it was gone.

XV

Stephen thought he heard voices in the night telling him to

cut the kids in half, in a low whisper.

Stephen had no idea what this meant. He had been traveling for days through the trees, which were now thinning out into blackened soil.

Stephen had no idea where he was headed, or whether or not he should be turning back towards the direction of his cell. He didn't want to go back there. He didn't necessarily want to reach whatever point of transfer he initially was supposed to reach either. However, he knew that he wanted no part of places where things such as the one that had killed the guards lived.

So, he would venture north, as he and the guards had for many long days, taking care to avoid a direct course back to the beast that had devoured the guard.

He knew he would know his transfer point when he reached it. He knew without a trace of doubt.

Stephen traveled a few more miles that day before deciding to halt for the night. He was in no hurry, as he felt the shaggy black things with the bulbous heads lived only near doors, and he had not seen a door since the last guard was murdered.

Stephen roasted a small bit of the rations he had left over a tiny fire. When the food was sufficiently charred, Stephen ate in silence and stared up at the starry night sky. He sighed, thinking back on the past events of his life.

Many things have happened since I left the city. Stephen thought.

He thought that this form of solitude was something to be relished. Tranquility seemed to fill all the world that night. It seemed as if everything was at peace, and the night's splendor was enhanced all the more by the jarring episodes of psychosis of his past.

Few would think anything I've experienced real. Stephen reflected.

He supposed it didn't matter if they did. In fact, he thought it inconsequential whether anyone else was real at all.

As the last embers of the fire faded, Stephen lied down on the cool sand of this place of simple serenity. He stretched his arms back and placed them under his head and looked up at the stars once more.

Off in the heavens, a comet sped through time and space, only to be swallowed by some unknown force. Stephen thought perhaps a black hole had prematurely terminated the comet's run. If that were so, he wondered why no one had reported such a phenomenon in that area.

Of course, it is also possible there is some alternate explanation that we have no understanding of. Stephen thought, *perhaps some other world, some other reality has just been snuffed out by the simple trajectory of an ordinary comet.*

Stephen mused over these thoughts as he watched the countless points of the light that dotted the sky fade from his vision further and further until he passed into sleep.

Stephen jumped back into the waking world as a voice erupted in his ear.

Stephen scrambled to his feet and raised his fists in a fighter's stance. His time in the lonely and desolate cell of the Green Police had taught him to foster a desire to injure those who would bring him misery.

The sky was now a light shade of gray, and all stars were hidden from view. Cool air breathed through Stephen's now shaggy hair. He was thankful for the warmth it gave him now, as he was for the protection offered him by his constantly growing beard.

The man who now stood facing Stephen decided immediately upon the deranged and hungry nature of Stephen. To this man, Stephen's beard and coarse hair only furthered the appearance of a man on edge, lonely, and desperate.

Stephen eyed the man who had so shocked him warily. He eyed him as a wolf eyes a solitary lamb in a field.

For a long time, neither man spoke.

The man stared at Stephen from behind thin-rimmed glasses. He wore a long black coat atop a buttoned shirt of the deepest blue; so dark it was almost black. His face was expressionless. Long black hair draped across the right side of the man's face. Large black buttons, worn from time, lined the heavy black coat. Old battered boots lined with cracks completed the outfit.

Finally Stephen spoke: "Who are you?"

"I've been waiting for you Stephen," the man replied, avoiding Stephen's question.

"Waiting for me?" Stephen wasn't terribly surprised.

"I've come to take you to your transfer point." The man replied slowly.

Stephen gave a long, drawn out nod, and lowered his tightly clenched fists.

The man in black silently turned and began to walk.

XVII

The man walked in a steady rhythm across the grainy sand, and Stephen followed close behind.

After a time, the sky faded into hues of deep blues and light greens. The sand soon gave way to flat, dull brown ground. The man in black boots fell softly as he trudged forward.

Soon the sky faded from this beautiful blue into black, and it was night. Stephen and the man in black had traveled far, but neither seemed tired. Stephen now came to stand beside the man.

The man in black only looked ahead through piercing sapphire eyes. He then reached down into his coat pocket and, withdrawing his long and thin hand, produced what looked like a small black box.

Stephen eyed the box in the man's hand with wonder. He watched curiously as the man in black deliberately crushed the black box into a fine powder that fell through the cracks of his fist onto the desert floor.

