

Rumble Hill  
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## ABSTRACT

Rumble Hill

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*Rumble Hill* is a novel set in the future in a small town in the middle of a desert where each year townspeople vote on the ten happiest and ten saddest people in the town. These lists dominate the town's collective imagination. The unnamable narrator has just been named the fourth saddest townspeople and is distraught. He has lost his job working on a tube that snakes through the desert delivering water to the town. He spends his days answering questionnaires that the town sends him about the nature of his sadness. His life changes when he meets the town's painter, who paints portraits of the ten happiest and ten saddest townspeople each year for the town's records, but is creatively blocked. Together, the narrator and the painter decide to subvert the town's happy/sad binary, plunging the town into chaos.

*Rumble Hill* is a novel of skepticism towards language and narrative. It examines the power of naming and styles of expression. It is a novel about climate change and environmental estrangement. It's about the ability of stories and jokes to share otherwise non-communicable truths. It draws inspiration from the clipped, uncanny style of the *English Standard Version* translation of the parables of Jesus, the unfinished novels by Franz Kafka, and Robert Walser's wandering, despondent first-person narrators.

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## First of All

Well, I did not want to tell a story. It was important for me to write just the facts about what happened to me and the type of town I lived in for a book to go on the shelf with the others. I read the other books until I was ready, and I've emulated their aspects. To title, I wrote on my first parchment: *The Sort of Town It Was*. But soon I had to scrap this parchment and begin anew. And then I began anew again and again.

I kept beginning again because I kept accidentally telling a story. By automation I wrote only certain words in a certain way, creating a style and rhetoric. To balance, after writing something in a certain way I then tried writing in an opposite way and then in a third way of neutrality. But each way was wrong in its own way. I paused my writing procedures that I might relax and think for some duration, but while relaxing I began forgetting. Worrying about forgetting caused more forgetting and less relaxing, though I tried even more to relax to compensate. It needed acceptance that I would not be writing just facts and would instead be writing the story of the town and its people and its landscape, and that it was my version of the story among a possible infinity.

I faced these facts and I wrote the story through and I'm finishing now here where it starts. I learned that facts are fruit of changing flavours. I learned that a story is a fogged and leaking tube for facts to flow through. Once a story is done it's a remembrance instead, and our memories are statues poorly placed. Well, let's go. It was the only town I knew well, and I did not know there was another type until everything changed.

## The Sort of Town It Was

The town had a ground of dust that puffed up ankle high at each step. The dust colour depended on the day's light but one could be sure the colour was always burnt. The air was hot and thin, swishing lightly against anyone. One road was most important, as it was widest and most often repaired. Lining this road were stumps. When I think of the town, I often think instead of myself making my way along this road from a high view, and I seem from this view to progress very slowly, like a first droplet of sweat on a temple. I was small in a small town.

The town was spoken of as having an inside and an outside, separated by the round road. Inside the round, which we called Town Square, were the important buildings and the area of lodging. Outside the round, which we called the Outskirt, there was hardly anything of note, except for the tube, the area of debris, and other places likely not of importance to this story. But I will have to write of Town Square.

Town Square was thick in a fog of smoke. The garment factory generated fumes, to be sure. The jail was said to be at the very centre of the Town Square, though I didn't know which building it was in. Much in the town was unknown by me, but especially the buildings. There was also the administration station, the general store, and Culture's Hub. One almost always saw the town's statue and the fluttering flag. This flag bore the painted image of a smiling townsman.

A small interruption here because I'm feeling surprised. Before, I had such a need to describe the town but I'm finding the description to be without interest. I want to scratch my moods. Well, so it will be. Here are some of the moods I was having in those days.

## My Moods

I remember with clarity sitting in my room's chair with my flat piece of wood resting on my legs. My room was small, to be sure, with walls slanted and uneven. Though the room could likely have accommodated my body's length in a multitude of three, it seems now in my remembrance small enough to be carried around inside me. Inside this room, I often felt like a drawing in a damaged frame. On the wood was parchment from the administration station with the day's questions. The administration station's parchment was lighter and less textured than my own personal parchment. It was flexible and could be rolled into a cylinder, unlike my brittle supply. This parchment was pleasing to write on.

Each day there were ten questions to answer, and on this day the first question was: "Do you perform actions with knowledge that they will make you sad?"

This was the most difficult sort of question. I paused with reluctance, but to answer questions was my employment. In those days, I collected coins from the town in exchange for answering these questionnaires. There was a new one outside my room's door each morning. I did not know if this was a popular employment, or if the employment was only given to townspeople of some particularity. Was I well-suited? Who knew. Well, I knew how to read at the least. And whatever way, it suited me. The easiest questions requested facts: what I consumed, how often I slept, what interactions I had on a certain day. These I could answer with ease. But this day's first question required reflection, which I felt to be a form of guessing. After it all, to say something is often to make it so. This was a "yes" or "no" or "it may be so" style question, but it was followed by a magnitude of space, indicating that a short answer



would not be of sufficiency. I had never received feedback on my responses, but in those laborious days I always wanted to employ myself with expertise in ordinance to prevent later problems. I was afraid of reprimand by superiors unknown. And so it was that I always answered these questions as thoroughly as I knew how to, often writing in a style of babbling, to take up the space.

In this remembrance I pick up the writing stone provided to me by the town. It is long and slim. While thinking I twirl it. I begin my response without a clear sense of what I will write, as usual.

I begin: "It could be said that I perform actions with knowledge that they will make me sad. In this sense I could be said to be responsible for my own sadness. And yet I do not wish to be sad, to be sure. I wish to be the happiest. I perform actions in accordance with my desires and yet if my desires have positioned me as one of the town's saddest, there is an error in my desires. In this sense, it could be said I should instead act in violation of my own desires if they lead to sadness. And yet, acting in violation of one's desires seems to be a condition of sadness. So I don't know."

I pause to read over my response, which fills the available area. It's a successful response to some degree, on the basis that it expresses an honest sentiment and is the necessary length. But it has problems, to be sure. For an example, the lack of clarity or resolution. And for yet another example, my reliance on certain phrases.

It must also be said with obviousness that this was not the precise wording of any particular question or response I made, as it is in my remembrance which does not contain precise phrases of such duration. I simply reproduced a question and response in accordance with the mood I associated with the remembrance of myself holding my

writing instruments in my stifling room. In those days my writing style was more rudimentary than the example answer above, and some of those words I likely didn't even know. But now I wonder what worth a fabrication of remembrance has here. Well, when it comes to remembrance, it must be best to focus instead on those of particular clarity. So I will switch my focus to a remembrance somehow entirely preserved in its detail.

## On Rumble Hill

The town had a ground of tradition. Each year on the brightest and most important day the lists were read aloud in Town's Square. The lists were ten happiest and ten saddest, and they had an effect of domination on the town's discourse. When the ten happiest were read you could expect wild cheering and dancing after each name. Each recipient was given a smiling trophy of a size relative to their spot. The trophy for happiest townspeople was uncarriable by one, so it was hoisted by many and displayed outside the happy home for one year. It had swirls of all known colours and its materials were unknown to me. Where had these materials been obtained, and who had fashioned them so? Well, when you had this trophy outside your home, there were always townspeople standing in the distance and having a look, though most had consciousness not to look at the happiest trophy with too much frequency, as coveting was considered a sign of unhappiness.

When the names of the ten saddest were read, the whole town laughed more loudly as each name passed and these suckers each got a frowning trophy. Well, it was the case that the last list proclaimed me to be fourth saddest. To me, this was truly unexpected. The laughter sounded much louder and more mocking in my direction, and I struggled greatly to bring my trophy to my room. Besides being the brightest day it was also the hottest, and my hands were sweating on the trophy's beautiful, slippery material. This trophy was of a tremendous mocking weight. It took no short duration to bring it to my room. I kept setting it down to dry off my hands and rest my muscles of distress.

In the days that followed this list's reading, I was always so sad and was always on top of Rumble Hill at the small lookout area with a full view of the town. I had the

feeling of a lost child who (having been told to remain in place if ever lost) both wants to stay and to go, and my lost place was Rumble Hill. It was a jumbled feeling. Each day I would stay on Rumble Hill until the light faded blue and the town went blue and the line between the last road and whatever was beyond it blurred indistinguishable.

Rumble Hill juts up out of the earth like a horn. A narrow ragged path winds around it to the top and this path is perfectly steep. I walked up and down this path over and over and over but I remember only one walk with mindful clarity. It was such a windy day and as I walked through the town on my way to the path's beginning I kept jumping when boards displaying advertisements of the general store's items fell and smacked flat against the street. On this day the air was of viscosity and the hot wind was pushing me this way and that. Once I reached the path I was weak. I paused, holding the beginning of the path's railing. Then I remembered that occasionally lately at the top of Rumble Hill was the Vendor of flattened fruit. This motivated me to climb. Those oblate fruit were always ripe and bugless.

The Vendor was truly up there and sold me two fruit for a medium coin. I slid one fruit into my robe's belly pocket. I headed to the lookout railing, where the ground was well-worn. The wind was blowing even more strongly than before but was less hot up high. My head's hair was damp from the sweat of the walk and it whipped into my face with a sting. I held the railing with one hand and the fruit otherwise. I chewed and looked out at the town below. I looked at the fuming garment factory, and I looked at the town's flag of flutterance. Though I cherished happiness, this smiling flag caused me some annoyance.

I accidentally swallowed the fruit's pittance and was opening and closing my mouth when I noticed a person at the lookout point near me. This was truly rare. She was unknown to me.

"It's an OK point," this townspeople said in a quiet voice of boredom.

These words were unclear to me.

"Not bad," I said.

"Well, goodbye," I then said.

"Goodbye," she said, and neither of us moved.

For some duration I looked straight ahead and breathed quietly, unsure of what to do. I heard her clothes fluttering. After this duration, I turned to look at her. Her necklaces in the wind were all a jangle. Her hair was blue, like the rocks around the looking area. I could not remember if I had seen her in my life before, at any of the gatherings. This colour of hair I would have remembered, I thought. She looked more awake than I had ever been. I thought she was somehow double, though I didn't know the meaning of this. I noticed she was wearing a pin in the shape of Culture's Hub.

"Well, I thought you were leaving," I admitted.

"So did I you," she said reasonably.

"Well, I guess one doesn't often say goodbye on behalf of others," I said.

"Why are you talking about what one usually does?" she asked, raising her voice. "It's annoying!"

Oh, the toll of conversation. The toil? Occasionally I'd dropped eaves on townspeople having animated exchanges apparently of levity. Well, I found it impossible to predict which direction a conversation should drift and what words one should insert. I

noticed we were now both watching the town's flag. I knew something else should be said. I struggled to think of what this should be.

“Will you return tomorrow?” I asked.

She shrugged before walking quickly to the path and winding out of my sight. I stood to continue watching the sun finish its movement. It had been a normal interaction, I reflected.

In my remembrance now the sun races back to its point directly overhead and on the next day I was in my hot room waiting to go back to Rumble Hill. When the days were of particular heat my grey walls would sweat and stink, and I liked to sit resting on the cold ground of stone. I believe much of my sad reputation in those days belonged to my appearance. For one, my dark hair was always mostly covering my face. For another, my robes were quite draping, ill-fitting and unclean and with no pins of community. For yet another, my eyes were vacant and eerie and my face had a stern, pointed expression. Well, I saw my appearance only in the reflection of liquids, which is to say rarely, and maybe this sternness of my face is attributable to the strain of seeing my reflection in dirty tube water, for an example. I never saw my face relaxed or while unconscious of its perception. But this expression of my face may also have arisen from my habit of only consuming the strongest flavours available. I drank no water but only a bitter brew. Of flattened fruit, I only ate Sour. In those days, that was my taste. We eat to match our insides and in this way we are painters.

While climbing Rumble Hill's path, I was certain for no reason that I would see her from the day before. But when I reached the lookout point there was nobody and not even the Vendor. In those days, often my intuitions were incorrect, and so there was a

necessity in avoiding judgments of importance. I stood there holding the railing, watching down below where the shadow of the statue stretched out across the area of lodging. I did not know what the statue was of. I was always too near or too far to see it properly, and now I was too far. I was embarrassed to ask anyone what it was of, and there was no placard. The statue didn't look much like anything I knew and it was the tallest structure our town had. I was watching the furthest tip of the statue's shadow about to touch the worst jail and then I heard her voice behind me.

“There's a limit to what can be gleaned from this view,” she said.

“So it must be,” I said.

There was not much sound then. Well, there was wind moving the dust. Far off in the Outskirt I could see a dust rotunda had whipped up and was racing around, although it may have been a smudge of my vision. If it were a rotunda, damage would be done.

I asked of her employment. She said she was the Painter. I asked for the meaning of this. She said she painted the town and its notable residents, to be preserved and viewed by a select few unknown to her. Well, I had known of painting but not that one could be Painter. I wondered why I had not heard there was a Painter. In those days, I very rarely saw a painting. Well, the images of the general store's items on the fallen boards were paintings, to be sure, and so was the flag's smiler. I asked whether she had painted these items and she told me that she had, when she was first learning to paint. What the Painter said next truly surprised me. She said she had painted me, as I had been fourth saddest.

“How did you know enough of me?”

“I have access to documents and records of each towns person,” she said. “Not to mention that I have seen you around the town. I remember the painting of you well, and could describe it to you with ease, for you to envision.”

I must have looked to her with some encouragement, for she began to describe.

My imagination is of no great strength but the painting was terrible to hear. It depicted a towns person of my physical attributes but greatly disfigured through sadness. I would not have wished to encounter the towns person of this painting. I suddenly felt terrible up there on Rumble Hill away from all others except the Painter, who had finished the description and was looking at me with expectation.

“You described it with style!” I said with false confidence.

“And the content?”

“I did not like the image. It did not seem to be me.”

“Well it was,” she said. “But yes, it’s ugly.”

Then she departed. Some sun remained, which I watched alone.

The next day I was smiling while walking up Rumble Hill and it was unfortunate that nobody was around to see this little smile of mine. I was smiling while walking, but with no cause in view, which is a sign of happiness and might have helped me climb from the ten saddest list back into neutrality, had the smile been seen by anyone. But rarely was anyone on the path up Rumble Hill. Most towns people never ascended the hill at all and were content to be below.

On this day the Painter was already there when I arrived, and she was looking out over the town. It was clear to me that she was liking Rumble Hill more and more, and I was glad to see her. Gladness. Quite a happy attribute. Part of the reason I had been



smiling while walking was that I hadn't known the Painter before and now I did and I had learned a whole new style of mannerism. The other reason was I had thought of some great questions for her so we could know each other more.

"I thought of some questions for you," I told her with immediacy. "So we can know each other more."

She extended her arms as if meaning, "go on ahead, man."

This gesture made me laugh, with my spirits aloft as they were.

"Have you ever been on either list?" I asked.

I had a feeling the answer would be no because if she had I would have recognized her to some degree.

"No," she said. "As an observer of life I am presumed neutral."

"Well, OK. Do you know what the statue is?"

"Yes, but it is different for each person."

"Will you paint me anew? A personal painting that I may appreciate more? Now that you know more of me, to some degree?"

"One day."

Well those were my questions, approximately. In actuality, they were likely more simplistic than this, as I was nervous and knew fewer words. We both stayed then, looking out. Our town had no difficulty reaching temperatures and hardly anyone liked to walk around while the sun was up unless there was some gathering or event. The town was dried and the roads were burnt and split, yet when the sun went down everything turned blue, because of the minerals. Of course the tube was constantly delivering water from someplace. And spurts of water would shoot high in big looping arcs into the air

and fall into small lakes on the ground of mud because of cracks or splits in the tube. The Painter and I watched the tiny workers below us fixing the tube like bugs on a string. The tube would always need work, everyone knew. Fixing the tube had been my employment before answering questionnaires, and it had been hard.

“That was my employment,” I told the Painter, pointing a finger in the direction of the tube. I closed one eye and moved the finger until its width was the same as the tube.

“Fixing the tube,” I said.

She nodded nicely.

“And it was hard,” I said.

Then the sun had gone down and I felt I had to go. The Painter it seemed would stay.

“Well goodbye,” I said, but pretended to stay, as a reminder of our confusion from before. She liked this comment and laughed as though it had been a joke, and the sound of her laughter almost scared me though it was gentle and warm. For whatever reason, I felt glad the Painter now knew I’d worked on the tube.

And when I was on top of Rumble Hill the next day, I saw the rare sight of two townspeople there at once: the Painter, yes, plus the Vendor, who had been coming to the lookout almost never lately, because of the heat’s extremity. She was so old. She was the town’s oldest and it must have been a challenge for her to get the cart all the way to the top with all the fruit on it, and it was hotter than ever in our town. I didn’t know how she got up there, really. It may have been that someone pushed her in exchange for coins.

I bought from her two flattened fruit. The fruit varieties were: Sour, Sweet, and Normal. I bought Normal though I preferred Sour because I planned to give one to the Painter, and I wanted for us to be eating the same fruit, for whatever reason.

“Here,” I said to the Painter, tapping on her shoulder with the fruit itself.

I noticed I often felt happy around her, though I couldn’t have been. The Painter reached out and took the flattened fruit from my hand and had a small bite without ever looking fully over at me. That was interesting of her to do.

“Sour would have been nice,” she said, chewing.

Some of the fruit’s juice came out of her mouth when she said this and stayed on her chin without her seeming to notice.

“Yes,” I agreed, “Sour is best.”

But when I bit my own fruit I found its Normal taste to be very good on this day and more enjoyable than Sour would have likely been.

I thought of flavours and looked out over the town. The clouds were so thin you saw through them to the hazy sky of blue. If I stared for a while, some squiggles appeared. Down below, some commotion was on the popular road. Some townspeople or other was on the hoisted chair, and many townspeople surrounded them, waving personal flags and throwing dust of pigmentation. There was singing’s susurrations. Mouths opened and closed like blinking. It was clear some good deed had been done.

The Painter turned to me suddenly and her eyes were of water. I was very surprised. While looking at the commotion below, I had almost forgotten of her beside me. I looked at her for a while. I noticed I was brushing my hair away from my face.

“Oh, I am deeply sad,” she said. “I can’t think of any paintings lately.”

“What?” I thought.

“That’s why you’ve been standing up here looking at the town?” I asked.

She nodded and I felt ashamed that I had considered us both to have been feeling happy. I shook my head while clenching my mouth. Why were my perceptions always wrong? What else was I seeing incorrectly?

“Were you afraid to admit you’re sad?” I asked.

She nodded. I looked back to the view below. I noticed then that something was missing. Usually, when I looked at the tube, I saw tiny threads of water streaming from it at various points. But now no water squirted from it anywhere. I realized this was likely the impetus of the celebration below; the rider of the hoisted chair had likely plugged the tube fully. This made me worried. Rarely was there progress in our town.

I looked back to the Painter. I wondered why she couldn’t paint. She was very forlorn, I could now see. She was looking at the town but seemed not to be seeing it through her sadness. If she kept this up, it seemed possible she would be among the saddest on the next list. Her neutral reputation would not remain. She seemed sadder than last year’s saddest. I had the sensation of wanting to help her somehow, and I knew to do so would require discovering the roots of her inability to paint. I said to her the only thing I could think of.

“Paint a new painting of me. To get yourself back on the track. You know me and what I do. And bring it here tomorrow. Make it a painting of my newfound contentment, which you must have noticed.”

She nodded sadly. She handed me the pittance from her fruit and trudged off.

The next day I ate too much fruit. I arrived on Rumble Hill quite early, and the Vendor was there but not the Painter. I ate a Normal, then a Sour, then a Normal, then a Sweet, and then a Normal. My stomach churned with the acidity of the Sour, and my teeth were gummy from the sugary Sweet. The Painter has abandoned me, I thought. Maybe she had even walked the tube, away from the town, to die, as some did. But just as the sun was down to some degree, she arrived with parchment. She was out of breath and sweating. She had been working on the painting and was late for this reason. Her hair was in many directions and she wasn't even wearing one necklace. I liked to think of her in some room working to complete her painting to bring it up the hill. I felt anticipation. A new painting to celebrate my imminent climb from the ten saddest list.

She held the parchment out in front of herself and the parchment was fluttering. She waited for the parchment to be still and her face was empty. The parchment was still and she coughed twice. She was staring hard at the parchment and the sky's light was almost gone. She turned this painting towards me.

It was the worst painting seen by any townspeople. It was much worse than the description of the painting of my sadness, and it was worse than the worst danger in the night. The colour did not connect and each shape made the next one worse. The painting pierced and was worse than pain. My exposure to the painting was brief, and when it was over the Painter sat on the ground of dust.

"I am sorry I asked you to paint," I said.

The Painter nodded with water flowing as though her eyes were tubes bursting, and each drop landed as a bead on the ground of dust and did not absorb. She could not stop sniffing, it was clear. It was clear to us both that we should get off the hill. Nothing

was to be gleaned. But we stayed. The sun was soon to be entirely down for the day. It was clear that neither of us should return up Rumble Hill the next day, or any day. It was not clear what would become of us, but an idea was forming. I stood still and allowed the idea to come all the way. Soon it was all the way and I knew it was the one.

I tapped the Painter on her shoulder so that she would pay attention to what I did. I walked to the fruit Vendor, who was organizing her fruit. Without permission, I unlocked her cart. The Vendor stood back in surprise but did not make a sound. I grabbed her cart by its handle and began to run, pushing it. It was made of light wood. The fruit jiggled while I pushed the cart over jutting rocks, and of course some of the fruit fell from the cart and onto the ground of dust. I pushed the cart off Rumble Hill and it went flying. It flew in the air and then went toppling down the hill, rolling and flipping and with fruit flying all over. The cart's coinbox opened, and coins flew through the air, glinting. I watched with admiration until the cart and fruit were long gone.

The next step was to return to where the fruit Vendor stood. She was barely a fruit Vendor now, with no cart and no fruit. She was a tiny old woman. I picked her up with surprising ease and held her like a baby. I ran holding her and when I reached the hill's edge I threw her off and she flew through the air and toppled down the side of the hill without a sound and from then on she was gone.

I took my place again at the lookout point beside the Painter and we each held onto the rail with our hands almost touching. The sun was down and there was not much to see of the town, but we looked out. Neither of us spoke. I had had enough of sadness, and happiness was nowhere near. We needed something new and I'd tried the newest idea available. I waited for the Painter's reaction.

The Painter turned to me and at once we each made a new surprising face because we realized the town had two lists but there were other ways of importance to be and we had just thought of one. We were the first to realize and now we had to act and to greatly disturb everyone and everything known. Surely our eyes gleamed as we clomped down the hill towards the town.

## The Comedian

But there is so much to explain. My interest towards the Painter can be properly explained by describing the year before we met. I wrote already that I was sad. I was fractured like a zapped old stump fallen across a path, requiring removal at great exertion by many, and I was sad, and I was cohabiting with a Comedian.

Who doesn't love a Comedian? When we're laughing there's no pain to be felt or remembrance of responsibility to cause tension in our bodies. Our eyes close with relief and are not round with notions. Laughter is the anointment of the troubled and when the Comedian appeared in my doorway one day after knocking her comedic knock (three simple knocks at consistent speed and of equal volume, yet somehow funny and a joke about knocking) and asked whether she could live in my lodging, I did not consider whether I should answer yes or no. I did not wonder why she had no lodging of her own—even though it's provided to all—and I did not wonder why I was chosen by her to be her host. I simply tilted back my head and laughed while she made jokes at the expense of my room and my furnishings, not to mention my dismal appearances. The jokes reflected truths I had been unwilling to see, and the relief of finally seeing with clarity created a cavern that amplified my laughter. In an addition: to me she was famous. This is a word I learned recently: famous. Proximity to her fame charged my mundane surroundings with sparkles and made me larger.

The Comedian's appearances were somehow rapid. Her expressions shifted in accordance with the phrases she uttered. She seemed to be of her words, rather than her words being of her. The skin of her face was stretched tightly over the bones below, and her eyes were triangular. Can any of this be true? To be sure she wore clothing that was a



commentary on the clothing trends of the town. Her robes were unblemished and fit naturally, and her movements and gestures seemed perfectly considered yet natural and without thought. I thought of her as an amalgamation of every townspeople, and so she was entirely unlike anyone. Her hair was bright dusty red and was short and rectangular.

When she moved into my room it was in the days I was employed fixing the tube, and the tube had been doing worse than ever, which lowered my mood. I thought of the tube when I closed my eyes before sleeping and when I rose, and I conflated my own well-being with that of the tube. The tube's waterlevel was of constant fluctuation. Some townspeople sensed causes of tubewater vicissitude. Certain deeds or rituals had their correlation in what transpired in the tube, some thought. On occasion the tube was always filled and on occasion it contained only a trickle. When the amount of water in the tube increased this water became more pressurized, making the leaks worse. In those days, the ground of mud at the tube's surrounding was particularly mucky, and various mosses began to grow. The tube's leaks sprayed high and seemed to thicken and cool the town's air, slowing the convections. The other tube workers and I often slipped on the ground of moss as we raced along the tube to reach a leak more urgent. Our worksuits of white quickly became brown, though we rinsed them frequently in the spray from the very leaks we were repairing, during recuperation periods. We scrubbed but stains remained. In those days, my body felt like a dried and forgotten fruit on the ground of dust, but I never worried about who I was or what to do.

The Comedian worked at the Culture's Hub, of course. She wrote jokes based on lamentable behaviours. Based on the hearing of these jokes, we as townspeople knew what not to do. Before this Comedian there had been another, who I could barely

remember—an old man who told jokes insensible to me, though I laughed just the same. I likely understood the jokes of the current Comedian more than those of the previous Comedian because we seemed to have lived for a similar duration. Well, I assumed I was the town's youngest. I had heard of no townspeople who had lived fewer days than I, but the Comedian seemed close. On occasion I wondered whether some new person would ever appear in the town. Someone young? It had never been so.

I could not find a discernible organizing principle to the behaviours outlined in the Comedian's jokes. I took the jokes one by one by one, and at each I felt surprise. That is to say, I could never have predicted one of the jokes in advance. This may have been a quality of necessity for jokes; if any townspeople could have predicted the jokes, this townspeople could have acted in opposition to these yet unjoked jokes, ensuring happiness and a place on the corresponding list, which was in opposition to the spirit of surprise and mystery we seemed to share in consideration of these lists.

