

Hesychius Hilarion

*Attentiveness is the heart's stillness,
unbroken by any thought.
In this stillness the heart breathes and invokes,
endlessly and without ceasing,
only ...
St. Hesychius*

I did not trust the train; I slept with my trunk underneath the covers. Each morning, sometimes even before the sun rose, the attendant would come in and shake me awake to try and sell me goods from his case. He tried to put the rings onto my fingers and once got a bracelet around my wrist, insisting that there was no charge, it was a gift; taking my hands, slow to mobilize from their sleeping state, he would impress one of his small figurines like a grandmother would a sly coin into a child's palm. All of his goods were made of the same cheap material, so light it could only be detected by the rough seam where the sides of the mold had met. Strapped to the inside of his coat (which was a different style than that of the other attendants), he also showed me links of dry sausage, covered on the outside with a chalk-white crust, the powder of which rubbed off and shook down as he walked around, so that his shoes always looked like they'd been left out in the snow. He always took my refusal hard and left looking so sullen that I resolved to buy something from him on the last morning of the train's journey. To my surprise, however, the train arrived late at night, eight or nine hours ahead of schedule, and he did not make an appearance during the disembarkment. A porter—who walked with me as far as the taxi station, although I did not ask or allow him to take my trunk—told me that the early arrival was the result of a very favorable tailwind during the final stretch.

I did not like to refuse the taxi driver's offer to put my trunk in the back, but I did not want anyone else to pick it up. I was worried he might feel slighted by me, which would probably have been fair—I certainly played the part of the suspicious traveller—but he was warm in conversation and gave me a little tour narration as we drove through the town. Twice he took me to the same intersection, albeit from the other intersecting street, and in general I was not so confident in his descriptions, but it was useful to get a sense for the town's geography. "There's the Portuguese embassy, and there's the Moroccan one next to it; this stretch is called Embassy Row," he said, indicating what looked to be a block of residential houses, on the porches of which women were out hanging laundry, "and through here," he made a left turn back onto the main street in a direction we had not yet explored, "is the main square." As we entered the roundabout in the center of the main square, a handsome plaza where even this late at night people sat at little tables outside shops watching stray dogs drink from a few greenstone fountains, the driver pointed up to the tops of the surrounding buildings. In the streetlights, one could just about make out pennants in black and purple strung from the high windows. "Can you see the flags?" he asked me, looking over his shoulder even as he continued to turn hard around the roundabout. "Yes," I said, and "are those the local colors?" We kept circling; when I readjusted to grab hold of the handle from the ceiling my trunk slid off to the other side of the footwell and banged into the door. "Not exactly," he told me, "the purple is local—it is the

ancestral color of the land, from when there used to be purple colors in the ground—but the black is for mourning. A local hero has just died, not but four days ago, and the town is still grieving. It's possible you've heard of him—he was a miracle worker named Hilarion, a genuine saint. He came to us twenty-five years ago when he was exiled from his homeland (that was during the interregnum in the East, when wicked happenings drove the holiest peoples out of their own and into lucky arms the likes of ours). I tell you: if I'd suffered the treatment he had in my own homeland, I would have given up my work even if I worked in miracles; however, my own homeland—that is, here—does not even have sufficient power to mistreat me, in fact, it seems more often as if *I* am the one who has failed *it*. Anyhow, Hilarion did not retire into his exile, as so many might have, but rebuilt his practice in our small community here. We may be few, but we are as in need of miracles as anybody anywhere, perhaps more; we could probably compete with the most destitute and unfortunate metropolises in that regard. In the course of his twenty-five years of work, interrupted only by a peaceful and honorable death, it is said that every person in the town received at least one miracle at the calm hand of Hilarion. I myself once went to him to plead for the salvation of my marriage and when I came home, as if by magic, my wife had fallen asleep!" He laughed very loud, and, taking advantage of the energy, careened out of the rotary orbit the car had been engaged in off into a wide streetspoke. I was amazed how straight he drove, for I kept leaning off into the window. Soon I simply lay my cheek against its cold glass to lessen the coiled feeling in my stomach. By stretching out my legs I was able to pull my trunk back over beneath me, now I kept it beneath my knees where it knocked slightly every now and then.

