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Rabbit Stew

Aaron Paulson

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

Rabbit Stew

Aaron Paulson

Rabbit Stew is a collection of short stories about the characters of Rabbit and Baby Judy and their friends. The stories are set in a post-punk, near-future world parallel to our own. Human society is dystopian. The natural setting has all the force and presence of an, at best, amoral character.

The style of the stories, the present tense narration, the shifts in points of view, and the tone of the descriptive writing reflect the impatience, the anger, and the often melodramatic nature of these characters struggling into some form of adulthood in a hostile environment.

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Preface

“There are two kinds of footgear in the world, and the people who wear them.”

This awkward-sounding sentence, with its overly simple intent and superficial concerns, inspired a story that has been long since reabsorbed into the subsequent narrative. But the characters and the setting of that first story, their oblique roles in a created world, have led to more successful stories, until what started out from a single inspirational moment has evolved into a fictional world that I, the writer, observe as much as create.

Rabbit and Baby Judy have grown since their first appearance as characters, or caricatures, who could inhabit a world divided into two kinds of footgear. They now have complete wardrobes. And the means – or lack thereof – to acquire them. And places to wear them to. And things to do in them. And there are things in their environment to put those wardrobes at risk. Their characters remain faithful, however, to the superficial tone that first inspired their creation. Surface and appearance remain as central to the Rabbit and Baby Judy stories as they do to the writing that produces them.

The world they inhabit has also evolved, from a basement bachelor apartment in an un-named city, to a complex and messy culture and eco-system, parodically, ironically, sometimes a little too simplistically reduced to a fight-or-flight struggle for survival in a post-punk, seemingly post-apocalyptic environment. At the same time, there remains

something distinctly Canadian about the setting: despite a conscious attempt to stay on the surface of a sophisticated and complex urban reality, nature and the elements refuse to be left out of the picture. The setting often has the force and presence of a character in its own right

At some point Rabbit and Baby Judy took on lives of their own, forced their way out of my attempts to hold them as objects of art or craft, and into the urgent work of the creative process itself. Although Rabbit and Baby Judy started out as products of my imagination – and of course remain so – their stories increasingly defy my attempts to frame them, to say something definitive about them and be done with it. They deny me such satisfaction. Such closure.

As the Rabbit and Baby Judy stories grew in my imagination, I started to envision a more ambitious plan: a sequence of stories, unified through character as in Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* and Linda Svendsen's *Marine Life*, and through time place and, in particular, tone, as in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and George P. Elliot's *The Kissing Man*. I have succeeded, at least in part, in shaping a narrative that benefits from the combined effect of the stories. But they have also resisted my efforts to frame them in traditional narrative structures. *Rabbit Stew* amounts to neither a story sequence nor a novel; but in pursuing a course as fractured and impatient as the lives of the characters, which denies the satisfaction and closure of an extended, continuous narrative, these stories argue, it seems, for an emphasis on process: means rather than ends.

Montreal, Canada
February, 1998

c'est la vie, c'est l'amour, c'est la guerre

A warm wind, spun from the flaming top of a volcano half a world away, is sent loping across seas and ice-rimed continents by the random tilt of the earth. This same wind has thawed winter's first snow, so that the ice will now tamp down hard instead of resting lightly on top of the grasses and moss that feed the patchy herds of caribou adrift in a landscape of oil refineries and pipelines and cottage industry sculpture studios.

Rabbit and Hippy-punk perch like two gargoyles atop the roof that usually serves to keep the rain and snow off Rabbit's head in his rented room above a Chinese restaurant on the main street of this dying town. From up here, Rabbit can see moonlight tangle in a forest of tv antennas and satellite dishes that line this high road of rooftops: chimney stack shrines for those who, lost in a late winter blizzard, finally lie themselves down to see what does actually happen next. A warm wind, that has melted the glaze of ice into mirror-still puddles on this rooftop pathway, now warms the bottle of beer in Rabbit's smooth hand.

Hippy-punk reaches back and fetches himself a beer from the spill of bottles that glitter in the moonlight.

"This is living, eh, Rabbit?" says Hippy-punk, popping the cap off another bottle and sending an arcing spray of foamy beer off the roof. Rabbit watches from up here, above the halo from the street lamps, as the talon of foam dissolves in the dry air. Bends over his knees to watch the fine powder settle on the heads of passers-by. But the sudden rush of blood to his frontal lobe nearly topples him from his ledge into the chain of humanity

grinding its way up and down the street three storeys below. Passers-by, bright pieces of cloth, move frantically in and out of cafes and theatres and restaurants and blind historic alleys. As though the scent of death were in the air and these people, these mammals, had awoken from hibernation, come out of their holes to eat and mate one last time before their blood thickened and the hair on their bodies grew out long and thick to insulate them better as they slept through the winter months.

Rabbit snaps his head up, back to the roads of rooftops that stretch out across town.

"I'm drunk," he says. Moonlight shines in the marbles of his eyes.

"So what do you want to do tonight?" says Hippypunk, dancing a little jig by the lip of the roof.

"What do I want to do with my life?"

"Life. Tonight. Whatever."

"I want to build a boat," says Rabbit, thinking. "I want to sail it around the world. I want to do *things*. Have adventures. I hate this life."

"And this life hates you, my friend. When was the last time you ate right, huh?"

"Since I quit my job at the marina..."

"And why did you quit your job?"

"I don't know! I don't know why I do what I do. Shit just happens."

"Think so, huh?" says Hippypunk, sitting back down and staring out over the street. After awhile he says

"Hey, isn't that the guy?"

Rabbit looks down the length of Hippy-punk's pointing arm. A man in a beaten old army parka sits alone on a bench, to one side of the chain of revellers grinding on between the two axes of the fort on the hill and the prison gates.

"Naw," says Rabbit. "That ain't him."

"That's him," says Hippy-punk. "I'm gonna give him another beer."

Rabbit stares at the shaggy head of the man in the parka.

"Maybe it's him."

Hippy-punk grabs another bottle of beer from the box and lobs it at the man.

If the rambler had heard Hippy-punk's voice call to him. If his mind had been here on this street, at this time, watching the citizens of this new town down the road enjoy an Indian Summer evening. Then maybe he would have seen the bottle spinning his way off the rooftop. Maybe would even have enjoyed a nice beer offered up with good-will and recognition. But the rambler had long since left his parka and his shaggy head behind on the bench, his body caught up in this town of locked doors and Neighbourhood Watch observation posts. The rambler's thoughts were back at a bottle cap of soil he'd spent the night on and would return to again later tonight, beating his way out of this town before he starved. The bottle tumbles over the man's head and falls instead into the street, where it smashes against the bulldog front grill of a police cruiser.

"Oh shit," says Hippy-punk.

Rabbit looks down at the moon faces in the street below.

"Terrorists!" one voice cries.

"Hooligans!" cries another.

"Elves!" says a little girl, her sticky hand still wrapped in her mother's paw.

The cruiser mounts the curb, forcing a wedge into the human chain on the sidewalk. A long-snouted searchlight probes over the alley entrances and the front stoops of store fronts. The man in the parka, jolted by the cruiser brushing his bench, slips off into the crowd.

"Up there!" cries a woman, ducking for cover from the terrorists behind the police cruiser. "They're on the roof!"

"I saw the Jihad in their eyes," she later tells a reporter from the local news station.

The broken bits of human chain scatter into alleys and cafes and restaurants. Four Constables pile out of the cruiser and make their way up the street. Hippypunk touches Rabbit's shoulder.

"It's time for us to go," he says.

Rabbit rolls back off the lip of the roof. Starts to gather loose beers into the torn box. He can hear breaking glass from the street-front entrance to the Chinese restaurant.

The rubber soles of Rabbit's red running shoes stick to the tarry roof, pulling him toward a side street fire-escape. Rabbit, then Hippypunk, pound down metal stairs. Behind them they hear what any damn fool would know to be pistol shots.

Hearts beating like hummingbirds, Rabbit and Hippypunk run down narrow side streets, brass plaques on historic stone houses glinting dully in the moonlight. The streets twist and dip across the antediluvian flood plain of Olde Town's foundation. Turn and intersect in a cut-stone labyrinth built by foreign masters to confuse an invading army. Side streets wing off each other at oblique angles, and Rabbit and Hippypunk twist and turn their way blindly through town. *Cops can't find us*, thinks Rabbit, *if we don't know where we are*. Their livers combust small beer into a fine adrenaline wine.

The streets mount and slide down the escarpment. Every few blocks or so Rabbit sees again the rooftop above his room, to left or right, in front or behind them. *we're running in circles*, he realizes. Mandibles of light from police torches probe the roofs along the main street of Olde Town.

Rabbit stops against a lamp post.

"Where are we?"

Hippypunk squats in the middle of the street, breathing short quick breaths to burn out the stitch in his side.

"I dunno."

Rabbit looks up and down the street.

"No cops," he says.

"No," says Hippypunk, after awhile, "no cops."

"Then, why are we still running?"

"Because," says Hippypunk, picking himself up off the cobblestones, "we can."

Moving at a slow trot, the houses seem to loom out into the street. Rabbit can feel their weight squeezing him through the street, pushing him along. Expelling him from the quiet neighbourhood of historic houses. Hippypunk stops up ahead, where one street joins abruptly with another.

"There he is again," he says, as Rabbit pulls up next to him.

"Where do you think he's going?"

Rabbit looks down this new street. Sees a parkaed figure moving swiftly away from them.

"Do you think he's seen us?" says Rabbit.

"I don't think he's seeing anything. Looks like he's just staring at the ground."

"Seems to know where he's going..."

"Yeah. Let's follow."

The man in the parka moves quickly along the narrow streets, never looking up but always turning confidently down blind intersections. Rabbit and Hippiypunk have to walk quickly to keep up.

The streets start to widen out a little. Cobblestones turn to brick, then asphalt under their feet. The houses are a little further apart. No historic plaques glint in the moonlight. Every once in a while Rabbit catches a glimpse of the river in the distance, over rooftops and backyard fences, glittering wide and black. The man turns a corner and is gone.

Hippiypunk pulls up short at a ribbon of asphalt that runs straight north and south. Weeds tangle in the chain links of a fence by rusty railroad tracks. Off in the distance, across the boulevard and fence, a will-o-wisp or man with a lantern floats away across the marsh grass of the flood plain.

"We made it out of town," says Rabbit.

"I know where we are," says Hippiypunk.

The boys walk along the boulevard, past small clapboard houses with screen doors that creak in the breeze and Neighbourhood Watch posters in dark windows.

"All these houses look the same," says Rabbit.

"No, no. I know ..."

Hippypunk stops outside one house. Points to a swath of dead soil around the foundation of the house. Rabbit sees a light burning in a basement window in the dark house.

"That's Old Man"

"What is?"

"See that? That dead lawn? Story is, Old Man ... got so furious catching some guy messing with his daughter he chased him out with an axe. Then he walks around, pissing against his own house while his wife and daughter are inside. Like he's a fucking wolf, marking what's his."

"What're you saying, Hippypunk?"

A candle burns in the basement window. Hippypunk steps over broken pavement in the drive and raps on the basement window.

"That his cruiser ain't here."

Rabbit looks up and down the empty street. At the dark frames of windows in the rows of houses. The railroad tracks rusting in the snow-melt on this Indian Summer night, big flakes of metal falling in with the cinders. Off in the marsh an orange light flickers, a lonesome campfire on a cap of soil in that still pool of water. Rabbit hears a car engine growl up one of the side streets, headed toward the exact spot in the road where Rabbit is standing.

"Hey Rabbit! Get up here. I gotta introduce ya."

Hippypunk disappears through the basement window, leaving Rabbit cold and lonely among the oil patches and rubber skid marks on the driveway. The face of a man who'd piss around the outside of his own house grins from each dark window. Rabbit

skulks up the driveway, towards the light shining through the basement curtains and the smell of roasting meat. The rusty chain-link fence sags a little lower by the railroad tracks. The orange firelight in the swamp flares into a ball and is gone. Rabbit lowers himself through the basement window as a car growls onto the road somewhere behind him, headlights sweeping the blank fronts of houses.

White silken pods hang lifeless from the rafters, billowing slowly out in a current of air through the dank, candlelit basement. Rabbit presses his back up against the stone foundation as the closest gossamer shell brushes cold and damp across his face, sucking him gently, willing him to climb inside and be embraced. To go to sleep in wet, smothering arms. The smell of cooking meat hangs heavy in the air. The smell of successful hunting. *What kind of spider, Rabbit thinks, cooks its prey first?* He looks back up at the window he fell through. That slammed shut behind him. *A trap-door spider. Go to the front of the class.* Escape route blocked, Rabbit picks up a rusty length of pipe off the floor.

""Hippypunk?" he whispers, "where are you?"

Rabbit waits anxiously for a reply. Tries to project his senses through the room. Tries to guess from the shadows that flit through the starving cocoons, from the currents of air that lick at him from somewhere close by, where the spider that spun those pods would wait for its prey. *What the hell do I do now?* Rabbit remembers the latest video by the Blood Dolls. Phlegm wandering through an underground cavern, fighting off monsters from old Japanese horror flicks with a microphone stand. Rabbit holds the pipe firmly in both hands.

"Your death will not be in vain!" he cries, and strikes out at the cocoons hanging like sheets from a clothesline.

"Hey, Rabbit! What the hell are you doing?"

Hippypunk. Or a good imitation thereof... Rabbit creeps forward, the sheets surrounding him. Disorienting him. As if they did not want to let him pass. Rabbit fights on stealthily, but still finds himself back at the stone foundation.

"What was that noise?" The voice that could be Hippypunk's calls out. "Hey, don't mess up the sheets, huh? She just washed 'em. Rabbit?"

Rabbit can tell the voice comes from somewhere near the centre of the room, where candles burn the brightest.

"Keep talking," he says. "I'll follow your voice in."

"Come on over to the winning side," says Hippypunk.

"Just keep talking. I'll find you yet..."

"I can't believe it's taking him this long," he says in a lower voice, as if talking to someone else.

Rabbit pushes through a tunnel of damp sheets. Smack into the side of a squat water heater.

"You're cold, Rabbit."

Rabbit stops to consider. Somewhere in that labyrinth of sheets is Hippypunk. Or, more likely, a giant spider that's ripped out Hippypunk's voice box and is breathing through it now, spider lips pursed, drawing Rabbit ever deeper into its web. Rabbit finds himself back at the window, then starts to edge his way around the room, following the unfinished stone and mortar of the foundation from the inside. He stumbles over aluminum vats and cases of tools and low blocks of wood anchored to the floor, covered with what looks like bloodstains in the dim globe of light. The sides of the foundation stretch on and

on, Rabbit passing the same patchy mould, the same windows set too high up to see out of. *The house just ain't this big*, he thinks to himself.

"Cold," says Hippy-punk.

"Getting warmer."

Rabbit freezes. Shadows leer out from the rafters and cobwebbed corners. The face of a man who'd piss ...

"Where are you? Can you see me?"

"I'm everywhere, Rabbit. I can see the hairs on the back of your neck. They're stiff, aren't they?"

Rabbit runs his hand along them. Tries to mat them down with spit.

"C'mon, I'm kidding. It's just a bloody laundry room."

Rabbit pushes through a row of clingy wet laundry, the same as all the other rows, to the middle of the room. Past a sheet printed with hearts and stars and moons and clovers, he stands in a sudden clearing of light, stands panting on an apron of concrete around a bed. The spice of cooking meat and candle wax heavy in the air. Hippy-punk and a girl afloat in a sea of pillows, their heads bobbing gently in the swell.

"Hey buddy. What took ya?"

"Hi. I'm Gun Street Girl. Welcome to my room. Why are you holding that pipe over your head?"

Rabbit looks at Hippy-punk in the flesh. The girl equally real next to him.

"Uhm. Hi," he says, letting the pipe fall.

"Have a seat," the girl says.

Rabbit edges onto the bed.

"You live down here?"

"When I can. When Dad doesn't make me sleep upstairs."

Rabbit looks at the hanging sheets.

"What is all this?"

"My Mama takes in laundry."

"Your Mama?" says Rabbit, looking quickly around the room. The weight of the house upstairs, the dark windows, pushes on its foundation. The basement ceiling shudders down around their heads. "Is she home?"

"Upstairs."

Hippypunk grabs Rabbit's arm.

"Relax, man. She's cool. And Old Man's away. The mice will play ..." Hippypunk lunges at Girl across the pillows. The bed seems to rise and shake itself, moving her out of his trajectory.

"Would you boys like something to eat?" says Girl.

Rabbit and Hippypunk sit astride the bed, warm bottles of beer clenched between their thighs. They wolf down stew, fingerfuls of gravy, from bowls held close to their mouths. Rabbit sneaks a peak at Gun Street Girl over the rim of his bowl. At her loose sack of a dress open at the neck. Long hair pulled back in a ponytail. The shift of her breasts as the whole waterbed rocks with the motion of their eating.

Rabbit watches Hippypunk and Girl curl up together in a nest of pillows. Watches them eat from the same bowl. Lick the gravy off each others' fingers.

"I have to piss," says Rabbit. "And I don't know where to go."

"Take your time," says Hippypunk.

Gee, thanks.

Rabbit stumbles out into the sheets again. The food and warm beer in his belly, the flickering candlelight in the rich, humid basement air, closes like a fog around him. Rabbit moves heavy and slow around the room, tripping over slaughtering blocks and cases of tools. In one blind corner a skinned rabbit hangs from a hook. He finds a toilet in a closet built out from the foundation. Pisses away the last fine wine of adrenaline of the day. Stumbles his way back to bed, too tired to care about the two shadows thrown up on sheets hanging like screens around the bed. The rhythmic slapping of the waterbed as he crawls under the blankets. The rocking lulls Rabbit to sleep, afloat on the foot of the bed in the centre of the room in the basement of this house on the outskirts of town. He dreams of brown gravy that fills his eyes and ears and nose and throat. All three of them sleep, finally, for hours and hours and hours. Late in the morning Gun Street Girl is gone.

Rabbit pokes his head out from the pillows, shards of mussed hair jabbing at his eyes. A column of sunlight from the small window pushes shadows back into corners. The pregnant cocoons of sheets from the night before hang limp now, rows and rows of industrial linen. A fine mist has settled over the bed, leaving Rabbit chilled in his clothes. Hippy-punk's head pops up from the pillows. Looks around bright-eyed and buoyant.

"I dreamed I was a pair of ragged claws ..."

"No you didn't," says Rabbit. "You read that for school."

"So what did you dream about?"

"I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry."

Rabbit digs through layers of discarded clothing on the floor. Uncovers a crock pot stewing away, spicy bubbles breaking in the gravy. Rabbit and Hippypunk squat on the pillows, eating out of last night's bowls.

"This stuff's amazing," says Rabbit.

"Yeah. Pretty good for three hundred year old stew."

Rabbit stops eating.

"What do you mean by that?"

"This stew's been cooking in that pot for ten generations now."

"Whaddya mean, 'ten generations'? It couldn't. They didn't have electricity then."

"No. But, like, three hundred years ago this was a trading post or a fort or something. Trappers would come in from the hinterland, from the interior, and trade their furs for goods here. This house is built on the foundation of that old post, where Girl's ancestors settled ..."

"Three hundred years ago?"

"Yup. Anyway, the women would keep a fire under this huge iron cauldron all the time, so that the traders and natives, the scouts and soldiers, could have something hot to eat whenever they blew in from the bush."

"So didn't they eat it all?"

"They'd try. But there was so much game around then, and the women worked so hard, they never once ran out. It became a point of pride. A family tradition that there would be a hot meal for anyone who wanted it or needed it. Same when the railroad came through, surveying and laying down track. They switched to a smaller pot when the post closed and the family switched to farming. Still, though, they kept the stew cooking all the

time. Just stir it good to keep the gunk from sticking to the sides. And then, when the land was all used up, they got this here electric pot. The same stew for ten generations."

"That's far out, man."

"Know what it means, dontcha? That somewhere in that bowl your eating out of is atoms of stew, like, three hundred years old."

Rabbit looks into his bowl. *Do atoms go bad?* Shrugs. Keeps eating.

"Gun Street Girl told me that."

"Yeah? Where do you know her from, anyway?"

"She was in class last year. Man, school really was a blur for you, wasn't it?"

"You know her well."

"We used to skip out to the sheds together during study breaks."

"... hey, what are you two talking about? My ears are burning."

Gun Street Girl thrusts her way through to the bed, baskets of soiled sheets in her arms.

"Didn't hear you come in", says Hippy-punk.

"Okay, boys. Time to earn your keep."

The room transforms as Rabbit and Hippy-punk strip the sheets from the rafters. From a lair of cocoons to an unfinished basement, bare stone foundation. Chests of tools and large squat vats. The toilet closet not really much more than ten feet away from the bed. Sheets down, Rabbit realizes that they are in a basement of a row house in the suburbs of Olde Town.

They roll the vats out from the wall and fill them with buckets of hot water. Rabbit and Hippy-punk and Gun Street Girl work stripped to the waist in the steam. Toss wet

clumps of linen at each other, plastering arms and chests and faces. Rabbit makes a note as the sheets go up. Paths to the toilet. To the small window he can scramble out of if that skinned rabbit means anything more than fresh meat for the pot. The steam and the bleach from the vats turns Rabbit's skin a bright pink. By the end of the day all three have wrapped sheets like togas around themselves, sodden clothing in a pile on the bed.

"Who's the boy looking down your top, dear?"

Rabbit looks up from his vat. A large woman in a shapeless dress stands at the foot of the stairs. Holding a gun. But she smiles.

"I wasn't..."

"Mama, this is Hippypunk's friend. Rabbit."

"Hello, Friend Rabbit. I see my daughter's got you working hard already. How would one of you like a change of pace? Hippypunk?"