The jokes depicted jailable offenses. After it all, a long duration spent on the saddest list was very jailable. To be too sad was of criminality in our town, to be sure. In one of the Comedian's jokes, a townspeople sends an anonymous letter threatening to kill another townspeople in ordinance to upset them, to feel happier in relation. Recently we heard a joke of a townspeople who makes uncontrollable verbalizations, insensible to all. In another joke, a townspeople spreads false information about another townspeople to impact their position on the lists. There was a joke of a townspeople who sleeps all day and is awake during the night. I remember a joke about a townspeople who destroys the property of another out of jealousy and a joke about a townspeople who tries to convince the town that some jailed townspeople doesn't deserve to be in there. I remember also a

joke of a townspeople who spends all day pointing out the town's flaws, making the town appear as a disgrace. Writing these jokes out now makes me laugh still, though far more quietly than I did back then. Her funniest and most famous joke involves a townsman who secretly changes the titles of the happiest and saddest lists immediately before their disclosure, so that the happiest become the saddest, and the saddest become the happiest, tricking the entire town and causing the town to lose its faith in the list system's providence. This joke was almost too funny, it was clear.

The jokes were periodically read aloud by the Comedian from atop her box outside of Culture's Hub. We townspeople would hear the Comedian's horn of beckoning. We would assemble around her and once she was satisfied that most of the town had gathered, she would read a joke from parchment, her hands shaking with laughter. Often, she had to pause repeatedly and begin again. Well, she was no great orator, but the jokes never failed to confuse me and alter my moods. They presented new information about the nature of townspeople and their motivations that made me feel as though I should go home and sit and laugh. After I finished laughing, there was always a strange silence in my room.

One day, after we had been living together in my room for some while, the Comedian and I were together drinking an incredibly strong brew. Our strongest point of connection was our shared desire for strong flavours. That she enjoyed the same flavours as I and with such authority never failed to fill me with confidence in this aspect of my conduct.

"A strong brew is best," I often thought in those days.

On this particular day I'm describing, I didn't have to mend the tube, for it had been doing better lately and many of its leaks had been patched in succession. During this period, the Comedian and I knew a few things of each other and had, during surprising outbursts, occasionally stimulated ourselves with sexuality while observing one another, though afterwards she always possessed no shortage of jokes and comments about my performance and general sexual mood. In her estimate, my general sexual mood was a scattershot and my techniques were strange. I seemed not to have a sense of what one ought to do and what not to do, and as such I seemed to be grasping in the dark. In meaning's while, she stimulated herself with confidence and never failed to find satisfaction. I pretended to be satisfied, but she was never fooled, and each time a new joke was read I worried it would describe a townsman who could not even stimulate himself effectively. It was the case that she described me as being a Comedian of sexuality without volunteering. Well, so it was. Let's move on.

On the day I'm describing, I had a question in mind to ask the Comedian, which I knew she wouldn't like.

"Where do you get your ideas for jokes?" I asked her.

It took a moment for her to look up from her brew, but once her eyes were locked onto mine they did not move. It was unpleasant to view her expression of scorn, yet I also felt some small joy that I had accurately predicted her angry reaction, meaning I knew her well.

"Are you aware," she said, "that this is the stupidest question?"

I supposed I had been aware, although when she asked me this question, I seemed to become twice as aware. I was so annoying.

“My meaning is to ask how you know which behaviours should become a joke?” I asked.

“I know your meaning. I have access to documents and records of each townspeople,” she said. “The documents and records stretch back immemorially and my focus is on the records of the jailed. My jokes are based on the behaviours of those who died in the jail: the saddest outcome. The behaviours of the alive jailed are jokes pending. Though often the jokes are interpreted as the prediction of sadness, this is not my intent. When townspeople are condemned for seeming to adhere to the behaviour of my jokes, I consider this no concern of my own.”

I was grateful for the length of this answer, though it answered only part of my question. I now knew how the Comedian learned of the behaviours she described, but not how she chose which to focus on and which behaviours she deemed saddest, and what her evaluation criteria were. I decided to let it go, and nodded ingratiatingly to her as she turned her attention back to sipping her brew.

Further questions for her emerged and I couldn't suppress them. These questions involved how she had come to become the Comedian, and how she had learned the skill of joking. The questions also involved whether she had the freedom to joke at will and whether there was a schedule to the release of her jokes or if she unveiled them in accordance with her whims and moods. I wanted to ask whether she ever felt uncertain about the content of her jokes or if they always felt proper, and if she had gotten better at making jokes or if her comedic sense had emerged fully formed, and how she knew how much comedy to put into each joke, and when the jokes were complete.

She did not answer any of these questions and instead responded sneering: “I don’t ask you about that tube, do I?”

And that was true. It was true that she did not.

And so it was that on the day upon which the list was read announcing me to be fourth saddest in the town—after a life of neutrality, besides a single year in which I appeared as seventh happiest following a triumphant plugging of a leak in an important segment of the tube that had been causing trouble (this plugging resulting in a minor celebration in my honour in the town, which improved my posture and general demeanour, although this year of happiness now holds only a brief flash of remembrance and has a falseness)—the Comedian moved out of my room immediately following the list’s disclosure. She seemed repulsed to have been sharing a space with someone so sad, although I couldn’t help feeling as though she had somehow influenced my position on the list. After it all, I had been proceeding in neutrality before she moved in. Well, but it may have been that I was looking for someone to blame. That evening, I sat in the dark in my quiet room with my frowning trophy. I tried to make myself laugh by reciting to myself her jokes, but it was to no avail.

Then I slowly lost the strength and energy needed to effectively fix the tube. I was clumsy and made mistakes. I got in the way of others and was oversensitive to feedback. I lost the motivation to rinse my stained worksuit and I looked like a nutrient. In order to make up for my errors, I attempted ambitious tube fixing schemes that never failed to fail. Finally, I was told not to come to the tube any more. I folded my worksuit of mud and put it in the corner of my room. Before the questionnaires began to arrive, I believed

I would die without the coins of employment. After each vision of my death and subsequent burial beneath dust I thought: who cares.

The arrival of the questionnaires and the compensation coins gave me some energy, which I converted into the exercise of walking up Rumble Hill. I didn't see the Comedian again for a while, and by then much had changed.

## The Tube

While describing the Comedian I kept noticing I was describing myself only in relation to others and to the town, as though I was dust blowing in those days. Well, we should have responsibility for ourselves even if we do not seem to be agents of our will, or if we do not know what our will is, or if we do not know that we ought to have a will, or if we don't know what it is to have a will, or if we don't care in either way. Well, this is a word I learned recently: will. Well, for a while I will discuss myself and minimize the import of others so that I can be known.

When I sit with the remembrance of my youngest days I have the image of constantly trudging on in a group. This group would arrive somewhere with greenery and would rest for a spell while erecting buildings. Each place became more and more beige, and then we would trudge more. Whenever we established a new town it was more provisional than the previous because we became increasingly despondent. This packing up and trudging was an unavoidable fact of being a person, I believed when young. Our trudging was thoughtless as we simply followed along the tube. There was no way to become lost.

Though my experience trudging with many others in an amorphous mass shifting in shape depending on the landscape was social, to be sure, I knew almost nothing of the others. I wondered who among the group was of a relationship to me, but there was no way to know. It was my assumption the others felt likewise, as I never saw anyone embrace or chatter. We all had the mood of determined neutrality.

At some point, we arrived at the location of the town of which I have been describing. It was no different from the sort of location we usually stopped at: flat and



slightly greener than its surroundings. The town of which I have been describing could have been any of these previous towns, had we been able to stay at any of them. But it must be noted that this town had a yet-unnamed hill jutting strangely, taller than anything seen to me before. We lived in this town by the hill and noticed with neutrality as it slowly lost its faint tinges of green, until the first day of water's rushing in the tube. Now, hold it in your mind that I had no notion of why we trudged as we did. The tube had always held some drizzlance, and townspeople would smash the tube to access it. But when I overheard of water's rushing in the tube, I didn't know what it would look like or what it would do.

“Tube,” I would often think.

I remember with particularity one particular late morning when I was of an unspecifiable young age wearing my draping child's attire, walking around the provisional town. I was noticing there were no other townspeople near me. Well, my first thought was that they had all decided to find some other location without alerting me. This was no big surprise, as I wasn't so important to anyone and wouldn't be missed. I felt afraid and the day was notably hot, with lines of the heat seeming both to be squiggling down to the earth from the sun, and waving up from the ground of dust, with both the sun and the ground and all of the objects around heating one another in this cycle of lines which caused my vision to blur as though with sadness' extremity, though the day was clear. It seemed then possible that everything would soon explode.

I focused simply on walking around the town and breathing calmly, but breathing the hot and dusty air made my body seem to swell, as though I might explode, too. But soon I heard a murmur and then, while turning from the secondary provisional road onto

the main one—without stumps yet—I saw a crowd of all the townspeople. I couldn't think of what they were doing until I got closer and realized they were inspecting the tube. When I got closer I could notice that water sprayed from it in directions uncountable. From the large tube holes smashed by townspeople, the water glogged straight into the ground of dust.

“There has been a change in the tube,” I thought, without being told, and so it was.

I have just had the realization that I at some point abandoned my telling about the Painter and I making our revelation on Rumble Hill and descending with a new look in our eyes. When I think of how this story is being told, it becomes clear that this is the main line of interest. By discussing myself in my childhood (my child self walking hot and without direction thinking vaguely of a tube but without access to many concepts or notions) there must be a feeling that I am holding certain information to myself or delaying my story with an effect in mind, especially now that the tube has been well described. Well, so let it now be the remembrance of the Painter and I and the actions we undertook, for good or for otherwise.

## The Bottom of Rumble Hill

While the Painter and I were stumbling, half-running down Rumble Hill, I began to feel unsecured. What if our convictions were incorrect and we hadn't really made any revelation whatsoever? What if we were just going to act really sad with deliberation? Had we gotten all worked up over nothing? Should we instead revert our focus towards making ourselves happier somehow, and should I start planning how to atone for ending the fruit Vendor's life? What if her absence was noticed and linked to the Painter and I, and we were jailed? Shouldn't the Painter just get back to her paintings, in disregard of their quality? I slowed my pace slightly. On the Painter's face was calm contemplation.

“Well—” I began, reluctantly.

“Hold on,” she said, and we continued down the hill.

As we neared the bottom of Rumble Hill—both of us panting and not to mention having  
scratches on our hands and faces from when we had fallen and rolled on the ground of dust—the Painter paused and then so did I. She took from her pocket the piece of parchment upon which I knew to be the dreaded painting of me. She flipped this parchment over and drew from her pocket a nubbish writing stone. She then squatted down so that she was close to the ground and her heels were pressed against the back of her legs. She rested the parchment on her legs and began to mark it with the stone.

I stood looking out at the darkness and could see in the distance a sliver of the top of the town's statue. I was now feeling uncomfortable from my place standing above the Painter, who was still crouched and scratching. But I didn't want to crouch down just as well, fearing I'd crowd her. And I did not want to take a few steps in any direction,

fearing she'd assume I was bored and leaving, and I did not want to tell her I felt uncomfortable and would be taking a few steps in any direction, fearing the saying of this would interrupt her work. Well, such is the feeling of proximity to those we admire. I peered down at her parchment briefly and could tell by the shape of her scratchings that what she was working on was a new painting. Well, this should have been no surprise to me or anyone.

Eventually she stood. She held the parchment out in front of herself in examination of her painting. I could see that on her face was an expression of surprise and fear. I placed my hand on her shoulder to communicate that she ought to explain to me what she was feeling if she wished to. I felt through her draping clothes that her shoulder was of bones.

“This is the first painting of mine that is not about a towns person on a list,” she said. “I didn't even know if I could do it. While I was working on this painting, I wasn't sure that a painting would be the result. But this is a painting and it was caused by the Vendor's fall.”

Then she did something that surprised me. She handed me the parchment and stood back to give me space to view it. I stared hard at the scratches in the failing light.

In the painting was a dust rotunda waving to a moon unfinished and I could easily tell her blockage had unlocked and I began breathing easily. There was also the statue, still indistinguishable, and the path, the tube, the Vendor with limbs splayed. There was even Town Square, Culture's Hub, scattered shapes, fruit pith, and the two of us tumbling. It was all together.

I looked to see the Painter, whose face displayed what seemed to me genuine nervousness about the reception of her painting. But how could I receive it? It will be no surprise for you that I encountered these shapes as though they were scattered footprints on the ground of dust. That I wished to grab hold of some of the painting's decipherable elements (how its shape looked like going downhill, for an example) reminded me of trying to imagine an unseen colour or untasted fruit. Mostly the painting reminded me of an opaque tube with contents audible but invisible. I looked at the Painter and did not know what to do. I held my hands in the shape of a tube, the fingers pressing each other. I made my face into an expression communicating "I don't know" and then waved my arms around. Eventually she smiled. It was clear some point had been made.

I now realize I have made another error in how I've proceeded. I have been describing moods and states of mind I encountered back when I did not have the words useful in conveying such moods and states. My meaning is that I'm describing with apparent precision thoughts I couldn't actually have been thinking then, creating an impression that is false, to be sure. With hesitation and a feeling of uncertainty, I will take a step backwards here so that I might better depict how this painting actually appeared to me when I saw it.

## What I Knew

Between my existence in the town as I knew it and the present as it is now, there are things I have learned. This is obvious. I believe confusion may be emerging between what I knew then and what I know now, and why I learned certain things and how. Confusion wouldn't surprise me at all. Often I myself can't remember the difference between myself then and now, and I have to sit in consideration of the disparity.

Well, when I first encountered writing was long after I knew well how to speak. When I was young, words existed only in saying and thinking. I did not know they could have a shape and be seen. I considered words to be something quickly vanishing, like water. I am still not greatly accustomed to words remaining. At a certain point I was aware that there was writing and that certain townspeople knew of it, but it never made itself relevant to me. When I first saw writing it was as though seeing the inside of a fruit: clearly organized, although who is to say for what purpose.

I became sharply aware of writing one day when the other tubeworkers and I were presented with the tube manual book. It was a large volume, sloppily bound, showed to us by the leading tube worker. When I became strong enough to work on the tube, this particular worker had no more knowledge of it than I had, but he was the fastest learner and could read, it turned out. It was never made clear to us whether he wrote this book himself or if he had been presented it at the administrative station, or what. But as every day passed he was always the tube's best worker and we accepted this without resentment. He was also consistently on the list of the town's happiest, usually around the spot of eight or nine, and this was attributable to his capacity for learning.

One day, before we began our work, he gathered us and showed us this manual. You can imagine my discomfort. I was young and I had never been shown parchment stacked in this way. It may have been that when I first saw the manual, I presumed the sheets were for wiping the dust from one's face since I knew of decorative cloths similarly purposed. On the cover of this book was a painting of the tube and it was accurate. Upon seeing this, I understood that this item was closely related to the tube in some sense. He flipped through the pages. On these pages there were diagrams of the inside of tubes, tube holes, and tube repair supplies. There were busted tubes and perfect tubes. Also there were blocks and blocks of letters, and their shapes were taking up space as words on each page. Some among us began to murmur worriedly.

“What?” the tube's best worker interrupted his own summary of the manual to say.

There was a silence except for the pages continuing to flip themselves over in the wind.

Finally someone unseen by me decided to speak.

“We can't read,” their voice said.

Even this unseen townsman was more knowledgeable than I in their knowledge that a book was something to be read.

The tube's best worker looked from face to face for verification, and we all nodded with grimness. I felt surprise that he hadn't considered the possibility that his knowledge was exceptional. He flipped to the book's first page.

“Well the meaning of this word is ‘tube,’” he said, pointing to one of the words.

We looked at it and nodded.

He pointed to a few other words.

“This one is ‘this’ and this one is ‘is’ and this one is ‘the.’”

I hoped he didn’t plan to go on in this way. It was clearly a waste, as none of us would be able to remember these shapes. Luckily he did not. He closed the book with the energy of some frustration.

“You can just look at the diagrams for now,” he said. “And I’ll read the book aloud to you all at the beginning and ending of each shift.”

“Diagrams,” I thought.

He flipped back to the first page and began reading about the tube’s importance for the town and value in the terms of hydration and manufacturing. He read about the first day of water’s rushing in the tube. While he read, he ran his finger along the page and in this way I was able to know which word shape corresponded to which sound. In this way, slowly, year after year, I eventually learned able to read the tube manual itself, though its suggestions were not interesting or useful to me. Fixing the tube was all about using the hard stuff and the substance of adhesion and pressing down as hard as you could and then rubbing in a circle until it stuck, preventing any spurting. You pressed the hard stuff onto a crack and then scooped the adhesion and smeared it around, and then pounded with the side of your hand until it stuck. Then you smoothed. The less busy you were, the better you could smooth it. The stronger you were, the better it stuck. There really wasn’t much more to it than that. But it must be said that in this way I was able to read certain tube-related words and when I encountered other words I could read them too, although I doubt I will ever be able to see a word without thinking of a tube.



## The Painter's Home

This is why I was thinking of the painting as a tube while the Painter and I walked along the main road through the town. It's possible I thought of the main road itself as a tube, and of the two of us as water. Of course I could not offer any words about the painting to the Painter and it was my fortune to be under the impression that she did not wish for me to speak about the painting, or anything else. We were walking with purposiveness but no clear purpose. The night was very still, with even the finest top layer of dust undisturbed and our footprints lasting behind us in a curved line. We took various turns while continuing to walk. Soon I noticed we were headed to the area of lodging. Soon I noticed we stood outside a home that was a small dome of wood. Thinking of it now, there must have been to its structure something of a flower.

“This is where I live,” the Painter said.

As we stepped into her home, I noticed immediately that I felt less warm than I had ever felt inside my own room. There was no apparatus I could see to account for this. I thought maybe she lived in a less hot part of the town.

I decided that because the Painter and I had resolved without speaking to establish a new outlook for living, I would begin to behave in a more decisive way than was typical of me. My typical fashion was to stand by and wait to be given some instruction, whether through word or gesture. But I now decided to stroll through the Painter's home with a sense of ease and comfort and take a seat in her chair, which was low to the floor of wood. By sitting in her chair, I realized that she was without a comfortable seat for herself, but I accepted this situation. After it all, hadn't she purposely led us to her home without asking me whether this was correct? Well, I had been free to go, and perhaps she

had not been leading me to her home. Perhaps I had followed her, in a way. But though these thoughts emerged in some form, I decided not to make much of them. I sat with a look of detachment while she poured some brew into two mugs. She brought these two mugs to where I sat. She sat across from me with her legs crossed and set the mugs out in front of us. I noticed the brew's colour had more vibrance than the brew I was able to buy. I realized then that the Painter's home itself was of a greater quality than any home I could wish to live in. This related somehow to her position at Culture's Hub, I realized.

So I sat and looked at the Painter. On a low table near me was a dish containing dried flakes with salt. I took a few pieces and began to chew them. They were very crisp and not chewy like flakes I knew. Shortly after eating them, I felt their taste in my nose and my ears. The back of my neck became hot. These were unfamiliar sensations and I distracted myself through scrutinizing the Painter. Her blue hair was completely straight, though I had never seen her to touch it. It was a single shade of blue and it was a shade I had only seen to be the water inside a half sliced tube in the manual. And her hair had rigidity and barely moved when her head moved. Overall, her way of being was very still. Her eyes were very watery blue, though dry.

The Painter was looking back at my face and we drank our brew periodically. I realized she was seeing my face more clearly than I ever likely would, provided that I, like anyone, only ever saw my reflection in a muddish water, or in the surface of a mug of brew. Well, it may not have been true that she was seeing me more clearly than a muddy reflection because I did not seem to believe that townspeople saw things with equivalence. For an example, my view of anything changed completely in accordance with my mood. It was not uncommon for me to stand atop Rumble Hill looking out, and

for the sky and town to shift in my perception based on a certain remembrance or notion my thoughts obtained. I then noticed a small red mark on her cheek, not far below her eye. I guess I must have been noticing it all along, but I hadn't thought of it. I felt some curiosity at the nature of this mark. I decided anyway that there was nothing further to glean from our silence and that it would be helpful to say something, to encourage further thoughts based on what was said. I finished chewing the dried flakes in my mouth. I had almost finished the dish's contents.

“What is that?” I said, pointing to her face's mark.

My voice sounded small and dry in this room, and my voice seemed to come from the walls.

“What?” she said.

She rubbed her cheek's bone in the area I had pointed to.

“There's a mark,” I said.

She was pulling at the spot near the mark with one finger.

“I'm not sure,” she said. “I wasn't aware of it.”

Then we continued looking at each other. I thought of her entirely as being the Painter which made me wonder what definition she used of me. The fourth saddest? The one from Rumble Hill? The one with unclean clothing and long hair? The former tube worker? Well it would have been impossible for me to say and I didn't want to ask, as the last question I asked annoyed her. I looked away from her in consideration of her home.

My own room had a hardness to it, considering the ground of stone and the hard grey walls. My own room was a place of few colours or comforts, although I had previously considered it to be the most suitable kind of room. After it all, it was built

better than any of my childhood rooms in the provisional towns we rapidly departed, and I'd had no greater notions of what a room could be. But now I had some greater notions. As I sat and looked around the Painter's home I began to understand the meaning of comfort. To begin, there were multiple rooms, it was clear, though the doors were closed and I did not know their contents. In the corner of the room in which we sat was a table with piles of parchment neatly stacked, and various small cans and tins, and not to mention brushes. Belonging to her table was a chair of wood. I realized the Painter could have brought this chair over earlier for herself to sit on, rather than sitting on the floor. I wondered whether she had forgotten this chair or hadn't been in the mood. Our experience of looking would have been different; she would have been sitting above, looking down at me in my lower chair. I was filled with the notion that her table in the corner was the perfect place for painting. Even I, who knew nothing of painting, could envision myself sitting at that table and getting to work. I realized she likely did most of her work at Culture's Hub, where she had access to documents and records of each townspeople, but I supposed she worked on planning the paintings here, perhaps. As I had learned while descending the hill, she didn't require many supplies to create her paintings: just one stone, one parchment, and her ideas. The same supplies I am now using, I realize.

I remembered then wanting to act decisively and so when I realized I wanted to sit at her table, I stood, walked across the room and did so. I turned the chair so I could look at her and the rest of the room. The Painter got up and sat in the chair I had been sitting in. Some unknown sentiment had been expressed.

On the other side of the room from the desk was an area of food preparation, it was clear. She had various bowls, not to mention blades and a large hard board of wood. Hanging on the wall at eye's level were spoons of many sizes hanging next to a rack affixed to the wall containing flavours, in my assumption. At each instant I looked, I noticed a new item: mortar and pestle, grater, juice squeezer. These items were common enough and I had seen them in the general store although I did not own any of them myself. It will be of no surprise to admit in those days I was feeling too sad to prepare intricate meals. In those days, I was munching on Sour fruit with exclusivity and drinking a punishingly bitter brew, and these two items gave me the irritation I needed to carry on.

After peering around at the room's items for what must have been a while, I wondered if I was being impolite. After it all, the Painter would not have been as interested in her own home as I was, and was likely getting no pleasure from its observance. She knew all the items well and had obtained them herself, after it all. I wanted to initialize some discussion. In my newfound spirit of confidence, I decided to ask the most important thing I could think of. I decided to ask her a question that would illuminate some aspect of what had been brewing between us.

“In your view, what did we decide on the hill?” I asked.

The Painter had been looking down with a bored expression, but when I asked her this question, she looked up at me with calm acceptance. She had expected a question of this nature eventually.

“To be neither happy or sad,” she said. “To be some other thing, and forget the lists.”

Well, my body warmed when she said this. The words had the truth of my feeling on Rumble Hill, though I hadn't been able to think it with clarity. Well, she was a professional artist after it all, to be sure. We looked at each other, nodding. I could tell the colour of her face had warmed slightly, too, because the mark on her cheek was invisible.

“How will we decide which things to do?” I asked.

This question was more difficult, I realized. I watched her think and I realized I was putting our decisions onto her, but this seemed proper because I had thrown the fruit Vendor off the hill. It was her turn to decide something.

“We will write our own jokes to follow,” she said finally. “And we will make them in complete opposition to those of the Comedian, if we can.”

I could tell she had disdain for the Comedian by her tone in uttering the name. I nodded with contentment for this plan. It was a perfect plan, after it all. For this reason, I was surprised when she made an addendum.

“And we will convert the townspeople and they will follow our way, changing the town forever.”

Well, and so it was.

## Our Preparations

The mental moods of the Painter and I entered a period of rapid entropy, to be sure, but when I remember our decision of how to act I'm reminded of a brief period of pleasant stillness that immediately followed.

After it all, I still had to continue the completion of the questionnaires to have enough coins to obtain what was necessary to feed myself with nutrition. And The Painter and I knew our plan would require supplies, which required further coins. Based on her employment at Culture's Hub, it was clear that she had a greater ability to earn coins than I did. Yet, she faced her own difficulties. As I have said, she was unable to produce any new paintings about the townspeople. This blockage prompted her visits to Rumble Hill in the first place. Her progress on paintings was always unsupervised. She was trusted to have the necessary twenty paintings finished each year, plus some additional assignments if some notable event occurred, such as the death of someone known. She was both unable and unwilling to paint the ten happiest and ten saddest townspeople, but still had to show up to work. So what did she do? Well, she pretended to be painting the ten happiest and saddest, and there was nobody to know the difference. From a distance, all painting motions looked the same. She sat in her room at Culture's Hub and worked on writing the new jokes for the town and she showed these to nobody at first.

We met often in those days. I stopped climbing Rumble Hill, as it had been tarnished in my mind by the Vendor's demise and I didn't want to be seen there. I still had the urge to exert myself physically, but could think of no other way. I couldn't simply pace around the town, as this was a sign of distress. Though the Painter and I had

decided to disregard the importance of the lists, we still did not want to call attention to ourselves during this period of planning, and so we avoided any actions that had connotations of joy or sorrow. We were pursuing neutrality, though when we met there was a feeling of fire, noticeable by how we shivered under the sun of day.

We met mostly at her home, as I was ashamed of my own in comparison. How had I lived in ignorance of decoration? When the Painter first visited my room, she stood looking at the blank walls.

“I guess you have not found anything you like,” she said eventually.

I nodded then, though I wasn't sure exactly of her meaning.

Our meetings were never planned. When either of us had something to discuss, we first checked each other's homes before wandering the town, searching other likely places. Once, after an entire day spent unable to locate the Painter, I decided the only remaining place she could have been was on Rumble Hill. I climbed the hill quickly and with a great sense of dreadfulness. Were she at the top, something would have changed, as we had agreed that we no longer had any use for the hill's view. I arrived at the top and she wasn't there. I stood catching my breath and then began running back down the hill. I felt my blood rushing inside my body very fast and I was breathing uncontrollably through my mouth with much sound. When I reached the hill's bottom, I took great efforts to compose myself. Where was the Painter?