"I knew Hilarion very well," I told the taxi driver, "and he is the reason I've come here. We were partners for many, many, many, years before he left for this place. I was not able to leave at the time that he did—there were circumstances which kept me there, in our homeland, which did not so much him—and it was only very recently, as you probably know, that the interregnum ended. I'm glad that he lived to see the end of it—even in the few years since, the government is already much reformed—I only wish that I had thought to visit sooner. Twenty-five years is a long while, and though I thought about Hilarion very often, he was so lost to me that even with the end of the interregnum (and the reformation of the government and police) it never occurred to me that I could go to see him, and even when I did think of it, legal though it finally was, it did not seem possible. I can tell you: I wasn't sure, even today, that I would be allowed in; I do not feel at ease here, and no amount of longing for my friend could have helped with that. When I heard of his death I did not feel guilty—he could, after all, have come to see me as well and did not—but I nevertheless understood my obligation, part of our original vows. I am here to live out the mourning, as close as I can get."

The taxi driver was trying to get a better look at me now, but it had grown even darker outside, and pressed against the window as I was—how flushed I felt!—he couldn't catch me in either the rear-view or the driver's-side mirror. As soon as I had finished speaking, he spoke thus: "Well, then you must be Hesychius! Certainly your presence will be warmly received, if unexpected; the whole town has heard so much about you from Hilarion. You certainly remained in his thoughts as well, but I must admit, you don't look quite as we'd imagined you. Some of the local murals will have to be updated. And what's this, the interregnum is over? My, things move fast—and news slower! I will take you straight away to the garden, where he lived out his

days; we may still catch the night's vigil." I sat up, pulling my cheek away from the windowpane. "Vigil?" I asked, "already there are vigils? When will the funeral be?" "The funeral has already happened," the driver responded in the soft voice of consolation, "and the burial too. Hilarion left explicit orders in writing and also in the presence of the town lawyer, from which I can quote, that he 'not be kept even a moment of time after death, but be buried immediately in the same garden, just as he was, clad in his goat-hair tunic, cowl, and his peasants cloak.' The undertakers and gardeners worked together on it. The earth has been turned, covered again, and the bush that originally covered the plot is back in place." This news disturbed me greatly. I fell to thinking.

Now the driver took what appeared to me to be a more direct course. Leaving the town center, crossing back over Embassy Row, it no longer seemed as necessary as before to be making constant turns. Soon we were back at the train station. The driver slowed the car as we approached the elevated tracks, crossing over only once he had made sure no trains were on their way. On the other side, he turned left onto a dirt path that ran alongside the rails, crowded on the right by dense bramble. The path was only wide enough for one car and had been worn deep ruts, so that the relatively low riding taxi chassis could often be heard scraping along the sandy hump. The driver apologized for the noise, and promised me the car would be fine; "this is mostly a military road," he told me, "and so it is usually driven on by heavy vehicles which are less bothered by the ruts they are creating." Soon, headlights bore down on us, so much higher than the roof of our car that I mistook them for those of a train. Although there was almost no shoulder on the right side of the road, there were only train tracks on the left, so we were obliged to pull over. The driver turned off our lights. The tight branches curled and unsprung against my side window, or sometimes slowly uncoiled themselves along the car door in obvious discomfort. Out the other side I watched a massive car pass by. It was painted completely black and had been stripped of all doors, seats, or paneling, so that the soldiers inside had to hold fast to the frame, like passengers on the deck of a reeling boat, and as it came flying down the uneven road—only narrowly missing the taxi's mirrors—the high and loose suspension caused it to bounce and sway, dipping and then bobbing up at the corners. Even the driver, I was amazed to see, was standing up in a special box toward the front; with one hand he gripped a crossbar and in the other held the reins to the two dark stallions out in front, whose steady gallop kicked the dirt from the wheelruts up into the faces of the soldiers. Between the dark glasses and bandanas they wore I couldn't get a good look at them, but neither did they pay us any attention, and sooner they were gone than had approached. After we'd pulled back onto the road, the driver looked at me a few times, as if expecting me to speak, but I remained silent. He hummed to himself.