Hippypunk drops his washing. Takes the pellet rifle from Mama's hands.

"Get us something for the pot. And pick some carrots and potatoes from the patch out back. There should still be something left under the frost."

"Yes, ma'am."

Hippypunk mounts the stairs and is gone. Rabbit bends to his work again, driving his arms deep into the soapy water while Mama takes the rabbit down off its hook. Quarters and dices it into cubes. Drops the meat into the pot and climbs the stairs.

"You two play nice," she says, and is gone.

The last of the sheets washed, Rabbit and Gun Street Girl drop onto the bed. The bleach in the water feels now like bugs crawling under his pink and swollen skin.

"You do this every day?" he says, flakes of dead skin coming off under his nails.

"You need to develop callouses if you're going to work with your hands."

"Wait a minute! I DID work with my hands..."

Girl wanders off into the sheets, leaving Rabbit itching and scratching on the bed.

She comes back, a green stalk in her hands.

"This's aloe. Takes some of the sting out."

Girl takes Rabbit's thin young arm in her hand. Breaks an end off the aloe, and runs it along his skin.

"I've seen you in class," she says, not looking up.

"Yeah, I noticed you too," he lies.

"That day you smashed the window with a fire extinguisher? What was that all about?"

"Those windows don't open. And it was a beautiful day," is all he can think of to say.

"Are you coming back this year?"

"No. I don't think so. I've had enough of that, y'know?"

"So what are you gonna do now?"

"Dunno. I'm open to suggestions. I had a job for awhile working down at the marina, but that didn't work out..."

"Yeah? Why not?"

"Aah. I dunno. Working on all those boats. That belonged to other people... made me jealous or something. I kept dreaming about owning a boat myself. But I wasn't even making enough to feed myself. Used to steal food from the kitchen."

"No one should ever go hungry," says Gun Street Girl. "There's always food enough to go around."

"Yeah, well. Tell that to my boss."

"So what are you gonna do now?"

"It's a big world out there. Figure there's gotta be enough space in it somewhere for a guy like me."

Rabbit shifts on the bed. Drapes his toga more loosely in his lap.

"I didn't know that Hippypunk had a girlfriend."

"He doesn't. I'm not. I don't belong to anyone, y'know. I do what I please. The way you knocked out the window. Some people just ain't cut out for that kind of a life."

"Yeah, well. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"Uh huh. Where did you pick up that piece of insight?"

"Something I saw on tv."

Girl uses the aloe branch like a pencil, like a finger numbing the itch up Rabbit's arms.

"Everybody needs to find their own space in this life," says Girl. "It's just that most people don't know it."

Rabbit looks around the room. You seem to have something for yourself here."

"Yeah. Mama and I do alright. We could almost be self-sufficient, what with hunting and the vegetable patch out back."

"So what's the problem?"

"Mama's past caught up with her. She used to think she was somebody she wasn't. Got herself a man. My Papa. They lived out in the world. In the town. Spent a lot of

money, because that's what productive members of the world do, right? But they didn't figure out until too late that they were living beyond their means. Now they're broke, and Papa blames me and Mama for it. Says raising a kid is just too expensive. Can't afford it. That's why the sheets. Working off our debt."

What does Old Man... what does your Papa do?"

"Oh, he's the sheriff."

"... hi, honey. I'm home. Boy, what a day!. My feet are killing me."

Hippypunk stands at the foot of the bed, pellet gun cradled in his arms. A couple of squirrels hang from cord over his shoulder.

"Man, we gotta get outta here!" says Rabbit. "Her dad's the sheriff."

"Yeah, I know. Relax. This'll be the last place they look for us."

"You're okay here for awhile," says Gun Street Girl. "Papa's got a girlfriend in town. Says he won't let me and Mama stop him from building a new life."

"Besides," says Hippypunk, "where else you wanna go?"

Rabbit and Hippypunk stay with Gun Street Girl in the room on the outskirts of town.

Hippypunk and Rabbit take turns hunting along the railroad tracks, out into the swamp, looking for the animals brought out of their holes by false-spring sunshine. Gun Street Girl and one or the other of the boys work the vats, rubbing and scrubbing bed linen from the prison and the army fort, while Mama collects the money to pay off some debt from her past.

"You boys are welcome here," says Mama. "And I thank you."

The long days over the steaming vats ruin Rabbit's skin. The room that seemed so large at first closes in on him. At night he paces out the space between the walls while Hippypunk and Gun Street Girl sleep. But the aloe that Girl lathers over his arms takes some of the sting out. And the days afield with the gun, across fields and swamp water, wandering free, make him content. He feels again the freedom he did the day he shimmied down the tree outside the classroom window. The pot never runs empty, and all three of them grow strong and healthy.

"Wouldn't it be great," says Rabbit, "if we could live out the rest of our lives like this?"

"Yes," says Hippypunk. "This is swell. I've been thinking. Maybe we should start brewing our own beer while we're at it. Put aside one of the vats. Make enough for ourselves, and some to sell besides. I bet we could pay off that debt in no time. Then we wouldn't have to wash sheets anymore. We could just hunt for food and make our own clothes and live here."

Rabbit sees a future of wandering the fields with Hippypunk and Gun Street Girl stretching out before him.

"My Papa..."

"Fuck your Papa!" Hippypunk yells, grabbing the gun. "Who the fuck is he, keeping you and your mama against your will. You got as much right to a life as he does. More so, 'cause you ain't been holding anybody else down. He's got that whole town locked down so tight..."

"Don't mess with my Papa," says Girl. "He's a killer."

"So am I! I'll shoot that fucker between the eyes."

"With a pellet gun? He eats those things for breakfast. And he's got a gun. A real gun. And he's the sheriff..."

Hippypunk sits down.

"Yeah. But ain't it nice to think that the problem can be solved like that?"

"Why don't you split?" says Rabbit to Girl. "Just leave while he's not here. We could all go."

"I can't leave Mama like that. She's been good to me."

"So that's it, then," says Hippypunk. "Over before we start."

"Look," says Girl, taking the gun from Hippypunk's hands, "relax. Let's enjoy what we've got while we've got it."

Rabbit walks under a low anvil sky of winter, the wind biting at his eyes. The gun hangs useless at his side. There are no more animals left to shoot, the cold clouds sending every living thing back into its burrow. He walks all day, plates of ice over the swampy ground breaking under foot. Cutting at his ankles. Rabbit walks back to the house. Tears in his eyes. Digs up the last few vegetables from the patch, and crawls through the window.

They sit around the pot that night, all four of them, scraping gravy from the side.

"Well, it was good while it lasted," says Gun Street Girl.

"You boys did a fine job," says Mama. "And we thank you. The debt's nearly paid now..."

"What are you all sounding so down for?" says Hippypunk. "We're only just beginning! I told Girl about brewing beer already. I got plenty of ideas like that. This ain't

the end. It's just the beginning. Like I told Rabbit, all we need is a chance to get a good start."

"We'll see," says Mama. "You kids have a good sleep. We'll talk again in the morning."

That night Rabbit dreams of big plans. Of growing crops out along the waste between the railroad tracks and the swamp. Brewing beer by the bucketful. Of living a life here in this house with Hippypunk and Gun Street Girl..

except for the hand over Rabbit's mouth. He wakes gagging. Finds Girl leaning over him. Hippypunk already dressed by the side of the bed. A ripple of tension flows through the ceiling over their head.

"It's time to go boys."

"What's the matter?" says the still groggy Rabbit.

"Shoot the sonofabitch," mutters Hippypunk.

"Fe, fie, fo, fum. I smell the blood of a couple of bums. Messing with MY daughter!"

Rabbit's eyes fly open.

"It's been great," says Girl. "Leave. Now."

Rabbit and Hippypunk bolt for the window, helping each other scramble up the dusty rocks of the foundation. Rabbit squeezes past a police cruiser parked in the driveway, front grill smashed in. A young buck of a deer is tied across the hood. Rabbit can smell the highway and woods, the late-night jack-lighting and the animal fear, coming off the engine block.

"I'm outta here," says Rabbit.

"Okay. Call me tomorrow," says Hippypunk.

Rabbit runs out into the street. Picks up the trail of broken beer bottles that glint in the setting sun. Jogs back through the warren of streets in the old part of town, arriving under a quarter moon at the corner where the Chinese restaurant and his room used to be. Where a fire-blackened shell is all that's left of his home. Of the roof looking down over the main street, a sky alley perching spot for fair weather sitting and drinking. Rabbit stands on the sidewalk outside the husk of the restaurant at the corner of the main street of this dying little town, nowhere left to go.

Rabbit and Hippyunk Reach Lands' End

For lack of anything better to do, Rabbit and Hippyunk pace out the circumference of the islet that will be their campsite. The soil is wet and organic, a slow accumulation of rotting vegetation mixed with the sand of an ancient seabed, washed up around the roots of stunted trees and bushes by a subaquatic current in this delta lowland where the lake as big as a sea empties into the river that flows to the ocean.

The islet isn't much to look at. Ferns and poison sumac lie like a green membrane over a couple hundred foot cap of soil. The trees along the railroad spur they'd followed out of town had turned a blood red already. Out here in the swamp, though, the leaves would stay green right up until they fell dead in the nutrient-rich water. In places the tree roots and animal skeletons, the broken paddles and pirate chests that are the foundation of the islet, are so loose that a foot sinks down almost to the thigh, thick organic mud cementing jeans to legs. Rabbit pulls himself out of one such sinkhole, a giant bubble of gas oozing out as his big red floppy running shoe pulls free.

"THIS is what you ran away for?" says Rabbit.

"Maybe this, maybe not," says Hippyunk, looking out over the dark pane of unmoving surface water around them. "Don't know yet, do I? That's the beauty of it."

Rabbit sucks on a cigarette. Looks at Hippyunk's reflection in the water. Sees him standing there, the slight distortion twisting his features just a bit. Just enough to make

him look like a new self. One who has lived out in the world and come back home to tell about it.

"I can't believe you're going," Rabbit says finally.

"Yeah, well. Now or never. That town just gets under your skin. Before you know it, you're married at, like, twenty, and by twenty-five your life is over. School. Work. House. Job. Women. Think about it."

Rabbit thinks about it.

"Y'know, that really doesn't sound so bad," he says, remembering cold lonely nights under the blanket in his room above a Chinese restaurant. "A reason to get up every morning. Someone to go to bed with every night."

"Yeah, maybe so. And maybe some day I'll come back here for just that. But out there," Hippy-punk says, pointing to the dull grey waves out in the middle of the river, "don't you ever wonder where that out there goes when it ain't here?"

"Whaddya gonna do about One Sister?"

"She's leaving, too. Soon. But not with me. She's got her own thing. This is our last time stepping out together. What you should be asking yourself, man, is what YOU want. And whether you're gonna get it staying here. In town, I mean."

Rabbit stares at the hard surface glass of the swamp. Water lilies and mountains of clouds hang suspended in the near-frozen water. A chaos of swamp grass just below the surface, forming channels that close in on themselves. That loop back into the centre of the mass, so that no matter how hard a fish might swim, once he got in there he'd never get back out. Wouldn't even know he'd been caught. Only from up here, standing on the shore, could you see that the choices through the swamp weren't really choices at all once

you were inside it. Any one of a hundred pike alleys through the weeds would always lead deeper into the middle of the pool. Anything could be down there beneath that oily skin of water. Rabbit shivers from the cold.

"Watcha guys up to?" One Sister and T'Other Sister stand by the packs and walking sticks on a clear patch of packed earth at the centre of the islet, watching Rabbit and Hippypunk muck along the shore.

"Hunting up some dinner for you girls!" yells young Hippypunk.

"Well, don't be looking for dinner up here! We're gonna change our things."

"That's my favourite dish," yells Rabbit.

"Y'know," says Hippypunk to Rabbit, "that's not such a bad idea."

They'd leaped hummocks of ice-plated roots and dead marsh grass out from the mainland into the swamp, balancing packs and walking sticks but sometimes plunging to their waists in the rotted mass of vegetation that lay like a carpet under the still water. Rabbit fought back each time he plunged, striking his stick into the sucking bottom and throwing himself back onto a hummock as his legs sunk into what felt very much like the inside of some living thing that wanted to swallow him whole. By the time they reached the farthest spot of land in the delta, their islet before the slow sweep of water out to the river, the whole gang of them were soaked.

Rabbit and Hippypunk sit across the fire from the Two Sisters, up on the driest spot of ground on the islet. The girls had built a fire in a circle of smoke-blackened stones they'd found next to an old campsite, cracked branches still piled neatly in the lee of some bushes. Their sodden clothing drips from low branches over the fire. Rabbit shivers, perching on a log in his boxer shorts as close to the flames as he dare. He watches the fire

tangle with the tatoos, the lions and tigers and bears, on Hippypunk's upper body. The Two Sisters glow in the blessed heat, their dimpled skin and white underwear shining like beacons in the darkening night. Hippypunk turns to the shivering Rabbit.

"You, my friend, need more body fat. You're thin as a snake."

"I'm not thin," says Rabbit through chattering teeth. "I'm wiry. Got plenty of muscles."

"Yeah, and they're turning blue, too."

T'Other Sister steps up and circles around the fire towards Rabbit, a long blanket dragging like a cape across the ground.

"Poor baby. You're frozen."

Rabbit leaps at her warmth, wrapping himself in her arms and the proffered blanket. He rests his face by her throat, her close heat bringing a flush to his cheeks.

"Tell me again," says Rabbit, his blue lips mumbling against T'Other Sister's soft flesh, "tell me again why we're here?"

"To put that," says Hippypunk, pointing to the west, and the floodlit cloud of magnesium light creeping up from town, "behind us. We are here to get while the getting's good."

"I don't get it," says T'Other Sister to Hippypunk. "What's wrong with our town? We all grew up there. Our future's there. Get yourself a job on one of the agribusiness spreads or the prison. Find yourself a good woman," she says, looking at Hippypunk through one eye and her sister through the other, "and just live your life."

"That's just one kind of life. I wanna live as many as I can before I lose my place on this earth. Before I have to make room for the next guy. And I don't wanna spend the rest of my time bored. fucked up. sick of this shit."

"What makes you so special now all of a sudden? You're gonna give up everything a right-thinking person could want. Ain't that right, love," she says, giving Rabbit a squeeze under the blanket.

"He isn't gonna stay," says One Sister. "Hell, he's already left. So lighten up. We'll hang out here, and when the food runs out we'll go back home. For now. And Hippypunk and Rabbit'll do whatever it is they're gonna do."

"Whaddya mean, 'they'? Rabbit's coming back with us, right?"

"He's his own man," says Hippypunk, "he can go back home or go to the city. He can go to the moon if he wants."

"You're selfish, Hippypunk. You don't care who you hurt, just so you get your way about things."

One Sister slides off her rock towards Hippypunk. Soon there's just two nylon shells aglow around the fire, as the sun sets low in the west and the dim lights of a freighter navigate down the river towards the open sea. Hippypunk and One Sister's shell starts to tickle and tease, starts to giggle and rock around on its log.

"Hey," says Rabbit, "what's going on? What are you two up to in there?"

"Nothing," says One Sister.

"Did we bring any condoms?" asks Hippypunk, a few minutes later.

"Never you mind about that," says T'Other Sister to Rabbit, "we've got an understanding, you and I, right love? Next year I'm old enough to marry, and then you'll

go to work and we'll get a house on the edge of town. You can wait that long for me, right?"

Rabbit can smell the scented talc between T'Other Sister's breasts.

"I'm getting... anxious here, babe."

T'Other Sister pats Rabbit's hand away from her bare leg under the blanket.

"Next year we marry," she says, "and then my body is yours as much as it is mine.

But not until then."

"I don't get it," says Rabbit. "We used to mess around like..., like..., well, like the unsupervised teenagers that we are. But ever since this understanding, there's been NO business at all."

"I know it's hard on you," says T'Other Sister. "Boys have needs. Here's something to keep you going," she says, her hand disappearing into Rabbit's boxer shorts. "Don't mess the blanket," she pants in his ear.

Rabbit can hear the swish of the other nylon shell as it rocks on the log. A few minutes later Hippypunk crawls out of the tangle of sleeping bag to take a leak in the bushes. One Sister's face glows from the sleeping bag cocoon.

"Hello," she says to Rabbit's glass-eyed stare.

Rabbit storms off into the bushes, branches cutting at his thawing skin.

Rabbit and Hippypunk stand down on a plate of hardpacked earth by the shore.

Mist rises off the dark water into the frigid air, coating the leaves on the islet in silver.

Rabbit shivers in his boxer shorts as he and Hippypunk watch the magnesium glow of the town brighten in the east.

"How is it with T'Other?" says Hippypunk, lighting another cigarette and handing one to Rabbit.

"Not good," says Rabbit. "She's still on about that marriage stuff."

"Whose idea was that?"

"I don't know! Remember that night we got drunk in the Sisters' basement?"

T'Other and I were messing around on the floor like usual, and we just kept drinking more of that homebrew. I puked in the morning, and T'Other reminded me of 'what I'd promised.'"

"So it was your idea?"

"That's what she says. I don't remember it, personally. Doesn't sound like something I'd say, but who knows? I was really drunk."

"And since then...?"

"Since then nothing! Hell, she's got it all planned out. I'll get a job during the day and finish my highschool through correspondence courses. So I can get ahead at work. And we'll get one of those little bungalows near the end of town and I'll buy beat up old cars and fix them up, until finally we can afford a new Ford or something. And she'll stay home, give me good loving and spit out babies to her hearts' content."

"So what's the problem?"

"I don't know how to drive! I didn't drop out of school just to work like a dog to get back into it. I've been there. I've done the working class hero thing. Didn't I waste the whole summer down at the marina, fixing up other people's boats? Know what I got from all that? That room above a Chinese restaurant, and a handful of fibreglass slivers."

"I didn't think you were into her, anyway."

"No. But see, it's not just that. All those boats I was working on. Most of 'em were owned by bored townsfolk who'd come down on a Sunday and fuck around in the harbour. But every once in awhile some sailor'd come in, all sunburned and wobbly-legged. And he'd sit at the bar and talk about running the coast all the way up from Patagonia or something. And I'd work on their boats, and I could smell the saltwater in the bilges and I'd scrub the barnacles off the hull. And a few days later they'd be gone, and I'd be stuck with all those boring shopkeepers and civil servants at the marina again."

"So what's your point, Rabbit?"

"I wanna be the guy on the boat! I'm sick of scrubbing other people's hulls."

"What about T'Other?"

"She's alright. But I don't wanna spend the rest of my life with the first one, know what I mean? And ever since that night she won't put out. Just helps me out now and again."

"You gotta understand, Rabbit. There's the boys you have fun with, and the ones you marry. You crossed that line. T'Other wants to settle down, and God help her, you're the best bet she's got at the moment."

"And if I don't wanna marry?"

"Then stop messing with her. Let her do her own thing. Just like you gotta do your thing."

Rabbit looks at Hippypunk.

"How'd you learn so much about women?"

"One Sister told me."

What's she got, Rabbit thinks, that I need? Rabbit remembers the weekend her parents were away and they played house. T'Other Sister had pattered around the kitchen wearing nothing but an apron while Rabbit sat in an overstuffed armchair and played video games on the big-screen tv. They skinnydipped in the backyard pool at night and had sex on a whim in every room in the house. They slept in her parents' Queen-sized bed. But Rabbit couldn't sleep, not there, like that, with only the ticking of a clock from somewhere down the hall. The room was too dark, no streetlights shining around the blinds. The regular ticking of the clock worked its way into Rabbit's heart, steady and methodical, until Rabbit became convinced that if the clock ran down, if T'Other Sister's father had forgot to wind it before they left the house, then Rabbit's heart would stop, too. And all that regularity, all that softness, that was all only at the end of the arc of her parents' life. They had both worked all their lives to buy such padding, and now they were old and always fighting, T'Other Sister said, because for the first time in their married lives they had to actually spend time together. And realized that they hated each other's guts. The father resented all the missed opportunities in his life, all the skirt he'd never chased and the steady drain on his pay packet. Now he spent all his time working around the house, poking around in her herb garden and messing with her children now that he was home when they came in from school. *It doesn't have to be like that necessarily,* Rabbit figured, *but sure as hell it happens a lot.*

Hippypunk looks at Rabbit's thin, shivering frame in the night.

"Hey, Rabbit. You alright? You're slurring your words."

"I am so fucking cold."

"I'll show you a trick."

Hippypunk starts to lather himself head to foot in mud.

"That's a trick?"

"Something my Old Man taught me."

"Don't fuck with me, man. I'm dying out here."

"I'm not fucking with ya. It works. I think."

Rabbit breathes in sharply and starts slapping handfuls on himself. His head spins, treetops and marsh grass and the cadavers of clouds wheeling around him. Rabbit and Hippypunk stagger back up to the campsite.

"Bogeymen!" shrieks One Sister as the boys enter the orange circle of firelight.

"Come to eat you up," says Hippypunk.

Rabbit and Hippypunk and the Two Sisters lie around the fire ring, blessed heat scorching their clothing that drips still from low branches. Steam rises into the gangs' faces where the water hits burning branches. Rabbit can feel the mucous clearing in his chest. His frozen brain starting to sort itself out again. Hippypunk scrapes absent-mindedly at a can of baked beans and hotdog bits. Rabbit drinks coffee straight out of his can, grease and brown gravy mixing with bitter crystals.

"She feeds you, doesn't she," says One Sister to Rabbit, watching his face closely.

"It's alright."

"I can really cook, too," T'Other Sister says. "Not just weiners and beans. When we go back..."

"Who wants to go back?" says Rabbit. "This place ain't much, but it's ours. No rent, no nosy neighbours, no cops to kick the door down when we bang our under-age girlfriends. No worries at all out here."

"What are you talking about?" says T'Other Sister.