I tried to walk casually back to my lodging. The Painter was standing outside my door, waiting. She had been asleep in her bed all day and had slept through my knocks. She had been unable to sleep the night before because of breakthroughs she was making



in the planning of our new jokes. We entered my room to discuss these breakthroughs.

Well, now I should describe our plan.

## Our Plan

The Painter made clear to me something I had not been aware of. My reputation in the town was bad. Some brew splashed from my mug as I jerked my body around to face her. Some splashes went onto her robes.

“What’s your meaning?” I asked.

She gestured towards her dampened robes as if to mean “see my meaning?” and we laughed in the knowledge that this wasn’t her true meaning. Once we stopped laughing I looked at her with seriousness.

“But what’s your meaning?” I asked.

The Painter filled me in. She asked me to consider that I rarely spoke to other townspeople. She asked me to consider that I took so seriously the effort of the tube, and never participated in tube-related banter with the other tubeworkers. She asked me to consider that I had, while depressed, become terrible at fixing the tube and made work harder for everyone, not to mention the odour I developed when I stopped paying attention to cleanliness and not to mention how depressing my appearances had been already. She asked me to consider that I liked to stand on Rumble Hill looking out with judgment. She asked me to consider that I had cohabited with the Comedian, who was considered an enemy by some. And finally, she asked me to consider something obvious. I was the fourth saddest townspeople and not getting any happier. Some of these things I had told the Painter myself, to be sure, but others I had not. She had perceived my bad reputation from afar or had spoken to other townspeople about me. The notion that I had been in the conversation of others while not present had never occurred to me before.

“And they don’t even know yet that you killed the fruit Vendor,” she said.

This was a painful blow, and in certain ways I doubted her judgment. After it all, I rarely saw any townspeople speaking except in circumstances of necessity. And the appearances of many townspeople depressed me, too. And other townspeople stood in places I didn't like. And finally, there were nine other townspeople who were among the saddest, and ten the year before that, and ten the year before that, and so on as far as is possible. At some point I had even been notably happy. I couldn't help but to feel that I was being painted in an unattractive shade. And so I couldn't help but to ask a question of defensiveness.

“Are you so much better?” I asked.

She set down her mug and looked at me with her mouth agape. The answer she gave was the opposite of my expectation.

“Of course not!” she said. “I never talk to anyone yet I depict their likenesses. I live in an area of solitude. Never have I carried a townspeople's hoisted chair or participated in tube celebrations. Some must resent me for the ease of my job. I take— took—the effort of my paintings very seriously though they are viewed by a small group of people who are unknown to me. I never receive criticism on my paintings, and I do not even know if they are good.”

Well, the uncertainty of our jobs was common. I had taken the surveys seriously though without feedback, and I too had felt worried I wasn't doing a good job. Until this moment of disclosure from the Painter, I had felt both alienated from and similar to all townspeople. I had thought of all townspeople as equally dissimilar and in this way similar. But if what the Painter was saying was true, my estrangement from townspeople was unusual. She also shared this estrangement, which had drawn us together. I was

sweating, to be sure, and decided then to disrobe. It seemed to me that each day had been hotter than the one previous. I piled my robe into a heap beside me and sat cooling in my undergarment. My skin felt hot except the parts touching the ground of stone, which was cold. I wondered whether the Painter would disrobe similarly in accordance with my precedent, but she did not. She looked comfortable enough. As a fact, she seemed rarely affected by elements.

Considering the Painter's perceptions of me, I did have to admit that she seemed far more perceptive than I. Well, her job was to perceive and express. When she painted townspeople, her depictions had to be similar to how these townspeople were perceived by all. There could be no emphasizing of certain traits in accordance to preference or interest; emphasis of this sort would be a flaw. I decided that based on the Painter's perceived responsibility towards an objective eye, she should be trusted. I asked what new jokes she had created, and how we would tell them.

"Well they will not quite be jokes," she said. "And they will not be told by us."

Luckily I was not holding my mug of brew when this was disclosed, as I likely would have sent it splashing again. My day had been filled with emotions. I had searched worriedly for the Painter, found her waiting for me with news to share, learned of her surprising perceptions of me, and I had decided to accept the implications of these perceptions. I was like a fruit of oblation hurtling down a hillside. Our plans were constantly changing in ways I could never predict. Well, it does tubewater no good to wonder in which direction it flows and why. I knew the only thing that could bring me to a stop would be for her to disclose the plan she had devised.

“While trying to write jokes I kept finding a limit,” she began. “I’m sure you’ve noticed the jokes told by the Comedian are always scornful.”

I was pleased to nod along wisely. Jokes were always scornful. It was known.

“Whoever the jokes resemble most closely are the saddest, and whoever they resemble the least are the happiest,” she continued.

Again, I was pleased to nod at the obviousness of these statements.

“When a joke has been told, we laugh,” she said. “This laugh signals that the sad behaviour is condemned and happy behaviour is conversely praised in comparison, fulfilling the joke’s function.”

The Painter was speaking with true clarity, which filled me with a calm, alert feeling.

“But what about our new way?” the Painter said.

I could sense an unexpected change around the corner and felt pleased to have made this perception.

“We have decided not to accept that people are either happy or sad,” she said. “We decided there was something else.”

I was glad to have another opportunity to nod, as this was known.

“If our jokes don’t praise happy behaviour by condemning sad behaviour then they will not cause any laughter,” she said. “And if they do not cause laughter, they will not be jokes. And if they are not jokes, they will be some new thing that reflects the new way of being. A way of no laughter, but of knowledge, and a way that exists outside of lists, as it cannot be ranked.”

Oh, she had explained this realization with such clarity that I began to vibrate. I stood and paced my room while looking down at where she remained sitting. As I paced I was nodding and snapping. Well, I couldn't help it. She shrugged with modesty. I became tired. I walked over to where she sat and slid down the wall until I was seated beside her. Because she had explained this new kind of joke to me so well, the rest of the plan was clear. It was akin to fixing one portion of a tube with such effectiveness that other parts of the tube improve in relation. Though I could have described the rest of our new plan to her myself, I sat in silence and allowed her to continue. I closed my eyes in the pleasure of hearing her describe what I knew to be known and true. Well, occasionally I let out some minor utterance of agreement.

“Because our reputations in the town are bad, we can not deliver these new messages ourselves,” her voice said. “The Comedian would take note and construct a joke of our attempts, and we'd be considered even sadder. We need a messenger who the townspeople are predisposed to listening to. Someone whose presence, in its happiness, represents the opposite of the jokes. Such a person could certainly bring forth the end of jokes.”

I opened my eyes to look at the Painter and make sure we were thinking of the same messenger. Well, so we were, and so it would be. One towns person was admired in every regard and all his actions were of truth. The Beautiful Boy.



## The Beautiful Boy

Though we were pleased to have a plan that made so much sense, we were not without anxieties. After it all, the Beautiful Boy was a figure of intimidation for the Painter and I.

My neglect to mention him earlier may be considered a flaw, but I have chosen this strategy only so that the Painter and I could become properly known without the Beautiful Boy's humbling presence, and not to mention certain problems of description. After it all, I hardly knew how to account for this boy's beauty or his acclaim in the town.

The Beautiful Boy was considered to be young, but his presence had always been known to me. For the duration of my life in the town, he was always in the top three happiest and was no stranger to taking the highest spot, even when he could not walk or talk. The location of his home was well-known, as it so frequently hosted the largest trophy outside. Often when I heard the Comedian's new jokes, I instinctively thought something like, "oh, how unlike the Beautiful Boy the conduct this joke describes is."

It will be unsurprising that I had never spoken to this boy before. After it all, his presence was in high demand and my social proficiency was in short supply. His job was fruit sortment. While it may be unexpected for the sortment of fruit to be a job of acclaim, it must be known that he was the only townspeople who had ever performed this job. That is, the varieties of fruit were indistinguishable to all by sight. No townspeople could tell simply by observance whether a given fruit was Sour, Normal, or Sweet except for the Beautiful Boy, who could do so by simple observance and without much scrutiny. He plucked each from a giant crate with both hands at once and placed them into three smaller crates of specificity. Some watched him perform this task for their entertainment for long durations.



Apparently, before this boy and his skill of sortment, townspeople ate fruit from a state of ignorance. A preference like my own for Sour would have been difficult to fulfill in those days. All varieties were kept in unison in a single large crate. A townspeople would bite into fruit to determine its flavour. Well, this was lamentable, as townspeople were constantly consuming flavours they found distasteful. In those days, the first bite of a fruit was tentative and joyless. You can imagine the amount of fruit that went to waste in those days, as one with a preference for Sweet would rarely eat Sour, and it was unknown to eat the fruit bitten by another. Well, in those days, the unfinished fruit were taken to the Outskirt, where they lay stacked high until they decomposed into piles of pittance. I just ate whatever fruit in those days, without the conviction for any games of guessing, and as a result I hated fruit. Well, so it was no surprise that the Beautiful Boy became beloved for his sortment, but this skill was only one of his aspects we cherished.

When I was a tube repairperson, the Beautiful Boy and I passed by one another on the main road in opposite directions often, as our schedules were in alignment. Each day when we passed we nodded to one another slightly. Well, I often wondered if he nodded to each townspeople he saw or only to me in acknowledgement of our frequent encounters. I nodded only to him. Most noticeable in his appearance was his perfectly straight posture. His body was of complete alignment, like a straight tube. This differed from myself and the other tubeworkers as we had postures of hunchment and pain. The Beautiful Boy's body moved with the lightness of dust; he walked although weightless, swaying only slightly from side to side. This boy also had unexpected facial qualities. The Beautiful Boy looked like no other townspeople. He looked like the blurry face of

someone important seen in a night vision, but his face also degraded the quality of its surroundings. As I've said, there is no way to account for this.

Now I do not wish to give an impression that our town was so impressed by the performance of single job and by physical appearances. The town had many problems that caused me pain, but we had sophistications also. For a townspeople to be a great worker and to have a pleasing appearance was not enough for them to become truly beloved (although my absence of these traits seemed sufficient to account for my malignment). Well, the main source of the boy's acclaim was his wisdom.

The Beautiful Boy's wisdom was not reflected in what he said. He was rarely heard to say anything in public, to be sure. But during any public event—the reading of one of the Comedian's new jokes, an update about the tube, some deliverance of supplies—the boy was always composed. Others, in their excitement, would talk loudly and begin chanting or making some dispute. As I have described to some degree, the announcement of the happiest townspeople was followed by cheering and dancing, and not to mention celebratory gestures by townspeople who held particular favour for the name announced. And the saddest names were met with laughter of increasing volume, to be sure, and other sounds too, such as cries of dispute from the sad, and shouts of disagreements of placement. Well, it was not rare for townspeople to begin shouting at one another, and this spirit of both celebration and antagonism at once would persist throughout the day. On the day following the lists' announcement, a hush of embarrassment seemed to fall over the town. Well, we could not help but to be swept away by the pressure and theatrics of the list. These lists dominated us.

But the Beautiful Boy's demeanour was never altered by the circumstances around him. I often watched him during events to see his actions. During the reading of new jokes, this boy would listen with a polite expression of attentiveness. When the end of a joke came, he would smile and clap, while those around him were slapping one another on the back, bent over with wet eyes, laughing hard from the back of their throats and gasping. When tube news was revealed, he never yelled angrily when bad news was given. He never shouted tube repair suggestions, but if a good suggestion was shouted by another he would clap in approval. During any deliverance, he never bemoaned the absence of some supply or another, even when what was lacking was fruit. Like all responsible townspeople, he assisted in the carrying of the supplies to the general store, but he did so without loading the supplies high in boastment of his carrying ability while looking all around to see who was noticing this display of strength, as many townspeople did. And when it came to the lists, he laughed quietly at the revelation of each sad name, as an expression of pity. He cheered with pride for each of the happiest names, and when his own name was read, he looked calmly and with gratitude at the celebrating townspeople. He did not dance boastfully or point in the faces of his detractors while yelling phrases of admonishment, as many townspeople did.

I knew the Beautiful Boy was ideal and I tried in vanity to embody his ideals. The more I emulated him, the more unpleasant I became. It was too difficult. Well, I should have known better than to copy the boy, just as a Painter should not re-paint another's painting. But he was the best guide for my conduct I could think of then.

Well now I've described my attitudes towards the boy, and so it will be known the apprehension I felt on my way to request his participation in the plan.

## Asking the Boy

Well, in those days I completed the questionnaires quickly and without much effort, and my trips up Rumble Hill had come to an end, and so there was hardly anything to do. Before approaching the Beautiful Boy, I first sat for an extended period in deliberation of how this meeting should occur. The Painter and I had come to an unsaid agreement that I should approach the boy because it had been her idea to solicit him. In those days, we had a clear sense of fairness and the correct distribution of tasks. I planned this meeting on my own. I decided simply to approach him at his home.

I knew there was no particular reason why the Beautiful Boy would want to help us. Our plan threatened to upend a list system that had been working well in his favour. What townspeople voted near the top of a given list year after year after year would want to do away with this list? And the boy could engage happily with any townspeople of his choosing. There was no reason he would want to associate with the Painter and I with particularity. Back then, I felt almost certain this aspect of our plan would fail. Because of the high likelihood of failure, there was not as much pressure. All there was to do was to make an effort to see what would happen. I remembered the Comedian simply knocking on my door and making a request of me that I had been glad to agree to. Maybe this was the way of many—to be more willing to entertain the plans of another than to follow one's own notions. Maybe a surprising knock on one's door put one in the mood for change and adventure.

On the day of this planned meeting, I first wanted to ensure that the boy's mood was good so that he might consider the plan with optimism. I walked strategically around the town with a false casual air. My route took me near where the Beautiful Boy was

engaged in his sortment. As usual, a few other people were standing at a distance, watching. I walked over and joined them. To join a casually assembled group of five or six others in this way was not in my nature, but none of the group turned towards me. Well, these townspeople all wore hats to shield their faces from the sun, and they stood unmoving. I was slightly behind them, watching between two of their heads.

The sun was making it difficult to keep my eyes very open, but I stood and watched the boy as he sorted fruit at a consistent speed. I had seen him perform this task before, in passing, but had never stood and focused on it. He did not seem to be thinking of the fruit at all as he sorted it. He could have done this task while sleeping it appeared. He wore a blue band around his head that kept sweat out of his eyes. Instead of throwing or dropping the fruit, which might have caused bruising, he rolled them off his fingers with a spin. How had he decided this was the optimal way to sort fruit? Well, it clearly was. On each of the crates was an image indicating the variety contained therein. The image of correspondence to Sour fruit had spikes and a piercing colour. The sweet fruit was depicted as being very round and pale. The normal fruit looked more or less as the fruit actually appeared. At first, I thought these images indicated the boy's visualization of each fruit, but then it became clear to me that they were likely the work of the Painter. I heard steps in the dust behind me. There was then a townsman standing behind me, watching the boy over my shoulder and I had been catenated to the group.

I determined it was impossible to sense the boy's mood by watching him sort fruit. As a fact, I was not sure whether he was capable of bad moods. Still, this clandestine viewing had not been fruitless. I had seen the boy sort fruit as normal on a normal sort of day, and this was enough for the plan to continue. I returned home to rest.

Once the sun was down and I could be sure the boy would no longer be sorting, I set off towards his home. The walk was not far. No trophy was outside, as on this year he had been only third happiest, after being second happiest the previous year. I hadn't enjoyed watching him slip consecutively. I had never seen him to be lower than third happiest, and I dreaded the idea of him becoming fourth. I knew the town would change somehow if that happened. Well, the town had already changed.

I stood outside his door, wondering greatly how his home looked inside. I then knocked in a casual way, with the knocks fluctuating in volume and tempo to communicate that I did not care either way how the knock sounded. Soon the door was open and the boy was there.

“Oh hello,” he said.

His expression was of interest but not surprise.

Well, I had assumed he would ask me why I was there and was standing prepared to answer this question. However, no question came. He wore a robe I had not seen him wear before. It was less pristine than his usual robes, and its shape was somewhat bunched. In a few places the robe was thin. Well, it was his home robe, in my assumption.

“Well, how are you?” I asked.

His face's expression changed. Well, he knew I had not knocked on his door to ask how he was. I sensed skepticism towards some potential deception. I decided to wait for some response. The boy noticed I was waiting for his response.

“I'm good,” he said, finally. “I was just about to eat some food I prepared.”

He pronounced each word with careful precision. The words emerged like little invisible stones, in that they did not seem to vanish instantly as words of others do.

“What kind of food?” I asked so that he would continue to talk.

The conversation was progressing in a normal fashion.

“Beans and spice,” he said.

I didn’t know what that was, to be sure, but I nodded in approval all the same.

“Do you want some?” he asked.

Well, this offer came as a surprise. It represented entry to his home and access to him in a confined space where he’d have to consider my idea with more politeness than in public. It was almost too good to be the truth. Well, I could understand that the Beautiful Boy had made this offer because of pity. It likely seemed I was begging for help. After it all, his home was among the town’s best known, and he was known to be among the best of all townspeople, so any pitiful townspeople seeking charity would likely seek it from this boy. And I was dishevelled, to be sure. My firing from the tube was likely known to all townspeople and my new employment answering questionnaires likely was not, and it would have been no surprise if the boy considered me coinless, if he considered me at all. I was willing to accept subordination and I smiled in anticipation as the boy led me into his home.

The home was a mess. It was of a similar size and shape to my own, but items were piled in the corners. I had to plan each step in advance. Many robes were strewn, on the floor or on stacked bundles. Certain robes hung high from the walls, and these were without wrinkle and of colours of quality. Various tools of unknown function were all about. Instruments and containers for food preparation were around. In one corner was an

oblong black stove, with a tube running from it to a hole leading outside. Beside this stove was a stack of stump wood. On the stove was a pot with the beans and spice steaming and bubbling, spitting up into the air and freckling the stained wall behind the stove. The boy's room was very hot from the stove, and droplets of condensation dripped from the ceiling to the ground of mud. He told me to take a seat. I sat on the mud and watched him rummage through a stack of bowls. I watched him scoop beans and spice into two bowls, and put a spoon into each. I watched him search through a bin of mugs until he found two of equal size. He poured into these some brew from a canteen. He set these bowls and mugs down and took a seat on the mud, facing me.

“I made too many beans,” he said, blowing at the steam. “So it's lucky you came today of all days.”

I was chewing the beans. It had been so long since I'd eaten hot food, and the temperature's sensation was a surprise. I was chewing rapidly to get the beans out of my mouth and into my throat's tube, and I was breathing in and out of my nose at a great speed. I swallowed the beans. I wanted to make it clear to the boy that I hadn't come to him for beans.

“I want to make it clear to you,” I said. “That I didn't come here for beans.”

At this the boy smiled, though I had intended the comment to be stern.

“How could you have come for beans if you didn't learn of them until I answered the door?” he asked, reasonably.

I lowered my head while chewing on some more beans and my subservience was amplifying. It was clear I was in no position to persuade the boy of anything. What's more is that the spice seemed to be accumulating in my throat and was making me



wheeze, and what's more is that my nose was running and I had to repeatedly wipe it with my robe's arm. I finished half my beans while the boy had barely begun. I took a sustained look at his face up close.

"Do you know who I am?" I asked.

"To some degree," he said, his mouth filled with beans. "I used to pass you quite often on the path. You were a tubeworker but then you were fired for being too sad."

I felt shame in having this history of myself repeated, yet I also felt a degree of pride. I had accurately predicted what he knew of me. It was seeming as though my perceptions were sharpening. I owed this to my association with the Painter and my attempts to see the world from a Painter's viewpoint. After lifting his bowl high, the boy tilted back his head, opened his mouth, and started spooning beans in, filling his mouth. Once he could spoon in no more, he poured some brew in, closed his mouth, and swished the contents all around before swallowing with great effort. He completed this routine repeatedly. My perception of the boy was shifting. He was impossible for me to predict, but it was clear he was not to be thought of as a person of perfection. As a fact, in his home he was vulgar.

I could not think of any words to initiate my request of the boy. I looked around his dark room and then noticed a recognizable shape covered by a drape. The shape struck me as very familiar, though I was not sure why. I realized then why it was familiar. It was his smile trophy for third place. My joy in recognition quickly shifted to unsettlement. After it all, the purpose of a trophy is in its prominent display. What purpose is there in a hidden trophy? It was clear that he was dissatisfied with this trophy. It was then that the path to the plan's disclosure revealed itself to me.

“Is that your trophy?” I asked, my mouth full of beans, gesturing towards the trophy with a movement of my head.

At this the boy simply nodded.

“Why are you hiding it?” I asked. “From dust?”

The boy looked at me with some concern, and I felt recognition in his expression. He was about to make some reluctant disclosure.

“I don’t really like to see that trophy,” he said. “I thought I deserved to be higher last year. I thought I was the happiest. I’m not sure what happened.”

“The same happened to me last year!” I said. “My position on the saddest list seemed unfair.”

“But you moped around until you lost your job,” he said. “And then didn’t you live with the Comedian? You seemed obviously sad to me and I didn’t even know you, really.”

“You’ve got it all wrong,” I said. “I lost my job after I was listed as one of the saddest. I didn’t mope until I was listed.”

“Really?”

I nodded. I was surprised in the interest he had taken in the information of my life. Success was now within view, but I knew I had to stay focused on the flow of our discussion. A discussion is like a leaking tube, and each point of persuasion is like a minor plugging, contributing to the possibility of the culmination in sublime repair.

“I never felt sad before I was so declared,” I told the boy.

“But then once they announced you were sad, it became true,” he said.

“And the same thing is happening to you,” I said, again motioning my head towards his hidden trophy.

He scraped away with his spoon at the film of bean residue on the walls of his bowl. His room was full of silence. Well, our sense of duration varies in any room we are in, based on the familiarity of the room to us. The longer we spend in a room, the more this room enters us and our moods and becomes invisible. When a room becomes invisible, we turn inside ourselves, where durations fade or can be greatly modulated by our mood. Well, my thoughts were along these lines as I sat looking on and on and on at the boy, who was looking absently over my head at the wall, not seeing me or the room.

“You came here to tell me of this?” he suddenly said.

And so then I outlined the plan of the Painter and I. I told the Beautiful Boy of our theory of a new form of joke that did not involve happiness or sadness or lists, and I told him that the telling of these new jokes could dismantle the list system altogether. I told him of the special connection the Painter and I shared, and how it caused to new ideas that seemed to drift into our heads from the air. I told him it was clear to the Painter and I that beyond the list system was an entire new way of being that opened the possibility of currently inexpressible and unimaginable sentiments. I don't know how long I talked. It was very easy to talk in a clear and confident way because I believed everything I was saying to be true. The boy sat listening, eyes closed. On occasion he moved his head up and down and up, and on occasion he moved it from side to side to side.

When I finished speaking the boy stood. His state was agitated, which was no surprise. He paced his small room, stepping on items, muttering to himself. I sat in rapt observance of the change I catalyzed in him. I realized he was already acting as a

messenger to an idea I had suggested, to some degree. I stood, patted him on his shoulder, and then he was alone.

## Back on Rumble Hill

After leaving the Beautiful Boy's room that night I knew I was too jumbled by notions and sentiments to return to my room to rest. As a fact, I feared returning to my room. This room was always so still and silent. I imagined that in its confinement I would begin to vibrate and expand and that the walls would crack and fall.

So instead of returning to my home, I walked to the Painter's. Rarely was I active and in motion while the sun was down. Any activity in the dark was a clear indication of sadness. Many of the saddest were creatures of the night. Many of the Comedian's jokes were set at night. Some of these jokes described otherwise innocuous activities rendered pathetic and hilarious by the moon's presence. Whenever I was awake and it was late, I would feel sadness in progression the longer the sun had been down. But on this night, on the way to the Painter's, I felt no night sadness at all. As a fact, I was enjoying the air's coolness, the silence of the town, the lack of fumes, and the desolation of the main road. Walking spent no energy. I started running at my maximum velocity. Still, no energy expenditure.

I arrived at the Painter's home and knocked, knowing she would be awake and waiting for information. The door opened instantly and I could tell she was wired. To be sure, her pupils were the entirety of her eyes. I told her we should climb Rumble Hill and she agreed.

We progressed up the hill's winding path in the dark at a regular walking pace, as we knew the way well. I was glad to be back on this path. Though my relationship to the hill had soured by my crime, this seemed only to apply during the day. The night's

hill was innocent. We were up at the lookout soon enough and unable to see the town below.

Without any prompting, I began recounting to the Painter my encounter with the Beautiful Boy. The darkness was complete and there was only my voice. I spoke without hesitation, as though breathing the words out while inhaling my next idea. There was only my voice's sound, and this sound became the shapes of the letters forming the words spoken. I knew the Painter knew nothing of letters, yet her sense of shapes was more developed than mine, and as I spoke I wondered what shapes were forming for her. While speaking, I thought of myself in the room of the boy, and the shape of the letters I had spoken and was speaking, and of the sentences flowing as though through a tube, and of the Painter and I flowing through a tube, and of the Painter's image of the conversation of the Beautiful Boy and I (which I imagined as a single painting in motion) and these lines were merging into one and this was the silence after my description came to its end. I realized my eyes were closed. I opened them and saw a line of faint light at the horizon. This line of light was touched by the furthest trace I could see of the tube.

The Painter was clearly energized by my description.

"Aha," she was saying. "Aha!"

The plan had as a fact advanced very little, but I felt pure excitement at the day's developments. I moved closer to the Painter and embraced her, and she embraced me in return with equal reciprocation. Well, I thought it must have been the best day of my life. But had I correctly identified the Beautiful Boy's interest in our plan? I had been making incorrect judgment after incorrect judgment after incorrect judgment year after year after year, and just because I had correctly observed several situations consecutively did not

erase this uncertainty of my perceptions. Well, the boy was going to arrive at some decision towards our plan, and if it turned out not to be favourable then we would act in some other way instead. Others could be spokespeople, after it all. A plan was like a tube transporting our efforts, and we were this tube's repairpeople.

## The Namer

Something of wonderment should be clarified. If the Beautiful Boy with all of his admirable traits had lately become the third happiest towns person then who was number one? What towns person was holding the top spot, and what was their style?

