

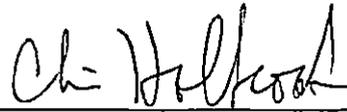
**BROKEN STONE:  
FINDING DUST AND DRAGONS IN APPALACHIA**

**Jonathan Lounsberry**

**Submitted to the faculty of Morehead State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree  
Bachelor of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
Morehead State University**

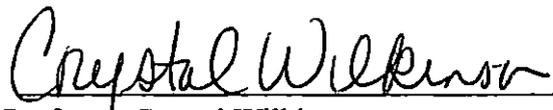
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Accepted by the faculty of the Creative Writing Program, Morehead State University,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree:



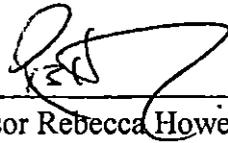
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## INTRODUCTION

I remember my father telling me about the time he took a little old johnboat down the Russell Fork River. Now, to someone who's not familiar with that river this might not seem like such a feat, but if you know that people from all around the world travel to the little town of Elkhorn City to go whitewater rafting down one of the most treacherous and highest rated rafting rivers in the world, then that might change your mind. My father was simply looking for a new place to fish, to take a path different from the ordinary, one that required throwing aside the paddle and holding on with both hands as the boat crashed against the rocks and the rapids, and somehow he ended up alive. My mother's father called it stupid and said that she was marrying a lunatic. I'd say that's about right.

I've heard wild stories like this from both sides of my family, and from my friends and neighbors back home in Eastern Kentucky. And every time I hear one I think, *this is what's important. Stories.*

I've always wanted to be a storyteller—not necessarily a writer, but just a good storyteller. I would consider just about everyone in my family talented in the art, but I had never considered myself as one of them. And then I got into college. I started as an art major but then figured I would try my hand at becoming a writer. When it came to subject matter I found myself always, uncontrollably, returning to home, writing down the old oral stories and making up a few of my own. It was then that I felt like the tradition was a part of me, that on the page it was different. I could have all the

time in the world to think about what makes a story worthwhile, what grabs people's attention, what minute details really brings a story to life and etches the whole into memory.

I've often asked myself what is the importance of being a writer? What is it they do that deep down is non-subjectively important? People preserve monuments, paintings, ancient writings, and musical masterpieces because they deem them an important part of universal human history—something that everyone should know about because it expands the culture of humanity. This holds true with my personal beliefs about writing. I consider myself an Appalachian writer because my central goal is to preserve certain aspects of the culture that I believe people can appreciate. I'm not overly concerned with what people will think about my own writing—the style, the form, the word choice (although I try to maintain them well enough to fit the story, or keep a person interested). Instead I focus more on what people will walk away with after reading it (not necessarily the plot, but the essence of the story itself, the feelings invoked, the spirit of the characters).

This is what I have tried to achieve with the two stories you are about to read. In them I have attempted to capture a part of Appalachia, the imagery, the dialogue and dialect, the interactions between people and how they react to events, and how these reactions are exclusively unique to the region. I have tried to capture what it feels like to live here, how the characters feel connected or unconnected with place, and how it has affected them and their outlook on life.

The first story, “Men of the Dark,” is the first chapter from a fantasy novel I started writing three years ago. I do not have a title for the novel yet, only referring to it as “Jacob and the Dragon” as a placeholder; so I will refer to it as that from hereafter. And even though I realize that the fantasy genre is not well accepted in the literary world, (perhaps due to all the shabby paperback Tolkien-ripoffs that have come out of the woodwork in the last five decades) I decided to include this chapter in my senior thesis because I believe it has some literary merit to it.

I have always been a fan of the fantasy genre, owing some of my writing style to the influences of J.R.R. Tolkien, the beauty and depth in how he presents his world of Middle Earth; and to Robert E. Howard, in how he can very intensely capture the ugliness of man and the beauty of savagery both in the same story. These writers have shaped me just as well as Faulkner or Hemingway, or James Still or Dostoevsky. They showed me that there are infinite realms of the imagination to explore, that real things happen there just as they do in Kentucky or Russia. And so I decided that I wanted to try something different with *Jacob and the Dragon*, something that I had never heard of anyone else doing before: I wanted to write an Appalachian fantasy novel.

I grew up hearing many stories—wild stories about people seeing black panthers in the hills or ghosts riding atop black horses. Superstition and folklore have had a major impact on the shaping of Appalachian culture; carrying many traditions and beliefs over from Great Britain they have become a part of its history, a part of American history. I wanted to recapture the feeling of those old folktales in this story, to show the impact that superstition has on people and how they react. I also wanted

to incorporate folklore and fantasy into real life contemporary problems, such as the dichotomy of relying on coal for jobs as well as it being a part of your cultural history, versus it destroying the place you grew up (this is only touched on a little in chapter one). But most importantly, I wanted to show the search for truth in an Appalachian setting—how a young man comes across some of these problems and is tested by them. He is on a quest for truth in a world that is familiar and unfamiliar. And that is the beauty of fantasy—to be thrown into a strange world and then become familiar with it. Readers will recognize many aspects of this place as Appalachian, but there are some that belong only to the territory of the mind.

The story basically follows the traditional hero's journey, with more than a few alterations. I have tried to play on clichés, reversing them or using them to the story's advantage. Normally the hero would want to escape the place he is at, feeling that there are greater things outside his simple life that he could be doing. But he is a coal miner, and instead I wanted Jacob to feel that home is where he belongs, that mining is what he needs to do in order to help support his family (his mother and his disabled grandfather.) But in the story there is a folktale, one told by the old man, Ezra (who is known to tell tall tales), that there used to be a dragon that terrorized the countryside, until the leader of the people decided to make a deal with it. Knowing, of course, that dragons eat coal, he made an agreement to supply it with all the coal it could ever eat in exchange for leaving the people alone. And that is why they mine the coal. It is only through events that happen after chapter one that Jacob will be forced to leave his home in search of the dragon, to see whether it is real or not.

I encountered many problems while writing *Jacob and the Dragon*. The most troublesome was the tone of voice for the narrator. I tried writing it in a closer third person like a character belonging in the story, one with true southern Appalachian vernacular. I felt too limited by this, however. I found that I couldn't describe things the way I wanted, to make the reader feel engrossed in the story rather than in the narrator. So I came up with a compromise. I decided to make the narrator omniscient, with a verbose language (as verbose as I can manage) but also with a hint of dialect and downhomeness. I wanted the narrator to resemble an old mountain storyteller, one like my father or grandfather, but one with a more literary tone. I wanted to make the narrative a mixture between Appalachian oral storytelling and the traditional novel. I thought of an article I read about how Charles Johnson handled *Middle Passage*, how he felt limited by the circumstances of African Americans in the historical time frame, the language that a low class narrator might use at the time, so he simply rewrote history. My approach is similar, except I chose to keep some of the cultural vernacular in the narration. There are phrases that resemble the way a person would orally tell a story, phrases that some people might consider cliché or too simple if they saw them on the page. I find that these words and phrases come naturally, even when I am engrossed in a literary tone. But I also understand that some may not be able to get past their misconceptions that intellectual language is flat, without colloquialisms or dialect. That is also one thing I hope to change readers' minds about with this piece.