We arrived at the garden ten or twenty minutes later. I followed the driver, carrying my trunk, through the field. Really, either one of us could have led the way, for the destination was clear: out, over the high grass, there was the silhouette of a small cabin. A small group of people processed around it, holding their lights mostly above their heads, although a few smaller figures (probably children) clutched them to their chests or balanced them on a shoulder. They intoned a familiar hymn—although I for distance or dialect could not make out certain parts—in warm and sleepy voices; it seemed, from far away, as though their ring was pulsating, sweeping in and out organically. As we got closer, though, I could no longer discern such a movement, and probably it was only my own dizziness in the first place.

The children saw us first and broke away from the circle eagerly, running over and greeting the taxi driver, who they called Uncle. He patted them on their heads and said to me “don’t mind these nephews, they are up too late and needn’t be listened to.” There was a little uproar over this, but then they noticed my trunk and gathered around it, walking alongside it like telekinetic pall-bearers and examining everything, sometimes lifting its corners and knocking their fists on different parts, which I put a stop to quickly. The commotion was enough to break the concentration of the remaining mourners, who convened quickly to halt the vigil at least long enough to deal with the newcomer. Having arrived at this decision, they took to their break with gusto, hanging the lanterns and lamps from the branches of the tree out front of the house and unpacking food and sweet wine from baskets and parcels they produced from the porch of the cabin, where no lights shone. They all greeted the taxi driver, “hello Uncle,” and handed him bread and cheese; he made a show of passing on the wine, I imagine for my benefit, so I smiled at him. He didn’t suspect that I would not be needing a ride back into town, I realized, and I decided that I ought to make my brief speech.

“Hello, nephews,” I said to them, turning a lantern so they could see my face best, “I am pleased to find you engaged in such pious acts. I want to extend my sympathies in the wake of Hilarion’s passing—we can all be assured he has found a better home. He had a talent for that. I am Hesychius,”—the people gasped through mouthfuls of food and drink—“the longtime partner of Hilarion in the decades before his exile. This gentleman can confirm this.” I indicated the taxi driver, who quickly mastered his surprise and drew himself up, nodding. “Now that the interregnum has ended, my long-awaited visit has unfortunately become a pilgrimage to a tomb. It is my understanding that the body has already been buried and is not to be moved. That is no concern of mine. However,” I said, and turned opened my eyes to the lantern light, allowing them to well a little extra, until everything wobbled to the vibrations of my voice, “I have made vows to Hilarion which I must fulfill, and as I was not able to reunite with him in life, I will have to live out the rest of my days here, in his cabin, as close to my dearest friend and his body as possible.”

They all kept looking at each other, and spoke for a while in dialect and whisper. I couldn’t follow their discussion, but no one looked to be steeling themselves for a conflict, which relieved me. The taxi driver did not join them, but rather remained standing near me and each time I looked at him he smiled, then returned to watching the proceedings nervously. I thought he might try and talk to me, although under the circumstances I can understand why he did not. The children had stolen an empty bottle of wine but were treating it as full. They carried it as if it were unbearable heavy, and took turns sitting down, taking it between their knees, and shoving their noses into the opening to smell deeply. They had no cups and made a show of looking for some, and it was true that the adults were using all the glasses for their own wine. Making bitter faces, the children turned away, dragging the bottle after them. They started sniffing it again, but now they imposed new rules to ration the smell: at any time when someone was not actively breathing in the smell, a hand had to be held over the opening, and if someone held onto it for too long the person who awaited their turn could smack them on the back of the head, slamming their noses down into the glass lip. At first some of them complained, but they soon realized, while massaging their injured noses, that the smell had perfumed their palms in the time spent sealing it in, which placated them. (Please, forgive me if I go on too long about