The man opened his hand and let the last of the powder fall. Stephen waited and wondered, but nothing happened.

The man in black continued to stare straight ahead as he lit a cigarette. He offered one to Stephen, who accepted it with a nod.

Both men smoked leisurely, waiting for something, the man in black waiting with knowledge, Stephen waiting in ignorance.

Stephen sucked at the cigarette and watched the fire burning at its tip consume the weed rolled inside. As he took another drag of the cigarette, Stephen saw something approaching out of the corner of his eye.

He slowly turned his head to the left and through an exhalation of smoke saw a small black object hurrying towards them. The object was steadily growing larger, and Stephen soon forgot about his cigarette.

The man in black continued to savor his tobacco, blowing out streams of thick gray smoke. He did not turn towards the quickly approaching object, but it seemed to Stephen as if he somehow *knew* it was approaching. It was as if he expected its arrival.

This put Stephen somewhat at ease, but it was impossible to contain the multiple floods of emotion welling up within him. He felt excitement, apprehension, worry, doubt, joy.

As the black object grew larger with speed, Stephen saw that it was a vehicle of some sort. Soon he could make out the curved form of an automobile much like those that constantly blared at him in his former city life.

Suddenly, it dawned on Stephen. "It's a hearse," He spoke quietly.

The man in black let his spent cigarette fall from his withered white hand, and he ground it out under his boot.

The hearse pulled up slowly in front of the two men. The man in black walked around to the opposite side of the car and opened the door. A man dressed in a priest's uniform sat silently behind the wheel.

Stephen gave a start as the man in black shot the priest and pulled his body out of the driver's seat.

The man in black slid calmly into the car and waited.

Stephen took one glimpse of the priest's lifeless body before entering the hearse. As the man in black turned the car northwest Stephen took one last look at the priest through the window of the hearse. He saw blood pouring out of the grief stricken face of the holy man and onto the cold desert floor.

XIX

The hearse sped across the desert sand in the dead of night. Soon the sleek black car came upon a paved highway split by a dashed yellow line. The yellow was striking beneath the lights of the hearse. Wind whipped through the man in black's hair and Stephen stared grimly at the dark stretch of highway.

The man in black switched the radio on, but only static emitted from the stereo.

The man in black seemed to sense Stephen's unease at the emptiness of the highway and the way the radio seemed deafening in an otherwise silent land. To help Stephen better cope with his new surroundings, the man in black offered Stephen a bit of cocaine from his ring.

The ring was adorned with a six-pointed star in a circle of black. This star was pulled back to reveal an inner compartment and the fine white powder inside.

Stephen snorted a bit of the cocaine as the man in black lit a cigarette.

Stephen soon felt the cocaine taking effect. It was the perfect drug for such a journey. Stephen now felt able to accept the pitiful loneliness of the highway.

The man in black shook a little more of the white powder onto the dash. Stephen did another line. He now noticed that every so often a telephone pole stood ominously like a cross along the road.

These crosses of the mechanical age towered above the hearse, dwarfing it. Stephen felt an inexplicable emotion rising within him. It was somewhere between hallucination and a feeling of complete purpose for his life. Like a sense that what he had been meant to do, what he had to do, was contained in some portion by those crosses and the empty black highway which they lined so sparsely.

Again and again they passed them. Stephen could not tell, but their locations did not seem to take to regular spacing.

The man in black offered Stephen a handful of small white pills. Stephen accepted them without a word.

Stephen swallowed the pills and waited. Soon he saw small and frightened men running along

the sides of the highway. He was sure the hearse would hit one of them sooner or later.

The hair on Stephen's legs tingled, and the sensation crawled madly up his calves. His hands were twitching, and his back soon began to ache. The man in black offered some more of the white powder.

The cocaine seemed to help Stephen stop his panic. With his anxiety under control, Stephen worried less about the men who raced frantically along the highway in the opposite direction. Some of the men reminded Stephen of the scarecrow in the club, only they were plainer, more frightened and more fragile.

Stephen now saw tall lights far off to his right.

The man in black took the hearse off onto an unmarked exit headed towards the lights. The black strip of highway narrowed and rose now. The hearse rose with the small hills as it headed towards the bright white lights in the distance.

As they approached these lights, Stephen saw that the highway gave way into a single street that appeared to lead into a city far ahead.