The happiest towns person that year was the one named the Namer. Well, this was a name she herself named. The Namer had risen from nowhere, it seemed, and she had exerted great influence over the town. The previous year, she had made her debut on the happiest list at the fifth spot when her naming tactics first become known. I assumed her rising esteem disguised her, causing her unfamiliarity to the town. Our images are altered by our ability to influence. It was clear that the town's trends when it came to happiness were in favour of those who held sway over the town's general opinions, and no towns person had been more powerful lately than the Namer.

It will be easier to describe the role of the Namer by explaining the town before she developed and presented her naming system. It is akin to how we could more easily describe "day" through comparison to "night." Before the Namer we had referred to things with generality. The words "happiest" and "saddest" had not been used in the announcing of the lists. Instead, tone and gesture indicated the nature of each list. When talking about a road, the louder and more emphatically one spoke, the more prominent the road. Things of which there was only one, such as the tube, were easy enough to refer to. Things of which there were many, such as colours or moods, were very challenging to describe with clarity.

The Namer introduced a way that reduced the importance of tone and gesture. Previously, if one had wanted to mention the Painter, they would have instead said



“townsperson” in combination with a tone and gesture indicating they were making reference to the most painterly of townspeople. But the Namer introduced words such as “Painter.” She seemingly pulled these new names from the air, but their sounds were always correct. There did not seem to be any limit to what she was capable of naming. Well, she named moods and she named events, and she also named items and she named the weather. She named the Painter’s techniques, and she named the Comedian’s jokes. She had never named an aspect of me, though I wanted her to. It was my assumption that once she did, it would make my life of greater purposiveness, though I was also nervous to be named.

There had been some rumours in the town that the Namer was planning to name the town itself. It will go without saying that this caused in us a sense of worry. To name anything altered its character, to be sure, and we were afraid of the town becoming different by way of its new name. But if the Namer named the town, we knew that we would accept the name. Never had one of her names gone unembraced, and we didn’t consider the possibility of rejecting a name she proposed. Well, had she named the town my book would have benefited.

The Namer’s most recent naming had been of great audacity. She had arranged a gathering at Town’s Square to be attended by all. Well, we knew something was about to be named and we stood in nervous anticipation of how this name would sound and what it would refer to. The sonic combinations she produced were always otherworldly and unpredictable.

On this day she arrived dressed with a flair. Her robe was of stripes black and white. No other townsperson wore robes that were not of a single colour (besides of a

stain) and this robe was stressful to behold. At first I thought she was about to announce the name of this style of robe but she never did. On her head was a hat, wide and flat.

There was silence of anticipation as the Namer stood before us. The moments before she spoke always felt momentous. For the Namer, the gulf between silence and utterances was enormous. Somehow I knew what was coming immediately before it occurred. She turned slowly and pointed to the mass jutting out of the earth like a horn and blocking some of the sun's rays.

“That’s Rumble Hill,” she said.

## The Owner

My obligations are many. Because the Namer was happiest and the Beautiful Boy was third, I will describe with brevity the townspeople who occupied the second spot that year, in completion of this trifecta of joy.

Quickly climbing the list with each passing year was the Owner, culminating in his position as the second happiest. Well, the Owner and Namer were of necks aligned, and it was hard to predict who would top this list. One could never count out the Beautiful Boy either, to be sure.

In our town there had been enough of everything for all. Everyone had a room and employment to perform in exchange for coins. Some—such as those employed by Culture’s Hub—received more coins, but this was relative to the consequences of their performance. For an example, if one performed poorly while flattening the road, this could be smoothed over with some ease. But if one ordering necessary supplies failed to do so, townspeople would starve. In this way, coins signalled pressure. To have more coins than another was no mark of pride. It was a burden, though the coins themselves could ease this burden by providing access to soothing products, such as candles and oils of relaxation (of which I have little knowledge).

However, the Owner somehow developed the idea of the possession of items as a gateway to power, and power as a gateway to happiness. When I first became aware of this tube of thought, it appeared clearly flawed, akin to a tube with leaking holes growing in size as pressure was increased.

But The Owner had his focus on what the Namer had named productivity. He planned his actions to have maximum impact and speed. These were unfamiliar notions

in our town. I'll give an example. The Owner was the only townspeople with no hair on his head. It was common for townspeople to remove the hair from their faces, so their features would be recognizable and they could be referred to with more ease. But no townspeople before the Owner had removed also their head's hair. Well, this baldness (as the Namer called it) certainly made the Owner a figure of individuality. But this was not why he removed this hair. Removing his head's hair removed the need to clean, tidy, or style his hair. It removed the necessity to think about his hair and to observe it in reflections. The Owner's unchanging head cleared his mind, he claimed, freeing him to think of other matters and allowing him an advantage over his fellow townspeople.

And what was in the Owner's clear mind? Acquiring and possessing items.

The Owner had many ideas that were new to the town. For an instance, he rose early to survey the day's fruit selection and would purchase only the fruit of the highest quality. He would then sell this fruit at a higher cost of coins. A transaction of this sort benefitted the Owner, as all fruit were the same price for him to acquire, whether fresh or rotting. Townspeople knew that the Owner's fruit were of the highest quality, and this saved them the drum's hum and uncertainty of fruitbuying. It was a symbol of happiness to be seen buying the Owner's prestigious secondhand fruit. It was assumed by some that the Owner's foray into the fruit business had pushed the Vendor towards strange behaviour such as trying to sell her fruit atop Rumble Hill, where townspeople rarely were. She could not compete with the Owner in terms of selling high-quality fruit, and the strategies she devised to increase her business were illogical. And yet, the amount of fruit she sold was of no real importance, as she was not rewarded or punished based on her sales. And yet, it was clear that she took her job's performance personally. Well, this

was true of every townspeople. Only the Owner's performance was of direct incentivization, and he was never seen to fail in capitalization.

The Owner was also what was called an inventor. That is, he developed new productions of automation. He created a device that produced sounds harmonious, and a device that peeled fruit with automation. He created a device that filtered debris from water and was said to be developing a tube repairing device of some sort.

But the strangest strategy of the Owner in his quest for coins was his acquisition of surplus lodging. As I have described, each townspeople had a room of entitlement. However, there were more rooms than townspeople, to be sure. Certain rooms were in such poor repair that they could not be lived in with safety. New rooms were built and these derelict rooms were abandoned. Other rooms were emptied by townspeople who walked the tube or died otherwise, and other rooms were emptied by those jailed.

The Owner began to obtain these surplus homes from the town in exchange for coins. Well, the town had never sold homes for coins before and homes were not thought to be of coin value before the Owner laid out this plan, but why refuse these coins? After these sales began, townspeople began to discuss how many coins their own homes were worth. Value was ascribed to other items, additionally. My own home was worth very few coins, I assumed. It was likely one of the town's least valuable homes, and it is likely now in the Owner's possession.

The Owner sold devices to townspeople using one of his surplus rooms as an emporium. Few townspeople had enough coins to purchase these devices, but many held in their minds the notion of striving towards a devices's possession at some future point. I never visited the Owner's emporium, but I heard in passing that these shining devices

were organized neatly in rows. I heard that townspeople were often in observance of the machines' properties and gasping at the disclosure of their coin prices. I did not visit the Owner's shop because I knew any desire for devices of life's improvement would make me sad in relation.

Well, the Owner had his focus on the solving of problems but his strategies of ownership often caused more problems than they solved. For an example, when the Owner noticed a product at the general store was in a short supply, he used his surplus coins to acquire the rest of the stock, rendering the product unavailable to others. He could then charge any desired price of coins for these products if their acquisition was of necessity to a townspeople.

And it will be known without saying that the Owner wore meticulous and unusual robes. They were of materials with properties unimaginable. For an example, they were of colours unseen in the town's environment. His robes were apparently of supreme durability, as they never appeared blemished or stained. Well, he also performed little manual labour and rarely was seen to wear the same robe. When he tired of some robe, he sold it for coins at his robe emporium. When any townspeople acquired one of the Owner's robes, they could be seen grinning widely while strolling around the town.

It was clear that if the Owner continued to obtain rooms, the town would soon have fewer rooms available than townspeople. Then, some townspeople would need to buy a home from the Owner in exchange for coins. This would put the Owner in a powerful position, and yet it was not clear how this was indicative of happiness. After it all, the power of the Owner seemed predicated on the misfortune of others.

The misfortune of others. This reminds me I have focused on the happy and neglected the sad. Let's take a look at a dismal townspeople or two.

## The Worrywart

I've elucidated the crop's cream so I should mention the barrel's bottom. I was fourth saddest and there were three below. I don't want to hit them while they're frowned, but to describe a town's happiest without mentioning the sad is to misrepresent the facts. It would be akin to describing water flowing into a town without referencing its tube And so let me mention some misery.

Oh, I must be brief, as it's tiresome to spend my mind's energy in consideration of more unhappiness. There was one townsman of annoyance to all and he was called the Worrywart. Before the Namer named him this, we made reference to the Worrywart through impression of his whining utterances.

This worrying townsman was always turning his head this way and that. His arms and legs were constantly vibrating and he frequently rubbed his fingers across his face as though to check for crud, though his face was always spotless. The Worrywart had the best grooming of any townsman and was always freshly rinsed. Aside from his nervous condition, his health appeared pristine. He had the smooth face of one who drinks considerable water and few brews of strength immoderate.

The Worrywart's employment was maintenance of the area of debris. This employment included digging holes for the town's waste, and burying this waste. This employment also involved collecting waste from the town's ground, and this employment involved restoring the town's order following celebrations. His cleanliness was even more impressive in consideration of his constant dealings with waste. His employment was desirable, yet not more difficult than fixing a tube. However, an advantage of tubefixing that some cherished was the camaraderie. To fix the tube required some



cooperation. The Worrywart handled the debris alone, which may have contributed to his unhappy disposition.

The Worrywart's position of sadness hardly belonged to his appearance. After it all, numerous townspeople had uncontrolled physical particularities, and many were sickly and depressing to behold. Certain townspeople had sustained great injuries, such as the administrative worker from Culture's Hub who first organized the regular deliverance of fruit to our town, which relieved all townspeople of wondering when fruit would next appear. This worker was cherished by way of a parade on a hoisted chair. While this chair was high, the worker stood on it and began dancing in a tremendously carefree style, kicking his legs from side to side and flapping his arms in an unprecedented fashion. His face was to the sky. Never had I seen a townspeople with such a blissful expression. I could not help but to cheer for this townspeople's state. But this townspeople slipped and tumbled from the hoisted chair. He spun in the air and landed on his head on the ground of dust. The parade ended instantly and the townspeople was attended to. His head was dented greatly. Well, that year I wondered what list he would appear on, and in the end the answer was neither. I supposed his happiness and sadness were each other's cancellation, ensuring permanent neutrality.

While this head dented townspeople's conduct had been foolish but understandable, the Worrywart bothered us with deliberation. Each day, he was either pacing around the town or standing with prominence at Town Square. In his loud voice of complaint, he articulated his worries. The town was getting hotter each day and the differentiation of weather at differing periods had nearly vanished, he reminded us. The tube's water came out less clear each day, and on certain days it had a sick pinkness. The

Worrywart made references to the fruit Vendor's disappearance and speculated whether it involved the Owner's involvement in the fruit market, the town's heat, or another source. The Worrywart described instances of townspeople wrongly jailed, or good deeds incorrectly attributed, and of misguided plans for the town's future. According to him, the town was unprepared for unforeseen developments. He seemed to know all. His most enthusiastic condemnations were of the town's morale. He described the town and its people as sentimentally leaking. He lodged himself beneath each townspeople's skin and it can be no surprise that we hated him.

Yet some of the Worrywart's claims sank in. The worries he articulated became my own nervous thoughts. The future he predicted became reality in my visions. Like all townspeople, I never failed to direct some epithet of opprobriation at this lamentable townspeople, but I knew his complaints helped to make us aware of potential problems on the loom, though these potential problems were always ignored. The Worrywart saw the world through muddy eyes of sadness, to be sure, but also with a clarity of possibilities. The main problem was that his voice and phrasing were of such annoyance. His voice caused an itch, and his style in choosing words sent our bones clattering.

Were I asked: "quick, describe the town's sentiment of what it is to be sad" I would have responded: "the very attributes of the Worrywart." The Worrywart knew he annoyed all and he did not care. He accepted that he was doomed to always be among the saddest, and each year when his name was read, he walked to receive his frowning trophy with calm acceptance. To him, our laughter and jeers were no more noticeable than some windy gust or a tube's gurgling. His immunity to our scorn only made us hate him more.

He was known to be a primary source of the town's unhappiness, yet he did not accept the town's jurisdiction over his state. And this in itself was of course sad.

The Worrywart was dismal and had been second saddest for many consecutive years. And now I feel a churning of my insides. Now I'll talk of the town's very saddest.

## The Singer

A word on parchment is similar to an utterance. That is, I have seen literate townspeople confronted with text who moved their mouths in silence while forming the words in their heads. In an addition, certain words resemble what they describe. For an example, the word tube. The sound of the first letter barely uses the throat and is instead the sound of air's stoppage causing pressure. Pressure is a characteristic property of tubes. The sound of the second letter is long, indicating length. Length is a characteristic quality of tubes. The sound of the third letter is abrupt but not piercing, like a droplet of liquid. Liquids are frequently transported in tubes. The fourth letter has no sound of its own but is used to draw out the sound of the second letter, much as how a tube supports deliverance. I have buried myself in a bed of words and am using them now to make the world.

While letters and words can resemble sounds, there are no known combinations of these to replicate the utterances of the Singer. The Singer often opened her mouth very wide and uttered sounds at a high volume of modulating tones. She closed her eyes and held both hands clasped against her chest. These utterances were named singing. They were similar to the sounds of injured tubeworkers. The Singer's sounds were similar to the Worrywart's warnings. These two sounds—the Singer's singing, the Worrywart's worrying—were my most hated sounds, and I found them more upsetting than even my own cries of despair when my mood was sad beyond repair.

No townspeople knew why the Singer sang, but singing became the Singer's occupation, in a way. I'll have to explain. Previously she worked in the garment factory. From what I heard, she one day began to make utterances unusual yet mild. Her mouth remained closed and she produced muffled tones in certain patterns. These utterances were

barely audible over the factory's din, the sounds of the clattering wheels of the transportation bins. Wheels spun and jittered as the carts were pushed across the factory's ground of stone, as the carts transported fabric, thread, buttons, and other materials all around.

Perhaps the Singer was emboldened by the absence of protest towards her sounds, or perhaps whatever expulsion her noisemaking represented became more satisfying as its volume increased, as it wasn't long before she was wailing very loudly, puffing out her chest, raising her arms for emphasis, her mouth wide. She sang on her way to and from work at the factory, and she sang for the duration of her shifts. During brief breaks, she sipped a mild brew to soothe her throat.

The other workers at the garment factory began to complain constantly. They did not naturally enjoy the sounds of the Singer (as one naturally enjoys the relief of stepping beneath a patch of shade on a scorching day and feeling the sweat dry on their skin, leaving behind a light saltiness) and they also did not enjoy the sounds of the Singer through the benefit of understanding (as one encounters an invention and feels disdain towards it before becoming aware of its function and becoming impressed by its ingenuity and design). No, the Singer's fellow workers did not appreciate any aspects of her vocalizations, and not even her passion or her commitment to singing at all times. In eventuality, it was decided that they could not work with her any longer, and she was told that she was no longer a worker at the factory.

However, the other garment factory workers did not want the Singer to starve foodless. After it all, they had seen her day after day after day for some portion of their lives. Though they didn't wish to hear her any longer, they did not wish to hear of her

demise. And so when she had been banned from the factory and had taken to standing in Town's Square and devoting her energies to singing always, those who had worked with her gave a coin or two to her each day. Each morning on the way to the factory, these workers formed a line as they walked through Town Square. One by one by one, they each dropped one or two of the smallest coins into the bucket at her feet. This bucket would fill and the Singer could eat.

Oh, why go on? This parade of drudgery through the town's dredges has lasted long enough. Let us jump back into the main action. Remember, the Painter and I were atop Rumble Hill cooking on the fire of possibility of what was to come, and the Beautiful Boy was somewhere below deciding whether to accept our plan. Let us jump to where these visions of the future made their convergence.

## The Boy's Return

The Painter and I were walking along the main road. I had come across her while she was leaving Culture's Hub for the day. She was in high spirits, describing to me some paintings she had been working on. To hear a description of paintings in a painter's own words interested me because she was not necessarily any better at describing a painting than any other townspeople would have been. That is, her great skill was the creation, not the summary. And so occasionally she became frustrated with inability to evoke something to her satisfaction.

Though I enjoyed the descriptions of her new paintings in progress and it was clear that she enjoyed describing them to me, it was known to both of us that we were acting in avoidance of a matter of gravity, and we shared knowing glances in this knowledge's acknowledgement. The heavy matter was that the Painter had also been writing the new jokes, and had not yet told me them. Well, she wouldn't disclose them while we were glibly strolling, but we knew soon it would be necessary for us to strike the centre of our plans and intentions.

Then we noticed an unmoving figure before us on the road, and we noticed that it was the Comedian. She was a surprising sight. Her hair matched exactly the shade of the ground of dust in this particular light. I had not seen her since she moved from my room. This was no surprise. As an observer and commentator, she generally found it necessary to be out of sight. After it all, I hadn't seen her in my life before she had appeared in my doorway.

So I was disturbed to see the Comedian. Her brazen presence before us seemed to mean we were being observed as to be the subject of a future joke. It occurred to me that

the Comedian had not delivered a new joke recently. I wasn't not sure if she had some idea for a joke of us in her mind or if she was observing us now for material. Until we had seen her we had been proceeding along the road in a state of visible happiness, I thought. What comedy could there be in that?

She stood still but her expressions were shifting like an accumulation of dust drifting waterlike along the ground. Her eyes darted from me to the Painter again and again. When we had lived together she often glanced in my direction with disdain but never had she held me in her eye for such duration or observed me with such focus as she was now. On her face was no scorn. I was being received with openness. The Comedian was wearing a form of robe I hadn't seen before. It was not draping at all, but instead was wrapped closely around her body like another skin.

"Hello," I said.

A happy enough greeting, I thought, though I received no response. The Painter did not greet the Comedian. Well, the nature of their relationship was unclear to me. The Painter and I walked past the Comedian, and I knew that some comment would be addressed to our backs. We walked slowly and with anticipation. I was thinking with such concentration of the Comedian behind me that I seemed unable to see what was in front of me as more than a red blur.

"One of the town's saddest," came the Comedian's inevitable voice. "Walking along joyfully with the painter of the sad."

Well, it was funny. The Painter and I began to laugh. Our laughter started without much force, but built and grew in strength as we took our next few steps. The air was dry and our laughing turned to coughing. Well, hunched, we had to pause. I spat phlegm onto



the ground of dust. But while laughing I thought of a retort for the Comedian's joke. Never had a towns person responded aloud to one of the Comedian's public joke-tellings, as they were understood to be rhetorical. Yet I had found such an obvious flaw in her joke that I knew I would have to say it. I was nervous in anticipation of how she would respond. After it all, who would enter a battle of words against a Comedian? But her joke did not acknowledge that the Painter also painted the happiest. To acknowledge this would remove the joke's sting. Maybe our association was a sign of my happiness rather than my sadness.

So I spun to deliver this retort, but she was gone. There was no accounting for how fast she had escaped. The Painter and I stood on the open road with no shelter in view. I looked to the Painter confusedly and she returned my look. Well, I shared my retort with the Painter and the open air and sky, and then we continued along the road.

The Painter and I arrived outside her home and I sat on its step. Our mood of carefree buoyancy from the earlier portion of our walk had evaporated with the Comedian's joke. I decided to act with the purposiveness I considered essential to our plan.

"What have you planned for the new jokes?" I asked.

She looked at me and nodded, as though I had uttered a statement rather than a question. Then she began to speak.

"Just now when we saw the Comedian, the joke she told was characteristic," the Painter said. "The nature of it was that it is lamentable to act joyously while sad in reputation. She used me as a symbol of sadness, because that's what I depict. I think the

essence of the joke was that you're sad but acting happy, which is a rejection of the lists, which is unhappy behaviour, which will result in you slipping further on the list."

Well the Painter had explained the joke with clarity, yet I was confused and rubbing my face.

"You pointed out that the joke misrepresented the facts," the Painter continued. "I think that might always be true."

I had to interrupt to ask the meaning of this.

"I think a joke makes us laugh because its frame catches us by surprise," she said. "The frame cuts off true parts. To fairly represent a situation would not make anyone laugh."

"What makes us laugh can't be true?" I asked.

She closed and opened each eye alternatively in fast succession, likely without realizing. She began to rub at the caked mud on her feet, which had become stuck as we'd walked through the muck while passing near the tube.

"The style of joke we know must have a true part," she said. "Or nobody would pay attention. Like a painting. But it cannot be comprehensive, or it will become interesting instead of surprising."

Well the landscape of dust that stretched out in front of me dimmed as an idea had suddenly emerged and become focal, as the sun is sometimes suddenly noticed to be directly overhead through pain of a headache it evoked. The limitations of jokes that made us laugh were the same limitations that made the lists so compelling to the town, and these were the same limitations that made the lists unfair and detested by the Painter and I. That is, the reduction of all to happiness and sadness did not say anything useful

about what sort of a towns person one was, and the uselessness of these positions prevented satisfying communion in the town.

I then had the impression of zooming out of my body and seeing from a distance my conversation with the Painter as though from the perspective of a towns person passing by. We were sitting near one another, our shoulders touching, our legs splayed out before us. The Painter was hunched forward, pressing her chin into her palm to support her head as she watched my talking. She was watching me as though I was the weather. I was sitting back slightly, my back resting against the step, one arm outstretched behind me, supporting my posture. I was talking with ease, without pause or hesitation. If I had been a towns person watching us, I would have thought we were communicating important, private information, and I would have become aware of my own distance from this information. Then I noticed my thinking and speaking had separated fully and formed a lacuna and that I had been speaking without thinking for some duration. I noticed then that I had paused speaking. The light became normal again. I zoomed back into my body.

“The new jokes will capture the essence of towns people in a balanced way,” I said. “Perhaps they will not be funny, but they will allow towns people to feel known. It will become clear to all that to consider only Happiness and Sadness as central does not allow us to think or know each other with satisfaction.”

The Painter was nodding. Then she turned to look out into the distance. Someone was walking by lightly in graceful robes. Their spine was straight as an arrow, to be sure, and they seemed to be dancing along the top layer of the ground of dust without their feet sinking at all. Well, it was the Beautiful Boy and we watched his approach. He stood

before us then with startling calm. I noticed my posture was somewhat hunched, and I sat up straight. When his mouth opened to speak I knew what his words would be and I could have recited them in synchronicity to him.

“I will be the Messenger of the new jokes,” he said, his voice loud and clear.

“We begin tomorrow,” the Painter responded.

The Messenger nodded. He turned with a graceful spin. We watched him walk away. Suddenly he stopped, and the Painter and I both tensed and sat up straighter yet. He turned to us. He was already far in the distance and his facial expression was hard to determine, but I detected some confusion.

“Where?” he yelled. “Where do we begin?”

The Painter and I turned to each other and shrugged.

“My home,” I yelled.

At this the Messenger’s tiny head was of bobbance yet he did not move.

“But where is that?” he yelled.

Well, I felt some embarrassment to have presumed my home was known to him simply because his home was known to me. I yelled out a description of my home’s location in reference to certain landmarks. Finally, satisfied, he turned and continued walking until he was indistinguishable from the sand in the furthest distance.

This uncertainty of where we’d meet had inserted some small sourness into our plan. It had been proceeding largely with unspoken grace until this exchange. It also occurred to me: how had he known of the location of the Painter’s home? Had he watched us from afar, following us home, noticing our interaction with the Comedian?

The Painter and I became engrossed in planning how the next day should unfold. She entered her home and returned with a long parchment and two writing stones. This parchment was the finest I had seen. It was textured yet uniform. It flattened easily and did not curl at the edges once smoothed. At first I did not want to make an impression on it, as it appeared perfect. However, the Painter began scratching on it with her stone and I did likewise. The stone too was of exceptional quality. It was of red pigmentation and created bold lines on the parchment with little effort. It maintained a firm point and rarely needed to be shaved for sharpness. We created a diagram of my room and what we would do there. We drew ourselves and we drew the Messenger. The Painter's images were lifelike and precise, and mine were as though scratched by a child in the night while the earth rumbled. And yet my impressions were easily known. When they had inexcusable flaws, the Painter corrected them. In our plans, we decided to be theatrical and we decided to be grand. Once the parchment had been filled with illustrations of my room, it was time for me to go I made the long walk home in the dark with an empty mind, having poured everything from it.

## In My Room

We transformed my room. The Painter had arrived early and knocked on my door, waking me. I changed quickly from my sleeping robe to my robe of the day. When I opened the door she stood greatly laden. On her back was some large bundle of cloth. In each hand she held a large can, dangling from a handle. She was swaying beneath the weight of these items. I took each can from her and we walked into my room.

She unbundled the cloth onto my floor and out spilled many items unfamiliar to me. Well, there were brushes of sticks and brushes of cloth. There were instruments with handles. One handled instrument looked as though it had a scraping purpose, another looked as though it had a smoothing purpose. Another indicated a poking purpose, another a chopping purpose. The Painter lined these handled instruments into a straight row. It pleased me to see them all.

She picked up one of these instruments then and used it to pry the lid off of one of the cans. We both peered inside. Startlingly white pigment. I stared at this white pigment, not noticing that the Painter had also pried the lid from the other can. She tapped me and pointed to this can, which I also peered inside. The clearest blue.

During the previous night, the Painter had entered Culture's Hub and taken these supplies. It was clear our plan was now swinging fully, as she would likely face reprimand shortly. We would have to disrupt the lists soon so that she would not be badly punished. We were going to use the pigment on the walls of my room to make it feel entirely unlike any part of the town, to induce new notions. We would make my room like the sky so that when the Messenger arrived, he would be able to abandon his preconceptions outside my door and become aligned with the state of our minds.

We set my possessions outside. Were any townspeople to walk by and see my items in this state, they likely would have assumed that I had died and my room had been acquired by the Owner and was being cleared out. Well, we knew the attitudes of the townspeople towards us were about to change greatly, so it was no concern to us whether we caused some confusion.