"Go back to town if you don't like it here. You two are in enough trouble with your folks, and last time your dad said they'd call the cops if he caught us with you again. So now we'll get busted. No-one invited you two out here."

"Lighten up, Rabbit," says Hippypunk, "that isn't true."

"Don't be such an asshole," says One Sister. "We're all friends here."

"Friends, yes," says Rabbit, drunk on the warm food in his belly and his armour of mud. "Live hearty, mates, for tomorrow we may die."

"Why are you talking like this?" says T'Other Sister.

"He's got hypothermia," says Hippypunk. "Don't listen to him."

They fall silent, the world spinning around on its axis and taking them with it. One Sister looks around their camp, at the bushes pulled down low into a shelter and the pile of cordwood and the scratchings in the soil of a house on fire. Of a fish.

"Someone else camped here," she says.

"That's okay," says Hippypunk, "probably some old drifter found his way here, being run out of town or something."

"Maybe it's an outlaw," says T'Other Sister, her head down and giggling nervously, "who's gonna come back here tonight and murder us in our sleep." She turns to Rabbit.

"We better share this blanket tonight. Just in case."

"That's a good idea," says One Sister. "Better than a wet dream, eh Rabbit?"

Rabbit smokes a cigarette. He can feel raw skin chafe against his boxer shorts. He slaps himself down and looks coldly into the bushes.

"I think we'll be okay," he says. "No reason to think he'll come back here."

"Oh," says T'Other Sister.

They fall silent again. Orange firelight flows into the runes scratched in the earth. If the gang had been high enough, on a spaceship or a meteor, say, circling their planet, they would have seen lay lines of such runes, all glowing orange or red or blue, covering the dark side of the Earth. Bent figures, solitary or in groups of three, carving with sticks and animal bones and jewel-handled daggers on the light side. The planet was covered with such markings, each connected to the other.

"This really isn't so bad, y'know," says Hippy-punk. "we could last out here for a week with what we've got. Tomorrow Rabbit and I'll lay out some lines for fish."

Hippy-punk sits by the fire, rolling cigarettes for each of them out of his father's army surplus tobacco pouch.

"That's okay," says One Sister. "I think we're gonna go home and face the folks tomorrow."

"Ma won't mind," says T'Other Sister.

"Yeah, but Dad'll kill us."

"Fuck him. Fuck men. They're all little boys, anyway. And fuck you, Rabbit," she says, "go find yourself a snake or 'gator or whatever the hell lives out here in your big, wide world tonight."

Rabbit stood down by the water's edge, where the drag marks of some great, low-bellied beast had tracked into the water and the drowned swamp grass. It was better out here, at least, thought Rabbit, than back in the ruts worn deep in the cobblestones and industrial roads of town, where he'd paced out the first seventeen years of his life on earth. Out in the delta he could breath a little, and the roof of his back room above a laundromat

didn't press down on his head. He might not get anything better, no job no woman no life, than he could have here now. But the walls were closing in. Rabbit felt the same release he'd felt the day he stood up in class and, standing on the window-sill, bounced a fire extinguisher against the plexiglass window until the frame had finally given and he could shinny down the schoolyard tree. Enough was enough. He'd tried things out the way it was expected of him. He'd try to do things on his own now. The Sisters would stay behind and he and Hippypunk would head out into the world to see what there was to see.

Is that a dime? Rabbit picks the shiny bit out of the dirt: a triangular piece of bone or rock flake, serrated edges running up to a razor-sharp point. A tooth or a meticulously worked arrowhead. Rabbit scratches at the millions of parasitic itches along his skin, under the plaster of mud that falls off like scales. The hummocks that stretched out from shore to this last bit of land had disappeared with the sun. Rabbit felt cut off, adrift in a watery world.

The wolf clouds chased their prey west, towards the lake, leaving the sky sharp and brilliant over the swamp. There was the Big Dipper. Follow the trajectory of the stars in the handle... to what? Was that the North Star there? A floating island of industrial effluent steams slowly by out in the swamp, propelled randomly by the energy release of its decay. Will-o-wisps or a brace of lanterns move on the irradiated, blue-glowing raft of garbage. Further out, near open water, the lights of a tramp steamer work their way through the river's channel. Rabbit scratches where he'd scratched a rune into the belly of his exoskeleton. He was so cold standing away from the fire that his balls had climbed back inside his body, all thoughts of T'Other Sister's warmth lost. Still though, out here, on this islet, a bottlecap tossed into the current, he was master of his own fate.

What the hell, he thinks aloud, what the hell do I do now?

Rabbit and Baby Judy: a love story

Rabbit and Hippypunk fishtail around the wide boulevard, between the swollen, walled gardens of Shiny Happy Place mansions. The car bucks and bolts between stop signs, Rabbit's feet barely reaching the pedals in the old boat of a car. He accelerates too fast again, and the G-force snaps his neck back over the seat, leaving him staring at shredded, asbestos-filled padding over his head as the car pulls into a speeding arc towards the polite drainage ditch that is only ever filled with the cleanest solvent run-off from suspect lawns. From a distance, from a high tower, say, or the back of some winged mount, the car seems to loop out of control, as Rabbit presses the brake pedal with the tippy-toes of a red sneaker. Wheels lock and the car slides to a bald-tire stop on the gravel shoulder by one mansion's gate: two lions rampant on stuccoed pedestals. Smooth tires crunch rock chips of fossilized coral and trilobytes and mammoth teeth and indian arrowheads.

"Your driving's improved," says Hippypunk.

Rabbit starts to breathe again.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Hippypunk steps out of the broken-sprunged skeleton of the front passenger seat. Rabbit looks over the high adobe privacy wall of the mansion, topped with broken, brightly coloured shards of glass embedded pointy-side-up, through the bare foliage of a single uniform row of whispering, weeping willows, to the brightly-lit upper windows of the mansion itself, and a young woman in a dressing gown brushing out her long hair, framed in the window, the blackness of the night the silvered back to Rabbit's one-way

mirror looking in. A blinking red light from a security camera sweeps the wrought-iron gate. The long snout of the lens pauses to sniff around Hippy-punk, pissing against the pedestal of one lion rampant. Rabbit watches the camera watching Hippy-punk.

"Hey, man."

Hippy-punk soaks the porous concrete with brilliant yellow piss.

"Hey, man. We better get outta here."

Hippy-punk looks up from his crotch.

"What's the matter?"

"There's a camera on that gate."

Hippy-punk looks around.

"I can't hit it from here."

"C'mon, man. Let's go." Rabbit grinds the transmission into reverse, backing the car up along the shoulder until the front passenger door pats Hippy-punk on his ass.

Hippy-punk climbs back into the car.

"Around once more," he says. You're getting the hang of this."

Rabbit shifts the car into first gear too quickly, and the spinning wheels on the gravel shoulder send a rooster-tail of antideluvian sea relics spraying over the privacy wall and fanning out on the lawn. From somewhere far behind him, Rabbit thinks that maybe what he hears is laughter. Rabbit drives, and the boat of a car wallows down the street.

Rabbit looks at the mansion gate receding in the rear-view mirror.

"What if those people call security on us?"

"So what? They can't arrest us. They're not real cops."

"But if they report the plates ..."

Hippypunk lights another cigarette.

"These aren't my plates."

Rabbit starts to relax, his hands loosening on the steering wheel. The running black current of asphalt pulls them along between gravel shores and the deep-set islands of the mansions.

"Hey," said Rabbit. "How come there're no sidewalks here?"

"The rich don't walk."

"Oh."

They drive on. Rabbit stops and starts at each traffic sign. The mansions pass by over the top of the dashbaord.

"Man. These're some houses," he says. "I bet they all have, like, huge swimming pools and private theaters and stuff."

Hippypunk looks at the mansions. Workers had levelled the earth and built the fences and walls stone by stone. Thinks about the poured concrete and iron girders he works with in the City. The trucks that prowl the streets at dawn to ferry day crews out to scattered sites.

"How do you think they keep this street so clean?" Rabbit says. "We're not THAT far from the city."

Hippypunk looks down the street of mansions.

"I dunno. Forced a deal with some fairies, maybe."

"What?"

"Sure. Settlers came out here what, a few hundred years ago, when all of this was, like, prime forest. Maybe they set traps in the dancing glades, or threatened to burn down

all the trees or something. Anyway, the fairies would protect this place for the settlers, and the settlers would leave those tree-homes, those ancient willows over there (Rabbit looks over there), alone."

"So that's what happened."

"Something like that shit happens all the time, you know," said Hippypunk.

"Listen. Haven't you noticed? Not a sound from the highway since we entered this place. Gotta be SOME reason for it. Why not fairies?"

Rabbit drives on, looking for wee folk in dancing glades.

"That's the difference between us and the rich, man," Hippypunk continues.

"They've got fairies backing them, and fairies can do anything they want. The normal rules of physics don't apply."

"Ever seen a fairy?"

"Well, there's that girl at the donut shop ... but, she can't be a fairy. Fairies only hang out in really beautiful places, or really ugly places, but that donut shop just kinda *is*, y'know?"

"Yeah. You might have it there."

"Maybe we *should* swing by that donut shop ..."

"Why?"

"That girl ..."

A vision of that girl floods into Rabbit's head. Hair pulled back in a bun. Her young figure teasingly hidden inside a brown polyester uniform.

"Yeah," says Rabbit, loosening the belt on his pants, "I know what you mean."

"It's been awhile now since ..."

"Since we left Olde Town?"

"Yup. It's been awhile," is all Hippy-punk says.

They drive on in silence. Rabbit, getting confident, rocks the steering wheel. The car makes slow, graceful turns down both sides of the street.

Hippy-punk throws his still-lit cigarette out the window. Then he empties the ashtray. Hippy-punk starts scooping the car's insides out into the drainage ditch as they drive, empty packs of cigarettes, Joy Burger wrappers, old bottles of engine oil, a pair of dirty underwear. Flotsam from a life lived out in the back seat of a really big car.

"What are you doing?"

"Tossing a salad."

"What?"

"The rich got no right to monopolize the good life. I want some of that fairy action, too. They can clean my car."

The Joy Burger wrappers were already washed clean in the stream of solvents.

"Now it really IS time for us to get outta here," says Rabbit.

"Yeah, alright."

"So whaddya wanna do tonight?"

"Let's go downtown. Grab a beer someplace."

Rabbit speeds through the rest of the stop signs, out the Shiny Happy Place gate and onto the freeway. Rabbit and Hippy-punk change seats, and Hippy-punk drives the car back downtown.

"See that sign?"

Rabbit looks at the yellow traffic sign. *Soft Shoulder?*

"What does that sign make you think of?"

Cantstudycantstudycantstudy. Baby Judy stares at the screen of her notebook computer. She wriggles the red nub of the tracking device with her fingertip, and a thin blue line traces itself out on her screen. She jiggles the little red nipple so that the cursor carves out hoops and arcs and squashed ovoids, stacking out of order into a whole, a non-Euclidean geometric tower that leans close to toppling out of the computer screen and into Baby Judy's lap. Baby Judy stares so long and hard at the looping blue lines she can feel herself drawn into the empty blue spaces between them. She stands at the intersection of the chaotic shapes a drifter at a crossroad, unsure which turn to take next. *God, this essay. I have to get away from this essay.* Baby Judy's private phone line rings. It's Dolly.

"Where are you?" says Baby Judy.

"Why don't you come downtown?"

"Yeah, alright."

Baby Judy shuts down her computer, grabs her jacket and laces her boots up to the knees. Out her room and down the stairs, past the maid's quarters, and through the front parlour.

"Goodnight," she calls. "I'm going out now bye-bye."

"What about your homework?" her father yells from his study. "That girl," he says, as the front door slams shut.

Baby Judy backs the tail end of her father's car out the gate, through the lions rampant statuary, not seeing the stain turn dark and settle into the porous cement. The mechanism of the car ticks along, a ball bearing running down a smooth rut of asphalt.

Baby Judy leans back and hits the vibrato-matic switch on the dash so that hidden rollers in the seat massage her buttocks and the small of her back. Fresh air curls in over the window. Tries to mesh itself in her long hair, before piling up in the back seat and rhythmically kicking her seat.

"Quit it," she says, to no-one in particular.

Baby Judy turns south on the highway, towards the magnesium haze of FreeCity. The odometer ticks over, past tarpaper shacks and jack-knifed tractor trailers and funnels of smoke from burning scrapyards. Baby Judy rolls her window back up, the car a chitinous bug scuttling around potholes and loose gravel. She enters the dim outline of the city, acres of townhouses glowing aquarium blue from tv sets. Into a maze of lowrises, the glass towers at the heart of the business district blinking like lighthouses, drawing her on, the car an iron filing to the lodestone pillars of commerce. Baby Judy makes a hard left, through rat alleys and whole villages of tents suspended in parks, to Dolly's place in a converted warehouse down by the old garment district. Dolly and Baby Judy drive through town, looking for this bar they've heard of ...

A raft of tables are lashed together in the middle of the floor, ten or twelve men and women drawn out from their rooms scattered through the neighbourhood by the warm night, stiff blood flowing through thawing skin. The men and women all laugh together in a collective buzz of goodwill and long friendship or, at least, the comfortable familiarity of sitting together over the years at the same tables in the same bar in the same part of town. Clouds of smoke rise above the tables, wrapping loving arms around the patrons who sit outside that raft of good cheer. Baby Judy and Dolly sit in rickety-backed schoolchairs at a table pushed up against nicotined wallpaper in the dim bar. They drink

beer from bathroom tumblers. Baby Judy looks around, and realizes they are the youngest two women in the place. The only two dressed head-to-toe in black. Baby Judy takes a sip of beer. Sinks down in her chair and runs her mouse-pointing finger over the naked, interlocking figures raised in velvet on the wall.

"I like this place," says Baby Judy. "It's unpretentious."

"Yes. Isn't it great? Those Meat Street bars are sooo uptight."

Dolly takes a slow drink from her beer and stares over the room. Watches the door open, and two young men walk past the raft of tables and sit near the empty stage. They have the rolling gait of sailors come back from the sea. The new, dark denim and leather of urban cowboys or escaped felons.

"Oh, Dolly," says Baby Judy.

Dolly looks at Baby Judy with bright, shiny eyes.

"What's the matter, love?"

"I'm sick of school. I hate all my courses, and the people drive me nuts."

"Yeah?"

"I hate my life."

"How much of this has to do with Stiff?"

Baby Judy skids her glass across the splintered table.

"That guy's such a pain. All he wants to do is brood at the Blood Pool and write poems about how shit his life is."

"I thought you liked Stiff?"

Baby Judy thinks about Stiff.

"He's got beautiful eyes. But he just tries so hard all the time. Told me he read *The Rebel* over Christmas, and it changed his life."

"So ..."

"... No, but he read it on a beach in the Dominican Republic, while he was fucking the hotel maid and telling her the people of the barrio should overthrow the government. Last summer he followed the Grateful Dead and didn't wear shoes for four months."

"So the boy lacks continuity. He's got the cutest butt I've seen on a man."

Baby Judy smiles again.

"That's true. But I still need a break from all this university crap."

"So what do you want to do?"

Baby Judy considers. "Let's drive out west. To the mountains. We can grow hemp and make our own clothes and just live like that."

"Sounds good to me. We can go into town once or twice a year, and pick out some of those fine country bucks for a roll in the hay, and the rest of the time..."

"... pardon me," says one of the two young men, appearing suddenly over Baby Judy's shoulder. "But my friend asked me to give you this." He drops a little twist of paper matches and cigarette foil on the table between the girls.

"What is it?"

"It's a unicorn. That's its horn." Hippypunk sets the twist right on its little spindly legs.

"So what does that make us," says Baby Judy. "Little princesses?"

"I guess it's just a horse then," says Hippypunk, pushing the horn back into the twist, so that it pops out the other end. Dolly laughs.

"Very clever," says Baby Judy, looking over at the other boy sitting at a table by the stage, an errant spotlight shining on his pale face and black spikes of hair, a rock star maybe, or a ghoul.

"Can my friend and I join you for a drink?"

"It's okay with me. Judy?"

"Hmn? Yeah, I guess ..."

Dolly watches Hippypunk walk away, the muscles in his jeans a-jumping.

"I dunno," says Baby Judy. "I'm not sure I want a couple of boys around tonight.

Listening to them talk about themselves."

"Yeah," says Dolly. "But look at that blue-collar ass!"

The two boys drag chairs up to the table.

"Hi. I'm Hippypunk. This is my friend Rabbit."

Dolly smiles at the boys. Baby Judy smiles into her beer. *Here we go again.*

"Hi! I'm Dolly. And this is Baby Judy."

"So," says Hippypunk. "What are you two girls up to tonight?"

Their table floats in a fog of rolled tobacco and spilled beer. Hippypunk tells stories, about losing the cops among silver woodlot trees in his old boat of a car. About building a fence once in the middle of an empty field for a rich old Citizen. "They can steal my money," he'd said, "but they'd be crazy to steal these rocks, and the labour I'm paying you to stack them."

"Sounds like my father," says Baby Judy.

Dolly asks Hippy-punk to push his sleeves up his arms. Traces out some of the tattoos curling up his muscular forearms. *Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!* Baby Judy tells the table she's moving to the mountains. Rabbit watches her face in the dim light, smoke curling over her lips, up her full cheeks. *She looks so ... so ... well-fed*, he decides. Baby Judy looks at Rabbit every time he turns to order another beer. Wonders what this boy with shy eyes and apologetic mouth, this pretty Goth poster child might be thinking about. *Still waters running deep?*

At some point along the smooth trajectory of cheap draft a cluster of men and women mount the stage from the raft of tables. Start beating out simple harmonies.

"Let's get out of here," says Dolly.

"To the beach!" say Dolly and Hippy-punk at the same time.

"Whose car do we take?" asks Baby Judy.

Hippy-punk opens all four doors on his big old boat of a car. Baby Judy hangs her head out the window as they speed through midnight naked streets, the wind slashing through clouds of nicotine and cheap beer and school and home.

Hippy-punk and Rabbit piss off broken concrete blocks along the waterline, into the black-green toxic waters of the lake as big as a sea. Hippy-punk holds his dick like a fire hose, jerking his wrist to send yellow jets of urine arcing and spiralling onto the black canvas of the night sky.

"Watcha doing with yours?" he asks Rabbit, who stands still, concentrating on where his stream of piss hits the water.

"Writing my name. So I'll know I've been here if we ever come back."

Dolly and Baby Judy finish a joint down by a small fire they've built in the sand.

"Can you believe these two?" says Dolly.

"Where do you think that comes from?" says Baby Judy.

"Instinct. They think they have a chance at getting in our pants, and all those chemicals take over in their heads. Bet Hippy-punk could lift a car over his head right now, if he thought it would help any."

Baby Judy laughs.

"So what do you want to do with them?" says Dolly.

Baby Judy considers.

"I dunno. They both seem kind of desperate ..."

"Whatsa matter, girl? I thought you wanted a change of scene."

Rabbit holds his piss in a steady line from his dick to the water. "Keep the rod up," his old man always told him. "Keep the pressure on, but never pull too hard." Rabbit angles his dick upwards, keeping the line taut. *What happens, Rabbit wonders, if the line breaks?* Rabbit wiggles his hips slightly, so that the piss hitting the water might appear to be alive: duck's feet, maybe, or an alewife broken from its school, floating small and solitary just on the surface. Warm nights like this, you could sometimes take the fat and oily deep-water trout with a surface lure, as though the boundary between water and sky is as lost to those big fish, who look up and see nothing but depth all the way to the stars, as the horizon is lost now to Rabbit's beer-swimming eyes. Rabbit follows the trajectory of a deep-water trout's gaze up, up through the phosphorescent night sky, to the stars, until his neck locks and he stumbles off the concrete block. The stream of urine does not snap back up his dick the way broken fishing line coils back to the reel. *I wonder if Baby Judy likes me..*

The four lie around a small fire in the sand, watching the lights of freighters pass far out in the toxic jelly of the lake. Rabbit and Baby Judy stay close together, quiet, on one side of the fire, while Hippy-punk and Dolly laugh and lean over each other in the shadows on the other.

"You don't say much," says Baby Judy.

Rabbit's stomach clenches.

Somethingcleversomethingcleversomethingcleversomethingcleversomethingcleverfortheloveofgodthinkofsomethingclever.

"Just thinking," says Rabbit.

"About what?"

About how you'd look naked. About where I'll sleep tonight, and what I'll do in the morning. About whether those skinheads we passed up the beach will come down here once they finish off those elves, or whether time itself is just suspended here. About what the hell to do next.

Rabbit's hand brushes accidentally against the half moon of Baby Judy's right buttock.

"Stuff," he says.

Baby Judy looks at Rabbit, at the blank expression on his face.

"That was a clever unicorn you made."

"Yeah? Oh. Wasn't me. Hippy-punk's really good with his hands." *But you should still stay here with me.*

"I've seen you before," she says. "Don't you play in a band?"

"A band? No, nothing like that. I'm new to this place. Never lived in the city before."

Baby Judy studies Rabbit lying there in the sand, his slight profile propped up against the horizon. Rabbit refuses to meet her gaze. *There's more to this boy than meets the eye*, she decides.

"So, like," Rabbit runs his hand nervously through the sand, "are you seeing anyone?"

"Hey you two," Dolly calls over the fire. "We're driving back into the city. Coming?"

Rabbit doesn't say a word.

"Well," says Baby Judy, "I'm happy here."

"Me too," Rabbit squeaks out.

"Okay, then. Call me tomorrow, girl. Lemme know how it goes." Hippypunk and Dolly walk off laughing. Baby Judy waves goodbye. Rabbit flushes. *Ohboyohboyohboy*.