The tall lights lit little but the highway and the occasional camp of a drifter. Once Stephen saw a man drinking a large beer over a small campfire away from the lights. Another time he saw a man shivering while his female companion fixed underneath the bright lights that led towards the city.

The city loomed large in the distance now, and Stephen could see signs of movement on its streets. The sun was slowly rising on the horizon, revealing blocks of color in the city.

The hearse sped on down the highway until finally Stephen could make out details on some of the larger buildings. Stephen saw cracked windows here, an apartment complex there. The red lights of one building were still on though day fast approached.

Soon the hearse rolled over one final hill, carrying its passengers into the city.

XX

Stephen now saw the city in all its decaying glory. Overweight women hung clothes from their window while wearing pajamas. Young men strolled along the streets, smoking from plastic pipes. The occasional rat scoured the gutter for food. Stephen was appalled at how much this city reminded him of his own. Except that there seemed to be more happiness here, and more crime.

Stephen saw two men shot, another robbed, and one child smoking some illegal substance, which Stephen took for crack, all in the span of a minute. No one else seemed to notice. The man in black was as silent as ever as he piloted the hearse down an alleyway to the left.

Graffiti littered the brick alley walls. Two small children were kicking a ball against a wall and

laughing.

The man in black pulled the hearse slowly to a stop in the alley. He got out of the car, and Stephen followed suit. The man in black nodded to a man sitting against the brick wall. The man had the face and hands of a 30 year old, yet he was no bigger than the children who played in the alley.

He too, smoked the small white rock. The little man cracked a smile at Stephen as he exhaled smoke into the dark air. The man wore jeans and a plain black T-shirt. He also wore a small yellow backpack and beat up tennis shoes that matched the faded color of his shirt.

The man in black stepped past the little man and reached for a small black knob. He turned the knob and pulled open a door of the same color. The man in black stepped inside and Stephen followed him into a narrow and dimly lit passageway.

A single naked red light illuminated the hallway. Stephen followed the man in black down a turn to the right that revealed an almost identical hallway. The man in black turned left now into another of the small hallways and under another of the small red lights.

They made another turn, and now the man in black stopped in front of a red door. Stephen heard voices and laughter from inside the room. The smell of puissant marijuana filled the hallway.

The man in black opened the door, and Stephen followed him into a room filled with smoke and laughter.

This room was also lit by a single red light, but five other people besides the room's two most recent guests occupied it.

Joints were being passed around, and all seemed to be having a good time. A large black man sat in between two women and laughed as a thin white woman across from him told a joke about an experience involving a pair of biscuits and a fire.

The man eyed Stephen briefly before taking a hit of a large joint.

A younger girl sitting half-naked and bound next to the man asked for "a toke, please."

"Sure thing baby." The man replied happily. He offered the joint to her lips and she took in the weed in small sucks between her soft lips. Her hands were tied in front of her and she wore only a short black skirt. She was quite young, but old enough to be considered a woman.

The man took back the joint now and reached to hand it to Stephen, who accepted with a smile.

"I suppose you'll be wanting to show this man to his new room." The large man said to the man in black who stood silently. The man in black nodded slowly in agreement.

"The name's Merv," the man said, extending his hand to Stephen.

Stephen pumped the man's hand and gave his name in return.

"This here's Brittain, but you can call her nipples."

"Why's that?" Stephen asked.

"Because she has such *cute* nipples!" Merv answered with a chuckle and a pinch of the girl's right nipple.

Stephen said nothing. He only passed the joint down to a quiet boy with spiked hair who was dressed in black. The boy squeaked in gratitude. His eyes were terribly bloodshot, but he smoked the joint anyway.

"C'mon now bitch, on your feet." Merv told the girl.

He gave her ass a swift slap as she rose. She cooed with delight.

"Nipples will show you to your room, ain't that right honeybunny?" Merv said.

The girl nodded and said "Yes, daddy."

"Hehe, OK. That's a good girl, off you go now!" Merv commanded light heartedly.

The girl asked Stephen to hold onto her shoulder as she led the way back out into the hallway.

It was now Merv's turn to smoke the joint again. The object was to have this joint catch up with the other one, which was in the hands of the woman who liked to tell jokes. Merv was catching up and rolling with laughter as the group smoked bowl after bowl of dope.

XXI

Stephen gripped the soft milky white skin of the albino girl. She led him slowly and silently down the hallway. The red light played beautifully off the girl's skin. Stephen slowly slid one finger across her shoulder, savoring the smoothness of her skin.