We had to wipe my grey walls with cloth, as they were having no problem sweating from the heat, though the day was still early. Once the walls were dry, we quickly began applying the white pigment using the brushes. It was no surprise that the Painter's skill with the brushes far exceeded mine, and she dictated how we should proceed. She pointed out missed spots and drips. With the walls complete, we had to paint the ceiling. It was slightly out of either of our reach, and I had nothing sturdy enough to stand upon; even if the Painter (who seemed very light) had stood upon my bed, its wood would be likely to collapse. We decided instead that I should get onto my hands and knees upon the cold ground of stone, forming a step. The Painter carefully stepped onto my back. I felt her rocking back and forth up there, trying to balance. The effort of supporting her was making me breathe heavily, deeply inhaling the pigment's fumes. Soon I was experiencing the sensation of floating, and this sensation was well-matched to the room's emerging blankness. The Painter instructed me to shuffle from place to place to place so she could reach each area of the ceiling. Much pigment dripped onto my head and my back, and my knees and palms became numb. Finally, the ceiling was white and the Painter stepped off of my back. It seemed possible to me then that my back was ruined. We reclined then onto the cold ground of stone to look at the dazzling ceiling. It was as though there was no longer a ceiling there at all. We couldn't rest long,

as we knew the Messenger might soon arrive. We had not spoken with particularity of when he should meet us, after it all. We painted our feet and then painted the cold ground of stone so that it was also white. Our robes were greatly stained, so we removed them and dunked them in the remaining pigment until they had also become completely whitened. While either of us was disrobed, the other looked at the wall in respect of privacy. While looking at the wall I wanted to turn to view the Painter unrobed, but I did not want her to view me similarly, and so I could not. It was my assumption that she felt likewise. Whatever the case, I felt too tired from painting's exertion to discuss whether privacy was important.

I thought of the stains and marks we had covered on my wall, which I had known so well. Each of these stains and marks connected to some memory, yet now each had been erased. Well, the Painter then told me something that caused no small surprise. We were going to paint over the white as well. We had only painted it white so we could make it a more perfect blue.

First we departed from my room and stood beneath the sun, waiting for the white pigment to dry. We stood near my items and it was as though we were in the biggest room imaginable: a room with a sun. Our wet robes began sticking to our bodies. We constantly had to pull our robes away from our skin so that they would not become stuck. We could not sit, as the ground's dust would become attached to our robes. Well, some dust became attached anyway, around our feet. We kept fidgeting and pulling at our robes and rubbing at the pigment stuck to our bodies which itched as it hardened onto our skin. It was clear the day would be uncomfortable. The Painter said the white pigment inside



would be dry, and we entered my room once more and repeated our painting procedures using the blue.

Then we were outside in our dripping blue robes, again waiting for the pigment inside to dry. Well, my basin of brew and my box of fruit were outside already, and so the Painter and I ate our lunch. I knew she wasn't accustomed to full meals solely of fruit and brew, yet she partook as though it were natural to her. Once filled, we carried my items back into my room and set them in a corner. The Painter grinned as she carried inside my trophy for fourth saddest. While walking she hoisted it above her head and danced, in imitation of the celebrations of those bestowed with a happy trophy, as though this shameful trophy of mine were something she was proud of. Well, she had a joking attitude, to be sure. We put the items in one corner of my room and covered them with a sheet of fabric, also blue, to maintain the room's unity. Now entirely blue, the room did seem outside of the town. It seemed also absent of temperature or duration. It was a room to float. All that remained unhidden in the room was the parchment containing our plans, and the can of what remained of the blue pigment, which was scant but would be of necessity.

Then the knock at the door came. It had a nervous quality. A double knock, quick. It was not the sort of slow triple knock I would have expected from the Messenger. But when I opened the door, there he stood.

The Painter and I sat side by side on the ground of blue and the Messenger was facing us, forming a triangle. I stood then and lifted the can of blue pigment. I walked to where the Messenger sat. I indicated for him to rise. I then slowly poured the pigment onto the top of his head. He closed his eyes as I did this. The Painter rose to help me by

rubbing this pigment across the Messenger's skin, across his robes, into his hair. Soon the pigment had all been poured. The Messenger was more or less completely blue. We hadn't done a perfect job but the blueness was of sufficiency. Then we were back sitting in the triangle and the room was entirely blue.

I kept becoming distracted when I glimpsed the Painter. Well, her hair had always been of a blueness only seen in a tube's sliced half, and her eyes in themselves had always been a washy blue. But against these walls and in this robe, the impression was now that she was as of one of the sun's waves but of water. That is, she sat still but seemed to be swirling. I knew that I (with dark hair inadequately pigmented and with dark eyes sticking out like fruit pittance on the ground of dust) appeared as a townspeople in determination to perplex, but the Painter looked natural, as though she had been born in blue.

All of this we had done to create an impression on the Messenger. It was clear that the Painter's appearance and our ceremony of blueness had impressed him. He wore a solemn expression and seemed prepared to accept whatever we proposed. During the development of our plan, the Painter and I had the idea to only tell the Messenger what he needed to know in ordinance to carry out the next part of the plan. This would keep him focused and prevent him from analyzing our plan with confusing scrutinization. And besides, we had not solidified every aspect. Certain parts of the plan depended on how certain other parts went. In alternating sentences we told the Messenger of his responsibilities for the first new joke while he nodded and asked no questions.

It is touching to think now of the three of us on the blue floor of that blue room planning our denial of happiness and sadness. Back then, it was not clear to us that our

sense of a truer way was correct. It was not clear to us whether we were about to attempt the saddest feat in the history of the town and wind up jailed. It seemed not to matter in our box of overwhelming blue. At this moment, we had never been further from the town and its lists. But we were about to breach this distance and become embedded in the town as never before. Let me relocate to where this story's tube reaches its first bursting point. Let me recount the telling of the first new joke.

## The First New Joke

The Messenger stood high on the blue box we'd built in the middle of Town Square wearing his robe of blue. The Painter and I stood far off, poking our heads out from behind a building, watching him. In his blueness he was a droplet against the backdrop of red dust. In a large but sparse semi-circle surrounding him were townspeople. Well, there were not nearly as many townspeople as we had hoped. The plan of the Painter and I dictated that the entire town would arrive to witness the telling of the first joke. We hadn't accounted for the fact that many townspeople would not be interested in the performance, or that they would sense something dangerous in its formulation and be afraid to attend, or that they would have other responsibilities.

Well, we had not been able to share the specifics of our plan with the townspeople anyway. Before the day of the joke's deliverance, the Painter and I had kept ourselves in the occupation of its promotion. A challenge in this promotion was that I was hardly known in the town, which made townspeople hesitant to hear what I wanted to tell them. After it all, I had never found it necessary to tell townspeople anything before, so why now? Why would I of all townspeople suddenly have some message needing communication? And I did not know many townspeople well, which made it difficult to greet them with warmth. Another challenge was that those who knew me knew me to be sad and didn't wish to make my association. Yet another challenge was that I could not tell the townspeople that I was involved in what I described to them, and I could share details only as though they belonged to a rumour I had overheard.

"Have you heard?" I asked them conspiratorially. "That Beautiful Boy is planning to make a speech of some form."

Though an unplanned speech of this nature was of no precedence in the town, some were active in their ignorance of this information, walking on past me before all my words had emerged. Others were dismissive in their absorption of this information, as though such a speech by the Beautiful Boy was of no interest to them. A third group listened with some interest and either nodded or asked some related question, such as when the speech would be made, or where. I could recognize in the crowd now surrounding the Messenger that many of the townspeople in attendance had belonged to this third group.

There was one townspeople whose presence was essential. That morning, before anyone had arrived, the Painter and I had watched with scrutinization as the first townspeople assembled around the blue box. We were in anticipation of the arrival of the Singer. The Singer's presence was of necessity because she was the subject of the first new joke. The first new joke had to be of her, as she was the town's saddest. If we were to prove the new style of joke could do away with happiness and sadness, it would be best to focus first on a case of extremity. If the Singer didn't arrive, we planned to postpone the performance of this new joke and to create a new plan, as the joke would not be impactful upon the townspeople without her presence.

Luckily, because of the annoyance of her singing, the Singer had no responsibilities and was available. When I had told her of the Beautiful Boy's upcoming speech and that it involved her with particularity, she did not cease in her singing and I found it very annoying to have to speak loudly enough to be heard over this din. But while singing, she was listening and nodding. And she was one of the first townspeople to arrive, carrying her bucket of coins. While waiting for the speech to begin, she did not

cease her singing and the other townspeople who arrived stood distant from her. There was a large ring around her where no other townspeople stood, as though she were a hole in an otherwise pristine tube section.

The Messenger's voice had begun, thin but audible in the distance. Well, he had to speak at his maximum volume, as there were many directions for his voice to travel. And yet while his voice had to be loud he also had to speak calmly and without seeming to yell. He spoke with confidence and clarity, to be sure. He was giving his planned perfunctory remarks. It brightened one's eyes simply to see him, but to hear him speak was even better. He was welcoming the stragglers and addressing the townspeople known to him. He was wishing everyone a good day. He mentioned the happy townspeople in attendance, such as the Owner and the Namer, with respect. We had expected the Owner and the Namer to attend, as both were invested in the temperature of the town's opinions. The Messenger then addressed the sad townspeople in attendance—such as the Singer, the Snoozer, and the Worrywart—and their mention did not fail to draw laughter from the townspeople of neutrality. The Messenger was performing with charisma never before seen. All townspeople heads in view were unmoving and pointed in his direction.

After a theatrical swish of his robe, the Messenger shifted from his style of jocular to a style of seriousness.

“We all know of the town's saddest,” he began with obviousness.

Many heads turned then in the direction of the Singer, who stood off to the side with no townspeople near, as though the crowd was carted fruit and she was fruit having fallen and rolled. Of course she had been singing all along, but the Messenger was speaking with such volume that this singing was barely an annoyance.

“Of course the Singer bothers us,” the Messenger said. “She lives in opposition to the preferences of townspeople who would prefer not to hear her, much as a sharp stone is in opposition to our preference towards a painless step. She is unable to stop singing, though she would likely like to be thought of as happy. She collects coins from many, as the ground collects droplets, and I believe it likely causes resentment in the garment factory workers to see the bucket of their coins at her feet presently.”

Well, grumbling was heard. It may be clear that portions of this speech had been provided by me. I had written in minuscule lettering different points for him to make and in what order he should make them. So far the speech was having its effect and my pride was growing. The rumbling of voices of townspeople angry with the Singer was getting loud. In response to the strain of anger directed at her, the Singer’s already unpleasant voice was increasing in volume and pitch.

“We all have a remembrance of the Singer’s appearance at the top of saddest list,” the Messenger went on. “None of us were surprised, I can guarantee.”

There were murmurs of assent all around.

“We remember the Comedian’s joke that seemed to be at the Singer’s expense,” said the Messenger. “The joke being of a townsperson who cannot stop themselves from making a vocal sound, and how this sound is the cause of hatred towards them.”

The crowd was beginning to laugh, including the Painter and I from our hiding place. The Messenger went on to relate the rest of this joke. In the joke, the townsperson’s involuntary vocalizations worsen as they sadden in a circle of viciousness, until the sound is so sad even the Singer is unable to bear it. The crowd erupted both at the recognition of this punching line and the sadness it conveyed. Well, if the Comedian

had been present she may have been proud at this reception of one of her jokes, although she would have found some fault in the Messenger's telling, to be sure.

The Messenger again swished his robe and transitioned into a third mood. The crowd fell silent. The Messenger's eyes could be seen to be very wide and innocent, and he glanced frequently towards the sky.

"But who knows the Singer with depth?" he asked the crowd. "Do any townspeople have remembrance of her before her singing, and before the Namer gave the name "singing" to the production of these sounds, and before she began making her appearances on the saddest list? Even those who worked along her side day after day; did any of you really know of her?"

There was a strong silence from the crowd, which the Messenger presented as an indication that indeed the Singer had been previously unknown. Well, by suggesting it was unusual that the Singer wasn't known by many, the Messenger was making the false implication that it was common for any townspeople to be known well and with depth. Well, the Painter and I had known the Messenger could present some false notions, as the townspeople would be overwhelmed by the amount of new information pummeling them like pressurized water. The Messenger proceeded to sketch the story of the Singer.

The Messenger recited the details we had told him of the Singer's life. While she had worked at the garment factory and before she had begun her loathsome habit of singing without cease, she had been a typical townspeople of neutrality. She had been known to have a method in the preservation of fruit so the fruit she acquired would not become misshapen or of odours unfavourable. The method was of placing the fruit in a basin of salt and the juice of previous fruit. After some duration, the fruit would become



bounceable with any flavours of unfavourable strength rounded off. During fruitless periods, she had given these fruit of preservation to townspeople in need. Certain townspeople loathed the taste of these aged and salted fruit, particularly because as these fruit were unsorted and preserved in the company of many other fruit they were without the distinction of flavours townspeople had come to know. However, these same townspeople were reliant on her preserved fruit, and spoke of the pitfalls of this preserved fruit while its salty juice ran down their chins.

The Singer's life had been unfolding smoothly enough. She attended gatherings and acted appropriately. Her home was said to be clean and in no need of repair. But one day in the garment factory, another worker slipped on the ground of cloth and fell onto the sharpest shears, recently honed. These shears were of blades each the size of a townspeople, and though they had been created in ordinance for the cutting of the roughest fabrics at the highest speeds, in this instance they instead cut off the entirety of one of this worker's arms when she fell hard without resistance. This injury was bloodier than any seen in the tube's repair, and worse to see than townspeople crushed by the collapse of a poorly fabricated buildings, which happened often. The factory worker's arm of severance fell to the ground of cloth and bled.

This injured townspeople had initially stood shaking with mouth agape in silence. No factory worker had seen this arm fall except the Singer. With some instinct for the preservation of others, the Singer grabbed fabric from the ground and wrapped it with tightness around where the factory worker's arm stopped. She then sat this factory worker down to rest. The Singer grabbed more fabric and wiped the blood from the sharpest shears. She wiped also the blood that spattered onto other surfaces and tools. In

meaning's while, the injured townspeople began to shriek in pain. This sound was common enough in our town, as townspeople often caused pain in themselves through workplace injury. For an example, tubeworkers often accidentally affixed themselves to the tube using the substance of adhesion. These poor tubeworkers then had to rip their skin from the tube with great effort, and these tubeworkers never failed to shriek. Well, some even shrieked simply in the anticipation of this pain of ripping. Other townspeople felt great pain through inner ailments, and some even shrieked for no reason at all, but these shrieks always came to some end.

When this factory worker of the grievous arm injury began to shriek, the Singer instinctively began to mimic these cries, although with greater volume. Now of course with two workers shrieking, others began to notice and were peering over. The injured factory worker looked to the Singer in confusion of these shrieks of mimicry for a moment before becoming distracted by her incredible pain. While shrieking in a fashion more or less identical to that of the injured worker, the Singer secretly gestured for this worker to leave the factory, even shoving her towards the factory's exit. This worker got the message and hobbled off, carrying the chopped arm with her attached arm while shrieking loudly, but not as loudly as the Singer.

Shortly after, one of the factory's supervising workers arrived in her bright vestment and with a parchment pad of infractions. This supervisor wanted to know why the Singer was shrieking, but the Singer was in no position to explain. And so the supervisor looked all around for some sign of distress, but could find none. She eventually had to accept that the Singer might be shrieking because of a personal preference to do so. Though it was annoying, to shriek was no infraction. Though it was a

sign of sadness, it would be a blip in the overall consideration of a worker of such neutrality.

But it was not a blip, to be sure. The shrieking did not cease, day after day after day, though various supervisors came by often to investigate because of the frequent complaints of the other workers. It was noticed that the dreaded sounds that the Singer made were without the disorder of despair of common shrieks. They rose and fell in pitch and volume according to predictable schemes, and the Singer herself maintained impressive posture and a look of concentration on her face, making it clear she was trying to accomplish some particular sounds and not creating a disturbance for no purpose. This purposeful auditory disturbance was what the Namer had decided to call “singing.”

“And why did the Singer begin making these sounds, and why has she not ceased?” the Messenger asked the crowd with a style of rhetoric.

He paused to allow any townspeople with the answer to make the answer known, to boast their skills of insight. But there was no townspeople with the answer. All watched the Messenger with devotion, waiting for the unpredictable answer.

“As could be predicted, the Singer began her singing to cover up the sound of the injured worker’s wails,” he explained. “She knew this worker would lose her job and be thought of as sad if it became known this worker had become incredibly injured in this way. The Singer knew if she could help this injured townspeople leave for the day, the loss of this arm could be explained in some unsad way, or hidden it from other townspeople with success. However, when the supervisor arrived to inspect the Singer’s wails, the Singer had to keep singing in the supervisor’s presence, to appear natural. For if the singing stopped, it would seem to have corresponded to some incident, and the

incident could then be investigated. And so the Singer sang for the rest of the day and has sang since. Does she sing when none are around? That can't be known. Is it wrong for me to have disclosed the nature of the Singer's singing and the dishonesty it involved? Well, she's already the town's saddest and there's nowhere to fall."

At this the Messenger leapt from his blue box and landed gently on the ground of dust, sending up a small red cloud. Without hesitation, he walked in the direction of his home, waving his hands in the air, knowing we were watching him go. We had instructed him not to stop if pursued by any townsman. If any townsman followed him all the way, he was to enter his home and shut the door, leaving them outside. However, none followed him. His audience dispersed slowly, as his small red cloud of dust settled back to the ground. The Messenger became a speck of the horizon.

The first new joke had reached its completion and none were laughing, to be sure. The Painter and I began to walk in the direction of my home. We had stood hardly breathing during the duration of the Messenger's recitation. Though the crowd had been fewer than we predicted and though the Messenger had been perhaps too theatrical, the telling of this first joke had largely gone as planned, and our plan could now proceed.

What was not known to the townspeople was that the Messenger did not know any more of the Singer than they themselves did. The Painter and I had created this fabrication of details in the ordinance of evoking complicated emotional reactions from the townspeople. In truth no arm had dropped. The nature of the singing was truly unknown to all but the Singer, and was perhaps unknown to the Singer herself, too. But after it all, it appeared no townsman had wondered, "and where is this townsman of the missing arm from the garment factory, and why have they remained unseen?" No

townsperson had asked “could a townsperson even survive such wounding?” No townsperson had wondered aloud of the Singer’s apparent regard for the well-being of others at her own expense, which was not a notion known to any in the town. The Singer offered no decipherable dispute towards any of the fabricated facts we presented on her behalf, and her singing droned on and did not take on a tone of argument.

The townspeople had drifted with entropy and without the engagement of each other. The voice of the Singer had diminished as she walked away from the group back in the direction of her usual singing spot. It had not been clear what emotions this false account of her life had evoked in her.

The Painter and I ran along the path towards my home wanting only to continue our planning. When one of us accelerated in speed, the other would match it. Our steps were light and it was clear we had done something happy, and yet we had done so in a rejection of happiness and in a spirit of destruction. The happiness of this deed was coincidental, we knew. Once the outside of my home was in view, we were running as fast as we could. We could do nothing but proceed and our second joke was already forming before we stopped moving.

## The Second New Joke

The Messenger was back on his blue box and robed in blue. Between this and his previous performance, he had repainted the robe with more blue pigment to maintain his contrast to what was around. There had been no more blue pigment, so the Messenger had insisted that the Painter take some more without permission from Culture's Hub. There was risk but she agreed in ordinance to maintain his enthusiasm. We helped him paint the robe early in the morning and he had stood outside my home, drying in the sun.

Little blue droplets on the ground of dust lead to the blue box the Messenger stood upon and his robe was visibly wet. On this day the crowd was more full. There may have been twice as many townspeople at this second performance. The Painter and I— from a different vantage point, behind a stump and nearer to the Messenger—whispered that perhaps half of the townspeople were in attendance, even though we had advertised the telling of this second new joke much less than we had the first. Likely some townspeople had heard whisperings of the last performance and developed some curiosity to attend. It may have been the case that other townspeople who had been afraid to attend the first performance because of the spirit of subversion now realized nothing detrimental would happen, yet. Well, it may have been the case that this performance was simply at a more convenient part of the day for some. Who could know?

We noticed that townspeople were not standing at as far a distance from the Singer as they previously had. She appeared almost to be a regular member of the crowd, except for that she was the only one who was singing, of course. It was a day of some wind, which was mixing the dust into the air, and townspeople frequently coughed and rustled in their robes. Because the dust was blowing, the town appeared redder than ever.

It was clear that some dust was becoming stuck to the Messenger's still-wet robe, making it purple. Well, it was clear he would insist on painting it again before his next performance, and every subsequent performance. One did not become known as a beautiful boy without having some fixation on their own appearances, it seemed.

On this day, the Messenger didn't bother to remark perfunctorily. He leapt onto the blue box, landed with grace, spun in a smooth circle, opened his arms wide. At this, the Painter and I had to laugh. We hadn't told him to act in quite this way. In our envisionment of his performances, he was eerily calm, as one who can see the future. In our envisionment, his grey eyes were wide and flashing as he presented himself as the body of truth. Instead, he had a grin of confidence and he was the body of entertainment. He launched into making a joke of the happiest townsperson, the Namer, who was in attendance, to be sure. Well, she was directly in front.

The Namer had enjoyed the telling of the first new joke more than any other townsperson, it had been clear. This was no great surprise. After it all, she cared of words and what they referred to, and she knew much of how changing a definition could change the town. She knew also of how to rise from obscurity, and how to make oneself a figure of the town's interest and trust. She must have recognized aspects of herself in the Messenger, as she was a messenger too, in some sense. At the telling of the first new joke, she had stood at the back of the crowd, but the Painter and I had noticed with ease how she had become more absorbed as the performance went on, and had inched closer to the Messenger on his box of blue.

The Messenger began his new joke of the Namer by congratulating her on being the town's happiest. His tone was of sincerity but some degree of bitterness, which the

townspeople couldn't help but to notice and grin in response to, as all knew he had previously been happiest and had been proud of holding this spot. Well, the town still considered him to be very happy, to be sure, but it was unusual to see him in this position of subservience to someone happier. During this introduction, the Namer smiled and blushed with modesty. As was typical, she wore a hat of audacity, and on this day her robe was of a pattern of small white and black squares of alternation.

The joke soon soured. After it all, if the Messenger spoke with singularity of the Namer's happiness, it wouldn't have been a joke at all. It would just have been the town's ordinary discourse. Speaking with praise of those happy was the most common conversation topic, to be sure. As a fact, mixed into their mild amusement of the Messenger's praise of the Namer, the townspeople had been observably bored to some degree, as they were hearing phrases they had heard in abundance with repetition. But this boredom quickly found its evaporation as the Messenger began to criticize the Namer.

He mentioned one of the first things she had named: fruit. To call the round flattened food items all townspeople ate "fruit" was considered to be the crowning of the Namer's achievements. She had created names also of the three subcategories of flavour: Sour, Sweet, and Normal. These subcategories saved townspeople energy. Before the naming of these flavours, these distinct types of fruit had been described by using the facial expression that accompanied their consumption. That is to say that for one to communicate that they wanted to eat what became known as a Sour fruit, one would say that they wanted the common flattened yet round food item, while holding up a fist in approximate indication of this item's size, and they would close their eyes and scrunch their face with their lips pushed outwards in imitation of the facial expression produced



by eating this fruit. Some townspeople were better than others at making expressions of this sort. For some, it was of a secondary nature, while others had to practice. For an instance, when I myself was young I would often receive the wrong fruit because my face was wrong. For what became known as Sweet, the common facial expression was a kind of smile with eyes only partially closed and lips tucked slightly in. The expression for Normal was the expression one makes while walking down the road on a windless day without a sun of punishment.

The Messenger explained that there were of course not only three flavours of fruit. He asked with rhetoric which townspeople had not tasted fruit that seemed to be both Sour and Sweet, yet not Normal? And he asked which townspeople had not tasted fruit that tasted extra Normal, yet not Sour or Sweet. It was assumed in town that Normal was somehow in between Sour and Sweet, yet how could these flavours be positioned in a row? Then the Messenger revealed information that caused no small disruption in the minds of all townspeople in attendance. He announced that he had no particular skill for fruit assortment, and had been dropping them into the three crates entirely at random.

“This began when the Namer first announced the names for the three styles of fruit. I did not believe such a clean distinction existed,” he explained. “My experience of eating fruit was that each fruit was different and unpredictable, yet similar. I decided to pretend that I could tell upon sight the differences between the Namer’s three types of fruit, and the townspeople verified this false skill to be true. Whenever I declared a fruit to be Sour, townspeople tasted it as Sour, without any fault. When I decided a fruit was Sweet, so did any townspeople who saw it in the crate for Sweet fruit.”

Well, it may not be a surprise that these claims the Messenger presented to the townspeople were not true. As he had explained to us in our first meeting of planning—during which we first proposed undermining the Namer’s names of distinctions—the fruit fell into one of three categories, which he had always been able to identify by sight. The fruit appeared to him to be of differing densities. Sweet fruit appeared somehow transparent, and Sour fruit were opaque. A Normal fruit was of a staticky translucence. Yet many fruit could not be put clearly in any category and some seemed to be directly on the line between Sour and Normal, for an instance. Well, because the sortment was not always neat, the townspeople were easily able to believe that no distinction existed at all between the fruit and that they had been misled. Because this disclosure of the falseness of categories was made by the townspeople who was most closely associated with the categories, townspeople began to murmur with worry, and the Namer could be seen to shrink into herself.

Using his skill for jumping upon moments of uncertainty, the Messenger launched into further underminements of the Namer’s names. It certainly did not take him long to mention that it had been pointless to give Rumble Hill a name of specificity when it was the only hill around. Conversely, he pointed out the pitfalls in referring to such a variety of different beverages as a brew, which made it very hard to request a beverages to one’s particular likings. Beyond making mention of names that were simply of inconvenience, he pointed out that certain names damaged the town’s understanding. He pointed out for an instance the implications of the title of Owner gave permission to the Owner to own, whereas to have named him the Thief would have created a different impression in the minds of townspeople, in particularity because the notion of thieving was well-known to

us already, as some townspeople of historicity had thieved during states of apparent derangement.

Well the Messenger eventually undermined even the name of the very ground we stood upon by pointing out that Town's Square was of a circular shape. This observation had been suggested to him by me, and I felt satisfaction in watching the townspeople's heads nod in agreeance.

Finally, in this long new joke's punching line, the Messenger announced he would be renaming the Namer and that her new name was to be the Misnomer. And so it was.