Rabbit and Baby Judy lie in the sand by the fire, inching closer through the twigs and dead fish of the beach, not saying much more of anything. Rabbit's hand brushes against Baby Judy's butt again, at first briefly and then more slowly, finally settling there for good. Baby Judy plays with the pointy spikes of hair on Rabbit's head. Runs her hand through the open front of his beat-up leather jacket. Both their nipples grow hard as frost settles the sand all around them. Baby Judy feels Rabbit's hands move over her hips, across her stomach, up under her shirt for warmth as the sky grows lighter out over the lake and the cliffs to the east. They walk up to a park cabana and have sex on a table as the sun explodes into their sand-filled eyes.

Rabbit in the Season of the Worm

Summer. That season when black anodized fire-escapes absorb the noonday sun and release it slowly through the less hot night. Dregs of last night's drink percolate through the gutter. Squirrels and chipmunks hop amidst the green stuff of parks and lawns, which are exploding by degrees into a fine brown dust, the memory of winter, the worst of the bum-killing weather, dragged north in the webbed feet of migrating geese. The same squirrels roast in the sun and might approach a sitter in a park for a handout or maybe just run up a pant leg and sink sharp teeth into a fuzzy neck. Summer. That hopeless time of bleak heat and lazy, rolling motion. The season of the worm.

Rabbit sprawls on top of the futon, chain-smoking, drawing phantoms in the dawn air and spearing them through with the glowing tip of each cigarette. The light in the room turns from black to dark blue and then progresses up the scale of shades until the blue will disappear altogether and be replaced with the burning magnesium brightness of daytime sunlight. Rabbit wipes his hands along his sweatshiny skin. Another lonely, sleepless night. Baby Judy joined her professor on an expedition at the beginning of summer, hunting for signs of an extinct tiger through island jungle and waterfalls. She has been gone for almost a month now. The last of her father's cheques is spent. The worst has come to pass. Rabbit needs a job.

But there are no jobs. With Baby Judy gone, Rabbit found himself with too much time on his hands. The idea of a job didn't seem too bad at the time, and he took a walk

through the neighbourhood, leaving his number at bookstores and gunstores and cheese shops. Anywhere a pretty face smiled at him over the counter. He would sit in a corner donut shop and nurse a coffee, avoiding the stares of dressed-for-work people passing the window. Looking at him like he was the cause of all their unhappiness. Failed marriages. Bad business deals. Pre-ulcerous stomachs. Back home, Rabbit sketched on the walls. A funeral procession. A ship entering a long and narrow bay. "*HERE THERE BE DRAGONS.*" Waiting for something to do.

But the telephone didn't ring. Thoughts of Baby Judy hung with the curls of cigarette smoke through the apartment. *Time*, Rabbit thought, *to try something else*. So he set off again, scouting the bars and cafes where he and Baby Judy spent their days and nights out of their basement bachelor apartment. Although the owners all agreed that he looked right to work in their place, bloodless skin tone and hair tied back in a knot, there was no need for his services at the moment, thank you but... and we'll call if anything comes up.

Next Rabbit looked through the weekly papers, but the only jobs that didn't promise \$1,000 a week for part-time sales required too many specifics: computers, typing speed, familiarity with national environmental issues. Rabbit wasn't familiar with any national issues. Rabbit sometimes couldn't remember where he lived. Then, he would wander the city until some taxi driver recognized him and could drive him home.

Nothing to do. Rabbit spent more and more time in his own head, the inside of his skull a wall for writing, a screen for projecting images of Baby Judy crawling under jungle vines. Pulling leeches off her legs. Wrestling crocodiles in clear jungle pools. "*HERE THERE BE DRAGONS.*" The money was running out, and a coffee at the donut shop felt

like an extravagance. Rabbit would put on his best jeans before heading out. Call ahead for a reservation. Mostly, though, now, Rabbit lay splayed out on the futon, smoking cigarettes out of a carton he kept under the pillow. A few warehouse jobs had slipped through his hands, early on, when the pressure was not so great. They had all been early morning shift jobs, though. Punch in at 6 a.m. or so. Just the time when enough of the night's milder air filled the apartment and Rabbit, stretched out already for hours, could finally drift off to sleep. Now even those jobs are gone.

When the going gets tough... Rabbit had waited this long, and now, here, without money, he would have to do something. He scratches the scars that run up one side of his ribcage. *Why is it, he wonders aloud, that it always takes such extremes of circumstance for me to get out of bed? Through the door and down the street to somewhere else. Wherever I have to be, to do what I have to do? I am a lazy shit. Why is it so satisfying to call myself a lazy shit? I've heard those words before...* Rabbit stands up off the futon, arms stretched out to embrace the future. The scars ache along his side.

Rabbit digs a small box out of the closet, mouldy cardboard with his name written on it and a clump of foreign stamps in one corner. Inside he finds two large and dented coffee cans, each with leather thongs attached, a headlamp and batteries with some life left in them, a leather pouch filled with still-dry sawdust, and a dusty government booklet on the worm picking trade. On top of all this a soiled parchment – a copy of a will – and a letter from his father explaining that he had left Rabbit the tools of his trade. Rabbit spends the rest of the day reading the booklet and practising picking worms out of the shag carpet on the floor of the apartment.

Rabbit walks along the dark streets through the city, a full canvas bag hanging from one shoulder. Sleeping figures moan in doorways. Stranger sounds echo down the alleyways that pockmark this part of the city. Rabbit can see his destination, can see it almost the moment he steps out the door: the empty castle on the hill that divides the lower half of the city from the upper, rising up above the railroad bridge and convenience stores in floodlit, faux-ancient glory. Rabbit walks up the streets. Under the railroad bridge. And then again up, on the switchbacked stairs that climb the ancient shoreline of a dead lake that once covered all of the houses and streets now disappearing over Rabbit's shoulder. He climbs, towards the commanding shadow of the castle and its gardens and fertile lawns.

Rabbit moves slowly over the close-cropped grass, hands darting along the ground and into the coffee cans tied around his ankles. Over and over again. One thousand, three hundred and sixty-four worms. One thousand, three hundred and sixty-five worms. One thousand \$20 per thousand. At this rate, if his knees and back hold out, he should make over \$50 tonight. *Easy money.*

Rabbit looks over his worm-picking shoulder, at the faded stone towers and battlements of the castle. The story, as Rabbit remembers it, is familiar: a great man makes himself rich by supplying work crews of immigrants to the railroad companies that were stretching across a nation forged out of the fires by other great men like himself. This man made a fortune contracting labourers as they arrived to this new country, forming crews and supplying his own camp stores with the luxuries and necessities that the workers could buy on credit from the same store-keepers who, once a month, handed over what pay was left after the books were balanced.

Rabbit picks. One thousand, four hundred and one ...

The moon arcs up and over the castle. Concrete gargoyles reach down from the turrets. Faces move behind the leaded glass in every window. Rabbit turns his back on the castle. Keeps picking.

A man appears out of the darkness beyond the estate. Climbs drunkenly onto the mortared stone fence. Rabbit keeps an eye on the man over a picking shoulder. The man pulls a bottle out of his jacket. Sits and drinks. Notices Rabbit for the first time. Watches Rabbit crouch in the grass. The man and Rabbit watch each other.

Rabbit's knee-pads are soaked in dew. First sun-shots of morning light hit the castle, pushing gargoyle shadows back into sandblasted tourist attractions. Rabbit falls off his knees, stands bowlegged and starts walking slowly towards the gate. The drunken man is asleep on the fence. Rabbit makes his weary way down the hill. Under the railroad tracks. Homeward.

"I'll give you forty bucks for them worms."

Rabbit looks at the man behind the counter. Too tired now to care if he's getting ripped off.

"Alright. I'll take it."

The man runs his hands through the damp earth in the coffee cans.

"You get any more worms like these," the man says, "you bring 'em to me. I'll buy as many as you got."

Rabbit takes the money and walks out of the shop.

"Best damn worms I seen in a long time," the man says to his partner.

Rabbit is working a different part of the grounds tonight. Behind him the heavy green plants in the glassed-in atrium glow in the damp air. The picking is better than yesterday. It seems like Rabbit just has to put his hand down through the grass to the dark earth for plump red and brown nightcrawlers to crawl into his fingers. Rabbit's cans fill almost twice as fast tonight.

The drunken man is back, sitting like an homunculus in a beaten army jacket on the same spot on the fence. A few more men show up through the night, sitting in a little group, drinking and talking. All watching Rabbit work. He is done before the sun is up this night, and as he walks out the gate the drunken man calls out to him.

"Hey, this is private property!"

All the men laugh.

"Watcha doing here?"

Rabbit stops. Unsure.

"Picking worms."

"What? Hey, he says he's picking worms!"

The other men laugh. A few more jump off the fence and walk towards Rabbit.

"Worms, huh? Watcha do with 'em? Eat 'em?"

"There's a man in the city who buys them from me."

"Selling worms from here? That's theft! Those worms are the property of the master of this estate."

"Oh. I didn't know. I thought the master was dead, or something."

All the men look at Rabbit.

"Yeah, or something," the homunculus says. "Well, you have a good night now. Selling worms."

The voices echo off the towers of the castle. A window flies open and shut in some hidden breeze up on the rooftop.

There is a small group of men and women at the gate when Rabbit arrives on the third night. They all watch Rabbit walk up the street.

"Good evening, squire," the homunculus says when Rabbit reaches the gate.

"Hello. Uh, what's all this?" Rabbit asks, looking at the men and women standing in a group.

The homunculus grabs Rabbit's sleeve a little roughly. Leads him away from the group.

"Listen, me and my friends were thinking. You say you pick worms here?"

"Yes."

"And you got someone who'll pay you?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, this is how we see it. We sleep here almost every night, y'know? The grounds are good and clean, and the police dogs don't come inside the fence. We kinda come to think of this place as our home." The homunculus looks out of one eye into Rabbit's face.

Rabbit feels the tough grip on his leather jacket.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't know this place belonged to anyone. I'd offer to pay you something, but I don't get much myself and ..."

"Naw, that's not it. I didn't say we owned this place. Don't belong to anyone but that dead guy. You earn that money, I figure, down on your knees like that all night."

A few laughs come from the group by the gate.

"Down on his knees."

"It's that, we figure we got as much right to pick worms here as you do."

Rabbit thinks about this. Thinks about the few acres of well-tended grass that slope down the hill to the flowerbeds by the fence. About nightcrawlers swarming through grass, over his kneepads and up his legs until they fall into his coffee cans almost by force of will. He looks at the group of callused hands and strong backs bent under sweaty overcoats by the gate.

"Yeah, sure. Makes sense to me. Plenty for all."

The homunculus grins at Rabbit. Slaps him on the back.

"That's truly good to hear, mate. Now, about selling these worms we pick ..."

From a distance, from the top of a tower, say, the group of bent figures might look like tattered boulders dropped in lines across the dark grounds of the castle at night. To the careful observer, however, one who might be watching the floodlit scene from dark, leaded windows, there is a rhythm of movement as each boulder works its way towards the flowerbeds and the fence. Hands move under those trenchcoats, sawdusty fingers grabbing and dropping the wet crawlers into coffee cans strapped to greasy thighs. Rabbit moves down his own narrow strip of lawn, counting the pennies as each worm rasps around his fingers.

Rabbit lies on his futon, counting dollar coins into brassy towers of money. There are over twenty pickers working the lawn every night now, and Rabbit gets a percentage

of every picker's crop for selling the worms to the shop owner in the city. Rabbit is earning twice as much in commissions in a night as he does from his own picking. He stretches his legs out. Looks at his red, swollen knees. If business continues like this, he can stop picking himself soon. Rabbit licks the filter of his Cuban cigarillo in anticipation. The new air conditioner hums efficiently in the bedroom window. A letter from Baby Judy sits unopened on the kitchen counter.

The grass lawn is aflame with the light from a thousand candles, all standing in rows, jammed into wine bottles along the edges of each picker's lot. The candles push the long gargoyles off the lawn, back up onto the buttresses of the castle where they belong. Near a hundred men and women, young and old, all drawn up here from the rancid, twisting alleys of the city by the legend of the village where anyone can earn a good piece of bread from out of the land itself. Near a hundred relics of the city move now along the ordered rows of candlelit picking lanes. A fire burns in an old oil drum in one corner of the estate, and a small group of workers eat stew straight out of the pot with twists of good bread. A couple of kids run between the pickers, taking up full coffee cans and dumping the worms into communal holding bins. Rabbit sits up in the front seat of his truck, surveying the acres of pickers. Counts each time one of the runners pass by. The truck is almost paid for already. Rabbit pulls out a handful of survey maps showing all the parks and ravines and great lawns in and around the city. Each area worth further investigation has already been laid out with grids. Tomorrow Rabbit will pay a couple of the top pickers to check out these new zones. *And, he thinks, I'll be paying them out of their own money* as a police van filled with troopers and dogs pulls up next to the truck. The window rolls down and a helmeted face stares at Rabbit.

"You got our cut tonight, Mr. Boss-man?"

Tens of green zones throughout the city. A hundred thousand homeless ready to work anything to pull themselves up a little in this world. And Rabbit has the man to buy all the worms. All the worms in the city. All the worms in all the green zones in all the fucking world, if Rabbit can only get them up out of the ground. Yup. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Wasn't Rabbit himself a testimonial to the power in that cliché?

The homunculus sits around the blazing oil drum with the other elected members of Picking Commune Local 001.

"Now we are assembled. What is this meeting for, Phlegm?"

"The pickers of the West Wing protest that the Rabbit Stew is overpriced. And we are being charged for what we could produce ourselves," says Phlegm, wondering idly if the Blood Dolls would ever take him back..

"And how do the Members from the other Locals feel about the tabled item?"

There is a general nod of agreement with Phlegm's criticism.

"I see. No need for a vote on this item. We shall add it to our list of grievances."

A young boy runs hurriedly over to the group sitting at the oil drum. The boy whispers something in the ear of the homunculus. The homunculus nods and smiles at the boy's report.

"Excellent work, my young friend."

Rabbit is sitting in his truck's leather captain's chair. The homunculus approaches as Rabbit puts down the stock reports.

"How goes the picking?" Rabbit asks his old acquaintance.

"The picking goes very well, Mister Rabbit."

'Mister' Rabbit. Man, if my old man could see me now. Rabbit dreams of galleons off the Main, holds loaded with gold, while the homunculus talks on.

"Some of the members of the Commune have had a talk. We feel that there are... issues that need to be addressed."

"Oh?" Pirate Rabbit senses treachery in the air. "And what are these "issues" of yours?"

"Well sir, some of the pickers have wondered why they cannot make their own meals on the estate."

Rabbit laughs.

"My good man, you and your people are outcasts of the city. You are the dispossessed. Without family and friends. You know, as well as I, that there are laws in the city, that only Citizens may deal with the Shopkeepers. Without me, you would have no real food to cook with."

The homunculus nods at this.

"And we appreciate your efforts. But, you see, some of us have scrounged some seeds for vegetables, and we've corralled a few chickens and pigs from the markets. We're nearly growing enough food to feed ourselves now. So your stew is a little... redundant."

""Redundant,' huh? You've been book learning."

"Yessir. We've got a few to pass around."

Rabbit considers. Not much start-up in making that kitchen. Oildrums and wood from construction sites. That's about it. Already turned a profit.

"Alright," Rabbit says. "I'll cut out the stew. You can even keep the drums and pots for your own cooking, if you like."

"Well that's much appreciated, Mister Rabbit." The homunculus continues to stand by the side of the truck.

"Anything else?"

"Well, yessir. We've all noticed that you don't pick worms no more, and some of the people don't wanna pay you a cut just so's you can sell what we take outta the ground."

"But only I know how to market those worms right. Without me, none of you would make a dime for your work."

"Yes, well. That WAS so. But, you see, we found a buyer of our own now. So we don't need to pay a middleman anymore."

Rabbit looks at the man. Looks out over the thriving lawn of the estate, and the countless figures making their work by candlelight, a village of oil drums and makeshift tents staked out on the gardens.

"But," Rabbit says, "I built all this. How can you try to take it away from me?"

The homunculus looks at Rabbit.

"No no, Rabbit. You misunderstand. We don't wanna take anything away from you. I know you. You're a good guy. We've put aside a good lot for you. You can start back to work any time you're ready."

Rabbit thinks about picking. Thinks about bloody, scabbed knees. Wrinkled hands running through wet grass. Ache in the back and the endless, endless counting of worms.

"I dunno. I dunno."

Rabbit's cellular phone rings. It's the real estate agent. Wants to know if Rabbit has the down payment for the castle yet.

Rabbit lies on the futon, blowing smoke rings out into the cool fall air of the basement bachelor apartment. A wasp buzzes through the still-open hole where the air conditioner used to be. He is exhausted, nights spent in the truck keeping the repo men at bay. The want ads all ask the same thing: "Do you have a pleasant telephone manner?" Baby Judy walks through the front door of their apartment.

"Hey, babe," she says. "Look what I brought you."

Rabbit and Baby Judy Do Something About It

Rabbit and Baby Judy sit back on the futon tossed in a corner of their basement bachelor apartment. The latest video from the Blood Dolls features splatter-punk livestock and heavy-machinery accidents. Rabbit and Baby Judy lie there, close together, and watch the small black and white tv sitting on a milk crate. Medea, the three-foot-long iguana, catches and swallows the crimson centipedes that crawl out of the cracks along the baseboards.

"(cough) shit. (cough) (cough). Can't shake this cold," says Rabbit.

"What?" says Baby Judy, thinking about something else – how great an abandoned steel mill can look with the proper light contrast.

"I'm hungry," says Rabbit. "When's your father's cheque gonna get here?"

"I dunno. Soon. Phlegm's new hairstyle looks really cool."

"Change the channel. I hate the Blood Dolls. That guy Phlegm's so (cough) obvious," squeaks Rabbit.

Baby Judy changes the channel and leans back.

The talking heads of two news anchors sit behind a desk. The news is bad.

"... the spill has entered the water table surrounding the City. All citizens of the metropolitan region are advised to seal water taps and shower heads to prevent dispersement of fumes into residences. Colonel So-and-So of the 3rd Reserve Necessities-of-Life Regiment warns that, unlike in past environmental disasters, building a fort out of couch pillows may not be 100% effective in this case. The one bright light in this item is that the Colonel has offered to distribute bottled spring water (aromatic) to the first 10,000 citizens who present themselves at

the Reserve base, and hold the proper government-issue identification AND a sufficient means of transporting the water back to the city. The Colonel is quoted as saying: '... yes, exactly ... in the citizen's own interests ... no tailgate parties ... move along now. Nothing to see here.'"

Both talking heads behind the desk stare into the camera. Then the one, face brightening, says to the other,

"Good news for the homeless today. Clown Corporation announced the conclusions of a recent study, which found that the packaging on all Joy Meal products, previously vilified by environmental groups as being 100% non-biodegradable, makes a superior building material – resistant to all the natural elements except the jackboots of self-righteous urban militants."

"The Clown himself held a press conference this evening to announce the findings. The conference, held at Clown Corporation's headquarters, took a surprise turn as a Really Big Government Agency interrupted the podium speaker to order upwards of 10 billion Joy Meals to complement relief efforts in That Starving Country Over There. The tearful Mr. Clown responded live, without rehearsal, that 'the profits we'll make from this won't change us a bit as people.'"

"Shit," says Baby Judy.

"What?" asks Rabbit.

"The Really Big Petroleum Byproduct Company's at it again. Do you smell anything?"

"What?"

"I dunno, whatever the fuck they just talked about on tv."

Rabbit sniffs. Old smokes. Sweat. Pancake make-up.

"I don't smell anything."

"Yeah, well, whaddy wanna do about the water?"

Baby Judy sits up on the futon. "There's some gas in Hippypunk's car. Let's drive out to the base."

"Aw shit. I don't wanna try and drive to the base. We don't even know if we can get that old monster of a car to start. There'll be traffic. Then there's what if we run out of gas before we get all the way out and back again. 'Sides, I've lost my i.d. . Where's your father's cheque? I'm hungry."

Baby Judy stands up from the futon. "I'm going to drive out to the base."

It takes Baby Judy and Rabbit a while to start Hippypunk's car. Most of the driveways are empty by the time they roll on down the residential street.

"Shit. There isn't going to be anything left by the time we get out there."

"I dunno. Remember that tailgate party from last time?" Baby Judy turns the corner and they drive along a street lined with shuttered storefronts. Rabbit looks up ahead to a group of people standing in the street.

"Oh shit."

"What?"

"Just drive. Act normal. Speed up oh shit."

"What?"

"Clowns."

There are twenty or so of them standing in the wreckage of the street. They are dressed to kill: neon wigs, sponge noses, banana-split shoes, striped or polka-dot baggy pants and blouses in all the colours of the rainbow. The clowns are drunk and singing and carousing and there is a solid sheet of broken bottle-glass spread across the street. Standing in their midst, imperious on a fiberglass shell of a hamburger with four tires and off-road suspension, is the

orange-wigged Clown himself. "Have at 'em, boys! tonight the town is ours!" Two policemen stand on the other side of the street, turning passers-by down a side-street.

"Speed up, cantcha?"

Baby Judy drives down the street. "It's okay. They're clowns. I used to hang with these guys."

Baby Judy slows down before she hits the sheet of broken glass. She yells at two clowns breaking from the pack and running towards the car.

"Hey guys!" is what she yells.

"No, wait. I don't recognize these two." A flaming tequila bottle explodes off the rear bumper of their car.

"Shit" is what Baby Judy says as she steps on the gas again and spins the car through the glass, away from the surging mob of drunk-furious clowns. The car jolts, a tire explodes and Baby Judy drives down the dark street and turns a corner towards the freeway. Rabbit looks at Baby Judy, who is looking at Rabbit expectantly. "What?"

Baby Judy looks at Rabbit. "Do you know how to change a tire?"