Some more minor problems I encountered include the historical time it is supposed to resemble (the same difficulty a historical fiction writer would face), stereotyping (it's hard to write about early southern Appalachia without mentioning moonshine, beans and cornbread (which I still enjoy), and banjos). But I feel confident that the characters transcend any stereotyping by their qualities of realness. I also found it difficult to capture certain character expressions that I felt necessary, particular when writing the character of Ezra. Ezra is an amalgamation of real people I have known, every one of them eccentric in their tone of voice and how they used their whole body when they talked. I do believe that dialogue alone should show a character's personality, but it can only go so far. I wanted Ezra to show those people's same eccentricities and body movements, and wrote them along with his dialogue as best I knew how. I can see him perfectly but that is only because I know the people he is based upon. I only hope that the reader will see them too, or perhaps imagine something just as interesting.

The story does not start in medias res. Instead, I chose to make the plot move in a slow, progressive manner; so the first chapter is solely Appalachian, rather than fantasy. There is mention of a bear attack, one that to the boy who witnessed it seemed supernatural; and Ezra tells about the dragon in chapter two, but there is no direct revealing of anything fantastical until chapter three. I want the reader to question the world they are in—to believe at first that this is early 1900s eastern Kentucky and then to question, along with Jacob, what is real.

The other piece is part of a short story cycle that I one day hope to complete. It is the first story in the cycle, and is told from the perspective of a young man, one whose experiences I admit resemble my own. I am a firm believer that you should write what you know, and this is something I felt I had some good firsthand experience with. My father is a carpenter, and I once worked a summer with him as a laborer at a construction job. It was then that I discovered that you could find the most interesting characters in the strangest of settings; in this case a construction site.

I also found that the setting was very distinct, having a life of its own. There is something in the act of working on a building, working together with a group of characters that is strange and beautiful. You really feel like you are a part of what you are doing and not just bagging groceries or crunching numbers. The physical aspect of the job, working with one's hands, allows for the mouth to open, for people to talk as they work. They talk about their life at home or about fishing; they tell stories about previous jobs or just the most random things; they sing (some might dance); they argue about how something might be done (either to the boss or other workers); they get hurt or try to not to; they tell jokes and play pranks. A mountain of life happens there.

The working class of Appalachia is perhaps the most diverse and interesting of people—men and women, of all colors and backgrounds, all in the same struggle to survive. Some are as friendly as can be and some are just downright hateful. My older cousin, who is also a writer, once told me a story about a man that lived close by. People used to call him “dead man.” They called him this because one time he left his

wife, caught a train to a far off state, and with his own hand wrote a letter back to her saying that her husband had been killed. So everyone thought he really had died. Well, he came back one day, had just stepped off the train and the first person to see him recognized him and thought he was a ghost. After that he was known as Dead Man. He was slightly mentally unstable (he once threw a hornet's nest into a holy roller church just for the hell of it) and so if anyone ever called him his nickname he would get angry and violent. My cousin then said that he knew a guy that worked with the man, a large fellow who was new to the job. Some of the other workers dared him to go over and call that guy Dead Man, that it would be a good laugh. He did. And Dead Man said "What did you say? What did you call me? I swear to God I'm gonna kill you, you son of a bitch." The big guy looked at him with all the concern of a brother in his face. He calmly said, "Ah, you don't want to do that. I'd mash you up." And he said it every bit earnestly and sincere, not trying to be intimidating at all. He was honestly concerned for the man's well being.

There is no other place in the world where a story like that could happen. No other way of life that could have shaped these two characters; no other setting that could give them their eccentricities: how Dead Man could do that to his wife, or react so extremely to being called his nickname; and how the bigger man, after his life being threatened, knew he could beat the other man to a pulp, but rather than being subject to anger or fear, simply gave him a humble warning. I find his word choice interesting as well (it's not too often that you hear the phrase "mash you up.") To me these characters are distinctly Appalachian.

I realize that I am a young writer, that not all of my notions are correct and that I will always need improving. I think that any writer should know that they will always be growing, that their perceptions will alter while truths become clearer or more blurred, whichever is best. But I hope that the point I am at is a good one, that the lens I present things through has been sharpened, and that it will continue to be sharpened. I hope that I am at least able to give credit to the region I am from and the proud people I grew up with.

[Novel Excerpt]

*Are you the ones who dwell in dark?  
Within the tunnels that bend and arc.*

*A mask to wear of broken stone  
And black to hide a wearied bone;  
To fear the fall of hidden cracks,  
And know you may not make it back.*

*Are you the ones who know not light?  
Are you the men of forever night?*

## Chapter 1

### Men of the Dark

It was an awful night. Twilight faded as the milkweed white moon drifted over the forested hills, dividing their slopes between luminance and shadow. Silhouettes of more distant hills—black vistas of forest or nothing—rose and fell in all directions under the glowering sky. The pale-tipped leaves of treetops quivered as a cold wind moved across the horizon. Something was in the air—or below.

A fog began to materialize out of the dark damp soil. It rose and grew and crept through the dark trees, caressing the land, moon-brightened smoke billowing out and disappearing within the cracks and crevices of hillside shade. The light was so awful, so terrible, anyone could see the phantasmagoric images that moved about the mountains as nightmares creep into dreams.

The fog grew. And pretty soon it was as gray as could be. And from that moonlit gray abyss emerged forms of men—or something else—painting the ground with long black lines that might have belonged to enormously tall beings, pulsing, back and forth, large to small as they came forth. One after another, tiny lights appeared within the gray. They hovered mysteriously, glowing faintly as strange little flames. The fog was thick here, and the lights flickered eerily inside, giving a spectral feel to an already chilly night air. Between the thick waves of airy particles, you could just barely make out the indistinct outline of each figure accompanying each light, as insubstantial as ghosts in moonlight. And as ghosts they walked, moving with the slow paced steadiness of lost spirits, or of walking dead men. Slowly, more and more lights appeared. Eleven total. Eleven wraiths that came from the shadow of a mountain. The fog lowered and they became clearer. One of the creatures turned its head to another, its strange yellow light giving illumination. It shined on something that could never be brightened—the blackened face of a walking dead man.