## Calibration

The Painter, the Messenger and I were back in the blue room, alerted to the sun's ascent by the glow of pale yellow light in the gap between the floor and the bottom of my door, which greened the walls slightly, reminding me of my childhood. We sat on the floor with our backs against the wall and our legs out in front of us. I sat in the middle with the Messenger and the Painter on my either side. Between each of our legs, between our knees, was a mug of brew. We were tired and silent. There was a great disparity between the tranquillity of the room and the unrest of the town outside. Well we assumed that no townspeople with knowledge of our location would knock down the door, yet we knew the town's awareness now had its focus on us.

We sat in the silence of having recently decided we wouldn't work for the town any longer. That is, the Messenger would no longer be occupied in the sortment of fruit. The reason for this was clear enough. He had just told the town that sortment was random and unnecessary, so if he was seen sorting he would be thought of as a frivolous townsman. The Painter would no longer work in Culture's Hub. The previous day, during her last shift—which she had spent pretending to paint, yet drafting the new joke of the Worrywort—she had taken a large supply of materials, including multiple cans of blue pigment.

I no longer had the ability to think rigidly of happiness and sadness as the questionnaires required. In an addition, if I was to be honest in the questionnaires about my thinking and doing, I would be admitting to my role in the dismantling of the lists and would reach the ire of whoever administered and read these questionnaires. I did not want to complete questionnaire after questionnaire of dishonesty, so each morning when I

noticed a new questionnaire had arrived for me, I would add them to a pile of incomplete questionnaires accumulating in my corner.

The three of us knew that by avoiding employment with no excuse, there would soon be some consequence. When it came to how we would feed ourselves when the coins we received through employment ceased to arrive, we decided that going forward, the Messenger would set an empty can before himself while reciting each new joke. At the joke's conclusion, he would request that townspeople deposit any superfluous coins into this can, as joke-telling was now his employment. We were confident some coins would arrive this way. After it all, the Singer had annoyed townspeople to a great degree and received coins of compassion. For all of its confusion, our town was one of surprising consideration.

I could tell from the deepening yellow of the light visible beneath my room's door that the sun was high. On each day of the performance of a new joke, I began to feel a stomach of pittance as the performance drew near. To ease this feeling, I reminded myself of how the previous joke had been received, and that there had been no catastrophe though it was a risky joke in that its target was one of the town's most beloved. Following the conclusion of his second joke, the Messenger had once again directly retreated to his home, kicking up clouds of dust with his quick steps. In meaning's while, the Painter and I had remained behind our stump, watching the crowd. The townspeople we saw were in some distress, it was clear. A group of townspeople stood in a circle around the Misnomer, asking her questions the Painter and I couldn't quite hear, but it was clear that the questions were of an accusatory tone by how the Misnomer stood shrugging, arms extended, palms outwards. Other townspeople simply

looked around in confusion. Some stared off at Rumble Hill in the distance. The Painter and I watched until all had retreated.

The next new joke was of the Worrywart and we had created a joke that would fit perfectly with the town's mood. Well, it was clear that the whole town was now worrying, as the Messenger's new jokes had thrown a shadow upon many classical notions held by all. For the next joke, we would position the Worrywart as being a figure of perfect rationality. After it all, if the whole town was now worrying, the Worrywart had simply been ahead of the trends. It would be easy enough to rehabilitate this townspeople's image, as he dressed with style.

Planning and promoting the new jokes had occupied the Painter and I to an overwhelming degree, but we had a new closeness that seemed to prohibit the necessity of speaking. We seemed to exist as a single entity. Well, I had never known closeness to this degree with another townspeople before. I knew I should soon speak to the Painter to find out if she shared these feelings of closeness and if they were also without precedence in her life. Well, her way of being was of such purposiveness that I couldn't imagine she spent much thought on it one way or another. We often shared looks of knowledge and secrecy which seemed to communicate more than I could say with a stack of parchment of any size.

Though we communicated to townspeople through the Messenger as a vessel, it was becoming increasingly difficult to communicate with the Messenger himself. When we weren't feeding him jokes, he often stared off with a spirit of arrogant indifference. I knew it was possible I was seeing with incorrect vision, but it was my interpretation that he was taking on attributes of the persona of his jokes and that he was beginning to feel

he had come up with this plan and these jokes himself. This notion did not bother me much. While the Painter and I lived entirely in devotion towards our goal of bringing the lists to an end and propelling the town into a future of our design, we were not looking for any credit. As a fact it was the opposite. There was to be no benefit to us if our involvement in this plan was ever made known.

The Messenger was humble when he came to us in acceptance of the role we had offered him. Now, this endearing vulnerability had been clouded over by theatrics. I turned to look at him as he sat beside me. His eyes were closed and he was mouthing some unknown words. Occasionally he pointed at some imaginary townsman with one of his fingers. Well, he was in his own world and it hardly caused me botherance. I leaned my head onto the Painter's shoulder and closed my eyes.

## The New Door

The Painter and I were preparing to leave for Town's Square for the telling of the third new joke. It was customary for us to leave well in advance of the Messenger so that we could establish our viewpoint location. In an addition, we wanted to allow him to collect himself in preparation. In another addition, it was important for us not to walk to Culture's Hub with him, as we didn't want our association with him to become known. In yet another addition, arriving early meant we could analyze the crowd in assurance that no mood of antagonism towards the Messenger could be detected. It was our plan that if we ever noticed a mood of antagonism in development before the Messenger's arrival, we could run back to the blue room and alert him and the performance could be cancelled if he didn't wish to face a crowd with such a mood. However, if such a mood emerged during a performance, there wouldn't be much to do. He'd be alone up there on the box, defenseless except for his voice and the ideas we'd given him.

It was the day's middle. We said goodbye to the Messenger, who sat on the blue floor repainting his robe blue yet again. He was in this task's absorbance and waved goodbye with absence. As we stepped through the doorway to stand squinting at the sun's light we noticed there were people outside, waiting and watching us. Some leaned against buildings and others sat on the ground of dust. If I looked at any of them closely, I could find recognition to some degree, though none were well-known to me. Their expressions were neither of malice or support. They simply watched us to see what we would do. We turned and went back inside the room to decide what to do.

At our reentry, the Messenger looked up in surprise.

"There are people out there waiting," I told him.



He paused painting his robe. As I looked at the robe I thought its painting was purposeless, as it could not have been any bluer. Well, it may have been that the painting itself had become a ritual of habit for the Messenger. I thought it strange that the Messenger was constantly painting and yet the Painter never was. I decided to tell her this later during some silence. It had been a duration since I had told her something simply for her amusement.

“People,” the Messenger said.

To this I nodded.

“Do they know I’m here?” he asked.

This had not occurred to me, but I realized it was clearly true, and I nodded again.

The Painter was reaching around with one hand beneath the blue cloth in the room’s corner for some item. Unable to locate her desired item by touch, she climbed beneath the cloth. We watched her shape as it moved. Then she emerged, holding shears and a sharpening stone. She rubbed the edges of the shears against the stone, creating sparkles that fell to the ground of blue, creating stars. I decided I would remember the image of these yellow sparks falling to the blue floor to remind her of later.

“What is your plan with those?” the Messenger asked.

His voice had a tone of concern. It was clear that if the telling of his third joke was going to succeed, he was going to have to improve his mood soon.

“We have to make a tiny new door,” the Painter told him, pointing to the wall opposite the actual door.

As I watched the Painter and the Messenger discuss the necessity of this door, I realized that they rarely interacted directly and that I was a kind of messenger between

the two of them. After telling him the size and shape this door should be, she handed him the sharp shears and told him to start cutting. He could push the cut piece out of the wall and crawl through. Once out, he could replace the piece. He could enter the room this way whenever necessary. This idea was strange and good. While my room's door was along a road with other buildings all around and townspeople coming and going with no minor frequency, behind the room's back was simply a dusty landscape of eternity. The creation of this new minor door would allow the Messenger to leave the room undetected and to walk for some distance unseen before joining the road and walking to Town's Square, where he would be awaited by the crowd of townspeople. He could return to the room through this back entrance also, slipping in and out without notice.

The Messenger crouched and began stabbing at the wall. The Painter told him it would likely be better to saw with unified motions. She told him to work quietly. She also told him to hurry. We watched him for a slight duration as he sawed at the wall with the shears, squatting, his wet robe dripping. Once we had confidence he would create this minor door with success we went.

Back outside, the townspeople remained where they'd been. We shut the door. As we walked past these townspeople, none of them moved. They would continue to wait for the Messenger if that was what they were waiting for. If they did not give up, they would miss out on hearing his new joke. Soon they would feel they had been misled by whoever had told them of his location. In our town, there had never been a building with more than one door of exit and it was commonly understood that there was only one correct way in and out of any building. The Painter and I were customarily thinking in opposition to the town, yet it wouldn't have occurred to me that my room could have a second door.

To imagine this growing hole in the wall created some vibrating revulsion in my body's tubes. I noticed I was secretly hoping the Messenger would somehow find himself unable to complete this new door. It was possible he could outwait the waiting townspeople, though it would be impossible for him to detect whether they had gone. It was possible the Messenger could simply be seen to exit my room and this would not cause the lists' dismantling to unravel, though if townspeople knew for sure of the Messenger's affiliation with the Painter and I and of our triadic delinquency of employment, it was clear they would pull with detriment at the details of our plan as one pulls at the threads of a robe of antiquity until it no longer can be called a robe. I had to accept that this small new door was integral to the maintenance of the Messenger's secrecy, and that this secrecy was integral to the maintenance of our plan, and that our plan was integral to the possibility of the Painter and I avoiding jailable sadness in the light of our recent activities.

While the Messenger was sawing with shears at the bottom of the room's blue wall, the Painter and I were proceeding along the road in the direction of Town's Square. It was a day of painful brightness and no shadows could be seen. In the brightness, the ground of dust was deeply red, but the sky's blue was very pale. This imbalance in the saturation of shades created a sensation that the ground was too heavy and the sky was too wispy and that everything was about to flip and we would be hanging upside down by our feet. I became dizzy but did not wish to stop walking. I closed my eyes but kept moving. While my eyes were closed, the dizziness started its subsistence, and I kept them closed for much of the walk.

### The Third New Joke

Again the Painter and I had a new vantage location, now behind a large pile of stones. This vantage was oppositional from where we'd observed the first two jokes and was behind where the Messenger would stand instead of in front. When the deliverance of this third joke occurred, we would see only the back of the Messenger. We chose this new vantage because we wanted to see with clarity the faces of the townspeople in attendance, to better understand their moods. There was a limit to what could be gleaned from observing their backs, after it all. If you had been a townspeople in the attendance of this joke and were looking all around in earnest for the Painter and I, it's possible you would have seen the tops of our heads poking slightly above the pile. We were in the distance, but you'd have recognized us if you knew who you were looking for. Of course, no townspeople would be looking in earnest for the Painter and I. They would be thinking only of the Messenger, their Beautiful Boy.

We waited behind the rubble and watched the crowd assemble. The Messenger was not yet in sight but the crowd filled quickly. It appeared nearly every townspeople had assembled, as the crowd was of the same size as when the lists were read which was an event missed by none. Old townspeople sat on stuffed bags they'd brought. Younger townspeople were restless and fidgeting. The telling of the first new joke had been met with an air mainly of indifference. The second had fostered receptive curiosity. Now the air seemed to be buzzing, and the buzzing only built, akin to sitting on a recently repaired tube with water flowing strongly inside. When one was straddling such a tube while it was well-patched without any major leaks, it would hum and shake.

Then in the distance some dust began rising as some group was making its way down the road. This cloud of dust and the group that kicked it was visible only to the Painter and I, as all other townspeople were facing in our direction. Soon we saw that the group was led by a blue figure. Who were those that followed him? Well, it may have been the case that some townspeople had come across him on the path, but it may also have been the case that the townspeople who had been waiting outside the room had seen him leave and now knew of our headquarters. There wasn't long to speculate.

The Messenger walked around the crowd while nodding at its size. A hush fell over this crowd as he was noticed. He leapt onto his box of blue and scanned the crowd in search of the Worrywort. He found the Worrywort easily, as he was standing directly in front and wearing a blue robe of an identical shade. Where had he gotten this particular pigment which had been exclusive to the Painter's supply? Well, it did not surprise us that the Worrywort seemed to have arrived in preparation to be the subject of the new joke. He was second saddest and we were following an observable pattern. As second happiest, the Owner would have known he was next if he was paying attention. Well, it was doubtful the Owner would arrive robed in such a fashion when it came his turn to be a joke's subject.

The Messenger offered brief pleasantries before launching into a listing of the Worrywort's bothersome attributes, and the Worrywort listened in acceptance with head hung. The crowd was quick to laugh at each detail, and there was applause of clapping. One by one by one these bothersome attributes were listed. His voice's dismal pitch. His jerking head, the ticks of his nerves. His visions of paranoia. Many townspeople had been burdened with loathing for this worrying townspeople for no short duration, and to have

these attributes laid out plainly was a relief. Certain townspeople likely blamed the Worrywort for lending them ideas that they then had to carry with them, causing unhappiness. I'd had night imaginations of these worrying visions of the town's future, including the tube's ultimate burst, turning the entire town's ground into mud which then hardens into a crust which cracks, showing the earth's horrible glowing core. I knew this was a vision of rhetoric, but it was impossible to forget. Some in the town considered the Worrywort to be the source of all the town's misery, as though he were a tube for unhappiness to flow through. Well, even the Painter and I who had supplied many of these observations ourselves laughed softly as the Worrywort found the chastisement he was due.

The Messenger then twisted the joke into shape as was his skill. He had solidified the town's sentiment of the Worrywort which he could now bash to pieces by showing how the Worrywort was much like any townsman. With this approach, if any townsman still believed the Worrywort to be worthy of the punishment of the sad by the joke's end, this townsman of judgments would have to level a similar judgment upon themselves. While the Painter and I knew well how each joke would progress, it still took our breath to watch with what natural ease he poured the sweet brew of his rhetoric into each townsman's ear. The Painter and I provided the Messenger with the details he needed, but we could not have incorporated them with such elegance into speech. Well, neither of us were naturals with words. The Painter was an expert of images, and I was an expert of nothing. To watch the Messenger use my notions to shepherd the town's attention of collectivity was like seeing infinitely into the horizon

and becoming aware with clarity of what is beyond one's town. Oh, and the day was so painfully bright.

Suddenly mixing with the sound of the Messenger's clear voice of projection and the sound of the soft drone of the Singer—who was singing less and less loudly each day, it seemed—was a third voice that gave me shiverance. This shiverance was because the voice came from directly behind me, though I had believed I had all the townspeople within my sight. I shivered because the voice was so near behind me, spoken almost into my year. I shivered because the voice had a tone of pain. I shivered because, though I didn't notice the words said, the voice was known well to me. At a certain point, it had been a voice I heard every day. I spun around and there was the Comedian. The Painter spun also to face the Comedian.

“What did you say?” I whispered quickly to the Comedian.

I didn't want to miss out on developments in the Messenger's joke of the Worrywort. The Painter was swivelling her head back and forth between the Comedian and the Messenger.

“I said ‘well, well, well, what do we have here?’” the Comedian said.

“Oh, OK,” I said.

I suppose I had been expecting a joke from her. I told her we were watching the Messenger's third new joke, like the rest of the town.

“I know you're involved in this,” she said while gesturing in the direction of the crowd. “I've been watching you.”

Well, this would be a long conversation, it was clear. I told her at the least to hunch down behind the pile so that we would not be seen by the townspeople and cause a

distraction. She said she didn't care if we were seen. I needed her to hunch, or townspeople would notice us. We weren't doing anything necessarily sad, yet our position was suspicious. Townspeople would begin asking questions, in particularity because many of them had been alerted to the first of these new jokes by us. I told the Comedian to please hunch or that I would ignore her. She told me it seemed I had developed some new sense of confidence. At this remark I had to look away so she would not see my face of self-satisfaction. Eventually she sat beside us on the ground of dust. It was causing my body tension to be missing this joke of the Messenger's. I had the sense that if I was listening, nothing too bad could happen, but while I wasn't listening, any disturbance was possible. I whispered to the Painter that she should turn and listen to the Messenger's joke and alert me if any disturbance emerged. Then I turned to the Comedian with an expression that she should say what she had come to say.

“You two must be the stupidest townspeople ever known,” she said. “What are you doing?”

Well, I was not going to simply spill our plan to her, it was clear. I shrugged and waited for her to ask me a question of more specificity.

“I saw you set up this pile,” she said.

I gave her a look in indication that it was not so unusual to assemble a pile, and what was unusual was the clandestine viewing of a pile's building.

“I saw both of you walking around with materials,” she said. “Stuff from Culture's Hub, likely stolen. And you've been neglecting your employment.”



I gave her a look in indication that whether or not these claims were true, they didn't seem to have anything to do with the Messenger standing on his box of blue and addressing the crowd, or the Painter and I sitting behind a pile of stones.

“Oh, but I could tell right away this all had something to do with you,” she said.

I knew this comment had aim at my chagrin, yet I again had to turn my face so she would not see my expression of pride. Face turned, I waited for her to explain what she meant.

“You don't understand anything,” she said. “This town is a certain way for a reason.”

“So it must be,” the Painter muttered.

“What was that?” the Comedian asked.

“I said ‘so it must be,’” the Painter said.

“The two of you are helping the Beautiful Boy confuse the town about who is happy and who is sad,” the Comedian said. “Surely this is sad behaviour.”

I gave her a look in indication that soon it wouldn't matter what behaviour was happy and what behaviour was sad. I was both bored by and interested in what she had to say.

“It's predictable too because you lived with me and were around while I was planning the new jokes,” she said. “The jokes must have come to seem frivolous. And you never connected with anyone in the town. And you're one of the saddest. It's predictable.”

I gave her a look in indication that I seemed to be connecting with the Painter pretty well.

“These faces you’re making at me aren’t really communicating anything,” she said.

I thought back to when I’d been proud to have had a few basic questions to ask the Painter, back when we’d barely known each other at all and had stood in estrangement on the hill, looking out at the town that we couldn’t understand and barely engaged with. I thought back further, to the expansive duration of which I seemed to have thought of nothing at all. There was now an endless stream of questions I wanted to ask the Comedian. Why had she chosen me to stay with of all townspeople? Why had she been unable or unwilling to stay in her own home? Why did she leave immediately when I was declared sad? I realized that these questions had in their root a first essential question.

“Why do you care what we do?” I asked.

She nodded in measure. There was a great change in her temperament from when I had known her. In those days, she was always sighing in exasperation of my questions. Though she had come to me, she found my presence burdensome. Before I knew her I had been in great isolation, to be sure, but I did not consider myself defective. Living with the Comedian made me certain of my defects, and in comparison she seemed to know all. But now she was uncertain, and now it was she who wanted something from me. What she wanted was for me to stop whatever I was doing, though she didn’t know quite what it was. Then I noticed the old assurance was back in her face. She had thought of something good to say.

“Think of how little you knew when you saw me last,” she said.

Though I didn't wish to follow her orders, I couldn't help but to think of when I saw her last. It had been when we had passed her on the road on our way home and she had told a new joke at our expenses. She was correct to point out that I had learned much since then, though she couldn't have been certain of the nature of this learning. I nodded in indication that I had thought of it.

"Now think of how much less you knew when you saw me last before that," she said.

Well OK. This would have been when we last lived together. She was correct to point out I now knew a lot more than then. As a fact, the amount seemed almost infinite. In those days, it had been as though the town was a tube I was stuck within, but at some point I burst out. Luckily, nobody tries to put water back inside a tube once it has burst. The water is free to do as it wishes, though what it wishes is always to head into the ground.

I could discern the point she was making. While I had burst out of one tube of understanding, I was now simply trapped in a larger tube. Well, so it must have been. One can continue to burst from their narrow tubes into larger and larger and larger tubes of understanding, until they're in a tube so large it is not discernible. So I was not concerned about her rhetoric about how little I knew.

I turned to the Painter and asked whether the Messenger was saying anything surprising. She said no, that he was simply proceeding in extolment of worrying as a style of living, and that the crowd was receptive. She said he seemed to be finishing. The Comedian cleared her throat with impatience.

“The next time you see me, you’ll be aware of how little you know now,” she said.

At this she walked off. We watched her walk in a long arc. Her walking style was an effortless drift. In her tight black robe her figure began to look like a sketch as it fluttered off into the dust. She disappeared behind the buildings. She appeared then near the crowd, which she quickly dissolved into.

The Messenger meanwhile was drawing lines of parallelism between the Singer and the Worrywort. It is good to put others ahead of oneself, he was saying. It is good to address issues of the town. He proposed a new name for the Worrywort. The Concerned Citizen. The crowd began to cheer and dance. We watched the Messenger beckon the Concerned Citizen up onto the blue box, and we watched the Concerned Citizen shake his head in adamant refusal. He had his concerns, it was clear. We watched the Messenger continue to beckon and beckon with increasing animation, and we watched the Concerned Citizen eventually grin and shrug and make his way towards the blue box, to the crowd’s ever increasing delight. We watched the Concerned Citizen carefully lift one leg and place it onto the blue box. As he put his other leg up, aided by the guiding arm of the Messenger, the crowd’s cheers hit saturation. The Painter was grabbing my shoulder and shaking me gently and we were laughing. There was barely room for both the Messenger and the Concerned Citizen on the blue box. The Messenger’s arm was wrapped around the Concerned Citizen and the Concerned Citizen shook one finger at the crowd in mocking admonishment. He shook his head at the crowd, and then pulled his robe away from his neck in an imitation of a sweating and nervous townsman. It was hard to believe he and the Messenger hadn’t practiced this comedic routine, as the crowd

was in a rapturous state. Eventually, as the cheering could go on no longer and the crowd's energy began to wane, the Messenger helped the Concerned Citizen down off the blue box to rejoin the crowd. The Messenger waved in riddance to the crowd before running off into the distance. If any townspeople had wanted to follow him, it would have been very difficult.

Once the crowd had dispersed, the Painter and I stood up and brushed each other off. Like each previous joke, the third had been unprecedented in its reception. Though my mood was of a happiness that I could not have previously imagined, thinking of the next joke filled me with some pain. After it all, the Comedian had said "when you next see me" with such certainty that it was clear she had some plan of a future engagement between us. And to be sure there were many aspects of the town I didn't understand. The sun was heading down as the Painter and I were ambling along the deserted road and I watched the stretching shadows of our robes reaching across the ground of dust. I wasn't speaking and neither was the Painter. As visibility narrowed, I had to wonder whether our plan was progressing towards some enlightenment or only into greater uncertainty.

## The Messenger's Concerns

When we arrived back at the blue room that night, the Messenger was already inside and pacing. During a public performance, any townspeople's body will heat up, turning some of their interior water into steam, creating a pressure that finds its manifestations in a red face, sweat, bodily tension, and a temper of volatility. One begins to breathe more rapidly, and this extra air in the body also becomes steam. Following a performance, the body needs to get rid of this steam before a townspeople can return to their normal temperament. Otherwise, their thoughts and actions will be pressurized, causing behaviours of delusion. When I had thrown the Vendor off Rumble Hill, my head had been filled with steam and was not capable of thoughts of rationalization. Because I had been acting without thinking, this act now has the quality of a vision of unreality.

When I lived with the Comedian, I had to grow accustomed to her transformations before and after the unveiling of her jokes. When she thought of some new joke I could always tell, though she never revealed a joke to me in advance. I always wished she would share snippets of them with me, so I could have nodded knowingly during their performance, but this wasn't her style. To fill the jokes with authority, she didn't reveal them until they were finished, and this prevented their questioning, as they had no edges of roughness to pick away at. I'm not criticizing this practice. In fact, it inspired my vision of the Messenger's conduct. It was why we demanded he dress differently while performing than in public, and it was why we instructed him to appear in public with less frequency. It was why we directed him to use different mannerisms while on the box of blue, and this was why we demanded he speak only in a tone of certainty.

On the day of a joke's performance, the Comedian used to become almost like a dead person. It was always the same. She would sit in a chair unmoving and I would bring her brew and fruit. She would raise these to her mouth at a speed imperceptible. Her eyes would be closed through their lids would flutter. Then, would come some mutterance at a volume indecipherable and I knew she was telling me to depart to join the crowd assembling. I would see her next as she arrived to tell the joke, and she would be jovial and bouncing along. As I've said, she had no great skill for jeketelling, but this was the most animation she ever possessed, as she arrived and delivered and departed. On the evening following a joke, once she had released her steam, she would have a warm afterglow, as the sun slipped away. This was usually when we would stimulate ourselves with sexuality.

When the Messenger ran away at maximum speed following the third joke, it had made enough sense to me. It had been the biggest crowd and reception of highest raucosity, so he had unprecedented steam to release. In this way, a townsperson under pressure was like a tube. Usually when I thought of a tube, my sympathies were with the tube itself, and I felt antagonism towards the water, ever attempting escape. In my days of working on the tube, I often cursed that the water couldn't find contentment in being tubed and was always searching for some crack or hole. I often wondered why the water didn't just slow down and take it easy. After it all, why was the water racing to be consumed by townspeople, or to be absorbed into the ground of dust? Why was this the water's urgent goal? Watching the Messenger's stress and need for relief, I was able to learn that pressure is necessary to the accomplishment of some task of resistance. When I

saw him pacing without cease in the blue room, I hoped he would soon be relieved of his pressure and able to relax.

But now in addition to his pacing, his face was agitated. His eyebrows were moving up and down and his eyes were darting from side to side. His arms were rigid alongside his torso, yet his fingers were twitching in every direction. On occasion he jumped and yelped as though he had stepped on a sharp rock, though the floor was smooth. The Painter and I exchanged looks of concern. We sat and waited for the Messenger to relax to some degree. Eventually his pacing slowed, his eyes darted less, and he jolted less frequently. Still, he was messed. He was malfunctioning to some degree.

“What’s the matter,” I asked him, breaking the silence that had persisted since we had entered the room, besides his mutterances.

He jolted and looked over to me in shock, as though he hadn’t been aware of my presence. Well, maybe it was so.

“It was an amazing performance today,” I told him. “I’ve never seen the townspeople react like that.”

He looked at me with suspicion.

“What about the threatening townspeople?” he said in a voice of distance.

Again the Painter and I looked to one another with concern.

“The townspeople thought you were great,” I told him. “The ones who followed you on the path. The ones who wore robes emulating yours. Didn’t you hear them laughing or see them dancing?”



“What about the ones glaring angrily at me?” he asked. “What about the ones in the crowd in huddled groups murmuring? What about the ones who tried to chase me?”