The freeway is bumper to bumper with headlight-shining cars, filled with polyester parents and their pocket-video-game-toting children. Rabbit and Baby Judy limp along the stop-and-go trail of exhaust fumes laid down by the 20,000 other cars that form a line through all the freeway's curves and up to the table at the Reserve Base where Colonel So-and-So personally checks each citizen's identification and then hands down a 5 litre jug of spring water. Rabbit sits behind the closed windows of the car.

"(cough) shit. These fumes (cough) are really fucking (cough, cough, etc.) ..." Baby Judy sits tall in the drivers' seat, trying to see the front end of the line of cars that disappear up ahead.

"I can't stand this shit," she says.

"Yeah, but (cough) watcha going to do."

"This ..."

Baby Judy throws the steering wheel hard over and the car lurches out of the freeway line-up, accelerates down the off-ramp into a smooth running through the potholed county road that disappears into inbred tree-lots and toxic burial sites.

Rabbit rifles through the glove compartment. "I can't believe Hippypunk has nothing to eat in this car." Baby Judy and Rabbit drive down the county road. The night is very dark. Close rows of trees in the woodlots press right up to the shoulder of the road, and block out the burning magnesium haze of light from the distant city. Neither of the car's headlights work. Rabbit worries about this, and makes Baby Judy pull onto the shoulder every time a police helicopter flies nearby. Rabbit is still rifling through the glove compartment. Baby Judy turns the radio back on:

"... the spill from the Really Big Corporation's local processing plant continues to flow into the water supply through the Dead Senator's River. All citizens are advised ..."

Baby Judy tunes to a different station. The Blood Dolls play through the one working speaker. Baby Judy stares ahead out of the window.

"Those bastards. They shouldn't get away with this."

Rabbit pulls a small, neon green rectangle of plastic out of the glove compartment. It has a button and a lens - the clear plastic shaped like The Clown's head.

"What's this?"

Baby Judy looks over.

"It's a camera. Clown Corporation's toy of the week."

"No. I'm serious," Baby Judy continues later. " Those guys get away with this stuff all the time. The cops never do anything, and those executives are so rich they don't even need to use the air or water from the city. They get away with murder."

Rabbit holds the camera up to his nose. There is still the faint smell of Joy Burger secret sauce on the plastic. Rabbit sees it all: sitting in a bolted-down chair in an alarmingly yellow-painted room, eyeing two Big Burgers and a chocolate plasti-shake under fluorescent tubes that highlight the blue veins in his death-white hands. "What?"

"They should be made to eat their own garbage," is what Baby Judy said.

"Hey, what's that? Looks like the fucking Mouse's Kingdom," Rabbit says.

* * * *

Mr. White stands by the tinted glass and looks out over the labyrinth of chemical silos and transfer pipes wider than transport trucks suspended by support beams over the warehouses. The asphalt driveways crawl with teams of rescue workers and pumper trucks, rushing back and forth from the one pipe at the far end of the installation that is pumping out a high, arcing stream of neon-green liquid plastic into the black waters of the bay. The usual installation lights are supplemented tonight by emergency floodlights and the flashing lights of rescue vehicles.

"Merry fucking Christmas after the Apocalypse," Mr. White murmurs.

"Pardon me, sir?" a well-tailored figure steps out of the shadows towards his employer.

"I did not catch that."

Mr. White turns away from the carnival scene at the window. "Nothing. Listen, bring the car around. Good man. I'm going home."

The well-tailored bodyguard executive takes the executive elevator to the executive parking lot. He drives Mr. White's black sedan down the twisting car ramp, past the security check, and into the driveway at the front of The Really Big Corporation's office headquarters. The bodyguard executive parks so that he will see the lights go out in Mr. White's office, and know that his boss is on the way down. Then the bodyguard executive watches the tinted lights in Mr. White's office, turns on the radio and sits back in the driver's seat to wait. Mr. White's tinted shape stands out behind the smoked glass of his office window. The bodyguard executive pulls a fat black automatic pistol out from under his jacket. The Blood Dolls are playing on the radio. He checks the action on his pistol. Feels its weight in his hand. He's always wondered ... the bodyguard executive looks to see that Mr. White's office lights are still burning. Then he undoes the gold buckle on his pants and opens his well-tailored fly. He puts the fat pistol in his lap and stares at them, lying side by side like that. He strokes the other a few times, and then looks again. Then the well-tailored bodyguard executive zips his fly back up. That's settled. The bodyguard executive sits and watches Mr. White's lights. He scratches the side of his face with the foresight on his pistol. The well-oiled rod slips over his smooth face: between his two wet lips, across his clean white teeth. A sharp metallic taste in his mouth and he runs his tongue absentmindedly around the hole at the end of the barrel where the bullets come out.

Mr. White has just finished talking to a senior executive at the parent company office in another country. They must have been watching him, Mr. White thinks, to know that fast. They want to hear how big the spill is – how much product is lost? Mr. White hung up on

them. What were they gonna do, take away his birthday? kill him? Mr. White is looking out the window again, at the flashing lights and the running bodies and the burning fires and the smoking smoke and the neon green pool growing out in the black waveless toxic jelly of the bay where the city draws its water. Water for the seething populace that lives among the high steel walls of the office buildings and the cardboard shantytowns that run whole blocks and the executive condominiums downtown and the open-air noodle stands and the dark doorways and back-alleys with barbwire fire-escapes. Mr. White thinks about it and is glad that he moved his family out to the country, to the open space where he could build a biospheric dome out of real wooden struts and clear, crystal glass that filters the sunlight through, like... like... a clean cup of water poured over the head on a hot day from a long time ago. A long time ago is before the corporate headhunters "disappeared" his last boss and CEO of the plant; before the corner office and the biosphere; before his son had fallen in lust with a girl from the City and not the Club, and shaved his head and set the tv room in the family condo on fire and disappeared down the private elevator and out past the screaming fire trucks and into the city of corrupt tap water and open-air noodle stands.

Mr. White stands by the tinted window. Spotlights from the army base dive through the black night, searching for a smooth spot high up in the rolling banks of nicotine smog. They find one, and the beams cross and re-cross until they focus: a giant face the colour of old nicotine looks down on the silos and transfer pipes and the square black tinted executive offices. Great. The Clown is coming. Mr. White grabs his laptop and walks out of the office.

They are parked across from the executive gate, pulled back up a gravel access road between the electric fences of a woodlot, the long snout of their beater car sniffing in the trash on the shoulder of the smooth asphalt road that runs into the executive parking lot. Baby Judy

is bolt upright behind the wheel, staring at the one tinted box of light in a top corner of the dark office complex. Rabbit looks up at Baby Judy's shadowed, firm-set face.

"What're we doing here?" he asks.

"Watching."

Rabbit looks out at the flashing lights and burning torches over the silo yard.

"Wouldn't want to pay that light bill."

Baby Judy stares at the box of light.

Rabbit eats half of a candy bar he found in the glove compartment.

"Shouldn't we get the water?"

Baby Judy stares hard. Baby Judy thinks she can make out a figure standing just on the other side of the tinted glass.

"That's him."

Rabbit looks up over the dash.

"That's the suit who's responsible for this shit," says Baby Judy.

Rabbit looks around and at the car in the executive parking lot, idling by the glass and chrome doors.

"Oh yeah. So like, let's go home."

Baby Judy is sitting bolt upright, staring at the figure standing in the tinted box of light.

Then she says:

"These black-suit, country club bastards come down here to make their money, leave a mess behind and drive off with a limo full of money. They make a profit selling things nobody needs. They piss into the water and fart into the air and say its good for us, and then they tell the government that they need public money to come back and do it again. Where's the cops?"

where's the army? how come some big man with a gun isn't down here tonight, putting every one of these guys up against a wall?"

Rabbit looks at Baby Judy's firm mouth and passionately heaving breasts under a skin-tight sweater. Wonder if she wants to ... "Yeah. Fuck the Man."

A black sedan limo parks in the puncture of light outside the brass and glass doors of the office box. The shaded figure is still standing at the window in the top corner office. Rabbit rolls the passenger door window down and the cold, toxin-damp air fills the blue interior space of the car. The shaded figure disappears from the window. Free-floating particles of insecticide from the woodlot and chemical waste from the plant scratch at Rabbit's sinus cavity.

"He's coming down," says Baby Judy.

"What're we stopped here for?" asks Rabbit.

The figure by the window was gone. A man in a suit appeared at the brass and glass doors a minute later and the rear door of the limo sedan opens. Sirens wail. Cries and screams from the work-crew ricochet through the parking lot and over the electrified security fence and across the smooth road and through the window and into the ears of Rabbit and Baby Judy.

"Listen, it's a nice night. Let's, ah, go park down by the lake for a bit," Rabbit says with a wink.

"Here he comes," says Baby Judy, and a second later, "here he comes" again.

The man in the suit is in the back of the limo and the limo is driving across the black empty parking lot to the gate that lets out onto the road. Baby Judy starts the slow rumbling engine and puts her hands back on the steering wheel. The car sits and vibrates in the dark and Baby Judy punches the gas pedal once to set the wheels in the gravel of the access road. The black limo stops under the security camera and hidden laser-blaster by the gate and then the

gate opens and the black limo turns right, away from the city and from the vibrating old car parked at the access road. Baby Judy steps on the gas again and holds it this time and the wheels turn once and catch and the great tank of a car just bolts out from the trees towards the limo. Rabbit's head snaps back over his seat.

"WHAT are you doing?" he yells.

Baby Judy grins and bites her lower lip. Rabbit thinks how sexy Baby Judy looks with her eyes all a-gleaming and a thin line of red blood cut into her lower lip.

The front end battering ram of the ugly, rust-heavy car smashes into the front driver's seat of the big, black limousine. Both cars skid diagonally across the road, until the limo hits a drainage ditch on the roads' shoulder and jolts over and lifts and is on its side and rolls on its roof and now the wounded driver's side of the car breaks through the electrified fence and the driver's roof hits the ground beyond the fence and there is the white flash of a hot mine wired to blow off anything larger than a deermouse that hits the contact wire and there is a loud bang and the black shiny skin of the limo peels back from the metal skeleton and the bodyguard executive is upside-down still in the driver's seat and there is a cloud of vapour around his steaming body. The other man in the suit is thrown out of the back seat of the toasted limo before it even hits the fence and he lies, not moving, in the drainage ditch by the shoulder at the side of the road.

Baby Judy drives too fast down the winding gravel road through the woodlot. The road is unlit and the tree trunks glow silver – *Dark* – in sterile luminescent rows along each shoulder. Baby Judy has one hand at her mouth, nipping and peeling – *Dark. Box.* – strips of pink flesh from her now bleeding fingers. Rabbit sits quietly, the frigid wind through the shattered windshield freezing streaks of his own vomit to his chin. Rabbit and Baby Judy can

just see the neon green glow of the lake that – *Moving*. – they speed towards. – *What the hell I'm bleeding*. – “Say something,” Baby Judy says. “Talk to me or I'll crash the fucking car.”

Rabbit sits there. The silver trees rush by. Mucous pours out his nose. Allergies. Baby Judy takes a turn too fast and the rear end of the car swerves out on the dirt-packed shoulder. The man in the trunk is heavy, and the car is hard to handle. – *Fuck I'm in somebody's car*. –

Rabbit wanted to run. The one guy in the well-tailored suit was dead, and the one lying unconscious probably couldn't identify them or the car. Alarms must have – *Must be the Clown's men*. – gone off somewhere, and somebody would come looking real quick. Baby Judy was freaked. Baby Judy didn't know exactly what she wanted, just that for once something should happen. A little reality check, maybe, that couldn't be tossed out with the afternoon's paper. That, – *This is no big deal*. – and some photos maybe. This was a big deal and it was a good thing. Too bad – *Talk my way out*. – about the driver. Still, she'd taken the neon camera from Rabbit's shock-rigid hand and shot two frames, the lens reeling nauseously the whole time. “Metal Death”, she'll call it. Or maybe, “Meat Is Mundane.” Baby Judy was going to throw up, but seeing Rabbit's mouth open and the puke run down his frozen body and pool in his lap made it clear she had to act. Rabbit lost his frozen stare soon enough, and Baby Judy convinced him to help her load the tossed body into the trunk of Hippy-punk's car. Rabbit stared at the steaming body of the driver, still sitting in the skeleton of the sedan limo, and thought about how warm it must be with all those volts in you and if Baby Judy wasn't there he could have climbed in next to the driver and been warm and comfortable. As it was, they dropped the limp and bleeding body of the passenger into the trunk. Rabbit and Baby Judy sped down a gravel access road towards the lake, a man in the trunk of their car. – *The bastards*. –

The access road leads eventually out onto a beach of grey boulders, worn smooth by the water, that turn and trap your foot until the tide comes in if you step on them wrong. Rusted frames of abandoned cars and air conditioners and VCRs and desktop computers are scattered along either side of the beach and down to where small oily waves laced with long strings of neon green spill-out roll and heave among the waterline boulders. The barbwire-tough roots of the beach grass and bushes are woven through the boulders and the derelict objects dumped long ago at the end of the gravel access road. A garbage fire burns far down at one end of the beach. A number of figures circle the fire, seemingly leaping and dancing with the flames. Further out, along the neon green trails through the water, the chemical plant glows yellow and white under spotlights and arclights. Little cherry red lights flash across the water from the emergency vehicles driving around the silos. One pipe, the size of a transport truck, sags in a girdle of buckled crossbeams. A steady stream of green liquid plastic flows out the pipe and falls a hundred feet into the water of the bay. Baby Judy stops the car and walks down the litter of the beach to the water's edge. Rabbit follows. Little viscous lumps of congealed plastic float among the boulders. Rabbit looks all around.

"What're we doing here?"

Baby Judy reaches down and picks up one lump of the greenglowing stuff. She holds it in her hand and it shakes and it tries to flow between her fingers, but holds its non-shape instead. Baby Judy slips the green plastic slime in her pocket. Baby Judy takes the camera with the Clown lens out of her pocket. She takes photographs of: the slowly growing spread of plastic through the black water; the bonfire burning at the end of the beach; down on her belly like a reptile, snapping close-ups of a dentist's chair wrapped in barbwire weeds; Rabbit, who isn't good for much but at least is photogenic, lying on the hood of the car. Finally, Baby Judy

walks around to the back of the car and opens the trunk. The flash from the camera lights up the crumpled executive lying in a pool of still-fresh blood. The executive is of course blinded by the flash, and starts hyper-talking.

"My arm's broken. Look, Mr. Clown, we can work this out. A setback. Temporary is all. No ... no real problem." Rabbit walks around beside Baby Judy.

"So now what?"

Baby Judy looks down into the trunk of the car. They'd already killed an executive and caused a lot of property damage at R.B.C. If her father find out about this, he'll cut her off completely. Might as well make it count. Baby Judy tosses the congealed plastic lump into the trunk.

"Eat this."

Mr. White's eyes start to clear and he looks up at the two young faces staring at him.

"You're not clowns," is the first thing he says. "Are you friends with my son?" is the second thing.

Mr. White tries to unfold himself from the trunk, but the pain nails his broken arm to the floor of the trunk, and he sits back down and gasps. Baby Judy watches the executive struggle. The executive wasn't eating. "FOR YOUR CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY, I ORDER YOU TO EAT THIS STUFF!" Baby Judy yells in a high-pitched cry. Mr. White looks up at the two, a young man and a young woman, dressed for a swarming or a nightclub, he wasn't sure which.

"My arm's really broken," is all he says.

Baby Judy turns to Rabbit. "He still isn't eating," she says. Rabbit looks at the death-pale face of the executive. Being so close to such physical pain makes Rabbit sick. Still, this is a

bonding experience for him and Baby Judy, and it is important for their relationship that they have a constructive experience. Rabbit reaches out and carefully lifts the executive's shattered arm over the lid of the trunk. Mr. White screams in pain. Rabbit looks through Mr. White, so that he doesn't see the pain and fear on the man's face.

"So then, shut up and eat the stuff!" says Rabbit.

The executive stares at Baby Judy. Rabbit picks the green lump out of the trunk and holds it next to the executive's mouth, but the executive just turns his head away.

"What do we do now?" Baby Judy says.

Rabbit braces himself against the rising bile in his stomach and grips the lid of the trunk.

"Eat this stuff or ..."

Rabbit closes the trunk, not very hard, on the dangling executive's arm. There is a scream and the executive sobs into a pool of his own macrobiotic-dinner puke. Rabbit holds the plastic lump to the executive's mouth again and, this time, the executive starts eating slowly. The green stuff dissolves into powder in his mouth, and absorbs the film of stomach acid that coats his gums. Slowly, so slowly, the powdery liquid flows down his throat and presses on his oesophagus as more liquid builds on top of the rest. Mr. White can barely speak.

"Crimes against humanity, hell. Humanity IS a crime."

The plastic shapes itself into a viscous plug in Mr. White's throat – each thin breath pulls the tail of the plug toward his fresh pink lungs. Amazing thing, plastic is. Rabbit and Baby Judy lift Mr. White from the trunk and lay him out on the boulder beach, watching the executive's face turn blue-purple as he lowers his head slowly onto a boulder. When Mr. White's head finally rests against a boulder, and his shattered arm lies peacefully across his handsome, still chest, Rabbit and Baby Judy climb back into the car and drive on back up the

road. When they hit the highway turnoff Baby Judy says she hopes the photos turn out. Rabbit says he's hungry as they approach downtown.

"The cheque's here!" Baby Judy yells when they walk in the door of their basement bachelor apartment.

Howling at the Moon

Rabbit and Baby Judy stretch out on a rock, two black-clad lizards basking in the sun. Baby Judy licks dry lips. Picks a bug out from between her teeth. Rabbit blinks in the bright spring sunshine. His weak, watery eyes ache at the alarming blue sky. At the explosion of green on the bushes and burned soil, after a long winter of concrete skies and lead snow in FreeCity. Now he can feel his heart slowing down, his pulse getting in synch with the throb of life blooming in the hydro slash. The wind rustling in the woodlot trees around them.

“This was a good idea,” says Rabbit.

“Yes. Yes, it was,” says Baby Judy, melting deeper into the rock.

Rabbit’s gaze follows the trajectory of the power lines overhead, all the way from the transformer station that shudders and hums, that belches out red and black smoke now on the horizon, straight through this valley of weeds between the fences and ordered squares of silver woodlot trees. To the grey metal twist of the distant city, built on the shore of a toxic jelly lake, and not yet reaching here, to this hot rock, on the ancient shoreline of a dead sea.

Songbirds sing among the green vines and metal struts of the hydro pylons. The last wake of winter’s low anvil clouds float high overhead now. *Nude on a couch. Lions and tigers and bears, oh my.* A dragonfly whirs through the spikes of hair on Rabbit’s head. Then, gently, settles on the tip of Baby Judy’s nose. Rabbit sneezes. They float on their hot rock in a running river of blooming weeds, small animals newly sprung from their

birthing holes kicking up pollen all around them. Baby Judy's arm snakes across the rough granite of their boulder. Rests on the worn metal buckle of Rabbit's belt.

"Bless you," she says.

"Thank you."

Baby Judy's nipples are hard in the dying cold snap of spring. So are Rabbit's.

"I thought winter would never end," Rabbit says.

"Really? I like winter."

Rabbit remembers winter. The wind coming down off the polar ice caps biting at his eyes. The tightness in his chest, and the phlegm he coughed into the sink every morning. At night, under the blankets, Rabbit would press his hands between his thighs for warmth, because Baby Judy would not let him press them anywhere near her thighs. He would lie sleepless, breath smoking in the dark apartment. The mice and centipedes would crawl out of the cracks between wall and floor and swarm across the bitterly cold floor, into a humming, buzzing mass at his feet. The wind outside the window of their basement bachelor apartment chased stray dogs and vagrants and torn bits of newspaper down the alley. In winter the window was always closed, and Rabbit and Baby Judy's skin would turn the colour of nicotine.

"I wonder what this place is like in winter?"

Bone-weary, the guard dog dragged herself through the snow. Exhausted from running she fell into a hollow around the base of a tree, and stopped moving for the first time since escaping the lights and noise and hormone injections and glass-laced meat from the men back at the mining compound.

She slept the sleep of the dead, curled around a last spark of animal intelligence, that hadn't been beaten out of her already, for warmth. Her fur was matted with sweat and ice. A thin line of blood trickled down the side of her muzzle.

Peace closed in again, after the sudden noise, the startling presence of the intruder thrust into the valley, had been absorbed into the silence, the plants and animals abed below the snow.

The guard dog lay insensible to the scene around her. Her insides still rocked from the desperate flight southwards, running long after the men chasing her had tired of the sport and returned to their warm cabins on the edge of the open-pit coal mine. Long after her belly was empty, and she had had to snatch at streamers of silver bark hanging from the woodlot trees until her gums bled. Until her fur started to turn silver itself, a bolt of lightning across the snow.

Years later, tree shepherds would gather at the bonfire on long winters' nights and tell stories of how a swarm of fairy dust had blazed through their lots, and how their lives were never quite the same again.

Three days and three nights the guard dog ran, growing thin as the deer that starved among the snowdrifts. Following the path of least resistance, south, over fields and through dwarf stands of timber and alongside fences and down old jeep trails beaten through the bush. It was like falling down: hard to stop once you start moving. As if the land had been meticulously carved out so that the things people needed, the coal and timber and metals, could trickle down, what had once rushed down in a torrent, into the waiting maw of the city. She ran on instinctively. Her legs buckling under her. Until her spark of animal intelligence lit on this broad valley, sheltered from the worst of the

elements, sunlight reflecting warmly on smooth snow. And so, for the first time since escaping, she laid herself down and let a thin layer of snow blanket her.