As the gray figures left the gloom of the hillside shadow their corpses caught the moonlight and sprang to life. Their cloudy substance fell away, along with the fog, and they became living men again—men who walked, yet with legs more burdened; men who breathed, but with a little less ease; and men who smiled, yet not that often. They were dressed in dark, dirty clothes that held no color under the moon. Each donned a cloth, hard brimmed hat fitted with a metal lamp that resembled a small watering can. From the long metal spout of each lamp a small flame poured out. The flames burned much brighter now and smoked with the strong scent of burning

animal fat. The black of their faces was not shadow but real; as real as the dust of life's gritty coarseness that falls on those who toil and sweat in darkness beneath the earth—as real as coal.

The white eyes from each of the eleven faces looked to the night with the same familiarity of a nocturnal creature; and that indeed is what they were. They did not know the sun, did not know the warmth that comes so easily in the day. Following the path in front of them, in the tunnels below, is where they found solace; they lived and breathed and died in darkness, going before dawn into the black abyss of a drift mouth cave to carve a path through endless seams of coal; leaving, as they were now, always after twilight. The sun had forgotten them and they had forgotten it. Still, they were content without it. And, while they walked as free men, they were glad just to breathe in the fresh, new night air.

Although every one of these miners deserved the right to be called a man, not all of them were: there were young boys, no older than eleven or twelve, with sad little eyes that sparkled with determination; there were teenagers, who's walk and cool countenance imitated an older man's. A group of common folk, as some of them called themselves, of sundry ages and spirits. Yet it was difficult to tell them apart—impossible by just looking at their faces—unless you looked at how each one walked. The elder miners had the slow, stiff gait of half-broken men, something that comes with years of kneeling on bent knees and swinging a pickaxe or using a shovel; and the younger a man was the more of a walking human being he resembled.

The one exception to this truth came in the form of an old man with a face made up of wrinkles and withered stubble. His cheeks puffed, especially when he smiled; and while the legs of the other miners dragged gloomily on, his marched to their own tuneful rhythm. His white stubble was speckled with coal dust, and his wrinkles were deeply etched by that same black chisel of rock that could carve a miner's face, just as he could it. He looked over to one of the other men in the back and said something, then sped ahead to the front of the group where the younger miners were, his arms bouncing up and down as he walked.

The old man quietly crept up behind the smallest of these miners, grabbed him in a fierce hold, and hollered out, "It's the evil bear-haint come to getcha boy!" He growled and lifted the little miner up with ease. "Someone's been a-loadin up too much coal for bein such a little'un, and he ain't happy about it," he said, shaking him ruthlessly.

"Let me down! Let me down!" the boy screamed while struggling to get away. "Dangit, you old loon. Let me down! Go bother someone else with your foolishness."

"Foolishness?! Foolishness?! Why you little heathern," he said, releasing his hold and letting the boy fall to the ground. "I'll show you foolishness when I get my whip out, boy!"

The child picked himself up, turned around and, fuming, said, "No you won't! I'll tell my pa on you!"

The old man looked at the boy all serious-like. “Now I talked to your pa just the other day. And he said 'if my youngin was to ever act up, you be sure to give him a good whippin now, Ezra'. Yessir, that's what he said.”

“He did not! You're a-lyin.”

The old man looked fanatical, and said in short, jerky bursts, “Wha?! Wha?!” followed by a long, drawn out “Haaaaaaaalordy!” His hand clasped his heart while the other tried to touch the moon. “Oh Lord, have mercy! Calling me a liar?! How could such an ill-mannered boy be brought into this world? Lord, give me the strength to whip this youngin good and make him see the error of his ways!”

“Leave that boy alone!” hollered a voice from the back.

“Wha? Who's there?” The old man jerked and turned around to see the distinct outline of another miner, his face veiled by the light of his lamp.

“What did you say son?” the old man asked.

The figure slowly approached and the old man's eyes squinted. It was one of the elder teenagers.

“I said, you'd better let that boy alone before someone goes and teaches you a lesson.”

“A lesson? That what you lookin for boy? A lesson? I can teach you one of them.”

“I'd like to see you try. I'd wager you couldn't teach a dog to lick its own hind end.”

The young man took another step. His dark eyes were stern and steadfast, burning with something between hatred and determination.

The old man took two steps. "Well hell boy! I'm ready for you! Or are you afeared of gettin the everlastin tarnation beat from ya?"

"I ain't afraid of havin to whoop up a feeble old man if that's what you mean. Especially one that looks like he ain't got enough sense to go to the road."

"Feeble?! You're one to talk, son. I'd wager my scrawny old mule'd put up a meaner fight than you."

"Your mule's dead, you old codger."

"And so it is!" The old man cried out, still burning his gaze into the boy's soiled dark eyes.

The young man stared back, not saying a word. The older miners had went on ahead, but some of the younger ones had stayed back, observing the scene, anticipating the imminent brawl between these two volatile substances. The intensity grew as each second passed, like watching a fuse spark and smolder its way to the dynamite. They waited for the explosion, and watched as both faces grew harder, sterner, fiercer, until they became savage-like, their eyes setting ablaze, trying to scorch the other to cinders before stomping the ashes into the ground. They were wild animals: an upstart young wolf challenging the leader of the pack, each waiting for the other to pounce, ready to unleash their ferociousness with wildly flung fists. Within an instant an almost unseen twitch came over the boy's face and something

terrible happened. His stern, fiery glare melted away, changing into a grin. Then laughing, smiling.

“You got me old timer,” the young man said, his dusty lips now bent warmly. “I can’t beat a dead mule.”

“Not many can!” the man responded, followed by a hearty laugh. He clasped the boy’s shoulder and pinched it hard. “And how is my young Jacob doing this fine evening?”

“As good as can be, Ezra,” Jacob said. “Cold, sore, and dead tired.”

Ezra motioned his hand forward twice like he was chopping the air. “Mighty fine! Mighty fine!”

Jacob smiled. “And how about you?”

“Well I’m just glad to be a-breathin if you wanna know the truth.”

“Well that’s good,” Jacob said. “Me too.”

Ezra nodded his head. “Hey, what say me and you raise a little hell tonight? Find us some purdy girls and go set the hills on fire?”

“Well I think that sounds mighty fine, Ezra.”

“Yes sir! Yes sir!” Ezra hollered. His eyes wandered everywhere over the dark horizon.