these unimportant details; you'll see, when my account has finished, that something very important did happen there, to and around me. If you don't forgive me then for not making more exclusions now, at least understand that I cannot tell myself what mattered and what didn't in those strange months; it could be that none of what I've recorded here relates to the fundamental thing, in fact that seems likelier the longer I go on. There may not be a word worth reading the whole way through; really it is the event that I am bringing out for you.)

Just as the discussion seemed to be reaching its liveliest point, a woman stood up and began to announce a verdict. She wore a cape and spoke very loudly at first to outspoke the remaining protestant voices. She said, pointing at me to indicate my place in the sentence, that they had decided to grant my request. "You will be able to take up residence in the home of blessed Hilarion as early as you like," she told me. "The servants will also be transferred and they will report to you in the morning. *However*," she shouted the word, though not at me, "Hilarion has left quite a bit of work behind him and even more has turned up since. If you are starting tonight, you will have to *start tonight*, do you understand? There are urgent cases all over the town—we won't be able to get to all of them, unfortunately, but the most important can probably be seen too—for there is a curse on our town. Hilarion arrived in part to defend us from it. I had hoped that the curse might die with him—the one seemed to exist only for the other, the curse and the healer, but this has apparently not been the case. It is a regular curse, an average but persistent blight that requires daily heroic efforts. The strain killed Hilarion, although he died in perfect health. At the end he was gaining energy and strength with every passing day; he was so strong he couldn't even stand, if you took him off his cot, he collapsed with the vigor of an adolescent." She stopped speaking, and in the solemn moment someone else said a prayer. I waited to speak until it was clear no one else was going to. I announced my acceptance of the proposal to applause. They poured a round for the adults and gave me the end of the bottle, for there were no extra cups. I drank it with my throat open, guzzling clean the slime and grit that had settled at the bottom. I imagined it was a frog and swallowed without grimacing.

In the merriment the woman who had spoken rushed over to me and pulled me away from the group. "Father Hesychius," she said, "it would be best if you did not associate with Uncle or at least did not rely on his reputation to support your own. He is disliked in our community and is known as an untrustworthy figure, if not an especially harmful one. In the future, if you need a witness to the fact that you are, as you say, Hesychius, please instead use my name, Clystra. I can vouch for you, for I often heard Hilarion describe you in a manner very close to that in which you now appear. I take your inexplicable youth as a further sign of your divine connections, and humble myself at your inexplicable feet." I thanked her and promised that I had no obligations to the taxi driver, who I only knew, I told her, because he had been my taxi driver. "That is wonderful news," she told me, visibly calmed, "for some people had been saying that he had put you up to this and even that you were a friend of his and that they recognized you." She ran back to the group.

I took a lantern to the cabin. I had noted its ascetic dimensions from far off and even still I was surprised to find only one small room inside, little wider than it was deep, and not very tall either. (Although the ratio of a room's dimensions do not necessarily describe its size, there are no large rooms that approach the square and cube; in fact, the closer the second wall comes in toward the other, the smaller the room, in practice, gets.) A bare and fraying blanket lay on a cot

in the corner. I had planned to stow my trunk underneath the bed, but seeing as it lay directly on the floor, I was forced to reconsider. There was really nothing else inside the cabin, maybe that was part of what made it feel so small, one looked around, saw nothing, and thought that nothing must fit. And though it does increase the effect of its poverty, it would not be so very bad to have a chair, or a little shelf for putting ones things on (am I meant to sleep on the floor, I wondered) because there are some very sorry looking pieces of furniture out there, tables with bandy legs or chairs that dig into your back. The cot, after all, would probably only be *more* uncomfortable if raised on the uneven support structure of a cheap bed frame rather than this flat and soft dirt floor. Yes, I would have to find some pathetic decorations soon, for at present the effect was too intense and simply unpractical. To start, I draped the blanket over my trunk and put it against the wall, and onto this rustic end table I placed my hat, which I did not want to wear anymore anyhow. I was looking through my pockets for other things to put there next to it when Clystra came rushing in.