And that was how she was when the greybeard half-wolf found her: a dying blue lamp under the snow. He moved through the valley cautiously. Listening close to the snow for the sound of rodents scurrying through tunnels below. Scenting the air for other predators or prey. But there were no living things astir in that blanket wilderness. The deer he had lamely followed south were already rooting through garbage or taking handouts from small children on the outskirts of town. So he fell into the hollow with the half-frozen guard dog, and made a nest for them both with tufts of fur pulled from his own body. He lay over her that night, warming her with his own primordial spark. In the hard light of morning he mounted her, planting his seed firmly in her womb. He bit a nipple open and fed her his bloody milk, that she might live long enough to give birth.

The greybeard half-wolf limped out of the valley, following the stale tracks of the deer south, away from the hills and the woodlots and the humming transformer and the sore earth around the slag heaps of the open-pit coal mine.

All the trees for miles around grew two feet from the time the puppy was conceived to its birth. The subways in FreeCity always ran on time. A line squall appeared out of a peaceful morning and sent a fleet of dragnet fishing boats to the bottom of the ocean. And Rabbit and Baby Judy's skin turned the colour of nicotine.

The same wind that blew in off the toxic jelly lake, over the grey metal twist of FreeCity, that roared through the terrible jaws of lions-rampant statuary on the front lawns of the suburban mansions, that accelerated through the hydro slash until it hurtled like a runaway freight train toward the shaking transformer that fed the city heat and light,

that same banshee wind stepped lightly around the curled body of the guard dog. Laid a blanket of snow over her milky-blood fed corpse.

First days of warm spring sunshine still melted the snow blanket as clouds of pollen blew around the body of the thawing guard dog. Not one single seed caught fire from the now-extinct ember of animal intelligence that had glowed under the branches of a stunted tree. The dog thawed, until her muscles passed the puppy in one last unconscious groan. Pollen blew into the folds of her loose skin. Into the hollows of her collapsed ribcage. Took root there, and bloomed into the greenest patch of weeds in the hydro slash.

So the puppy was birthed, and the guard dog expired. It lived in the hydro slash as early spring thawed around it. Crawled on weak puppydog legs among the bare bushes and caps of bald soil, eating maggots and larvae and pre-season pond scum warmed by the sun. Whatever crawled, wriggled or squirmed in front of its muzzle. Until its eyes sharpened, and it could watch the other predators hunt the rodents and small mammals sluggish still from hibernation or energy spent burrowing under snow for sparse grass and withered roots. Learned from the fox to stalk quickly and quietly. From The cat to grasp its prey by the head and bite at the throat, while the hindpaws dug the steaming entrails out onto the ground.

The puppy had the same long jaw muscles, that ran all the way from its mouth to the hindmost tip of its stubby tail, as its mother. The same plates of muscle across its chest, and the same muscles coiling into springs along its still-gangly puppydog legs. The same black and brown coat of wire fur, tipped with silver needles that glittered like speartips in the moonlight. And the puppy had a small tuft of grey fur on its well-formed throat.

It found an old cave broken into a rock face at one end of the hydro slash, and so there made its home amongst a pile of candy wrappers and beer cans on the cave's sandy floor. At night the pulsing power lines sang into the cave, and the puppy's small heart beat faster as it dreamed of a hunt, running down caribou across the soft floors of ancient pine forests.

"... pour me another glass of wine, would you please love?"

Rabbit sits up on the rock. Pours another glass of sparkling wine. Opens a packet of peanut butter crackers for himself. Around them, shadows of woodlot trees pull carbon and nitrogen into their silver bark. A limb-to-limb canopy for a faerie hall. A corral of lamp posts rustled off the lawns of the mansions that ring the press and shove of FreeCity. Rabbit eats a cracker.

"I have to piss," says Baby Judy.

Baby Judy wanders up the hydro slash, away from Rabbit afloat on the rock in a river of pollen. Overhead power lines sag under flocks of songbirds who had wintered south. Dustballs of insects fly up as Baby Judy kicks her way through the tangled weeds breaking through the hard earth. She follows a meltwater stream, thick already with phosphate scum and coal dust, that flows into the hydro slash from beyond even the ordered squares of woodlot trees and agribusiness pastures. Follows the stream and the prints of small animals, paws and tails and snouts furrowed in the streamside mud, to an outcrop of granite aglow in the sun. Baby Judy pulls her pants back up, and follows one set of tracks to a shadow on the outcrop, a cave broken into the rock.

An arrowhead of trash glitters inside the cave, candy wrappers and beer cans and spent condoms half buried in the sand. More prints, some human and some not. Baby Judy slips a can of mace out of her pocket. Holds a lighter up and peers into the darkness at the back of the cave. Two eyes glow like hot coals from a nest of torn plastic.

Rabbit bakes on the hot oven of a rock. The cool spring wind that covers his body pulls at the shards of his hair. Tweaks his itching nipples. Blows along his belly and strokes his throat and chest. Rabbit peels off his socks and the wind sucks at his toes, drying the accumulated sweat and dead skin from a whole season of wet shoes.

“What the hell is that,” says Rabbit, as Baby Judy drops a stinking mess of teeth and claws on his chest.

“His name is Tiger.”

“A puppy. And how do you know it’s a boy?”

“They eat roaches,” says Baby Judy.

Baby Judy bundles Tiger into Rabbit’s leather jacket in the back of the car, and they drive through the woods, down the ancient shoreline of a dead sea. Back into the grey metal twist of the city.

Lightning struck woodlot. Fresh green grass grew where once had been hard, dead soil. The open mouth of the granite face closed tightly in on itself, forever trapping the cow-tipper with one hand down the shorts of his was-to-be girlfriend.

Baby Judy takes the puppy down into their basement bachelor apartment. Rabbit peels his piss-soaked jacket from the back seat of the car and leaves it spread to dry on the

fire-escape. Red and black, gold and green butterflies settle on the wet leather. They drink up the puppies' urine through long probosci. In the morning the jacket is gone.

Spring turned to summer in FreeCity, and the sky that had been scoured clean by the harsh winter wind turned dull with exhaust as the streets rotted under a cap of humid air. People steamed slowly along the sidewalks, sweat and fumes from the city mixing into acid rain on raw pink legs. Down in the apartment, fungus grew in starbursts on the rug and up the walls. Greasy smoke from last night's dinner hung in curtains on the walls. Rabbit and Baby Judy got on with their lives as best they could.

Rabbit got a temp job working night security at a box factory. He picked up a portable tv from the neighbourhood pawn shop, and spent his shifts in a cubicle suspended above the production floor of the factory, robot arms pulling levers and cutting with lasers and folding the cardboard into useful shapes below. He watched tv all night and, back at the apartment, slept all day.

Baby Judy worked in her professor's lab, trying to grow a tiger in a petri dish. Sunup to sundown she impregnated protein smears with the last gene samples, the final few strands of DNA, from the last Tasmanian tiger, now extinct. She would drag herself home late each night. Kiss Rabbit on the cheek as he made his way to a job at some factory, dragging a bag full of stuff behind him. Baby Judy would collapse into bed with her scientific journals. Dream of striped flanks moving silently through the rain forest on an island half a world away.

The puppy had bolted for the deepest, darkest corner of the apartment as soon as Baby Judy first set him down. The crawlspace behind the toilet. A porcelain cave. Baby Judy had looked with pity at the bristle of teeth and claws, the fearsparkled puppy cowering in a corner. “We’ll give him some time,” she’d said, “let him get used to all this. To us.”

“How do you know,” Rabbit’d said again, “it’s a he?”

So the puppy lived in the cool of the bathroom, coming out only whenever Rabbit or Baby Judy had stopped twitching, and finally lay unmoving in bed. The puppy grew as thin and weak as a hydro slash rat, eating whatever roaches and centipedes he could catch among the fungal stalks of the carpet. Sometimes Rabbit or Baby Judy would sit on the toilet over him, a bird of prey perched outside his cave.

Baby Judy tosses in bed, her arm reaching out for another body to push against. Rabbit’s side of the bed is still warm. Still damp with sweat from his daytime sleep. Baby Judy lies on top of the sheets, watching headlights stalk across the ceiling and walls from the window set just outside the alley. She gets up to take a piss. Feels the puppy cower back further into his porcelain cave. Baby Judy drops to the tiles on hands and knees.

“Hey, you.” She reaches out to scratch the puppies’ head. “Are ya lonely? Huh? Want some company?”

The puppy lashes out at Baby Judy’s outstretched hand. Yelps with fright and wets himself as she plucks him up by the scruff of the neck and lifts him into the air.

“You’re a filthy puppy. I’ve been bad to you, haven’t I? You can’t do this for yourself.”

Baby Judy tosses the sack-of-bones puppy into scalding water. Scrubs loose clots of dirt and dead puppy skin, and the exoskeletons of fleas and ticks and of the centipedes that crawl along the baseboards at night, into the tub. And the puppy fights back, thrashing about in the gruel, scratching and biting at Baby Judy's forearms which are the colour of boiled lobsters. But the heat of the water, and Baby Judy's raptor-strong hands, wear him down quickly. The puppy holds on to his dying animal spark as Baby Judy washes and rinses and scrubs the puppy like a wet sponge, pushing him under for a third time and beating the dirt off him against the side of the tub.

"Okay, Tiger," she says, finally wrapping him in a dry towel, "you got your self-respect back."

Baby Judy cradles the damp bundle on her chest as she flips through more journals sprawled across the bed. The warmth of the water, the softness of the swaddling towel, the gentle lap of Baby Judy's pulse as her eyes close on her nightly reading. The puppy's own hummingbird heartbeat slows itself for the first time since the electromagnetic hum of the power lines first sang into his cave...

Baby Judy is gone when the puppy opens his eyes. He finds in her place on the bed a gelatinous cube of meat glistening in a bowl shaped like a skull. The puppy wolfs down the meat and, content, goes back to sleep in his nest of towel and bedsheets. Rabbit nearly smears the puppy across the futon as he flops into bed after a hard night's watching tv. The puppy retreats to his porcelain cave as Rabbit grinds his teeth in his sleep, the sound of carnivores crushing bone.

"Hi, honey! I'm home. Where is everybody?"

Baby Judy drags the puppy out by his arched back, claws digging at the fleety tiles. Drags him out again, until the puppy settles enough, resigns himself enough, to being hoisted up into Baby Judy's arms.

"Have you been a good puppy?" she says, carrying him to the empty bed. "Oh, such a bad day I've had. Wanna hear about it?"

The puppy falls asleep in Baby Judy's arms. Rabbit tosses him out of bed in the morning.

"Bad dog! Bad dog!"

Baby Judy holds the owner's manual in one hand and swats at Tiger with the other.

"You can't just do that anywhere, you know."

Tiger watches Baby Judy try to smack him again, her hand fluttering around his face like a broken wing. Until she grabs a hold of his head. Pushes his nose into the wet stain on the carpet.

"Guess I'll have to get you a leash, huh, love?"

Tiger was eating out of Baby Judy's hand by the end of the week. Sleeping peacefully beside her in bed. Baby Judy came home early each night to be with him.

"I've got someone waiting on me," she would say in response to her professor's critical gaze. She would walk Tiger around the block as the sky settled from cobalt to jet black over the city, and the neighbours sat out on fire-escapes late into the molten night.

Rabbit comes home at the end of his first week at the box factory and collapses into bed. Is still there when Baby Judy gets back at the end of the day. She tries to move quietly around the corpse in the bed, her feet sinking into the damp carpet. Leashes Tiger and slips up the stairs and out the door. She reads under a halogen street lamp at Shady Grove Mall while elven street urchins play with Tiger.

Rabbit is sitting up in bed watching tv when they finally get home. Some kind of nature program, some kind of horror show, filmed in the night-time savanna. A pack of hyenas, malaria-eyed, throwrugs for fur, mill about a muddy watering hole, laughing and drinking and carrying on like they own the place. Rabbit stares at the animals slipping in and out of the screen resting on a milkcrate at the foot of the bed as he relaxes at home for the first time since he can't remember when.

The camera and lights flare off into the night as a new hyena lopes into focus, what looks like a showman's grin playing across his face.

A hoar-grey hyena, bigger than the rest, breaks from the pack and rushes at the newcomer, teeth snapping. Rabbit's mouth drops open as older and younger, alpha male and challenger, square off by the watering hole and the savanna is filled with the hysterical laughing of the pack. The two circle and nip at each other's muzzles and heels, looking for an opening. The young hyena moves confidently, rocking and lunging at the stronger, but stiffer, leader of the pack. The alpha keeps himself low to the ground, protecting his belly and throat from the newcomer's claws and fangs. They snap at each other. Lunge again as the camera crew moves closer and the newcomer twists around the alpha's flank. Rips an open heel apart with his gangrenous teeth. The alpha buckles in a laughing fit of pain as the newcomer slashes at his spastic throat. The bloodied leader of the pack pulls himself

away from the fight, half-upright, through watering hole mud, snapping back at the still-cocky new alpha.

The cripple sits in a puddle at the edge of the watering hole, turned away from the pack, massive head laid down in the dark water between his forelegs. The cripple looks into the camera, sick light reflecting in his eyes. The new leader turns back to the watering hole and his thirsty pack while the camera holds on the old bent and bleeding outcast. Rabbit stares into the night-time savanna out past the cripple, but can't see anything at all.

Baby Judy sits down on the stairs and unstraps her boots. Looks sideways at the picture on the tv. A yellow-eyed hyena stares back, into the basement bachelor apartment. Sees a young man in patched and dirty pants sitting on a mat, black t-shirt stretched over a chest as tight as a snake's. Angry spikes of hair sprout like shards of elephant grass from his ivory head. And a tall woman, dressed in black and with skin paler than the remains of the tourist he'd eaten three days ago, holding a puppy down by the collar. The young man reaches out one snake-thin arm, wrist loose in submission, and the hyena thinks "salvation!" or, at least, "affection." But the hand bounces along the edge of the screen and the view goes blank. Night fills in where the people had been sitting a moment ago. The cripple rests on his haunches and watches the camera crew follow the pack to the next watering hole. He sits in a puddle in the dark savanna, and waits.

That was really sick," says Rabbit. "Did you see those two hyenas going at it like that?"

"What were they fighting about?" says Baby Judy.

"That one hyena wanted to be leader of the pack, I guess. Wanted the biggest piece of meat. And all the lady hyenas to himself."

“Just like a man.”

“Yeah, but it’s natural! It’s like, a universal law or something. Survival of the fittest. Might has right. It’s the reason socialism will never work.”

“What are you talking about? That’s not natural, that’s entertainment. How can you say all that was natural, with those cameras and lights and people standing around that watering hole to begin with. They must’ve spent months there, before the animals would be comfortable enough to get that close. And since when is a camera crew, with all that hardware and paraphernalia, all those sandwich wrappers tossed in the bushes, natural? Besides, the fight was probably rigged to begin with.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think a whole crew can afford to camp out like that indefinitely? They probably had that one hyena off-screen, starving in a box or something. Then they truck him out and turn him loose on some unsuspecting pack of wild hyenas and, voila, instant drama.”

Rabbit lights a cigarette. Thinks about the crippled hyena sitting at the edge of a watering hole, and a camera crew working its way across a continent with boxes full of wild animals driven half-mad by hunger.

“That’s fucked up,” he says.

Rabbit went back to the box factory for another week. Baby Judy spent her days in the lab, trying to grow a tiger fetus in a vat of tepid water. “The ecosystem of the island can’t survive,” her professor kept telling her, “without its natural predator. Already the cane toads have taken over the canopy.” Baby Judy would stare into the tank. Clumps of protein floated about like sea monkeys in search of a queen. Baby Judy was still bitter that

the sea monkey kit she had been given as a child, little intelligent fish with simian faces that swarmed around castles and sunken treasure, were nothing but domestic shrimp with no personality. She had let the water go stagnant, indifferent with disappointment, until her large bowl teeming with life had been reduced to a fetid bath of fungus and decayed seafood.

At night Baby Judy would ride the bus home and fix dinner for herself and the puppy. They would step out together into the night, to a small patch of grass where the neighbours would meet and let their dogs run in a pack, chasing each other in a dizzying circle. Baby Judy would drop in on the casual conversations of the owners.

“Gunner bit a mugger the other day...”

“I had to take Chapter Two in for shots. It was *so* ironic...”

“Tiger *still* isn’t housebroken.”

“Y’know,” said one of the men who brought his mongrel out to the patch every night, “animals use scent to mark their territory. I think it’s better to let a dog pee in its new house at first. Gives them a sense of place.

“I *love* what you’ve done with Lunchpail’s coat!”

Tiger would stand low to the ground, covering his belly, on guard, as the other dogs careened around the patch. Coming to heel when their owners called them. Still, Baby Judy figured, it was better than watching the fungus grow in the apartment, or not watching her DNA fetus grow at the lab. Baby Judy took Tiger to the patch every night of the week, and stood with him there in the center of the whirling canine vortex, the only life on the street, and listen to the small-talk of her neighbours.

Back at the apartment, Baby Judy would crash on the futon and watch tv. Music videos and live-action cop dramas. She would set the puppy on her chest and eat junk food, stroking and petting the puppy, and trying to make the hairs on the back of his neck lie flat. She would scratch the silver fur on his tummy, work the muscles loose along the side of his spine, cuddle and hold him until the feral gleam in his eye went out, and the puppy stretched out in a daze beside her. Baby Judy would watch tv, and Tiger would rest, his long muscular muzzle and rough pink tongue and razor-sharp puppy teeth nuzzled in the hollow between Baby Judy's throat and her collar bone. Tiger learned to sleep beside Baby Judy, in the spot where Rabbit usually was...

"Hi honey, I'm home! Man oh man, what a week! What's for..."

Rabbit hurls the tv guide across the room. Grabs a candlestick and rushes the puppy drooling at Baby Judy's outstretched neck. Baby Judy opens her eyes as Rabbit launches himself across the futon.

"What are you doing?"

"Don't move! I'll bash him with this stick."

Baby Judy sits up in bed, the puppy in a lazy roll standing up, shaking his head. Yawning bleary-eyed.

"I got here just in time. NOW can we get rid of the flea-bag?"

"But he wasn't doing anything! We sleep like that now, which you'd know if you ever came home straight from work, instead of gallivanting around with your buddies all morning."

“I don’t have any co-workers! I sit in a cubicle hanging from a rack off the ceiling, and I’m supposed to watch these monitors all the time and make sure the robots are all working properly. That’s it. Just me and the robots. Twelve hours a night. And then, if I go out for a coffee afterward... well, excuse me for wanting a life...”

A small spot of drool glistens in the hollow of Baby Judy’s neck, which is just Rabbit’s favourite spot on the whole of Baby Judy’s body.

“You shouldn’t keep him in bed like that with you, is all I’m saying. Anything could happen.”

“What are you talking about?” says Baby Judy, absently rubbing the drool into her skin.

“Look, you found him in the hydro slash, right? He’s a wild animal. A feral dog. You never know when he’s gonna remember that.”

“Seems to me he’s never forgotten.”

“Right. So why let him so close to you when you’re..., y’know... vulnerable?”

Baby Judy leaps out of bed, sending the sheets and the puppy flying.

“I’m not vulnerable! I take care of myself. Which is more than I can say for you, living off my parents’ money.”

“Oh, yeah. Throw **that** at me, why don’t you? And where do you think I’ve been, all these nights? Dragging my ass out of bed to sit in a factory full of boxes and robots! Does that sound happy to you? Do you think I’m having a good time? When my chair squeaks, it echoes around that place for five fucking minutes. Can you imagine how empty that place can feel? How completely pointless my job is?”

Rabbit disappears back up the stairs and out the door. Spends the morning over a breakfast special at a diner around the corner. The afternoon on a patio, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes.

“If you sit in one place long enough,” he remembers, “you’ll see the whole world pass by.” Or is it “pass you by?”

* * *

Baby Judy perches on the edge of the futon, hooping silver earrings smallest to largest in the smoky reflection of the tv screen. Rabbit stands half-naked in the background, staring off into space like a zombie scarecrow or store mannequin.

That the shirt you’re wearing?” asks Baby Judy.

“Hmn?” Rabbit tries to focus his sun-blasted and beerstained eyes in the subterranean darkness of the apartment. A giant spider with aluminum legs and a Formica shell creeping out of the gloom in the kitchen. The outline of a human hand on the greasy wall. *“evidence of missing link found in apartment! news at 11.”*

“What did you say?” he asks the pile of laundry sulking in the corner.

“Change your shirt before we go.”

Rabbit zooms in on Baby Judy through the blood clots, the radiation burns of his corneas. *a beautiful stranger. a fairy wand. what is she doing in the fuckup mess of my life?*

What’s wrong with my shirt?” is all he manages to say.

“The lint shows. Remember?”

Rabbit remembers. Moon faces afloat in air heavy like water above the bar.

Mandibles of light from exoskeletal artwork singled out anyone on the dancefloor not

shod in black. Turned things like lint into a moving target for the Clowns shooting pool by the bathroom door. For the bullyboys who only hit the floor during the thrash numbers. Rabbit remembers. Thinking of something else entirely.

“Oh, yeah! I’ll change. I promise baby I’ll change! It’ll never happen again, I swear. And she meant nothing to me. I don’t even remember her name. You’re all the woman I need now.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Sorry. Too much tv.”

Baby Judy continues chalking her face a fainter shade of decay. Pencils eyes and lips black. Traces the wolflike outline of an extinct tiger from half a world away on her face. A double set of canines etched along her jaw. Rabbit scrounges up another t-shirt from the pile. Falls back on the bed, blood rushing to his heat-cooked brain.

“Are you about ready?” says Baby Judy, working her legs into kevlar stomping boots.

“You sure you wanna go out tonight?” says Rabbit, his stomach still skidding around the walls and ceiling.

Baby Judy can feel the tension in her chest, a vat of stagnant protein solution filling her lungs. Layers of apartment-dwelling starburst fungal spawn itching under her skin. *this is all*, she thinks, *this is all ass-backwards*.