Jacob shook his head in disbelief. How could a man that was almost seventy do the same work that he did and come out at the end of the day like that? He looked with wonder at the pair of lively legs that belonged to his friend. They were skeleton-thin, but without a doubt, pure muscle. His eyes followed the emaciated frame up to

the old man's face, staring, uncertain as they took note of every wrinkle, every black scar, every timeworn mark of emotion, trying, searching for a clues to enlightenment. He reckoned Ezra's face to have been shaped by countless stories, for there were many marks. Maybe he could solve the mystery inside those clues, or maybe he was just wasting his time. In the end he thought the lines not important, only that unshakable smile.

“Well, boy, what are you staring like a coon dog for? Let's get a move on!” Ezra said, squeezing Jacob's shoulder one more time.

The rest of the group had gone on ahead. And the two miners now walked together down the dark path, Ezra with his arm around Jacob and his other making wild motions as he talked without mercy. They were led by the tiniest of lights.

The path down the mining road was long and aching, especially to these men who spent most of the day on hands and knees, bent down, swinging a pickaxe. The cold air seeped into their wearied joints and each step brought pain, yet there remained the pleasure of knowing that each was one step closer to home. Tall pines and hardwoods flanked them on either side of the road, towering up and filtering the moonlight that was steadily growing thinner.

A screech owl fluttered in and perched itself on a branch above the two men. It called out, breaking the monotony of the footsteps and crickets. Ezra stopped and looked up at it with a peculiar expression on his face.

“Hello my lonesome friend!” he shouted up to it with both hands at his mouth. Then he took a metal flask out from his jacket pocket. He raised it up in the direction of the bird. “Shall we both begin the night with a hoot?”

The owl turned its head once, then twice, blinking. And then it flew away.

“Suite yourself,” Ezra said. He guzzled down the potent smelling stuff, keeping his taut smile even while he drank. “Ah... nothin like fire to burn away all the coal dust in a man’s throat. How about you, son?”

Jacob looked hard at the flask he had been handed. All the devilry of this world distilled and gathered together, concentrated into one little bottle. He thought of his mother. “That’s what leads to the evils of this world,” she would say. “What makes men want to fight and kill and carry grudges upon one another. Now Jacob, don’t you ever partake of it or that dark seed will surely grow inside of *you*.”

The wild aroma of corn whiskey tingled his nose hairs. It was from the old man’s personal still. Best stuff around for miles. Some folks said it was unlike anything they’d ever tasted. That it had mystery about it, something magical almost, the way it filled your body with fire and life and left you smiling. Some folks even believed it really was magical, that the old man was some kind of a warlock, and wasn’t to be trusted. Jacob knew better. But as alluring as the stuff was, he handed it back with a rugged smile.

“I reckon my throat ain’t that dusty yet,” he said.

“But it will be. Soon enough, one of these days. You can count on that. But I see your ma’s got you raised up right. Best you watch out boy or she’ll turn you into a respectable human bein.”

Jacob laughed. “Respectable like you?”

“Me?!” Ezra gasped in deep indignation. “Oh lordy! Oh lordy lordy lordy! What have I done to deserve such insults? I’ve been called many a thing in my life, but never nothin as dirty and downright hateful as that. Respectable? Ha!”

He took another swig. “I’ll have you know, boy, that I used to be the lowdowndest sonofabitch that ever walked the earth. Why, I was like a brushfire, a-spreadin throughout the land; nothin safe from my hand, not a purdy girl’s jewel nor rich man’s money. Nosir! Wasn’t a bootlegger, gunman, smuggler, politician or any other no-count scoundrel that didn’t know my name.”

Another swig. He talked slowly this time, spacing his words. “And I’ve seen things too, boy. Things that would take a man six or seven lifetimes to see. Some good, some bad. I’ve seen things that would make a man think he was in heaven, and some that would make him wished he were in hell.”

Jacob looked irritated. “You done yet?”

“Just about. Point I’m trying to make is... now what were we a-talkin about again?”

“How you used to be such a nice person.”

“Oh yes. Yessir. Well I’ll tell ya, things used to be a-different than they are now.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you see, back in them days we used to live. Go out and do things! Not be holed up in a damn prison all day.”

“What are you talking about? Folks have always mined.”

“No sir. Not everyone. And not like this. Maybe a few fellers with a mule and some pickaxes that would go and get some coal for their homes or a little to sell. But not like this. When I was a boy we farmed and raised our own food. We lived and breathed outside, and it was good. We worked the land and the land gave back to us. And by God we’d have us a get-together just about every week; a-singin and a-dancin, and a big ol mess of food. Lord, them were good times.”

Jacob breathed out. “Well a man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. This is my time now and if a man’s got to mine then he’s got to mine. My daddy was a miner and his before him. And that’s what I aim to do.”

Ezra laughed, and then said very seriously, “You’re just sayin that cause that’s the only thing you know to say. Don’t you wanna live, boy? Or you want to be in the dark all your damned life?”

Jacob looked down. He rubbed his fingers together, feeling the grains of dust as they fell away. They felt rougher than usual. He looked back up and stared at Ezra. “I’ll stay in the dark if that’s what it takes,” he said.

Ezra shook his head. “That’s what I reckoned you’d say. Well. I’ve lived too long to know that you can’t change a young man’s mind. But let me tell you somethin now. You think things are always gonna be the way they is but they ain’t. Things is a-

changin, I can feel it in these old bones. I've seen a few storms in my life and I know when one's a-comin. And this one's a-comin. And sure enough, things is only gonna get worse. You bear that in mind, boy.”

They continued the journey home, talking very little along the way. It felt good to be walking on dirt, accompanied by crickets and all the other night noises. The distant hills flowed and seemed to change shape, giving an overwhelming sense of comfort now. They were dark but they embraced; they cradled with arms of wood and earth, and kept the howling winds at bay.

Jacob felt relaxed now, embracing the hills as they embraced him. This feeling would not last, however, as the two men saw up ahead some lights through the trees. They went around the bend and saw a cluster of miner's lights. They had stopped and where gathered in a circle.

“Get back. Get back. Give the boy room to breathe,” one of the miners, John Clevinger, said.

Ezra and Jacob moved ahead to see what the commotion was about.

“What's goin on fellers?” Ezra said.

Jacob pushed through the miners. “Brennus? That you?”

The young man in the center was bent down, trying to catch his breath. He held himself up with his arms on his knees, and then shook his head up and down without looking at Jacob, or at anybody.

“There's... been another... attack,” he said.

There were gasps from all around, especially from the younger miners.

Brennus continued, "Over at the number seven mine."

The men began to mutter. The children kept their mouths open. An older miner, Paul Potter, crossed his arms. "Well what was it?" he asked.

Brennus stood straight up, looked at the men who were eager to listen, then glanced back behind him, as if he still expected to hear screaming voices. He mouthed a few silent words and then began.

"I didn't see much. But what I did see... I wished I hadn't."