Suddenly the girl stopped and placed her back against the hallway wall.

"What's the matter? Why have we stopped?" Stephen asked.

"Hit me." The girl demanded.

Stephen gave her a look of shock and stammered his disapproval.

"Hit me, please." The girl pleaded with Stephen.

Her mouth was small, her lips shiny and moist.

Stephen slowly shook his head. Her tongue licked the back of her teeth as she asked him again to hit her.

Stephen's cock was growing hard. She was so young, so vulnerable, and the sexual tension within him was almost unbearable.

"Hit me or we don't move." The girl finally said.

Her ultimatum was senseless to Stephen. He knew nothing of the girl, and he had no desire to hit her. Still, she was so beautiful that Stephen could not help but become a little excited at the thought of smashing her gorgeous young face.

Sweat dripped off Stephen's face as he raised his shaking fist. He drew back and let fly with a shot to the girl's smooth white face.

She gasped in pain. Soon, however, the shocked 'o' of her mouth became a petite smile of pleasure.

Stephen forcibly turned her to face back down the hallway. He gripped her shoulder, harder this time, and they began to walk again.

Stephen thought how lovely her back was. It was like porcelain, but it was smooth and tauged across her small shoulder bones.

They rounded another turn, and suddenly the girl threw her back against the wall again.

"Hit me." She said as she shuddered longingly under the red light.

Stephen mercilessly punched her and roared as he licked the side of her face. Stephen whispered vague threats of rape in her ear and turned her to walk forward again.

They were going faster now, but again the girl stopped and pleaded for violence.

Again Stephen obliged, this time delivering three open-handed slaps in quick succession across her face.

She gave a deep moan of gratitude. Stephen twisted her nipple and said, "Nipples is it?"

The violence escalated with each stop along the narrow red hallway. The girl's skin was turning bright red, but she continued to beg for punishment.

Stephen began punching her in other places on her body- the belly, the back, the thighs.

What sweet and delectable thighs they were. Stephen slapped relatively gently at her thighs,

parting them to reveal the nectar of her hive.

Her pussy gleamed wet underneath those lights.

Suddenly she bit back into him, tearing into his neck with her small teeth.

He shoved her back with both hands and slapped her face.

He then kissed her softly. Her immaculate body was now a tapestry of pain and scorching pleasure. She was a beacon to his sexual starvation.

He howled with pleasure, she bit down in pain. He had her skirt off. He held both wrists in the air as he looked her naked body up and down.

How utterly vulnerable she was.

He teased her cunt with his now thoroughly engorged penis. His balls were aching to release, but he could not tear away from the pleasure of this new game.

He thought he could marry this girl, and abuse her night after night. She was that kind of girl.

He plunged into her without care. He filled her with his flesh, and her cunt sucked him tightly inside her.

He would marry her right here. There was no more fitting ceremony than this. The naked wall served as their altar of consecration. Holy matrimony. Blood, sweat, thrusting.

She gasped as he drove into her. He slapped at her breasts, turning them pink.

She bit down hard on his ear. He retaliated by pulling hard at her hair. He was pumping into her more slowly now, teasing her again. He had full control.

She resisted in her way, but he pushed into her again. Her legs clamped tight as her pussy released more of her sweet honey.

He pulled out, and ran his tongue down to her belly. He lingered a while to explore her navel. His saliva ran down her body, mingling with her own juices.

Quickly he spun her around and slapped her ass. She swayed to and fro, awaiting whatever new torture or pleasure he would give her. He ran his finger up and across her anus, and plunged into her like an animal.

He moved faster and faster, pushing her hard against the wall. She bit down hard on her lip. He slapped at her back and dug his hands into her shoulders. He jerked her back onto him as he pushed into her tight and inviting pussy.

He slapped at her body again and again as he drove into her. She began to scream, not caring what new punishment this would bring. She was about to come and her primal sexual instincts took total control of her. She came as he gave one final series of thrusts into her. He entrenched his nails deep within her sides as he gave the last push that finally brought forth the rush of his seed that he had kept stored for so long inside his throbbing genitals.

She collapsed onto the floor and he fell on top of her in a heap. They exchanged small bits of laughter amid their gasps for air. She nibbled on his index finger, he stroked the base of her spine.

XXII

They came now upon a solid black door with no handle.