“I’ve got to get out of here, okay? She says, standing up suddenly, twirling around, her outstretched arms nearly brushing all four walls. “I’ve done nothing but work and hang out in this lovely apartment all week. All work and no play... . You can sleep the rest of your fucking life away. I’m gonna dance!”

“What about the dog?” says Rabbit, slipping on some jeans.

“What dog?”

“The one,” says Rabbit, “eating all your make-up.”

“He’s coming with,” says Baby Judy. “He loves me. Unconditionally.”

“I was just thinking, you know,” says Rabbit, as the three of them walk out the door, “That maybe there’s something good on tv or something.”

Tv, thinks Rabbit, loves me. unconditionally.

Rabbit and Baby Judy walk out the apartment and through the rats’ nest of alleyways and derelict houses and abandoned warehouses with windows like broken teeth squatted by tent city spill-over and being renovated by the gypsy youth of the city’s wealthy families. Storefronts filled with reconditioned electronics and Third World handicrafts and sausages the colour of blood.

Baby Judy turns down a street lined with rows of tiny, multi-coloured houses and overgrown lawns ablaze even at night with the gigantic heads of orange and red and yellow and blue and green flowers. Figures lurk in the shadows on porches and between the houses, old couples cuddling discreetly and their slicked-down children standing in little clusters, garden gnomes among the rock gardens and artificial ponds on the lawns not much bigger than a blanket, smoking cigarettes and trying not to make eye contact.

“I’ve never been around here before,” says Rabbit, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

“I love this street,” says Baby Judy, slowing her machine gun pace down a little.

“It’s like a village in the middle of the city. We should live here someday,” she says, taking

Rabbit's arm. "I could have a garden. And I'll bet this would be a good area to raise Tiger. He could play with the other children."

Rabbit tries to imagine living with Baby Judy and the puppy in one of these quaint, one of these candy-coloured houses in this village near the heart of the city. Somewhere to come to at the end of the day. A place to watch tv and stride about in your underwear. And a place to call your own. Where the work you put into something stayed with you past the end of day. *no landlords. no bosses.* Rabbit could wear a tool belt slung low under his belly gone soft with good living, and maybe earn the respect of his thick-wristed, hard-working neighbours. *soft. good living.* Baby Judy falling out of her apron in the kitchen, putting all that energy she spent now in the lab, doing whatever it was she was doing, into baking tasty treats for the kids. Drinking homemade wine from jars with the other men on front porches on warm summer nights like this one right here. Chasing strangers the hell out of the neighbourhood while the rest of the world went straight to hell, boy, I'm telling ya. A place to call home. A place to live in and die in, to be buried in the backyard of and fertilize a patch of vegetables for the pickling jars.

I'm too young to die, thinks Rabbit, a fine sweat breaking out above his lip.

They pass a green patch at a quiet corner, not much bigger than a shopping cart tipped on its side, five spindly trees planted close together for protection. Baby Judy trips through the intersection. A swath of weeds sprouts up as she he passes. Rabbit and the puppy trail along behind. The puppy, nose to the ground, sniffs danger first. The scent of violence, mixed with rare minerals and the spice of old forests plowed under acres of concrete.

Someone yells at them from behind, from a blind spot near the cluster of spindly trees.

“We want your boots!” is what someone yells.

Five tall figures, five beanpoles in armour, step into the street. Faces thin as daggers glow in the ambient light from porches and streetlamps. Barbed wire and finely worked chainmail stitched to leather jackets.

“We want your boots.” someone yells in a high, magic voice. The five beanpoles, the five throwing spears with metal blades, cast moonbeams on the sidewalk. Sparkle like fairy dust on a mad summer’s evening..

Rabbit feels a spasm run along his spine. The muscles in his legs cinch up for a quick getaway burst of speed. A sprint down the rest of street, to the bustle and riot at the next intersection, where the crowds look like bright ants. Safety in numbers.

The five spearheads glide up behind them. Rabbit tries to burst down the street, a fine shot of adrenaline filling the hollows of his legs. Tries to take Baby Judy with him, But she pulls back mid-bolt, strangling a shout in his throat.

“You can keep the boy,” one sings out in a musical flute of a voice.

“Relax,” Baby Judy whispers, squeezing Rabbit’s hand. “I can handle this. You like these boots?” she says to the five approaching weapons. “You can have them. A gift from me to you.”

The five stop. Rabbit can hear them talking, like music on a winter’s day.

“A gift? Hmm. Damn, that’s clever.”

“What was it Oberon used to say?” says one.

“Yeah, yeah, I remember all this,” says another.

“Never look a gift horse...”

“No, no, it’s ‘a gift from a ...’”

“Those warnings weren’t meant for us, they were about us.”

“A bird in the hand’s worth...”

“Every cloud has a...”

The leader steps towards Rabbit and Baby Judy, something small and silver shining in his hand.

“Besides,” he says, “you can’t give away what you trade for your life.”

The puppy smells compost of pine needles. The scent of mad hermits living by the shores of underground rivers. He stretches out the slack in the leash. Sniffs the shattered boots of the lead spearboy moving beautifully up the sidewalk, a reed blowing in the wind. The puppy hikes his hind leg up and lets out a squirt of urine on a shattered boot.

Spearboy looks down at his boot, wet toes poking through the cloth. Looks at the puppy. At Rabbit and Baby Judy, rooted to the pavement. And laughs, icicles piercing Rabbit’s eardrums.

“That’s a beautiful puppy,” he says. “You take good care of him now.”

Spearboy retreats with his gang back up the street, towards the patch of grass twinkling in the moonlight.

“Jesus,” says Rabbit. “My heart’s beating like a hummingbird.”

Baby Judy looks at Rabbit. At his dry lips. Fearsparkled eyes.

“What do you know,” she says, “about hummingbirds?”

“I saw about them on a show once.”

They walk on down the road. A pack of grizzled Clowns roar by on bikes, beating their helmets with baseball bats.

NOW what?

Fae-riies! Come out to pla-aaay!” one of them yells over the roar of his machine.

“Hey! Have you two seen any faeries tonight? We’re gonna kick some pixie ass!”

“And,” says Rabbit, as the pack roars by, “You wanna live here?”

Rabbit and Baby Judy and the puppy walk through crowds of leather jackets and trenchcoats and hats held out and necks bowed by signs that read “WILL WORK FOR FOOD.”

“This is obscene,” says Baby Judy, spinning out of reach of a madwoman trying to sell bubble gum. “Every year, it’s the same thing, only a little bit worse.”

“It’s a slaughterhouse, all right,” says Rabbit.

“I should give them the key to daddy’s castle.”

Rabbit looks at Baby Judy. *a castle*, he thinks. *that would explain a lot.*

“Does he really live in a castle?”

“Well, it’s not a castle, exactly. But it seems that way, what with all the towers and secret passages and hidden rooms and the servants, and him always holed up in his tower like a mad wizard of money or something. Counting his cash all day and night, on top of all those rooms stuffed with, like, bowling trophies and pornography. Mementos of his youth, I guess. I mean, at least those people would actually live in all that space, instead of just letting it go to rot.”

“Maybe,” says Rabbit, visions of turrets and cloisters and sliding panels and secret passageways and rooms with tapestries and four-poster beds dancing in his head, “maybe we should move in with him...”

“What? Traitor!” screams Baby Judy, several heads turning to look at the tall, beautiful madwoman with a puppy on a leash and the skeleton of a young man standing beside her.

“But we could really live there, too. Think of it, all those empty rooms just begging for a quick fix-up. We could knock down walls. Recondition fireplaces. Build a staircase that doesn’t go anywhere! You could have a laboratory, and I could have...”

“What? What could you have?”

“Space, goddammit. And something to do with it.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this. After everything I’ve told you about what that man did to me. And to my mother.”

“But don’t you see, if there can be anything in that castle, then the castle must have anything. How do you know your tiger is really extinct? Maybe your father’s got a pair of them trained to bring him a fresh martini any time he rings a little silver bell.”

“Yeah, well. I guess we’ll never know.”

“So you don’t wanna go back? Even for a visit?”

“I won’t give him anything to hold over me.”

“But he already does! He pays for your school, and without that you’d have to work all the time. And if you did that, you wouldn’t be as far ahead as you are now. He’s been paying for so long, it’s like you think it’s an income or something. Like anyone outside the university gives a flying fuck about all the work you’ve done. But it’s him

buying the bread and butter, and putting you through university. But make no mistake about it, he's putting you through school, you're not earning it. He would never let that happen. And he doesn't give a damn if it's genetic research or art restoration. You could be designing suicide pills for street kids for all he cares. But just try missing one Christmas, one birthday, and see what happens. With one call to his cheque signer you'd be on this sidewalk with a toy chemistry set, mixing up cleaning solvents and hairspray for any mad bastard with a gleam in his eye and a fiver in his pants."

"No," says Baby Judy, crushing a cigarette in her hand.

"Yes," says Rabbit, blood rising in his dry-as-dust cheeks.

"Not for much longer. What with my scholarship now, and your paycheque, we should be free of my father this year."

"Yeah, well. About that..."

"Oh, what? Cold feet now that things are going a little better"

"But don't you see? We're not really any better off than before. Except now I've got to kill time in that warehouse all week. To make slightly less money than your old man sends us now. I gotta keep my boss happy, rather than your dad. But it's not like we're actually getting ahead. Just marking time, really. Falling a little further behind each month, until we're too old to work."

"Once I complete my research..."

Rabbit thinks about Baby Judy completing her research. About awards and diplomas and the talk shows and phone calls from the president of the Tasmanian Tiger Fan Club. About flocks of beautiful boys around the window to their basement bachelor apartment, just waiting for Rabbit to go off to work.

“Yeah, but don’t you see? Once you finish your work you’ll be somebody. And it’s your Daddy’s money that’s given you that chance, despite whatever he may have been planning. All I’m saying is, I want that same chance to actually do something, y’know?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno! But I’ll bet I could find out in that house. He must have all kinds of really cool stuff in there. Computers. Video cameras. A weight room. Who knows” Maybe I was born to be a tv director. Or a professional athlete. I’ve just never had the opportunity to find out. Access to the means of production...”

“‘Means of production!’ Where did you pick that up?”

“I’ve always said that!” says Rabbit. “Tv isn’t just game shows and infomercials, y’know. I watch educational programs, too.”

“I know you do, dear. And that’s wonderful. But what makes you think living at my father’s would really be any different? What would you be able to produce in that... that mausoleum of indifference? At least when you’re working you’re closer to most people’s lived experience, instead of playing squire at the castle. At least at the factory you’ve got steady hours to anchor you to the real world. And a paycheque you earn, doing whatever it is exactly you do.”

“Well, not any more.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“The boss came through the other night. Said I was so out of it watching tv he could have walked out of there with one of those robots under his arm.”

“so what are you going to do now?”

“Fuck ‘em! I mean, what do they expect for minimum wage?”

“Poor baby. I’m sorry.”

“On the plus side,” says Rabbit with a nod and a wink, “I guess I can take my place in bed again.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

“Anyway. We better not fuck your old man up just yet.”

“Yeah. Besides, we can’t just think about ourselves any more.”

“No? Why not?”

“Well, we’ve got a puppy now. What if something happens to us? Who’d look after him? This is not a world,” says Baby Judy, standing among the broken bits of humanity on the sidewalk, “that is kind to puppies. I’m putting aside some of the scholarship. Just in case.”

Visions, of mad dogs and Swiss bankers, roll through Rabbit’s head. Of the puppy living up in the castle. Of Rabbit sitting in a cardboard box down by the river, eating toxic jelly pies.

“‘Just in case’ what? I’m telling you that everything is happening right now, that this is the moment that will make or break the rest of my life.”

A three-legged monster staggers and hops snarling out of a garbage nest at the end of a blind alley. Shredded ears like war banners flapping in the charge. Broken jaw dripping acid, the spawn of urban decay lunges at the two sticks of meat locked in his tunnel vision. But something, the madness eating into the dog’s brain, maybe, or the imbalance of a three-legged hop, or just some random tilt of the planet throws the dog off

its charge. The beast staggers into the street. Is squashed under the tires of a monster truck.

“Because maybe, just maybe,” Rabbit continues, “this puppy will outlive us, and need some extra cash in his old age. Well, I’ll tell you,” says Rabbit, lighting another extra-strength cigarette, “that may just come true, the way things are going. We’re really hurting, in case you haven’t noticed. Dogs survive. That’s what they do. I’m the one who needs some help. Right now.”

“I’ll say you are.”

Baby Judy dances. Baby Judy dances on the heads of pins and across the starspangled floor and down in the Melancholy Grotto with the vampires and blood dolls. She dances around the triple-stacked speakers and the drinking booths and the tvs suspended by chains broadcasting plastic surgery disasters. Baby Judy dances in the exact geographic center of the dance floor, from where, to north and south and east and west, the dance club and the City and the whole rest of the world falls away. Wraps itself into a tight little ball hung in space, spinning under the heels of baby Judy’s rubber-soled boots. Baby Judy thrashes alone at the center of the world.

Rabbit sits in a booth and drinks dark beer from a bottle. Tiger stripes of light stalk the walls around him. He watches Baby Judy slam around in the center of a mass of shadowy figures. Baby Judy looks long and lean in the sharp halogen spotlights that follow her gyrations in the middle of a pack of admirers. Her canines shine. Her face glows like a beacon to all the lovely, damned boys haunting the corners and the Grotto. Reaching out to her for a quick spark of her flame burning bright and intense. The boys pale in the aura

of her glow. Shrink back from her pirouettes at the heart of their industrial-feedback worship. *she's beautiful. she's alien.*

Rabbit has another beer. The tiger stripes turn to leopard spots, and chase each other around the room. Some of the boys on the floor have stripped off their shirts. Faces dark from shadows like war paint. Sweat runs down their bodies and hangs in the air like a curtain of blood.

The beer in Rabbit's belly turns to poison as he sits, running shoes glued to the beersplashed floor. Rabbit watches Baby Judy out on the dance floor, wrapped in a cloak of glory, while he sits forgotten in a corner, the puppy chewing the lining out of Baby Judy's bomber jacket. The stream of music in Rabbit's head runs against the current of noise from the dance floor.

“What's a cowboy to do,” he sings, “when he's feeling sad and blue?”

and what the hell am i doing here? in a roomful of people who never worked a day in their life? Rabbit looks closer at the faces of the pretty people. At their well fed, buttery smooth skin. Touches the pouches under his eyes, too much tv watched in dim rooms. Too many quarters wasted on video games at the arcade. *lucky bastards. they don't understand,* he thinks, *how lucky they are to be here. luck. unsuffering, unfeeling machines of joy. and they get to go home and be fixed when they break.*

Rabbit scratches a post-adolescent zit and orders another beer. *i got sidetracked somewhere along the line. but where?* Rabbit broods over lost youth. Missed opportunities. Ships sailing out of port without him. Rabbit paints himself a portrait of a young dreamer, self-confident, and a hard-on for the Big Adventure, sitting half-asleep now in the polluted lung of this beast of a city. Rabbit tries to cry a single tear for all the

lost and confused scattered around a planet of gas stations and warehouses and roach-infested motel rooms, but mostly just for himself. *i could have been*, he thinks, *a contender.*

Doublestacked speakers squall out industrial feedback and songs of angst revolution. Weak eyes stare out from masks in the smoke-filled darkness. Baby Judy spins, cutting a space open in the mass of dancers with long, strong-swinging arms thrust out like blades. The crowd is thinning out, the disappointed glory boys and nightmare heroes spilling out of the club and into a rat alley lined with pick-up bars and all night coffee shops. Rabbit dumps his pockets out onto the table. Fishes enough small change out of the tangle of string and matches and desiccated tobacco to order a beer for last call. *and one for the dead.*

But wet lips brush his ear. Baby Judy leans into rabbit's collapsed form in the booth. The touch of her body sends a thrill up his spine, He barely resists the temptation to reach out between the bars of his isolation and make contact.

"Come on," says Baby Judy. "Let's dance."

okay. but I won't like it.

Baby Judy pulls Rabbit off the beersticky floor by the wrist. Leads him into the center of the shrinking press of dance, the small engine still pumping some energy into the after-hours club.

Bitter juices climb up Rabbit's throat and burn in the spot where Baby Judy once told him his heart was. Baby Judy gets swept up in the orbit of the other dancers, and

Rabbit is left to stomp along with a blood doll and boys boys in motorcycle boots. One boot lands on Rabbit's canvas-shod foot, and he starts to limp off the dancefloor.

But a long, strong arm reaches out from the mass of dancing pistons and grabs Rabbit's neck. Baby Judy pulls Rabbit back into the machinery. She clasps him by the neck. Starts spinning there, the faces of the other dancers and the dark corners, the broken bottles and empty cigarette packs and vacant booths and the little silver stars on the floor all wheeling by. The bitter acid in his system burns all the way up to the back of Rabbit's mouth, as his feet lift off the earth. Rabbit feels like an astronaut stuck in an impossibly high orbit above an alien, beautiful and fertile planet as he tries to pull himself closer to Baby Judy. Rabbit looks into her madly shining eyes. Sees galaxies of suns and moons and planets and asteroid belts suspended in space. Starships exploding on the lips of black holes. Planetary gravities, the near vacuum of outer space pulls Rabbit in closer, onto the deck of a wooden ship afloat in the Milky Way. Rabbit pulls closer. Sees with new eyes the prospect of a million points of light off the bow, clusters of stars leaping across space like a giant, world-consuming tiger. And Baby Judy beside him.

Until he collides with her. Rabbit jerks back to the dance club, and the sick and dying night. The spinning stops, and he and Baby Judy tumble to the floor. Rabbit slams into Baby Judy as the sour poisons shoot out his mouth and into the crowd. Rabbit and Baby Judy lie in a pile on a constellation of little silver stars. They can't hear themselves laugh over the sound of cutting steel from the double-stacked speakers. Rabbit looks up from the floor. Sees pipejeaned legs jammed into largeheeled motorcycle boots, the dark spume of his stomach acid shining dully on the leather as the angry boots close in around them. Baby Judy is up off the floor and pulling Rabbit away from the buzzing circle of

dancers. She scoops the sleeping puppy out of the booth. They bolt down the bar and out past the looming bouncers, into the rat alley and the streets towards home. Rabbit feels better than he has since he can't remember when.

* * *

Three Clowns stood around a cairn of white rocks at the side of the highway. One Clown angled a bronzed muffler into the cairn. Blew a few sad notes on a harmonica. Another Clown wept. The Third Clown stayed a little ways off, looking up and down the highway. The asphalt ran straight and smooth between drainage ditches. The bark of silver woodlot trees twinkled in the sunlight. A granite outcrop glowed warm and brown in the hydro slash. *What here*, the Third Clown thought, *what here drove Humpty's bike off the road. Into that there ditch?*

Big wet yellow stain of urine on the sheets. A small pile of shit bleeding brown through the covers, into the cotton batting of the futon itself. The puppy sits up in the window, eye-level with the alley outside as Rabbit's red sneakers slap up to the door. Liquid headlight eyes follow Rabbit down the stairs and into the apartment. Rabbit turns on the small black and white tv and tosses his sneakers into a corner of the bed-sitting room. Adjusts the antenna and collapses back onto the futon. Props his head up and watches the relic of a tv set:

“... and coming up next, City Works says it's garbage in the street and a threat to our Way of Life, but this self-righteous sonofabitch from the Institute says it's art. Only 'Hard Core' lets you be the judge...”

“What the fuck is this?”

Rabbit rolls off the futon, the stink of spent dogfood wafting up behind him. Rabbit rolls onto his feet, and sees the imprint of his back and the spikes of his hair in the wet mess of sheets. *oh hell. you.* Rabbit grabs for the crouching bundle of fur and teeth in crouched in the windowsill. Rabbit reaches, and the puppy leaps, all four claws wrapping around Rabbit's wrist. Rabbit's thumb scrapes along the roof of the puppy's mouth as razor-sharp, too-short puppydog teeth grind against the skin and ones of Rabbit's hand. Rabbit knocks the furious puppy puppet against all four walls. Drags it across the countertop that separates the kitchen from the living space, beer bottles and candle ends and ashtrays smashing to the floor. Tries to flush the mad puppy down the toilet. Finally peels it off with the stiff neck of Baby Judy's reading lamp, and tosses it into the sheets. Ties the four corners together, and leaves the whole writhing, stinking mess in Baby Judy's closet. *It's about time we settled,* he thinks, *we settled who's top dog here.* Rabbit falls asleep soaking in a hot bath, a still-burning cigarette staining his fingers yellow.

"What have you done!" Baby Judy yells when she gets home from the lab.

Rabbit spends the night with a blanket on the floor, dreams of sugar-plum fairies screaming in his head.

Rabbit and Baby Judy trip downtown one fine summer day, hand in hand and puppy in tow, to mingle with the mass of people in the streets. To feel the press of people on the sidewalks. Baby Judy ducks into a fetish shop to buy Tiger a new collar. Rabbit watches a pirate busker atop a mailbox sing songs of love, accompanied by a monkey with a lute. Three Clowns ride by on a chrome motorcycle, chasing the most beautiful boy in the world through the crowd, past pavilion tents where Citizens sit protected from the

ultraviolet rays. Pennants snap in the air, in sharp hues of blue, of gold, of green. The beautiful boy dodges between the pegs of two tents. Darts and flicks under the struts of a barbecue stand. Spurts into the crowd and disappears. Forever.

Baby Judy leads Tiger out of the shop on the end of a leash that matches her earrings, iron melted down from old coffin nails. Rabbit and Baby Judy and Tiger watch the whirl and flash, the bump and grind, of the crowd. Rabbit sucks coffee out of a vacuum-sealed box. Tiger licks himself between his legs. A scarecrow street artist asks Baby Judy to pose for him.