The miners looked impatient. "Well? What was it?!" Paul Potter asked again.

"We was just getting off work and. The fog came in. It was real cold, like it gets at the river in the morning. Real cold and. Could hardly see a thing. We hadn't just left the drift mouth when. It came. First the noise. That scream. That awful scream. Like a bear but. I've heard a bear before. It don't sound like that."

"Ya see?! Ya see?!" Ezra jumped in through the circle of men. "I told ya!" he said. "It's that damn bear-haint! He's a-pickin us off one after another'n. Won't be long fore he's killt ever last one of us."

"Hush up old man. Let him speak," John Clevinger said.

Brennus looked down, his eyes darting from left to right. "Well. I heard that scream and, then I noticed that the ground was frozen. I tell you it was the queerest thing. I swear I was walkin on hoarfrost. And it just sent chills up my body. And the fog, it just wasn't right neither. Like it was moving all towards us, coming down from the hills. And then I really couldn't see a thing. We tried to stay together but, we just

couldn't. I was right there with Silas and Todd and we had our pickaxes ready but, next thing I knew I was alone. Felt like I was frozen to the ground." He paused a moment to breathe.

"And then I saw it. Just a-movin and a-shiftin through the fog like a demon. And it moved real fast. Just saw patches of it and. Well, I guess it kindly resembled a bear but just like that noise, I swear it wasn't no bear like I'd ever seen. But then it was gone and, I heard another scream. A man's scream. It was Johnson's."

"The foreman?" Catfish Sawyers asked.

"Yeah. Johnson. The foreman."

Catfish chuckled. "Ain't nobody gonna miss him."

Jacob hushed Catfish. He might have offended him, a young miner telling an older one to be quiet but he really didn't care. "You sure it was Johnson?" he asked.

Brennus looked at his friend. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure. After he screamed it got all quiet. And then the fog disappeared. I could see everybody and we huddled back together. Waited on that thing to spring right back up on us at any moment. That's when we saw Johnson, or what was left of the poor feller. And that trail it left behind. Shhh, boys I tell ya, whatever got a hold of him wasn't natural. It wasn't no bear."

"Well what was it then?" John Clevinger asked.

"Beats the hell outta me. It wasn't no bear though. But whatever it was it never came back."

"What'd they do with old Johnson?" Ezra asked.

“They put him on the mule cart and hauled him back to wherever, I reckon. I figured I'd come over here and tell you boys the news. And that you better get home fast and lock your doors tonight.”

“Well we're much obliged, boy,” John Clevinger said, and gave him a hard pat on the back.

“Yes sir! Yes sir!” Ezra said. “Ain't many a-man that would risk gettin et by a bear haint to go and do that.”

Brennus just shook his head. The men began to leave, touching his shoulder or giving some other form of thanks as they left. He came up to Jacob.

“I ain't going back to them mines. I ain't. I'm done,” he said.

“What are you gonna do?” Jacob asked.

“I don't know, but. Not that.”

“Get you some rest, Brennus.”

Brennus shook his head again, and started to walk on home. Ezra and Jacob followed last, knowing they should walk fast, but still going slow.

The road branched off into others, connecting several hollows together that spread throughout the black hills. They could see some of the miners ahead slowly disperse, one after another, disappearing down his own separate path: hollers where they would be greeted by warm loving families, but also families who would be horrified to hear the news of another attack. The miners were glimpsed lastly as a flicker of fading light before they became extinguished in the dark.

They had stopped walking. Ezra's turn to Bearfoot Branch was at hand and Jacob's lay ahead.

"I reckon this is where I get off," Ezra said.

"Alright. See ya old timer."

"Yeah." But before Ezra had gone far he turned. "I knew your father well, boy. Hell of a worker. And a hell of a man. But he didn't break his back or choke on coal dust cause it was the right or wrong thing to do. Nossir. He did it for his family, so that his boy wouldn't grow up and have to. Now, I ain't preachin at ya; but if life ever gives you somethin else you take it. Don't be like these old broken men. Too many youngins I've seen start out a cart loader, them a-shovelin. And they keep on a-shovelin, start to like it cause they know it. And next thing you know they're old, like me. And that's all they've ever been. You know, a damn cart loader."

Jacob didn't say a word. He just watched the old man turn around, his form a shadow against the flame, walking away into the night like a ghost.

An unknown feeling buried itself inside Jacob's stomach. He didn't know what to think about the attack. And he didn't know what to think about Ezra; he'd never seen him act like that before. Not once had he ever known him to say something serious—maybe something semi-serious, with a tinge of humor to make the thing seem less important—but never serious. A chill tingled his bones, then he realized just how cold it was. He was alone. And being alone made him think; about Ezra's words, about the life of the dead foreman, his own life, about everything.

*Maybe he'd just had a bad day. Don't think anything of it. Perhaps it was the attack, or*

maybe the old man had bumped his head too many times on the low tunnel roof. Or he was just getting too old for the work.

Jacob headed home in the cold dark, feeling a bit emptier, more numb in thought. He felt like a lifeless body, one with cold, rusty skin and legs too thin for his frame, walking their only known destination.

The night was a blur. He saw nothing he passed. And then, up on ahead, he saw his house, the lonely little cabin with the rain-worn quilt for a doorway. Warm lights pulsed out the windows from inside and made the blanket glow a little. He stuck his arm through to move it aside. The texture was stiff, rough on the soft skin of his inner forearm. Still, it was a good familiar feeling. He quietly entered.

The warm room was empty and dim except for the flames of a small fireplace—flames that almost danced, but not quite. Two figures sat still in their wooden chairs, facing the fireplace. He could see the dull gold of his mother's hair, and her barely moving arms, silently working on an unfinished quilt. He could see the gray and dark streaks of his grandfather's hair, smoke rising above as he puffed away on his cherry wood pipe, the one he made while he could still make things. He was staring at the fireplace.

A soft breeze entered through the opening of the quilt, and the golden hair moved. His mother's face appeared, a beautiful face with sad eyes and thin lips. She didn't say a word, but only looked into the white circles of her coal covered boy, and smiled. His grandfather remained still but he shook his head up and down a little, acknowledging his grandson.

“It's good to see you, Jacob. The tub's all ready for you,” his mother said.

She came and brushed her hand across his gritty face, and he gave her a kiss. She helped him take off his stiff, greasy jacket, then left him alone to finish undressing. He peeled the shirt off his skin and dropped it to the floor. He plopped his filthy boots off, his feet feeling a great relief. His heavy pants fell, and then he stepped into the steaming water of the tin bathtub.