“I didn’t see any townspeople like that,” I said. “And I never have.”

He looked pleadingly at the Painter.

“I didn’t see any townspeople like that either,” she said. “Which ones were they?”

“Townspeople I didn’t recognize,” he said. “There was a group that stood with that happy bald townspeople, the Owner. There was another group that stood with the joketelling townspeople. Oh, those two used to be my supporters and now they hate me.”

“Nobody hates you,” I insisted. “You’re the most popular townspeople I’ve ever known. Already a new trend is to be like you.”

These words didn’t help because he didn’t believe them. He continued his circular walking. The Painter and I were standing in the middle of the room and he walked around us. His dusty feet imprinted a path on the floor. We did not turn to watch him as he walked around us. He was rubbing his face and muttering to himself that he was in trouble and that he was afraid.

Well, the Messenger was really frustrating me now. The telling of these jokes had exceeded my expectations of fantasy, and it was clear the town was changing rapidly in ways favourable to us three. And yet the Messenger was experiencing a reaction as though this plan was a terror in the night. It was clear we had applied too much pressure to him and his emotions were leaking out. It was clear by the circles around his eyes and his body’s twitches that he was overworked and underslept and that he had accumulated more steam than could be dispersed in one night. He needed to continue leaking steam so he would not burst.

So that he would stop walking, I stood in the tracks of his path. When his walking approached me, he noticed at the last instant and paused. I made an extension of my arms. He looked at me with questions. I nodded to him in reassurance. He allowed me to wrap my arms around him. I felt his body vibrate against mine. I felt remorse. What had we done to this beautiful townspeople? The Messenger's body was twitching as of pain, and I squeezed him so that his body could not move. The Painter joined and was squeezing our bodies, too. There was nowhere for the Messenger's body to shake. He was compressed. In eventuality the Messenger's vibrations ceased and all was still. There was almost complete darkness in the room. I looked over to the space beneath the door. The breath of light was pale blue and I knew it was the night's middle. I quietly told the Messenger he should go to his own room to rest. I told him there would be no townspeople on any of the roads and that he could walk slowly in the depository of the night's stillness. I told him to return tomorrow and that he would be himself again and all would be correct. He accepted my words and slowly parted from us. We watched him crawl through the circle's half he had cut for his escape that morning. He slipped away and reassurance rushed back into the room in his absence.

## The Messenger Returns

Following the exhaustion of trying to rescue the Messenger from his nerves of dust, the Painter and I slept on the floor of blue. It hadn't been our intention. We were sitting with our backs against the wall and our legs extended, as was customary for us in the room. With tiredness we had been softly mumbling remembrances of the third joke's performance to each other. These remembrances already had the quality of a memory of distance. At a point unremembered by us both, we entered sleep and slid down along the wall to the floor because of the weight of our heads. When the morning arrived, we woke together, and both sat up, stretching our bodies. My neck and back were solidified and cracking as I performed my morning routine of limberance. The Painter watched this routine and nodded in some admiration of its intricacies. Her own stretching routine was performed on the floor with legs straightened and arms reaching.

I pushed the cut out circle's half to let some thin morning air into the room. There was a rumble in my stomach and I decided to prepare a morning meal for myself and the Painter. Of course, there was not much to make. I had some Sour fruit. There was also my brew in its stone flagon. In my room's small food preparation area was a hard board, a blade, a large bowl, a fork, a spoon of stirring, a spoon of scooping, my small bowls, my mugs, and a few powdered flavours in shakers. I didn't know the names of these flavours. One flavour was burning and red, one was cooling and green, and one was brown and tasted of dust.

So I used the blade to chop the fruit into small cubes. These I put into the large bowl. I used a fork to mash the fruit cubes until they were a thick smooth brown paste. I sprinkled some of each of the flavours into the bowl. I focused mainly on shaking in the

cooling flavour, as the other two were difficult to consume, to be sure. I mixed this mixture with my spoon of stirring before transferring it to the small bowls. I realized I missed food preparation. I wondered what else I could add to this dish. I cut up another fruit into small cubes and put these into the large bowl. Once again, I mashed these into a paste. I splashed some brew into the bowl. Using the fork, I whipped the fruit and the brew together. The paste of fruit slowly dissolved into the dark brew, lightening it. Bubbles of air were forming. I whipped with great intensity, occasionally adding flavour dashes. Periodically I looked up at the Painter, but she was ignoring me. Foam was forming in the bowl and the mixture was thickening. I started stirring with my greatest intensity until my arm went numb and I couldn't go on. The mixture had become fully foam and was marbled brown. I scooped it into the smaller bowl and was pleased that it sat atop the fruit paste without mixing together. I smoothed the foam using the stirring spoon. I brought the two bowls over to where the Painter sat.

The Painter smiled after swallowing some of this dish. Well, it was still simply fruit and brew, although the spices added some new dimension. We ate quickly and with obvious hunger. After eating—while cleaning my bowls, forks, blade, board, and mugs—I remembered why I had abandoned meals. I wished instead to be planning the next joke and planning how to help the Messenger get himself back under control.

The Painter and I sat planning the fourth joke, but there was a blockage. The jokes were getting more difficult to write. The first had been easy; we simply had to think of what could have lead a person to make a constant unappealing vocalization. The reason for any action, no matter how sad, could be traced to some initial state of happiness, we thought. Finding and describing this happy state could dissolve one's unhappiness. In the

case of the Singer, it had as a fact been happy of her to care enough of her fellow factory worker to make an attempt to help them. To illuminate the apparent sadness of her singing as happiness in disguise was a subversion of the lists, which caused excitement in the townspeople. Creating this joke had been as simple as wiping dust from a path with one's foot after a wind storm.

We were struggling to write the joke of the Owner, however. The Painter sketched an image of him onto parchment. In her sketching she emphasized his large and shining head to get us into the spirit of jocularly. Though her sketching was simple and of rough lines, she had captured his expression of superiority. Well, the key to subverting the Owner's happiness would be to find some initial state of sadness, and this was hard to do because none had known him to be sad. It had been simple enough in the case of the Misnomer. While her naming had occasionally been effective (and even continues to be effective to me now when I describe the town) certain decisions of naming had been clearly flawed. Because her happiness had been contingent on her success in naming, we only had to present her faulty names to poke holes in her happiness. We had felt proud while constructing this joke and it had been easy.

The Painter was sketching some of the Owner's items alongside him on the parchment. After it all, this townperson's happiness was contingent upon his procurement of many items. It was difficult for us to find fault in this. Which townperson doesn't want a larger room and more food to eat? Which townperson doesn't want items of activity or items of pleasing appearances? What townperson doesn't want many robes and many tools of productivity and many instruments of grooming? Well to be sure before the Owner's rise I had not considered accumulation of this nature. In an addition,

no other townspeople seemed to have considered it. Well, during the Messenger's existence as the town's Beautiful Boy he had paid unusual attention to his appearances and had succeeded in maximizing these appearances into a style of happiness. The tube's best worker had paid unusual attention to skill and learning and had succeeded in maximizing his productivity into an appearance of happiness. Well, certain townspeople had developed proclivities, to be sure, but what was rare in the Owner was his proclivity for all things.

The fourth new joke came to us slowly, but when it arrived all the way we knew it was the one. The Owner's desire to obtain belonged to a void. He was like a tube in reverse, sucking at everything, swallowing it into himself in ordinance to plug a hole of infinity. The Painter and I grinned in disbelief when we realized how simple this would be to prove. The Owner was the saddest townspeople there had ever been and the desire of his void proved it with clarity. The Painter sketched a hole around the edges of the parchment, encompassing the Owner and all of the items. The hole looked like a tube. We sat in admiration of this sketching. With a look of distance in her eyes, the Painter described how once the new jokes were complete and the lists were no longer, she would paint the contents of this parchment properly using the best pigments in remembrance of our best idea. I tried to imagine this painting but could not.

We rolled up the parchment and sat waiting for the Messenger to arrive. It was either the late morning or the early afternoon. Our new jokes had never been told on consecutive days before, but there was no reason why there shouldn't be a joke on this day. As a fact, we realized that increasing the frequency of the jokes would communicate urgency and truth. There was a saying of tubeworkers: "best to plug while the tubing's

plugged.” If the Messenger was back in his typical spirits, we could quickly share the new joke at the Owner’s expense and he could rehearse it while we made rapid publication of its impending performance. Publication had become incredibly simple. It was enough for us to stand briefly in Town’s Square and for one of us to say to the other within ear’s shot of a single townspeople “are you aware the Messenger will tell a new joke today?” Any townspeople who dropped eaves would soon mention this to another and soon it would be known even to those on the Outskirt. The townspeople automatically formed a tube of information.

We sat waiting for the Messenger to arrive for some duration. We recounted his agitation in the room yesterday. The tracks of his pacing on the floor were still visible. We tried to remember if we had seen any of the townspeople who had caused his nervous state. After it all, it can be that we dismiss details that are not in alignment with the story we wish to tell or the painting we wish to make. We tried to recall the descriptions he had used. Townspeople glaring angrily at him. Townspeople huddled in groups and murmuring about him. Townspeople trying to chase him. Well, we had seen none of this. We remembered with clarity that he had dashed off into the distance unpursued. We had been observing the crowd and would have noticed groups huddled. But there had been the distraction of the Comedian and her accusations. And the Comedian and the Owner were disdainful of the Messenger, to be sure, and so it wouldn’t have been a surprise if they were sending him looks of vexation. And surely the Owner had associates similarly engaged in ownership who would be by his side, and surely the Comedian had admirers who would mirror her views. And in an addition, wasn’t the Messenger more perceptive than us, and more in tune with the town? If there were seething sentiments in his

direction, he would be the one to know. And yet he was in a state of great pressurization and had not been resting with sufficiency, which much have impaired his perception as much as the oldest and most bubbling brew.

The Painter and I mulled these questions of perception as our wait for the Messenger's arrival stretched out across the landscape of the day, and our speaking was stimulated by an unspoken worry in the room. What if he did not return to us? What if he could no longer show his face to the crowd from atop the box of blue and what if he desired again the comfort of the lists? After it all, he had been exemplary for his life's duration until his participation in our plan. Following an ordinance of an effect's cause would lead him to abandon the plan to revert his state.

We ignored addressing this tube of thought as the afternoon latened, and we talked instead of the hunger we felt. We discussed potential meals of satisfaction. Well, the Painter described a dish named loaf of a stump, and she described another dish named string root shavings. She had named them herself, so she was a namer too. The notion of a meal unsour was causing no slight salivation in my mouth of puckerance, to be sure.

Then the Messenger's head was poking through the circle's half where the wall met the floor and it was clear his head had something wrong. He slid his body through the hole along the ground of dust, groaning. He stood before us robeless, his skin stained a weak blue from his robe's pigmentation. His eyes were red like dust on a hot evening and his face was puffed and dented. Scattered across his body like debris were red and leaking slashes, and his body had dents and lumps. One arm hung bent at his side. He stood flat on his feet, tottering. One knee was wobbling back and forth in a throb threatening to send him tumbling. His mouth was barely shut, with fluttering lips, and



liquid was coming from each corner and running down his face, hanging on the edge of his chin and dripping onto the blue ground. We watched a number of drips, unable to move. It was clear the Messenger had been brutalized beyond our imaginations. Various scenes of the cause of this effect flashed in introduction in my mind, but each soon dissolved, as they couldn't explain his state with sufficiency. But I had to leave my mind. The Messenger's legs both began wobbling rapidly and he let out a deep groan that sounded of an earthly lacuna's opening. Finally I rushed forward and grabbed his shoulders so he would not fall. The Painter and I eased him to the floor. The Painter hurried to my bed and grabbed my cloth of comfort and wrapped it around him. I found among my items a childhood robe I kept for sentimentality. I began dabbing at his slashes with the robe, as gently as I could, though these dabs never failed to evoke a sour utterance. I dipped an end of the robe into a mug of water and rubbed lightly at the slashes to improve their appearances. I brought another mug of water to his mouth frequently in offerance of a gulp which seemed sure to help, but he was unable to focus on the water's drinking and it dribbled down his face and along his robeless body. I dabbed continuously at the corners of his mouth. I even dabbed softly at the bloodless contusions on his body, though this offered no purpose. I didn't know what else to do.

The Painter and I sat on either side of the Messenger, holding him up with our shoulders. He alternatively leaned on one of us and then the other, and he was drifting in and out of sleep. Well, he no longer emitted any groans and it was possible he felt some comfort. This went on. The Painter and I made no communication. It was quiet in the darkening room.

I woke when the Messenger shook and jumped to his feet. He groaned and then hobbled to regain his balance. He must have momentarily forgotten his pain. He stood hunched before us holding his knees. It was unclear if he was aware he was robeless and it was unclear if he would have cared. His state was hard for me to discern. It was dark in the room and his figure was frightening. If I hadn't known it was him I would have presumed I was stuck in a night imagination.

"There were people waiting inside my room," he said.

His voice was a whisper that was somehow very loud.

"What people?" the Painter asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Their faces were covered. They spoke in tones disguised. Ridiculous mocking voices."

I had some skepticism of this story. After it all, who had heard of townspeople waiting in the home of another in disguise? And yet, his body seemed to have the proof. And in addition the town was in a period without precedence it was clear.

"What did they do to you?" I asked.

The Messenger's eyes were catching the moon's light from the circle's half hole. His eyes were producing water.

"They made me remove my robe," he said. "And they tied my arms behind my back with it. Then one of them held up my trophy. I don't know how they found it. They passed it around, laughing. One by one by one they smashed me with it. At some point I fell asleep, but they kept smashing."

The Painter and I shook our heads in chagrin. To smash one with one's own trophy of happiness. Their meaning was clear.

“How many of them were there?” I asked.

“Who cares!” he shouted. He began to cough. “Five maybe. Ten. When I woke they were gone. My robe was gone, my trophy. I kept falling back asleep.”

I asked him if he wanted to sit to have some brew. I told him the Painter and I were thinking of having a meal of substance and that he could join us. I knew it was out of the day’s question for him to perform a new joke. For one, he had no robe and we had no more blue pigment. For another, his face was in dismal shape and his pain was visible. For yet another, it was simply too much to ask. The previous day we had sent this Messenger home with instructions to relax, to regain his mood. Instead he’d been smashed like the fruit of my meal, and seemed liable to succumb to his nerves.

He wouldn’t sit. He said his departure was of imminence.

“You walked all the way here,” I said. “Robeless.”

He looked down at his body. He shivered, though it was hot in my room.

“All townspeople are against me now,” he said. “Except for the two of you, who caused all my danger.”

“Come on, that’s not true,” I said. “Remember, it was just yesterday that all were cheering for you. Don’t you remember? You were adored.”

He shook his head with vehemence and some blood leaked from the corner of his mouth, which he didn’t notice.

“They’re excited by the lists’ dismantlement,” he said. “They’re excited by the showmanship. They’re excited for the frenzy. But they hate me, and they hate you both. We’re the saddest townspeople known.”

“There is no sadness!” I said. “Soon it’ll be gone.”

The Messenger laughed in spite and gestured towards his body.

“Look at this,” he said.

We looked.

“I’m the saddest there has been and I’ll soon be jailed,” he said. “You’ll soon be jailed as well.”

“The next joke,” I said. My voice was of desperation. I felt hatred towards myself. “This joke will erase the Owner’s happiness. The disruption will reach a bursting point.”

The Messenger threw up his hands.

“This is over!” he said. “I hope I never see either of you again. I’m going to repent. I’m going to build myself back up from the bottom. I’ll be happy again. This is the lowest I will go.”

“With the new jokes there is no high or low,” I said.

“Yes there is,” the Messenger said. “Yes there is.”

With this he spun in a smooth circle in sad imitation of his theatrical persona.

Well, what was he now? He was no longer our messenger. He had ceased to be beautiful. As we watched him slide his robeless body across the floor through the circle’s half into the night outside, shuddering as the slashes in his skin reopened, he was just another sad townsman.

## That Night

After the sad townspeople took his leave, silence stretched. What could the Painter and I say? A formed plan had come to us and we'd followed it. The plan brought forth the brutalization of a boy previously beautiful and now that the plan seemed to have reached its end it was clear we should not have accepted it unquestioningly. Well, the plan had emerged directly after I threw the Vendor of innocence from the hill. What did I expect?

The Painter and I were jobless, coinless. We had been distracted by planning jokes and performances and only now did the danger present itself. We were coinless and jobless. Soon the sad townspeople would sell us out to improve his stature and regain his statue. Soon we'd be jailed and the Owner would buy our rooms. The Comedian knew something of our plan and was against us. The Misnomer was against us and would surely soon name us and our actions with terms helpful in our prosecution. The townspeople who had awaited the sad townspeople outside of the blue room knew something of our affiliation to him. I imagined investigative townspeople entering my room and seeing its blueness and equating this to the sad townspeople. Consequences loomed, it was clear. And who was on our side? The townspeople we redeemed were rehabilitated in the town's eyes to some degree, but were still unpopular and weak overall and could offer us no great help. And in an addition, these rehabilitated townspeople believed their gratitude belonged to the sad townspeople and not to us. These two did not know of us beyond our reputations as the town's Painter and the sad former-tubeworker. And in yet another addition, these two would soon begin to hear of our deeds disreputable. Our plan had burst and we had no townspeople to repair it but each other. We had only each other.

“We have only each other,” I said to the Painter to test the words and to test the silence’s rupture.

“That’s true,” she said. “It’s just you and me.”

The words were of resignation, yet they made my body lighten. I remained in my place and yet I felt myself lifting. With each breath I seemed to be growing larger.

“There’s still you and me,” the Painter was saying. “There’s us.”

The difference between these two sayings was immense. “You and me” had two terms of separation. They were linked closely, but they were of a polarity, akin to a tube and its water. But “us” was a singularity, like a tube itself. To emphasize the “us” I held my body against the Painter. We squeezed each other as tightly as possible, to combine. Her body was warmer than mine but soon they were the same. I could feel the bones of her ribs and I could feel the tension of her back. We laid on the ground, squeezing each other to become one thing. We were both squeezing at our maximum strength, and in our exertion we began to roll. This rolling began as a rocking, but soon we were spinning across the room’s blue floor. We rolled quickly the length of the floor and smashed against the wall. We immediately began rolling in the opposite direction until we smashed against the other wall. We rolled back and forth, breathing in synchronized waves. My head was smashing against the floor with repetition and after some duration I could not hear. My body had become numb and couldn’t feel the floor or the Painter, but I knew we were still squeezing each other and rolling across the floor. I couldn’t notice the wall or the room and we were one thing rushing through the blue.

## My Vision

I stood on the blue box robed in blue in front of the crowd of all known townspeople. My vision had the ability to zoom. By focusing my eyes on any townspeople, my sight travelled forward, away from my body, until I could see their faces with true clarity. In this way I was able to closely study the faces of townspeople I had not looked at with scrutiny before. My former tube supervisor, his face square and unmoving with thin lips and a pointed chin. He looked at me with condensation. My vision zoomed on the very round face of the general store's clerk. Her eyeball's pupils were always towards the corners of her eyes, and her expression was of conspiracy, though her actions never were. I realized an opportunity. I turned to face the town's statue. My vision zoomed. But as the statue enlarged, it did not get less blurry. Its definition never increased, and though I stared at it with great scrutiny, it remained as much a blur as ever.

The crowd's hubbub snapped me from my vision's zooming. After it all, I stood before them on the box of blue, robed in blue, and they had some expectation. They were expecting the fourth new joke and I had to tell it.

I greeted the crowd. My voice was dry and had the sound of a small room though we were under the sky. I remembered the essence of the joke I had to tell. The Owner used items to plug the hole from which his happiness all leaked. I began introducing the Owner in terms of neutrality. From my eye's corner, I could see him watching me with expectation. He held a large sharp blade. I knew I shouldn't look at him, so I glanced elsewhere. My tube of thought clogged and again I was standing in silence.

A voice then rose and I looked for its source. Of course it was the Comedian. She stood in the crowd's centre, robed also in blue. Her robe was a joke at the expense of

mine, it was clear. I tried to focus on what she was saying so that I could make some rebuttal.

“Who is this townspeople?” she was asking the crowd. “Does anyone know?”

I scanned the faces of the townspeople. They were frowning in my unrecognition.

“Is it the third happiest, the Beautiful Boy?” she asked.

Was I? It would make a lot of sense. After it all, I was wearing a blue robe and I was on the blue box. And in an addition I was before a crowd presenting a new joke. Yes, this was very like him. I began looking for myself in the crowd, to tell myself that it was OK and that I was in fact the Beautiful Boy and I was known.

“Or is this the town’s Painter?” the Comedian asked.

Well, yes, it was clear I was not the Beautiful Boy, as otherwise my joke would have become a success. Was I the Painter? I was seeing the townspeople with unbelievable clarity, which was her known attribute. And in an addition I felt extremely awake. I felt certain that if parchment, pigment, and brushes were put before me, I could paint a new joke for the townspeople that would communicate better than any combination of words. And my hair was likely blue. Yes, I was very like her.

“No, it’s some other townspeople, isn’t it?” the Comedian said.

Townspeople were nodding. Their heads were in unison, nodding faster and faster, and I became entranced by their heads of bobbing. Their expressions held an appetite of hunger. Each of them wanted to know me through my consumption.

“We’ve heard of this townspeople,” the Comedian said. “The one who cannot know what is true. I’ve heard him to be called the Liar.”



The crowd was slowly beginning to creep forward towards me on the blue box. I tried to see whether my legs would move. Predictably, they would not. I could open my mouth or blink my eyes but this was all. The crowd was sludging forward and there was nothing I could do. The Comedian was about to deliver her punching line I began trying to jerk my head in any direction so that I could see the Painter. Why wasn't she helping me? I was vibrating with the effort of trying to swing my head. Finally, my head came loose and began to swing and it filled with pain as it smashed against the blue floor of my room and I was awake. We would have to leave the town.

## Walking the Tube

We burst forth. I told the Painter of my vision at our walk's beginning while we were heading quickly along the tube with the energy of nerves. She laughed at the manifestations of my mind's concerns. She said it was akin to when she painted without planning and could realize worries she hadn't known by looking closely at a painting. I felt some revelation. Never had I been able to teach myself something. That had been my frustration with the questionnaires. I was always telling myself things I already knew, and nothing new could emerge. I wished to reenter my vision so I could tell the Comedian that I ought to be called The Visionary.

We proceeded without doubt. After it all, there was no choice to be made. The sad townspeople had been correct to mention that if we stayed in the town, we would be brutalized with trophies and become sad and desperate and jailed. We would become memorialized in famous jokes, it was clear. The Painter walked ahead and I a few steps behind. The tube's top was flat, which made it easier to walk upon than the ground of dust. However, my feet felt the water rushing in the opposite direction of my walking, creating a feeling of constant slipping. Not to mention that the leaks were many and our robes were soon soaked. We had to step over the streams which shot upwards at us from below. Tiny holes sprayed the soles of our feet. Smaller holes emitted mist. We walked with speed on the smooth tube's top.

We set off during the day's middle, when we knew the maximum of townspeople would be around. First we'd made some preparations. We ate another meal of smashed fruit and brew. We turned the cloth from an old robe into a sling sack for each of us to

hold resources. Into these sacks we placed fruit in addition to one amphora of water and one of brew.

The Painter ran to her room to get “items of personal importance.” She took the back exit, through the circle’s half, knowing there were likely townspeople out front, waiting. Were we nervous she would be apprehended and brutalized on her way? To be sure. We were nervous about everything. While she ran, I sharpened my blade on a stone. I put the blade into my sack. I took the back exit too, and I walked to Town’s Square.

I entered the general store. I saw the clerk with the very round face. She looked at me without recognition. I had seen her so recently, in my vision. I pulled out the blade. I started spinning it. There was one other townspeople in the store. A statuemaker, maybe. This statuemaker noticed my blade.

“Leave the store,” I said. “Or I’ll slice your fingers off.”

He disappeared. I was relieved, as I had been unprepared to slice anyone, in actuality. Well, the clerk noticed this interaction and was cowering behind her salesdesk with only the top of her round head in protuberance.

“I’m going to take a bunch of these items without permission,” I told her. “I’m not going to give you any coins.”

To this she had to agree. I put the blade away. I made my way quickly around the store, taking items that would be useful. I took some parchment and a writing stone in case the Painter and I needed to draw our directions or create notes of remembrance. The parchment and stone I took were of the highest quality because why not? I took a liquid of disinfection. I took a can of food of density. I took a miniature of the town’s statue for remembrance. This miniature was somehow blurry. I took bandages and I took the finest

cloth. I took a reflector of enlargement: the store's most valued item. I would have had to stack completed surveys higher than my head before acquiring a coin of sufficiency to take home a reflector, and yet I was now taking one home based solely on a blade's brandishment. This reflector could initiate a flame. My sack was heavy and my sack was full. I hurried back to my room.

The Painter was there and her sack too was full. We loaded these sacks onto our backs and set off. Now we went through the front door rather than crawling through the circle's half. It was important that our departure be known. We had not been outside lately and the light dazzled us. Well, some townspeople were outside. Their presence did not make me nervous. They were an annoyance.

"Joke boy is not here!" I called to them.

None reacted.

"Also, we are going to walk the tube!"

Again, they acted as though they had not heard. But this declaration was of sufficiency, and word would seep. None followed as we walked along a minor road and turned onto a medium one. Soon we were on the main road and we passed townspeople known to us on occasion. As we moved through Town's Square, many townspeople were milling.

"We're going to walk the tube!" I called with multiplicity.

The townspeople of arbitration who heard this call gave us their attention's direction. Some followed us slowly at some distance. For a townspeople to walk the tube was not so uncommon, and it was often undertaken by those among the saddest who wished to avoid jail. Because no townspeople had returned from walking the tube before,

to walk the tube was considered death. As a fact, “walk the tube” was a euphemism for death in our town. Well, the Painter and I had no intention to die, to be sure. We knew a chance was being taken, but we had health and supplies. We didn’t feel sad, and we thought with clarity. We lacked the depression of typical tubewalkers. In an addition, I had a plan’s inkling. If we could walk no further along the tube at some point, we could find the most sizable leak in view and pull and pull at it with all our strength. Once this leak was of a size sufficient, we would enter the tube and the water’s motion would carry us back to the town. There would be something to breathe, and we would be spat out at the tube’s opening where all rinsed themselves and filled their containers. To be sure we would face some reprimand for entering the tube itself. To be sure there was a chance of suffocation. It was a tube dream but it was a possibility.