“Could you, like, step out of my frame?” the chalker says to Rabbit.

“That’s a beautiful puppy,” he says to Baby Judy.

Rabbit stands in a clear spot of sidewalk, trying to pick out individuals from the quilt patchwork of the crowd. A wash of jackets and pants and skirts and headbands.

From the center of the square, amidst tents and market stalls filled with surplus produce from the victory gardens and window boxes of city dwellers lucky enough to find soil relatively free of lead and battery acid to raise crops, Rabbit catches sight of some commotion.

Baby Judy and Tiger stroll over to Rabbit, both their pink tongues lapping up a cherry snow-cone.

“What’s that?” says Rabbit.

Baby Judy looks over the heads of the crowd and the tents.

“Hey cool!” she says. “It’s art!”

Rabbit and Baby Judy and Tiger squeeze through the muscle of the crowd. Into the festival square, where riot police in plastic armour mount barricades around a spinning

thirty foot column of bright shiny bits of paper and metal that could have been collected from garbage dumpsters or picked from the teeth of sewer grates. That could have been carefully orchestrated into this seeming random, seeming ordered vortex. Or could have been blown here by some wind shaken loose from the hurricane cones that whip around the bases of the monster office towers downtown.

Metal flashes. Colored print on junk food bags and soda cans and foil wrappers blink on and off. Bombard baby Judy's eyes as she tries to focus on any one changing spot. Baby Judy steps back to take in the whole. Small points of light that dance and chime in harmony, spun by the wind's shifty hand. *a pattern. out of which comes what? a flight of birds? a fire-escape? a strand of DNA?*

"I know what it is," says Baby Judy. "It's 'The Ladder of Life.'"

Rabbit looks at the blowing pile of garbage. Foil still greasy from the food stalls that ring the square.

"Whaddya mean, 'what it's called?'" says Rabbit. "It's trash."

Tiger stretches out to the end of his leash.

"What it is doesn't matter," says Baby Judy. "It's what it signifies."

Rabbit looks at Baby Judy. A fine tremor of tension snakes up the leash and into her fingers.

"Signify? It's a pile of garbage! It **signifies** that our union brothers in the sanitation department are spending all their time mowing the lawns for City Families, rather than picking up the trash downtown."

Tiger nips a shiny piece of metal from the lattice, and swallows it down. A bottle cap slips out of the center of the vortex to take its place.

“Beauty,” says Baby Judy, “is in the eye of the beholder.”

Rabbit holds Baby Judy in his eye. Sees the concrete reality of her knee-high patent leather stomping boots, rimed with sweat-salt. Of ragged tights slung low like a gunfighter on her child-bearing hips. Flat stomach, flaring up into muscular breasts pushing open a leather riding jacket. Rabbit looks at the hollow between her throat and collarbone. At the planets in her eyes.

“YOU are beautiful,” he says. “THAT is garbage.”

Planets smash.

“Oh, fuck off,” says the beautiful Baby Judy, and pulls the still biting, catching, eating puppy out from beneath the police barricade.

Tiger zygotes hang suspended in a vat of amniotic fluid. Baby Judy raps the side of the glass. Nothing. Stirs the foul smelling soup into a vortex of greasy bubbles. *Maybe I could write up the methodology*, she thinks.

Her professor returns from a conference to find a vat sitting on the floor, Tiger eggs floating in an aquarium kingdom. A pink castle and pirate chests and deep-sea divers resting on a spray of multi-coloured gravel.

Baby Judy stretches out on top of the sheets, dank heat covering her skin in a film of sweat. Tiger sniffs around outside the window, at a pile of glossy ashes that had been Baby Judy’s journals. Growls at Rabbit as he walks up the alley, into the apartment.

“What’s the matter, babe? You don’t look so good.”

“Come to bed, Rabbit.”

“I’ve stopped taking the pills,” she says.

“Tough day at work?”

“I just can’t seem to make anything turn out right.”

The whole earth lifted up and shook itself under the neighbourhood. Windows fell closed and broke. Foundations shifted. The surface of the community center swimming pool broke into a riot of vibrating waves as lifeguards blew whistles and parents pulled children from the water. The pensioner in the room upstairs burst through the front door.

“Time to be a hero, son. The gas main at Shady Grove Mall just blew up.”

Back at the patch of grass, dogs skid round their owners. Tiger stands alert, legs spread, between Baby Judy and the circling pack. Snaps at any body or thing that comes too close. Baby Judy lurks around the small talk.

“That is such a darling baby!” says one person to the blushing bride. “What’s his name?”

“Nigel.”

“Nigel?” says another, never seen before or since, “why the fuck did you give him a name like Nigel? Why don’tcha call him, like, Bones for Teeth, or The River That Flows to the Sea, or something? That the other kids won’t make fun of.”

Baby Judy looks at the infant swaddled in its blanket..

“Can you get them with stripes?” she asks.

“What do you mean?” Says the new mother, wrapping her only son in her sheltering arms. “Why are you people acting so weird tonight? What kind of a freak wants a striped baby? ‘Bone For Teeth? What the hell are you thinking?’”

A long low moan builds up from somewhere in the patch of green. Tiger tilts his head back and lets out a great howl, that carries across the open space, that echoes in the stands of office towers around them. The other dogs stop chasing their tails. Stop playing dead or fetching the same damn rubber ball for their idiot masters. A chorus of howls surround the office workers and apartment dwellers standing with their leashes limp in their hands. Spreads out over the city, chasing the timid back indoors.

“Full moon,” says Baby Judy.

Tiger looks back over the pack. Watches Lunchpail mount Chapter Two while their owners stare off into space. Something inside of him stirs.

Baby Judy sits spread-eagle on the futon, a sweaty sheet collapsed between her thighs. *Mountains of the moon*, thinks Rabbit. *captain sir richard francis burton searches for the source of the nile*. Rabbit traces the hard muscles in Baby Judy’s calf with the tip of his finger. Follows an old scar to her knee. Runs his hand along the inside of her thigh. Feels sweat spike up into his spear grass hair. *Dear queen vickie, secret admirer of my Perfumed Garden. Contrary to reports, the savanna remains hot and humid at night. May I touch your tits, your majesty?*

A sudden weight pushes Rabbit’s face into the damp futon.

“What’s the matter? Why did you stop?” says Baby Judy.

Rabbit knocks the sudden weight off the back of his head. Rolls onto the hot floor in a tangle of sheets. Tiger crouches by baby Judy's side of the futon, staring at Rabbit lying on the floor. Rabbit rolls onto his hands and knees, his testosterone-gorged body ready to pounce, like the puma, like the cobra set free from its cage.

"That fucking dog," says Rabbit.

Rabbit looks at Tiger. At two glaring headlights for eyes. Rabbit stares. Tiger stares. A shiver runs through the silver spines of fur under Tiger's muzzle, and Rabbit looks away from the suddenly half-grown, well-muscled puppy they had brought home. Tiger steps onto the futon. Rests himself sphinx-like in the hollow of sheets between Baby Judy's legs. Watches Rabbit stand up off the floor.

"Oh," says Baby Judy.

Rabbit, head down, his penis tucked between his legs like a beaten dog's tail, slinks off to the bathroom to pee.

A pack of hoar-grey wolves chased along a moose trail, past standing islands of pine and jagged hills that burned with the campfires of hunters and faeries and the hut of a mad hermit by the ancient shoreline of a dead sea.

Summer turned to fall in FreeCity, and the nicotine patch of sky lifted back up above the observation decks on the office towers downtown. Baby Judy went back to work, preparing notes on her failed experiment for the thesis committee. Rabbit got a job cleaning the windows of the tequila shops and gun shops and cheese shops that catered to

the neighbourhood residents and the shut-ins in the lowrises scattered like broken teeth through this anonymous village lost in the wash of the city.

On his days off Rabbit would head downtown, and watch the office tower jocks maneuver their cleaning platforms down the gold sides of fifty-storey buildings. Rabbit dreamt that one day he, too, would work high up above the close-pressed smog of traffic and steaming manhole covers. In company-blazed jumpsuit and “Fifty-Storey Man” tattooed on his bicep. Tiger followed Rabbit on his cleaning circuit, and Rabbit would unleash the growing dog and let the elven street urchins play with him in the alleys behind the shops. And would barely wrestle the muzzle back on when Tiger leapt at the cops riding by on horseback. Rabbit worked hard on the ground-level shop windows, until the fumes rising from the bucket of cleaning solvents shut down one of his lungs.

Back at the apartment, Tiger would stand guard under Baby Judy’s chair as she worked on her notes at the kitchen table. Baby Judy would slap the growing dog away each time he tried to hump her leg. Rabbit moped around, nursing his one good lung, saving his breath for the cigarettes he smoked whenever Baby Judy left the apartment. At night, Tiger slept between Rabbit and Baby Judy, and dreamed of the ravines that ran through the city like green arteries. Rabbit would wake up with angry welts down his side where the dreaming dog’s paws had scraped against his ribs.

During the day now, as leaves died and piled against the one window looking out of the apartment, Rabbit would tie the growing dog to the fire-escape outside their door. Twice more a day, Rabbit would wheeze his way back up those steps to feed Tiger meat in a skull-shaped dish that Rabbit had once used for an ashtray. Tiger would down that gelatin pudding in one good swallow, then roll his hunter’s eyes around the alley, looking

for more, like Rabbit's red sneakers, or the homeless people who, after the fire, wrapped themselves up like sausages in old newspapers and slept between the doorways and garbage dumpsters. In the evenings Rabbit would stand near Tiger as he choked down his food, and smoke a final cigarette while the sky turned crimson as the sun set through a lingering cloud of dust from a volcano erupted half a world away.

Rabbit spent the rest of the time in bed, eating mock-chicken soup and watching tv.

Hunger made the growing dog's eyes shine bright, so that sometimes in the middle of the day Rabbit could see Tiger watching him through the leaves that clogged the window. Peering into dark corners, and following Rabbit as he shuffled around the bed-sitting room. Flushing out prey.

"I don't think Tiger should sleep with us anymore," Rabbit says one day.

"Why not?"

"Because he thinks I'm food."

"Well, says Baby Judy, "In a way, you are."

The leash tied to the fire-escape was the constant boundary of the growing dog's terrain. He would lie in wait among the trash and leaves, and leap on whatever trespassers strayed inside his perimeter. It was the free-range rats and alley cats that made his fur grow long and shiny with silver tips as sharp as spear grass. The growing dog's muscles hardened, until the tired iron of the fire-escape would bend just a bit if he strained enough at the leash.

Rabbit's lung healed slowly.

"Maybe the problem is, you two don't spend enough quality time together," suggests Baby Judy.

"I took him along on my job."

"That's not quality time. That's selfish time. You were thinking only about yourself, not about what he would like."

Rabbit and Tiger head out of the neighbourhood block of lowrise apartment buildings and tequila shops. Tiger sniffs out a street-level tunnel into one of the ravines that are the living green arteries to FreeCity's fibrillating heart.

Rabbit and Tiger step out of the concrete drainage tunnel, into a rat's nest of bushes and scrub trees rising up around them. Straight up to the foundations of office towers whose skeletal I-beams and glass sides arch over their heads, a signal pane sky the keystone to a mirrored dome. The glass walls of the office towers absorb what little sunlight penetrates into the fishbowl capping the ravine, drawing energy out of rays that are finally as stripped of substance as the baked earth that the jungle of weeds takes root in. Rabbit's gaze lights on the tower rooftops, false islands in a grey wave of blue sea sky. Forests of television and radio and satellite and cellular transmission antennae ring the rooftop island bases. Groves of hard-wiring droop with information ripe to be plucked from ever-blooming data stems and consumed whole, the juices running down your chin.

Old, old eyes coldly watched waiting, this feral trickle of weeds the last running sore of once-rich soil earthy black loam decay of ancient trees a fertile womb of forests and streams through rock. White water running, earth cut deep to volcanic underbelly of fire-

hardened glass. Decay of bones thick oozing pools of tar the bottom of a once storm-tossed sea. Wanderers with houses of skins passed fleet through spirits of tall trees, bodies once born returned again to pot. Strangers wrapped in disease blankets who wielded and hewed and hacked and hauled through the great forest, sowing disciplined rows of crops in the black nurturing loam of ancient decay.

Tiger jerks and chokes at the end of his steel cable. Vapour creeps over Rabbit's shoes and up his pants. Licks the bristles under Tiger's muzzle, a sulphur-rich stink of decay from the unclaimed corpses of FreeCity's trickle-down economics rotting quickly, the heat of decay turning this once snowbound ravine into a complex semi-tropical ecosystem in this city of nuclear winters. Tiger lashes and gashes at the tendrils of vapour that creep through the weeds, the thousand arms of a giant green octopus starving in the bushes.

Eyes penetrating, the crimson blood-dot of Rabbit's beating heart barely registers through the swirl of warm vapours. It licks its lips in anticipation, a long red tongue combing bristles of grey fur, sharp as spears, under a broken jaw. But that other heart signature, low to the ground? A crimson storm consuming the other's hummingbird palpitations into its own great fireball. Old, old eyes watch from a bush as that fireball detaches from the other feeble presence, and leaps at a third signature emerging from the cold wash of vapour.

Tiger almost snaps his leash, leaping at a jogger suddenly come upon them from out of nowhere. Rabbit's running shoes skid on gravel as Tiger pulls him up the path after the jogger, until the jogger spins around and tosses an evil-looking canister in their direction. The pepper spray disperses through the heavy, moist air, but is still concentrated enough by the time it hits Rabbit and Tiger to knock them reeling into the bushes by the side of the path.

Tiger bolts through the undergrowth, a swarm of hornets filling his eyes and ears and nose and throat. Rabbit sits down on the path, the leash playing out of his hands. Weeps.

Tiger crashes through the bushes, biting and snapping at the hot pain in his face. Slips on an exposed root worn smooth by generations of passing feet. Tumbles into a patch of mud, earth kept wet by a constant leak from a cemented-over and long-since buried stream at the bottom of the ravine. Rolls in the patch, cool wet earth drawing the stings from the spray's residue. Tiger gulps in great, muscular breaths of air. Looks around for something to vent his rage on. To bite and tear and sunder. Sees a pair of eyes staring at him from some bushes. A strange new breeze blows from those bushes, those eyes. Tangles in Tiger's wet fur. Scratches him under the skin. The scent of running water and wind-blown pine. Chest-high snow and mountain flowers. And something else, too. The fear-tainted blood of prey chased through dark forests and across frozen seas.

Pepper tears flush down Rabbit's face, leaving welts that will take months to heal. With swollen, bloodshot eyes Rabbit tries to follow the trail of Tiger's leash as it snakes off the path and into the bush. Branches and roots tangle around Rabbit's feet, tangling him up where the young dog had found a clear path. Rabbit stumbles through the bleary

wash of green and brown bushes, the occasional strip of newspaper or bright tin can the only marker to flag a route. Deeper into the undergrowth.

Why, he asks himself, am I doing this? It's not like he would do the same for me. better just to turn away now. put an end to it. My life could be my own again. And so could...

Rabbit trips on the same smooth root that sent Tiger stumbling, and finds himself in the mud, looking up at the outlines of two large animals as they seem to melt and separate, warily circling each other. Rabbit wipes some of the fetid water out of his eyes. Clears his sight enough to see the young dog and a throw rug of fur sniffing under each other's tails. Locking eyes, not in alpha male combat but something else. After months of silence, with not a bark of protest or pleasure, a low whine passes between Tiger's black, rubbery lips.

Rabbit raises his eyes again, and looks into the rancid face of the greybeard. Sees there some of what Tiger had also seen, dancing fires and the stone hovel of a mad hermit. Feels himself drawn in, pulled out of the ravine at the heart of the City. Into a deep wood by the shore of a frozen lake. Fleeing down a moonlit trail, the jaws of something fast and hungry snapping at his heels. *what*, Rabbit wonders, from somewhere in the back of his mind, *is that smell?* But the greybeard, hearing some sound in the bushes, feeling a subterranean tremor, stops its advance on the prone Rabbit. Turns, and disappears up the side of the ravine.

Rabbit is left staring at the young dog. At his pistons for legs. At the fullness of the muscles in his chest. The bright silver pins of his fur. *that's my boy.*

Tiger looks at Rabbit lying in the mud. At his small shivering frame wrapped in denim and leather. Black slivers of hair matted to his head. Eyes swollen red from weeping. Tiger turns and, looking once over his shoulder, bounds up the side of the ravine after the greybeard... drops and gags as the collar slams his windpipe shut, the weight of a patent leather stomping boot anchoring the free end of the leash.

“Hey, guys! Thought I’d join you. Have you bonded yet?”

“Look what I brought,” she says, reaching into a pocket. “Zucchini!”

Rabbit and Baby Judy and Tiger sit on a grassy patch a little ways off the path, eating strips of zucchini and watching the play of sky overhead. Rabbit looks over at Baby Judy’s thighs, and at her arms bared in the ravine’s false summer. Purplish blood trickles out of old paper cuts.

“You need to eat meat.”

“I love this stuff,” says Baby Judy, pulling green skin back from the pulp.

“But look at those cuts. You’re wounds aren’t healing.”

Tiger steps over the reclining Rabbit. Stands between Baby Judy’s bent legs. Baby Judy and Tiger look each other square in the eye. Baby Judy sees again the bright light that would shine sometimes under the sheets as she and Rabbit played on the futon. Tiger lowers his head and, with long red tongue, starts to lap up the purple blood oozing out of the tears in baby Judy’s skin.

“That’ll get infected,” says Rabbit, turning away. “Dog spit is poisonous to people.”

“That’s not true! Dogs have incredibly clean mouths. People have dirty mouths. They’re so poisonous they’re weapons. Besides, Tiger isn’t a dog. He’s a wolf.”

“A wolf? You sure can pick ‘em.”

“Jealous?”

Baby Judy finished her article on the failed experiment, and the unemployed Rabbit’s lungs finally healed, and he spent his days in the apartment, watching tv. Twice a day he carried Tiger’s food out to the alley, where the young dog stayed leashed to the fire-escape. In the sharp fall evenings Rabbit walked Tiger around the neighbourhood. And Tiger would follow a million scents along broken concrete and into traffic. Tiger would leap at passers-by who strayed too close, his muscles stretching out long and fine until the choke chain snapped him back to earth. Predatory eyes shone out at them from alleys and doorways and trash cans. But Tiger passed on, indifferent to these flickers of hunger and hatred from dark corners.

The first sticking snow of winter covered the sleeping dog in a single night, but Tiger made himself a small cave out of shredded cardboard piled against the side of the building, and every morning he seemed stronger and sharper when he stepped out to take Rabbit’s food. The welts along Rabbit’s side healed.

On moon-filled nights, Tiger would sit back on his haunches and watch the tracings of light play out on the wall across the alley. The moon cast a fine web, a map sketched out in dust, veins of light that burned into the young dog’s eyes. Each moonlit night the growing spark of animal intelligence glowed a little brighter as that web imprinted itself on the young dog’s mind.

The old iron of the fire-escape had finally pulled clear of the brick wall, and Tiger played at the end of his leash, the metal anchor a toy, a spring that would pull back sharply as Tiger exploded out of his cave and launched himself at whomever drifted by, rolling him back in snow and ice that cut into his fur.

At night, the dream-legs of joggers haunted Tiger. The fleeting of deer. Children in the alley slippery otters on deep-settled snow.

Rabbit and Baby Judy spent Christmas Day at a street party around the whirling ladder of sparkly metal bits that made a beautiful tone when all the candles were lit around its base.

On the coldest night of the year, when the moon cracked and fell to the earth in millions of tiny little pieces, the old iron of the fire-escape twisted and bent around itself until it was one big ball of black anodized metal that blocked Rabbit and Baby Judy's front door. Tiger, bigger than the other dogs that collected on the now-dead swath of neighbourhood grass, almost as big now as the futon where Rabbit and Baby Judy slept, raised his head up out of his snow cave and stared with two cannonballs for eyes at the place where the leash lay buried in the old snow. The shattered moon fell in pieces around him, a bone-white trail against the grime.

Tiger sniffed around the apartment door, the scent of Baby Judy's leather boots still floating in the frigid air. Tiger thinks about the food Rabbit brought him twice a day, in a bowl shaped like a skull. And the walks through the neighbourhood and in the ravine.

But Tiger also thinks about the choke chain that kept him from joggers fleeing like deer between the trees.

Tiger looks through the hoar-frosty window into Rabbit and Baby Judy's apartment. Sees them rolling there in the nest of their futon. Baby Judy climbs on top of Rabbit, and bends there rhythmically, her face toward Rabbit or the wall, but not up, to the gray bristle of fur pushed against the window.

Tiger turns his back on Rabbit and Baby Judy's doorway, cutting the leash with a single swipe from his scimitar-like tail.

Tiger loped steadily out of the alley, down and around the now quiet neighbourhood, past tequila shops and gun shops and cheese shops. The trail of broken moon bits filled in the gaps in the web of light imprinted like a map in the veins of Tiger's eyes. Led him down, into one ravine where vagrants huddled around trashcan fires and dug for small change among the bushes.

The trail of broken moon bits led on through the ravine, heading north up out of the city itself. Tiger walked many miles that night, and many miles night after night, until the ravine finally appeared far outside the city and even the ring of Great Houses and the suburbs that surrounded it, further even than the woodlots and shuddering transformers of the hydro slashes. It was in this new place, a place of pine trees and frozen water, that Tiger ran free under the moonlight, the terror of deer who starved in winter and grew fat on the sweet grass of summer.

Rabbit and Baby Judy hug each other in a snowpile outside their front door. Rabbit holds the severed leash in his hand.

"What happened here?" he asks.

"I don't know either."

“Do you want to make a baby?”

“I’d rather slit a vein.”