It was the greatest feeling in the world, to fall into that cleansing warmth and water, to feel release from the aches and worries of the mines, the coarseness of the coal dust. His skin of darkness was being shed as the black water trickled down his flesh. He splashed his face with warm soapy water and scrubbed away the long day's work, finally feeling like he could breathe again. The person in the tub was no longer a blackened miner's corpse, but a newly born man, one with living, breathing skin.

He washed everywhere except his back. And then his mother came in, and he handed her the wet, coal stained cloth. She took it and rubbed it softly over his dusky back. No words were said. And her eyes said nothing as they watched the black rivulets of water run down her boy's skin. The back scrubbing was a kind of ritual now; she had washed her father's back after her mother was gone; washed her husband's back until he was gone; and now she was washing her son's. She noticed how much his resembled the ones before it, the sharp bones and broad shoulders. If those shoulders were ever to disappear, she knew she couldn't bear it.

She handed the washcloth back and left the room to make his plate. Jacob lay back as best he could in the small tub and breathed. He thought about Brennus's story,

about why he hadn't told his mother yet. *Why should I worry her?* It seemed unimportant. He watched the firelight play on the rafters above, the way the light and the shadows danced together—*danced or fought?*—moving and pushing one another but never touching. *They can't be at the same place at the same time.* He could smell peppered soup beans and cornbread wafting in from the kitchen. *She'll find out eventually.* The long heavy shadows of the rafter lines beat up and down. The fire crackled. *Someone has to do it.*

His eyes fell back down to the water, where he could see the blackness of an entire day. He swam in it. Soaked in it. He raised his body up and got out of the tub. And then he got dressed. He went into the kitchen where he would eat his dinner, cut his beets into slices and eat them together with the soup beans. Then he would mop it all up with cornbread, rise from the table and kiss his mother goodnight. He would go to sleep, and hope that the next day was better.

## SAWDUST

I watched him float away from me into the blinding sun, a burning silhouette of a feeble old man. The long steel arm of the Skytrak extended away, carrying him closer to his destination, closer to godliness. He was beaten and broken, but made out of something I don't think they make folks out of anymore, tougher than steel and tougher than the brick in this building of ours. I imagined the forklift arm taking him all the way to the sun, smelting him down to liquid metal and recast into something new. Gleaming, reflecting those rays even brighter.

"Put the damn blocks behind them wheels boy! You're gonna get someone killed if you keep daydreamin about that girl."

I squinted and peered back to reality, doing as the old man said, taking the cinderblocks and stuffing each one behind a giant wheel of the one armed machinery.

"There you go! There you go!" the old man shouted from above. "Now was that so damn hard?"

While he lingered fifty feet in the air screwing in window flaps, I leaned against one of the wheels and had a cigarette with the driver, Bill. He was a short, balding man, with a raspy mullet and his eyes were sad and interested. He looked at me liked a hunter looks at a deer before he shoots. He looked at everyone that way.

“Now there’s a damn sight. Got a seventy-year-old man up there doing Mike’s job puttin up windows, just cause boss says *we’re in a pickle*. God I hate that phrase. Almost as much as I hate that man. Mike’s boys is young and strong; they should be the ones up there. Mike too, cept you can’t trust him to do shit. Something about his eyes I don’t like. They say eyes is the windows to a person’s soul. Well if Mike had a soul he’d be puttin up his own damn windows. Ain’t that right Jake?”

“Yeah.” Bill was a talker and here I was just a yes or no man. Not to say I couldn’t talk. But here I was a foreigner, an out of place scholar in blue collar land. I’d worked plenty of jobs before but nothing like this. Sweat, dust, steel—it was all new to me. I was used to flipping burgers and bagging Cowtails and condoms at Wal-Mart—being a consumer and a consumer’s slave, never a maker.

It was a summer job for me while I was off from college. It wasn’t bad, a laborer for a construction company working on a pharmacy school over in Virginia. It was a second building to go along with the original, an expansion. I wanted a security guard job so I could get things done: reading, writing. Maybe do a little relaxing. My friend was going to get me on until we had a falling out—he thought I fucked his girlfriend. This is good though.

I listened like it was poetry at Bill rambling about hating people, especially his ex-wife. Said there ain’t a woman in the world that he’d rather drop a ton of concrete bags on than that beautiful bitch. Could mix her right into the foundation; nobody’d ever know. Or hell, pluck her out and there’d be the statue of a goddess we could sit

out on the walkway. People might not be such a waste after all. Bill's a very loving man.

“Done up here. You lazy asses gonna bring me down sometime?”

“Figured we'd leave you up there to cool off when the rain comes, Cecil,” Bill said.

“Awwph! Don't make me take a piss on you, Bill. I'll do it.”

Bill pulled a lever and the lofty platform gave a great shake from side to side. Skeletal arms clenched railing and Cecil held on tightly, unafraid. The machine always did that, nothing unusual. It was too old and too long needing replacing. But they never replaced anything till it was dead.

Greased steel contracted and the old man descended back to earth like an angel. I checked my watch. Time for lunch.

\* \* \*

The trailer was filthy and much cooler than outside. I liked it. I was sitting there with the boys—Cecil and Bill, and some fellow named Catfish, and there were two teenage laborers, and then me. We sat around a fold-up table that was draped with blueprints, like a tablecloth. The two teenagers mainly stayed quiet or talked to themselves about something stupid,. But Bill and Cecil and Catfish were interesting, not necessarily in what they talked about, but just how they said it. And they talked about just about everything. It was a nice day to go fishing, and Bill's momma made

the best pecan pie ever was, and some pillhead down on Rusty Creek had killed his grandma for her drugs. They also talked about work. Bill remembered when one time a young supervisor had a built a building ass backward, entrance facing hillside and all.

“We tried to tell him but he wouldn't listen,” Bill said. “Said that's how it is on the paper and that's how it's spose to be! I'll swear if that wasn't the dumbest little prick I'd ever seen in my life. Then after all's done and done he tries to blame the architect. No buddy! Bit too late for that shit. We looked at the blueprints and they was fine. It was the man that was the problem. Him bein a dumbass-know-it-all-won't-listen-to-nobody-can't-tell-his-ass-from-a-hole-in-the-ground kinda person.”

Bill took a moment to breathe, and then to chortle. “And I hear that feller's a math teacher now.”

Cecil shook his head, then ended the conversation with a motion of using his right hand to slap his left palm. I reached down into my lunch bucket and took out an apple and a calorie-packed Honey Bun. Good energy for the money, and I needed both. Cecil had a sandwich, then a Moonpie and an RC Cola. Probably the same thing he had had since he was a young worker. I was about to ask him about something when a short pepper-haired man walked in—the supervisor. He looked angry, like he just found out he'd got an STD.