Causing further separation between us and the typical tubewalkers was that we were two. This was without precedence in the town. After it all, if any townspeople had a townspeople of commitment at their side, how would they become so sad? And to be sure most townspeople would be happy enough to be jailed for sadness were it alongside one that gave them meaning. Well, still I was noticing contradictions of happiness. I would think in jokes with continuance, it was clear.

The tube was in view. We scrambled up onto it. We turned and townspeople were scattered before us. The Comedian was there. The Owner. The Concerned Citizen. The Singer was clearly around, as her singing was back at its most annoying volume. There were others. The tube’s best worker seemed annoyed that we would be a distraction to his workers, as the tube was not doing well. Certain leaks were spurting with steam, and while the ground wasn’t of mud, it also could not be called dust. The workers on the

tube's top would have to pause and move aside to facilitate our departure. I continued looking at the assembled townspeople. I realized I was looking for the sad townspeople. I hoped I wouldn't see him robeless and bleeding still. I hoped I wouldn't see him weeping or shaking his fist. Well, I didn't see him at all. I noticed none of the townspeople's faces had much emotion. They didn't care if we stayed or went, yet surely they wanted to see which direction we chose to walk. They didn't care what we did yet they wanted to see.

“Here we go!” I called, and we set off along some direction.

Of course no townspeople followed us. Any townspeople could walk the tube unmolested if they wished. Why hold onto a townspeople who wished to leave? The Painter and I walked with footsteps of freedom. As we became distant from the town, there were fewer and fewer tubeworkers alongside the tube. Soon there was no hint of any townspeople besides us. A remembrance emerged of us rolling on the blue room's floor. I hoped to do that again. What would become of that room? Well, the Owner would acquire it, to be sure, and the room of the Painter in addition. I turned my head now and then to glimpse Rumble Hill, which was fading. Well, I wanted to remember its shape. Finally I turned my head and it could not be seen.

As we proceeded along the tube I announced with pride to the Painter each item my sack contained. Each item's declaration bestowed some energy of preparation into our steps. I asked what she had brought in her own sack. Her parchment. Her pigment.

## The Tube's Fork

The sun was descending directly onto the stretching line of the tube. Spraying tubewater soaked us from below as the sun's heat drenched us from above. I watched in complete immersiveness as the sun hung only a wisp from touching the tube. This lasted for an eternity. Then the sun kissed the tube and the tube split the sun.

Next the unthinkable happened. The tube forked. Never before had I seen something like this. A tube was a single hollow line. But as I approached the fork, my misconception became clear. Or was this not a tube we stood on? Well, I couldn't consider this for long if I wanted to maintain my mind. When I first saw the fork it seemed to be a trick of the eye. After it all, the sun beamed with a strain all day, and shapes emerged in the deep blood dust. But as I neared the fork I had to admit it was real, especially when the Painter and I stood directly upon it. But I needed to mention the fork to her, just in case.

"Did you know this could happen?" I asked.

"I never imagined," she said, without concern.

"The tube turns into two tubes," I said, in assurance we were both talking about the same thing. "But it's still all one tube?"

"Tubewater has two sources?" she said.

Well in thinking of the forked tube I hadn't even considered its water, but I realized then my thirst, my hunger. The Painter and I sat on the forked tube. The tube forked into two tubes of sizes of equivalence. The junction beneath us vibrated. If we had departed the town in the other direction, would we have come to this same fork? Was there a network of tubes? It was too much to consider.

We sat where the tube forked. I pulled from my bag the water amphora and suddenly realized this had been foolish to bring. We were walking upon a leaking tube, for happiness' sake. I dropped this amphora to the dust and pressed my mouth against a tube's leak, letting the pressurized water spray hard into my mouth until pain emerged in my temples. The water here was of a better quality than that of the town, it was clear. It was less hot and was without sediment. Well, certainly some dust entered the leaks, and maybe the tube's interior was corroding. This seemed to mean we were now closer to some water's source. Again it was too much.

As I sat, I noticed my body's soreness. Since mid-day we'd walked with balanced steps and now pain prickles danced on my lower stomach. There was some pulsing in my shoulders from the sack's weight, not to mention that the sun's beaming had harmed my head's top and my neck. We decided to sleep at the fork. We reclined along the tube. Beneath our bodies were leaks and our robes were soon soaked to entirety. My feet's soles pointed to the tube of one direction and the Painter's pointed to the other. To our view these tubes were identical. There was no way to know which tube we should take. However, we wouldn't split. There wasn't much room on the tube and once again we wrapped ourselves together. As on the previous night, we faced a sleep of uncertainty. In the morning we would have to choose a new tube.



## Our Delirium

We woke when the tube was hot from the sun and was causing our bodies pain. Our robes were clean and steaming. It was fortunate we hadn't rolled off in the night. We stretched and stood on the tube. Our feet hadn't touched dust lately and were of unusual cleanliness. I felt recently born. Well, I was the most recently born person I knew.

I have no remembrance of which forked tube we decided upon or how we decided. Even if I did have some remembrance there would be no way to differentiate between the two tubes for you. We chose one of these two new tubes and set off walking shortly after waking. The sky was smoky pink. This tube's leaks were large and bursting, and no tubeworker would ever fix them, it was clear. Unlike the tube near town, scrubbed often to a shine, the tube here had a thick patina. I was beginning to think of tubes as roads. Soon, the alternative tube was out of our sight, and all was as it had been before. We were simply walking atop a leaking tube towards uncertainty.

But it became clear enough that this choice of tubes had affected our minds. The choice provided the instillation of arbitration. What if we were on the wrong tube? What if our instincts had again been of deception? Before, we had walked with the energy of certainty. The initial tube—it still felt unreal to consider the existence of a multitude of tubes—departed the town in opposing directions, but the choice was meaningless because it was a single tube. We departed our town by way of this one tube, which would lead with inevitability to something. But now, a choice had been made that reflected our decision's making. Well, still there would be something at this tube's end, but it might be the wrong thing.

Because we were walking in an uncertainty of decisionmaking it entered my mind with multiplicity that we could turn back to where the tubes forked. We could make the choice again. We could really analyze the landscape and analyze any difference between the tubes, and analyze the apparent pressurization of water therein. We could even walk for some distance on the other tube to get a sense of its style and make a decision of information then. But instead we continued walking. On occasion I walked in front and on occasion it was the Painter.

While walking in front I became aware that my robe was bothering me. After it all, it was hot and wet and weighing on my body. In an addition it restricted my movements, and in yet another addition it smelled sad. So I disrobed. I looked over my shoulder at the Painter and she was doing the same. We walked then with our robes draped over one shoulder and our sacks hanging from the other. It was clear the sun would punish our exposed bodies but it was worth the lightness and dexterity. I grew tired of my sack's weight. I tossed the liquid of disinfection. We ate the can of food of density and were unsure of its flavour. It provided some fortitude. I tossed the miniature of the town's statue for remembrance. Who needed to remember that statue? I kept the bandages and I kept the fine cloth. I tossed the reflector of enlargement. There was nothing to inspect and no need for any flame. A coin was worth no more than dust to us now. My sack was light and empty. My body was light and clumsy.

The tube seemed to be heading downwards. I had some distant remembrances of declines from my childhood trudging, but still this sensation was unusual. The town's ground had been of a flatness complete, yet Rumble Hill had been perfectly steep. This

slight gradation was eerie, to some degree. I felt like a mood as we progressed lower and lower ominously. I felt I might enter the earth. The leaked tubewater was running alongside the tube in a path in our direction.

“How low will it go?” I asked the Painter over my shoulder.

“How low will what go?” she said.

We paused. She had not noticed the tube’s decline and yet she was a person of great perceptivity. Well, maybe there was no decline. I looked again at the tubewater along the tube’s side. Well, maybe this water was of stagnation.

“How low will what go?” she said.

“What?” I said.

Again we were walking and now it appeared we walked at an incline. I felt glad no windstorm was showering dust painfully upon us. On occasion a mild gust sent the dust whispering and this provided relief of entropy. Though the wind typically smoothed the dust into an even flat floor, it made occasional errors by blowing the dust into piles of wavelike towerance instead. When these sand waves were around and I felt the tubewater rushing under my feet in the opposing direction, the ensemble of movements shook my balance and threatened to send me tumbling. And the sun was directly above and I was worried our heads would touch it eventually. My head was getting more and more hot, to be sure. I kept tapping it quickly with my fingers to check for a flame. I kept sniffing the air for smoke. There was no scent but our yeasty robes and the tube’s minerals. The sun was directly ahead and was harming my eyes. I placed part of my robe over my head as protection. After it all, my sight had nothing to glean. The tube was a straight line. Well, occasionally I felt certain it was curving in some direction, and on a few instances the

curve was quite drastic. But most frequently I was sure the line had a straightness of perfection. After it all, if the tube had been constructed solely for water's deliverance, to veer would be a flaw. I kept peeking to ensure there was nothing to glean. The view never altered and there was no proof we were moving but our exertion. With my head under the robe I felt very distant from the Painter. I had withdrawn into myself, it was clear. I hoped she was not losing trust in me, and I hoped I was not causing our connection's severance. Yet I had to protect my eyes. While the sun was shining into my eyes, their destruction was of imminence. During one peek from beneath the robe I noticed the sun was to the side rather than directly ahead. Now it was clear the tube was curved, as the sun's path was known to be set. With the sun to the side, I could walk without the robe over my head. The robe's odour had been paining me, not to mention the breathing difficulties it promoted.

Then my legs refused to move. With my feet rooted, I turned my body around to the Painter. She looked to be of exhaustion, too. Her body was quite folded and she was looking down at the tube. It was clear she had not been thinking of me. I told her my legs were refusing to move and asked if we could take a break. Her look was of relief and she collapsed onto the tube.

We sat facing each other with our legs dangling from the tube's either end. There was no conversation. The Painter had allowed a leak's spray to soak her hair and face. Her wet hair appeared astringent and her face was refreshed to some degree. We passed back and forth the brew amphora. It provided alertness and some sustenance, but then it was empty and all items of nourishment were gone. We knew we could live by the tube's water for a while. Both of us had familiarity with nourishment's absence, but it drew

nervousness that our survival now found dependence on the tube's length. We could only walk and the rest depended on the tube.

I flexed my legs and they were working again. There was still some light to cause our sleep's hindrance so we decided to continue for some duration. When we stood, something terrible happened. We forgot which direction we had been walking and there was no indication. Had it been the direction I sat in facement of, or the direction of the Painter? To which side of my face had the sun been aimed? We looked for prints of our feet on the tube in either direction, but these had been rinsed by the spray of leaks. We looked for clouds of recognition, but there was only a haze. We knew if we walked far enough in the wrong direction we would eventually see an item of our debris on the tubeside, provided it didn't become covered in dust, but we had walked on and on since last dropping an item and the light was nearly gone.

We had been progressing without assurance but now uncertainty swallowed everything but us. The tube, the water, and the sun had previously been elements of reliance, but now appeared deceptive, with motives of their own. My limbs were atremble and it became hard to stand. If you had been watching me quivering on this tube, it might have appeared I was dancing for reasons mysterious. I felt our robelessness detracted from our desperation. We sat down with despondence but a plan was emerging like a sliver crack in a tube before a leak's first breath. We were powerless and weak and surrounded by dust. We were nearly nothing and were close to dissolution. The emergent plan was of spectacular vagueness. We'd sleep and hope some new understanding had been born by morning.

## Seeing Tube Split

Again the Painter and I were striding with confidence along the tube. I had slept in comfort, using my robe as a cushion for my head. When I woke my skin was scarily crinkled, but it soon smoothed.

After waking, stretching, and standing, I had noticed the Painter was sitting off at a distance. Her shoulders had been hunched and she had been still except for the movement of one hand. I had watched her. There was security to be gleaned from her morning presence, although eventually I became bored. I walked over to her with gentle steps, not wanting to disturb her with the pattering of my feet on the wet tube. Then I saw she was working on some painting. I asked whether I could view it.

“The painting is public,” she said.

Well, the painting was of her view. The tube began of the parchment’s width at the bottom but narrowed into a line as it rose. Somehow, her tube was spraying pressurized water in spurts of movement. The sky was swirling grey pink near the ground but of increasing blueness nearer the top. I looked from the parchment up to the view itself, down to the parchment, up to the view. It was clear from the surety of this painting that she’d painted the way for us to walk, but it wasn’t clear whether this was her intention. Whatever way, I wanted to walk into her painting, and soon we would. Her vision of the view was similar to mine. There was some degree of objectivity. I had been carrying the tension of uncertainty of knowing whether the tube was straight or curved and whether we ascended or descended and whether we walked towards or away from the town, and some of this tension released upon the painting’s viewing. Soon, she was

wrapping her parchment into a tube and slotting it into her sack. Soon, there was nothing to attend to and our day's walking began. We did not even look in the other direction.

Of course our confidence was false. Our choice had been of arbitration. And yet the further we walked the more certain I felt we were not on our way back to the town. By the day's midsection we had not passed any of our discarded items. We had dropped these items to be rid of them, yet now they were representative markers. We had been smart without intending to be. At this I felt inspiration. What other actions of ours were wise without intention? Perhaps the Painter's morning painting. Perhaps simply walking. Perhaps our squeezing and rolling.

My body was weakening and desirous of sustenance. I thought of townspeople of antiquity who had walked this tube. Well, some must have been of such sadness to have made no real effort towards any destination, to be sure. Some had likely walked just out of the town's view before resting on the ground of dust, never to rise, and the Painter and I had passed the bones of these.

Then I knew my vision was failing. Well, my eyes had been facing constant punishment from the sun. In an addition my eyes were punished both by the dust that floated with physicality into my eyes and the dust of the landscape's unrelenting redness. While walking in the heat amidst a landscape of unwavering dust it was common to see smudges or an apparition of an expanse of water, as though a tube had leaked into a sealed chasm, leaving the water to stagnate with placidity. It was a comedic inversion, this dryness of landscape evoking imaginary water formations. These apparitions never failed to dissipate if one neared and stared, and they seemed rooted in the eyes' boredom. I saw in the distance water of this nature. It was more vivid than usual, which was easily

attributable to my increasing tiredness, my hunger, my boredom, and my desire for some marking of the land.

“What is that?” the Painter’s voice asked.

A sensation of spinning began. Though my eyes could be relied upon to conjure images false, and though the Painter and I had closeness without precedence, it could not have been that our false visions had synchronized. I knew then that ahead was some real liquid expanse, even though my vision had blurred with panic. The landscape began to spin and the redness around was saturating.

“What’s that lacuna?” I heard loudly in the voice of the Painter.

I formed some mumblance indicating my uncertainty. I paused on the tube and waited for stability. When the spinning stopped I looked once more at this expansive water. It was very blue. Touching the blue expanse from many directions were sketchlike lines. These lines appeared as the shards traced from impact of a smashed reflector. I grinned in admiration of my brain’s visions of imagination but my grin quickly shifted to glowerance. I turned to the Painter to ask whether she was ready to continue walking. She wore an expression of bewilderment.

“I’m sorry to keep asking,” she said. “But what is that? I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

The only way to learn was to walk, yet each step increased my dreadfulness. Then it became clear and I began to uneat the little sustenance I had. My body shuddered while food used my body’s tube in reverse, and the pulp of fruit stained by brew was oozing from my mouth. I was catching the ooze it in my hand. It was glowing and speckled. I was otherwise unable to move. While my body’s tube was working in reverse to churn



and push this food out, I was unable to think, which was a relief. This uneating continued. Eventually the space between the expulsions widened. Then there was nothing in me to uneat. My body continued to shudder and to try but soon it got the message. I was able to stand then, and to look at what was ahead. A blue body of water beyond the imagination, and tubes stretching from it in every direction. Tubes, tubes, tubes, reaching across the earth in each way. The Painter already was hustling in the direction of this unfathomable split. I rinsed my mouth and hands with some tubewater before hobbling after her.

## Leak Lake

You know the rest because you're here too. Your own story at coming to reach Leak Lake must have ended similarly, though most arrive alone. You may even have seen the Painter and I ambling along the tube towards where it joins the multiplicity of others at Leak Lake's. Well, it's also possible that you arrived after me and that you're new. If so, welcome.

We stood where our own tube entered the water. Soon we would have no sense upon which tube we'd come. It quickly became almost impossible that we could ever return to the town we'd known.

We stood unmoving watching the water because its colour was magnetic and our eyes were stuck on it, as yours likely were, too. This ultramarine would have made my old room look like the sky seen through a cloud. It would have made the sad townspeople's robe appear faded and old. The water's colour made my eyes feel they were going to drop from my face and roll into Leak Lake. I could tell this lake had been coloured by some pigmentation deep below the dust. The Painter was leaning over, looking at her reflection in the water. Her reflected self was entirely blue and it appeared she had no hair and that her eyes were holes in her face. An image of disturbance, yet she didn't look away.

Some duration passed and we were able to eventually look to each other. What could we say? But we slowly became aware of what was around. We saw the path tracing the lake's exterior and the people walking it. These people were unrobed like us. Some sat with their feet in the lake, looking out at the water. None came towards us and none seemed to pay us any attention. When I saw other people I felt no shock. My capacity for

surprise had departed during my uneating and it may have been that this is what my body's tube was forcing out. I felt weightless and passive. My vision was sharp yet my body seemed to be of dust. Still, I turned and looked around, out across the lake, which stretched almost to my vision's extent. Of all the uncountable tubes that protruded from the lake and stretched out over the ground of dust in each direction, each was of the same size of ours except one. This tube was at the least double the size of the other tubes, or bigger. I was without the energy to wonder at this tube's size.

"Bigger tube," I thought.

When I focused my vision on the lake to see with detail instead of in a colour's field, I could see the heads of townspeople in the lake. Again I began to have the feeling of uneating but I was able to quell it. I noticed structures scattered around, a short walk from the lake's shore. I was without the energy to wonder what these were.

I realized I wanted to walk right into the lake. Most people I've met since my arrival have expressed a sentiment of similarity. After it all, what more was there to do? I stepped off the tube onto the wet ground where the water touched the earth. My feet sunk with the sound of a slurp. I looked at the Painter who was watching me closely. Then I crept forward until my feet were submerged. I crept forward a little more. I heard clapping of feet on water and it was clear the Painter was entering also. The colour strengthened quickly with depth. I wanted to step further into the blue but I became too dizzy. I let myself fall backwards. I smacked hard into the muck, sending blue water spraying to my either side. My eyes couldn't look at the blue any more and I closed them. I reclined. Soon I felt myself being lifted and carried by a multitude of hands.



## The Room of Books

Maybe you're one of those who carried me. Well, I have carried others who have similarly arrived and collapsed. And to those who arrived with less exhaustion and remained awake I have spoken gently, offering explanations.

I rested in some wood structure. Well, it was a room. I hadn't seen its exterior. At the first instances of my waking in this room, I had no sense of my location and thought I was somewhere in the old town. Sometimes I thought I was jailed. The room was empty except for the bed under me and a small table. Unlike my room in the town, the walls were of wood. They could breathe rather than sweat. Sunlight slanted through the walls' holes in shifting patterns that allowed me to rest and recharge in alternation. In an addition, the nearby lake's water seemed to cool the air and it breezed over me, fluttering the thin cloth of comfort, moving my hair. The air was clear and not of dust. Some person occasionally entered the room to feed me or pour water into my mouth. The food was not warm and was slippery. It was smooth and was resistant to my bite, yet not chewy or tough. I could tell it was food of nourishment. When my strength grew, I quickly asked my feeders questions while chewing, before they went. These questions went largely unanswered, but when I asked where the Painter was I learned she was near and well.

After an unknown period I decided to rise. I didn't know the location of my robe or my sack. Once outside the room, I was surprised to see its slightness. It was only slightly bigger than a person in each direction. I began walking again towards the lake. I wanted my eyes to absorb some more of that blueness now that I was rested. I had never felt stronger in my life, or more awake. Yet as I stood beside the lake staring towards its centre, the blue suddenly overpowered me again and I was unable to draw my vision

away. Maybe you watched with some amusement as I stood there twitching. After it all, why didn't I just relax? Slowly I moved my head, which seemed to be of an incredible weight. Eventually I was looking closer to the edge where the water was more clear. I was then able to draw my vision away from the water and begin walking around the lake.

I passed some townspeople on my first trip around the circular path. Some ignored me and others glanced my way with calm disinterest. I wondered who had lifted me and who had fed me. Then I came across the Painter. I felt a surge of affection towards her as she sat there with her feet in the lakewater. I had been worried that she might cease to paint, since it was no longer her employment, but this wasn't so. She had removed the old town's handle on her talent. On her thighs was parchment and she was painting the lake. Her painting's blueness was almost identical to that before us. I knew she must have acquired some new pigment, as any pigment she'd used previously was without the ability to mimic reality with such persuasion. Beside her were a number of tiny bowls with blue pigments of varying intensity. She had also pigments black, white, and yellow. On her other side was a row of brushes. I stood in her painting's wonderment until she noticed me. She set down her parchment and it rolled into a tube, likely ruining this work.

"You look better!" she said.

I laughed and told her she did too. It was true. I asked whether they put her in a room. She said they hadn't had to carry her but that she had rested for a while. She had handled the walk better than I, it was clear. I told her I was feeling better than ever.

"There's a lot for you to see now," she said.

"I'm still getting to seeing this blue water," I told her. "And all these tubes."

“You’ve barely seen the beginning,” she told me.

Well, I won’t describe to you any more places that you know well. If you want to experience them you can, unmodulated by me. Put down this book and sit by the lake if you want. Put down this book and find the Painter and ask to see her latest painting. Put down this book to view the statues they’ve built of creatures unknown to most. Go find the pigmentmaker if you want, or go find the genius of meals.

I’ll finish in the room where my book began. The Painter got up from the lake’s edge and lead me there. She didn’t tell me what I was about to see. We arrived at a building that was long and rectangular and I remember anticipation that it might be filled with food.

When we entered I wasn’t sure what I was seeing. This room was absent of people, though this is not often the case. Well, you’re likely in this room now. I looked at the books on the wall of shelving and was not very sure what they were. I was most impressed by the chairs of cushioning. I walked from chair to chair and sat in each and was consistently surprised by the comfort of sinking into them. You’re likely in one of these chairs now. I was impressed by the table beside each chair, and I was impressed that each table had some formation of wax. The room was of silence and of a temperature ideal. It was dustless and without clutter.

I nodded my approval of the room to the Painter, who could only grin. Well, she knew I had not grasped the room’s import very well. She took me to the wall of shelving and began running her finger along the spines of the books. Each of these had some title, and each was of a different thickness. I assumed they all contained information about

tubes. After it all, this was the only purpose I knew for a book. I believed a book had to involve a tube. And, well, to some degree this is so.

While I looked from spine to spine to spine the Painter told me what she had been told. She told me that each person who arrived wrote a book of where they were from and why they departed that place. She told me that with each book's completion arrived some new knowledge of what was in some new direction. The books changed before my eyes while she told me this. It was clear that by opening each of these books I could follow each of the tubes they represented as it would not have been possible for me to do with physicality. It would be possible to escape my body if I wanted.

And so on that morning I immediately began reading each book. It was understood that my responsibilities in this new town would begin once my own book of arrival was complete. After it all, otherwise I would be of a liability to delay this undertaking until my dying day, and my old town might then never be known. I read each day when I rose until there was not enough light. Well, when I first began this reading it was difficult, and my comprehension was poor. All I previously knew of spoken words was from a town of limitations. Most of what I previously knew of written words was from a tube's manual and from questionnaires. When I first began reading these books of the shelf, there were many words and phrases of unfamiliarity to me. Well, when I first began reading I knew almost nothing of other towns. Certain descriptions evoked no environment. In addition, I was not used to looking at so many words at once, and I became tired and frustrated. Slowly, ways of being that existed outside of my old town became known to me. I sat scanning letters while the world opened itself up to me.



And of course I won't describe notions from these other towns. After it all, the books are all here. They describe locations unimaginable. They describe people of remarkable attributes and attitudes, and conflicts between them. Certain books have theories and philosophies of great complexity. Certain books describe events that changed the world for all. Each book has happiness and sadness, but never with exclusivity. Maybe you've noticed the thin book. Pick it up if you haven't. This book is wordless and grand.

Once I had read each book for myself, I began to write my own. During this first period, I met with the Painter after each day of writing. I told her my frustrations at length. My hand hurt, I whined. I had the wrong words for description, I complained. I struggled with remembrances. In meaning's while, she was working on paintings of our old town. Though she felt sourly towards that town, she still wanted to preserve its images. After it all, part of her life was there. It was then that another one of our classic plans emerged and we did not doubt whether this plan was good. While I was writing a book of our old town, she would paint one. Together we could recreate that town with comprehension.

When I first began this book it was here: myself in the room of books, having recently finished reading the shelf and having sat down with a writing stone to describe the book's beginning. I followed this with my first days at Leak Lake, then walking the tube in reverse. Then I wrote our departure from the town, and so on and so on and so on all the way back to my earliest remembrance. I completed the book in this way and showed it to the Painter.

“If you begin with your clearest memory and end with your least clear, the story will seem to be fading away,” she said.

“I don’t want to write a story,” I told her. “One thing I don’t like about the books on the shelf here is I don’t know if they’re worthy of trust. They remind me of jokes and rhetoric.”

This was a word I had recently learned. Rhetoric.

“They are of persuasion and I am just looking for the facts,” I said. “It’s important for me to write just the facts about what happened to me and the sort town I lived in.”

She said it wasn’t possible to write just the facts. She told me that one story of a possible infinity would emerge.

I initially rejected her notions and tried over and over and over to write just the facts of the town and its townspeople. As my parchments of failure piled, I could sense people were getting impatient with my progress. The Painter’s book was long complete. Well, I read each book on the shelf again in the spirit of embracement of story. I learned that mine would be a story book, too.

I’ll begin again with finality here but I’ll put this part at the end and at the beginning I’ll put whatever I write last. Well, this will be a leaky book. There will be digressions and uncertainty. I’ll have to follow my bad intuition, and I’ll be writing without language under my grasp. I’ll often be describing notions unknown to me and I may have to use the notions I do know well in overabundance.

I’ve imagined you reading this book’s final page. I’ve imagined that you smack the book shut with some satisfaction. You then slot the book into the shelf gap that’s

waiting for this book's return. And I've imagined that before reaching for a different story of a different town to know, you murmur to yourself in wonderment: "well, he wrote it with style."