Stephen and the albino girl had waited to catch their breath before they attempted to move again. But when Stephen felt he was able to continue he found that he was overcome by a strange sleepiness. He gave a king-sized yawn, and marveled at this curious new sleepiness.

Sex will do that to a man. Stephen supposed.

The girl snuggled up against Stephen, and he decided it perhaps best to cuddle up and take a brisk nap.

Stephen awoke to find the girl sitting silently against the opposite wall from the one that he was propped up on.

He rubbed his eyes, stretched his arms, and yawned wide.

The girl stood up and turned to face down the hallway. The red light was a jarring presence during the first moments of waking. Stephen felt like he had wakened from a lurid dream of violent sex, and the red light pouring into the hallway forced recognition of that dream's reality upon him.

Stephen groggily stood up and placed his hand on the girl's shoulder. She was, of course, still naked and bound.

They had walked for a time, and now they had come to this door. Stephen felt an unusual and intense feeling emanating from the door. He knew that behind that door lay the sum of all his journeys, the totality of his existence.

Stephen looked towards the girl, who was only silent.

She seemed to voice his thoughts when she said, "You must enter alone Stephen."

Stephen drew in a long breath. He was gathering all his strength, both mental and physical, for whatever lay behind that door. Yet, there was no real way to prepare for it. Whatever he would

find would doubtless strip him of all his safeguards and preparation.

Stephen reached out with the fingers of his long right hand, and opened the door.

XXIII

Stephen was looking into what appeared to be a very old elevator.

A collapsible iron grid door stood in front of the elevator shaft. Stephen pushed this door to the side and stepped into the elevator.

Stephen looked at the floor buttons, but found only a round black button given for choices. He closed the gate and pressed the button. The elevator began to descend slowly.

As it did so, Stephen's view alternated between scratched yet smooth black surfaces most likely of metal, and small windows to each floor he passed on his descent.

He didn't see anyone through these windows, only small portions of the hallways, their carpet, and the fake ferns that graced certain floors.

Stephen descended for quite some time, as the elevator was quite slow, and he seemed to pass many floors.

Finally the elevator slowed to a halt in front of a solid white sliding door made of wood. Stephen slid the gate back again and opened the white door.

Stephen stepped through this door into a medium sized white room, about the size of a studio apartment, or your typical family room.

The room's walls were of a fuzzy bleached white composition that made Stephen's eyes water.

A young woman in a business suit sitting and scratching out children's faces in photographs. A dish filled with black powder.

Stephen snorted a bit of the black powder at the urging of the woman. She talked as she continued to scratch out the faces of children in old Polaroids.

"Greetings Stephen." the woman in the black business suit said, "Welcome to your transfer point."

Everything in the room was a shade of black or white. It was as if all color had been bled out of the room. Even Stephen's hands and face were captured in black and white. It was a strange sensation.

"Please, have a seat." The woman said, gesturing with her right hand to a black leather chair in the middle of the room. Her suit hugged her curves quite nicely. Her hands were smooth and articulate. Her mouth: small, delicate, and succinct.

Stephen sat down in the black chair. It was quite comfortable, yet firm as well. The woman's focus was now simply on her task of scratching out children's faces with a sharp needle.

Stephen turned his attention now to the small black television set directly in front of him.

Suddenly the television turned on, revealing a wash of static and white noise. This changed abruptly into an image of a damaged white circle enclosing a black void. It looked as if the blackness were the backdrop for a theater, and the circle of white around it was somehow a part of the set's curtains, or otherwise set apart from the television screen.

Then, Stephen saw the screen change into a shot of a cross rising high into a bleak sky. The image was heavy with contrast. The white portions of image looked as if bleached. The image was terribly moving and ominous.

The image panned slowly to the left, revealing another of these crosses. This time the cross stood farther off and more directly ahead from Stephen's vantage point. Somehow this made the cross seem all the more foreboding, and Stephen felt that it could leap forward and obliterate his consciousness without warning.

Suddenly the cross was gone, leaving only black on the television screen.

A low drone could be heard along with the scratching of the woman.

The woman looked up to find the black chair empty except for a very fine covering of black ash.

The woman walked over to the television set and flipped the switch to turn it on.

The image is faint at first but soon comes into focus as it draws larger and fills our view.

On the screen we see a man wearing a dirty suit, lying face down on the concrete in a pointless, gray, and nameless city. He is beginning to wake, but for now he sleeps, silently, without conscious knowledge of his soul's true wanderings.