“Suits are gonna be coming tomorrow. I want you all to clean up after your nasty selves and I want this place fucking spotless. I'm sick of this shit and from now on we're gonna do things right.”

Bill looked over at me with a face that might as well have said “do you want to slash his tires or me?”

\* \* \*

My hands touched cold blue metal. It was an ordinary day but something smelled different about it. Smells of sweaty men and sawdust made me feel old and strong, used and wanted. The dampness of the coming storm drifted around and I could already feel the strange comfort of working in an open building when it rains. I lifted the door frame up so me and Cecil could make it level. Floors are never level when you pour them, it’s impossible. Ad doors don’t swing unless they’re level, so you add to them. The old man was on his knees on the hard concrete floor, something I couldn’t do. He was the same as that floor and I was still carpet. Earlier we had scavenged some tiny metal discs from the electricians’ outlets, and he placed them under the uplifted frame, giving me a look that said not to let go or I’d squish his damn hand. It feels good finding those discs, like finding loose change. Figure they would have things for that but you just have to use what you can get.

“How’s that?” he said. While holding the heavy doorframe I checked the magnetic level that was stuck to the top.

“Almost. Try one more.”

Cecil looked up to make sure. “Let’s make it two.”

“Alright. Two.”

Bubble in center. Drill, screw, done.

Cecil walked away from the perfect door to check which one we'd set up next. My eyes fixed on the floating bubble of air, a little embryo of life trapped inside liquid. I floated away again to flashing images of hair and eyes and lips, fresh smells and warm touches, cold stares. Why can't I balance you? Why can't I make you level?

\* \* \*

One day I was sweeping up on the second floor while Cecil was at the sawhorses. Noises from strange machines came from the distance, one after another, clean noises crunching on rough noises. I looked out the windowless opening and watched the mud stained road down below. Out of place people left out of place cars, expensive shiny ones. Young men and women were laughing and talking in the parking lot of the other building. They were like me, college kids, but they weren't like me. They were all smiles and money. Pharmacy students.

The guys wore their suits and the girls their black dresses, skirts, and jeans. Most of the girls were attractive, or at least pretty enough to trigger a stereotype. Whistles shot out like arrows from our little fortress. Block masons on scaffolding, Mexicans from the second floor, teenage laborers here and there, all let fly acknowledgments of sexiness—whistles, hoots, and hollers. I thought for a minute about the repercussions of Chauvinism, but said to hell with it and let out a sharp

whistle. Why not? My hands were dirty, my jeans stained. Here I was unclassified, just dirt and sweat and muscle. Here I was just a guy in a hardhat.

A cute black haired girl in a black dress looked my way for a second and blew me a kiss. I was just a dumb hillbilly laborer after all; what could it hurt playing with me I'm sure she thought. Wonder her surprise if I walked right up and recited some Byron to her raven-tressed ass. I smiled and turned back to resume pushing my broom against the wet soggy clumps of sawdust on the floor.

\* \* \*

“Get over here boy!” Cecil said one time. “I need you to hold this for me.”

I'd never heard the old carpenter ask for help with cutting before, but I did it without question. It was a long strip of ornate trim that I held onto for him on the sawhorses. The detail in it was surprising and I hadn't expected anything like this in a modern building the first time I saw it. I'd heard the boss talking to Cecil about it a few days back, at lunch. “They want it to match exactly with the trim at the old building. Think you can do it?” “I can do it. Give me two weeks.”

“How long you been working on that?” I asked.

“Too long. But it's got to be done right or it ain't worth a damn.”

He stood on the other side of the sawhorses, both hands on them, head down like he was praying. The blue prints were laid down but I knew he didn't need them to know what he was doing. Just making sure. That's the way it's done.

After he was done praying he looked at me like he was about to ask me to shoot someone.

“Ever use a router before?”

“Nope.”

He curled his face and hesitated. “Well, got to learn sometime.”

\* \* \*

It was an easy, slow day. Up until I had to help the steel crew. They were short a man and I was too stupid to act like I was busy with something so the boss sent me up there. I worked with some guy they called Rooster. I’d wondered why they called him that until I saw him standing on the roof, perched, watching the soon-to-be pharmacists and screaming “URR-UR-URR-UR-URR COCK SUCKERS!” He was a character.

Me and Rooster carried some heavy steel sheets back and forth across the metal roofing, walking each time on what we laid down. We had just a couple feet of space to walk on since you couldn’t stray from the steel beams underneath or you’d sink right in and fall. Every now and then a gust of wind picked up and we had to set the sheet down and hold on, lest we fall a good hundred feet.

“Who’s the Greek god of wind?” Rooster asked me out of nowhere one time.

“I think his name was Aeolus,” I said. “He was the one that gave Odysseus that bag of wind to sail home with.”

“Well someone needs to tell Aeolus to keep his god damn bag shut,” he said before another big gust almost knocked us over. If it wasn’t for the sudden fear of death I suppose I would have laughed.

\* \* \*

“My feet hurt,” I said one day to Cecil. What I’d meant to say was that this concrete’s a bitch, but it didn’t come out that way. I felt like a child complaining.

“Mine too,” he said, turning away from the blueprints.

“Really?”

“Always do. You think your feet hurtin goes away after so long? It don’t.”

“How do you stand it?”

“Just get used to it. Been doing this over thirty years now. Things ain’t changed that much. My feet’s still the same, this killin floor’s still the same.”

Cecil seemed different now. For one thing he wasn’t cursing but mostly it was his eyes. No it wasn’t his eyes. It was everything. He spoke differently, softly, like a father.

“Ain’t nothing to worry about, boy” he said. “Pain ain’t gonna kill ya. You ever gonna get that trim finished?”

I slid the router across the long piece of trim as carefully as if it were gold, trying my best not mess up like before. I’d ruined a piece earlier with my greenhorn hands but it was getting easier now. The firm oak blasted easily away into thousands

of showering pieces. I breathed in and felt like an artist. Two long cuts: a solid square indentation that felt necessary, concrete; and a rounded one for the smooth comfort, the abstraction, the unreality; and then a quick jerk.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” I said.

“It’s alright, we can still use it for the fifty six and three eighths. You just messed up on the end there is all.”

“I messed up at the beginning a little too. Left a mark.”

“I know. That part’s fixable though. Always a way to fix things.”

“Unless you cut it too short.”

“Yeah. That sounds about right. Can’t uncut something once it’s been cut.”

Cecil took over the router and I watched him work his old magic on the earlier mistake. I gazed at the wood and it felt like my mind became trapped inside, waiting to be cut.

“Know anything about women Cecil?”

He was getting ready to cut but stopped. He looked at me. “Not a damn thing,” he said. Got twenty seven grandkids though, if that counts for somethin.”

“Any idea how you know if you really love someone?”

“Hell if I know. Why don’t you go ask Bill.”

I laughed. “Yeah, Bill’s a regular Don Juan ain’t he?”

“You’d be surprised.” He finished touching up the scratch.

He reached into his shirt pocket and took out a pack of Tahoes. I did the same. Everyone on the job smoked those cheap things. I used to only be a Camel Lights guy

but I decided to give them a chance, might as well. They tasted like ass at first, but I got used to them, just like the job. And the more I worked the better it got.

The cigarette shook up and down when he put it in his mouth, before slowly bringing the flame in. We leaned over the sawhorses, looking out the windowless third floor at July sun-capped hills and cloudless sky. We breathed in the fresh breeze and industrial blackness, the wisdom and cheap tobacco. Cecil looked down.

“Love’s like wood I reckon. All you got’s pieces and pieces. All different kinds. And if you ain’t careful it’ll all just rot one day.”

He took a drag and continued. “I’ve loved a few women I reckon. Only one I really cared too much for though. Only woman that ever cared enough to pack my lunch in the mornings, or do something nice ever now and then. Other one’s I’d always have to tell, but her, no. She’d do things for me and I’d do things for her, because we wanted to. I built her an oak bookcase one time—nicest thing you ever saw. And she loved to read. She liked a lot of things.”

Cecil kept the cigarette in his mouth and picked up the circular saw. It glided across and a piece of dead wood clattered to the floor, resting in the bed of sawdust.

“I plan on workin overtime with Bill today. You wanna tag along?” he said.

“I can’t today. There's something I gotta do.”

\* \* \*

I went home and gave my girlfriend a call. I told her I was going to build her a bookcase, oak, something real nice to replace that cheap thing from Walmart. “Yeah baby, real nice.” I could feel her smiling on the phone.

\* \* \*

The next day I actually came to work awake, not sleepy at all. The clouds were comforting and the morning air was soft and cool. It felt like it was going to be one of those easy days.

When I pulled my truck into the dirt driveway I noticed a crowd of people standing past the corner of the building. They were workers, all kinds: brick masons, electricians, HVAC, laborers, carpenters. I got out and went to see what was going on. There were some other men as well, well dressed, and I wondered what they were doing here. I’d seen them before though, one time when the boss told us to rig up some railing like our job depended on it, because it probably did. And they had come just an hour later—safety inspectors. They were all standing around the Skytrack, staring.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Everyone turned their heads and looked at me like I’d just said fuck in church.

“Well?”

“Cecil’s dead,” Rooster finally said.

I felt like a sledgehammer had hit my chest. Couldn't breathe.

“That’s all you can say?” I heard a voice from beyond the crowd—it was Bill’s. He was sitting on an empty pallet, arms widespread over legs, leaning forward and smoking. He stood up.

“That all you can say? ‘Cecil’s dead.’ Who the fuck you think you are?”

Bill pushed Rooster back, and kept pushing, each time saying “That all?” with increasing magnitude. Four times, until it exploded into a scream.

“That all?!” on the final push. And Rooster fell backwards, stumbling over a cinderblock.

Bill looked like he would have beat the tar out of Rooster if some of the men hadn’t held him back. The inspectors stood there eyeing him like they’d found another safety hazard. I ran over to help but Bill had already broken loose in a berserker frenzy of wild, work-hardened arms jerked forward in search of freedom from feeling. He fell to his knees, crying, tears mixing in with the barren soil before disappearing beneath the dust, not even able to make mud. He looked at me and I understood. It wasn’t his fault.

\* \* \*

It was a nice day out. I felt the brisk summer breeze followed by a sudden dust storm. I closed my eyes, sixty feet in a metal basket, as wind and dust and sand blasted my face. I knew what a desert felt like, even if I’d never been.

“Careful up there!” Bill yelled from the inside of a shiny new white Skytrack.

I tugged on the orange safety harness hanging from my body, letting him know that it was fine. I held my hand out and motioned my thumb up—the signal to go higher.

Bill shook his head and moved the lever, then spit some tobacco out the side. He’d given up smoking, but reverted back to his good old snuff, claiming he never should have quit it in the first damn place. I gently came back down.

“We got enough done for now. It’s about time for lunch anyways.”

It had been three weeks since the accident. Everything had changed. Concrete came flowing over the first floor like a rising gray tide, hardening; electrical conduit snaked its way throughout the building, decorating the interior like some kind of Baroque architecture. The building looked more beautiful now than it ever would, in its raw, unfinished state. It grew redder with each brick, sturdier with each metal stud—flimsy little things, but many can hold much.

Almost every morning we had a safety meeting before work. Fifteen dead minutes of mindlessly staring at papers about stupid safety precautions: how to properly use and stand on a ladder; when to wear a dust mask or face plate or safety goggles; treating cuts and chemicals; tape, eye drops, Band-Aids. Nothing in there about how to properly operate a broken piece of heavy machinery.

Boss told me to clean up the second floor so I went and cleaned up. I followed the path of garbage, led by dust and pop bottles, wood scraps and bits of sheetrock, plastic wrappers, sawdust, bent nails, stripped screws, and all other useless things,

gathering weight with each push of the broom. I was the only soul up there in that large open room, everyone else was gone. It was as quiet as a dead man's least breath.

I had avoided looking at the walls until my broom betrayed me. I was looking down into the gray rubbish oblivion as it led me forward, and with a hard thud, banged against something—a long strip of trim. It wasn't ornate or elegant, artistic or passionate; it wasn't even wood. It was plastic. Plain, white, cheap plastic.

I wanted to tear it down. I was there when the suits had changed their mind. I ignored it. I was there when the new carpenter came to put it up. I ignored it. I wanted to tear it down. I wanted to rip it off with my bare hands and break it over my knee, piece after piece after piece, again and again. I wanted to take a sledgehammer and pound it into the ground, pound it into a million little pieces of cheap fucking powdery plastic. Maybe Bill would join me. He'd see what I was doing and look for a minute with his eyes and come to some sudden revelatory manifestation of what it means to live and sweat, and he'd join in. We'd do it for Cecil, tearing and ripping and smashing it all to bits in some kind of carpenter's crusade. Plastic. Everyone would come up to see what the noise was and then they'd stare with pride and revolution in their eyes, except the new carpenter. He'd ask us what the hell we were doing. And the boss too; he'd tell us to get the hell out of his building and we'd give him a big fuck you and Bill would punch him in the face and then the cops would come and take us to jail and fine us for destroying industrial property. Plastic. I wanted to tear it down.

My broom pulled away and continued down the dusty path. Alone. Boss told me to clean the second floor. I cleaned the second floor.