“Hesychius!” she said and called out the door “I’ve found him!” She leaned back against the wall and took deep breaths, then spoke again. The panic was fading from her voice. “You cannot run away from us like that. We’ve been looking for you desperately.”

“But you saw me come in here, why search in other places?” I said. “And anyway, it can’t have been more than five or six minutes I’ve been gone.”

“I did see you go in, but we were already by the cabin when we started the search, so it made more sense to look there last since it would take the least time. Better start with the difficult parts; so long as you always do the most difficult thing first, you can finish without ever having chosen an easier option. This strategy maximizes the virtue from any task. It is one of the many gifts Hilarion has left us.”

“I see,” I said, “I think that’s alright. You could have called my name, though, how can you expect to find someone, even if I had run off, without calling a name?”

“It would be of no use while you were in the cabin. Hilarion put newspapers into the walls for insulation, but they stop the wind so well that sound can’t get through. Sound is only a sort of wind, you know, they’ve proven this and now they know it’s true. That’s why you need to breathe so many times when you’re singing, and that’s why people who’ve been hurt in certain ways can barely make any sound (the wind) at all.”

“I see,” I said again, and nothing more. She did not irritate me with her explanations, and I thought she might go on. “Why have you come to get me?”

“There are two people we must go see, urgently, tonightly. They need help from you. I do not expect, Hesychius,” she softened her tone, almost to a consolation, “that you will be as capable as dear lost Hilarion. He was a rock, a magical one. He performed feats of which no one but angels and very wealthy queens or merchants are said capable. It would be enough, in those situations where there is nothing to be done, to simply say a few words to the unlucky, help them down onto the ground, and perform last rites. Now! Come; we will have to take Uncle’s car.”

We drove back out into the night, Clystra at the wheel, I in the passenger seat, and Uncle in the back with another man whose name I did not yet know. Clystra had told me he was there “to keep an eye on Uncle.” The sky had only darkened, without any threat of morning. Clouds, thin and straight as horizon lines, gave the sky’s texture striations, wrinkles somehow left unlit. We got across the tracks without incident and turned around the town, drove around its outer

edge clockwise. I would have liked to look out at the black fields out the driver's side window, where I sometimes saw strange shapes out ahead, but I didn't want to distract Clystra who was not only in the way but also driving without headlights. The farmers out here didn't like to have people driving through, she told me, for it disturbed the animals and often accompanied the stealing of crops, and so they had installed large mirrors all along the roadside, raised on stakes. With the headlights on—Clystra showed me this—a fleet of oncoming cars appeared, sudden, out of the night. They swung their beams wildly over us, like desperate searchlights, and the road was covered up.

They led me to a red farmhouse with warm lights glowing in the windows. It was colder inside, though, and generally dirty. In the kitchen Clystra introduced me to a woman who had her foot stuck in the stove. They spoke in grave tones; it was evident both of them held little hope that the situation could be improved—or if they were hopeful, they guarded it with the trained cynicism of the longtime desolate. The woman, Clystra explained to me, had gotten her foot caught in the stove a few weeks ago and since then things had only gotten worse. It was really causing a lot of problems for the town, she said, and almost glared at the woman down on the ground.

“It is perhaps characteristic of the evil luck of our town,” she began, “that so much preventable pain should storm out of a single minor occurrence. We can never get out from a single problem, for just when one thing has been wrapped up, all the problems it had begun during its stay have now matured into untenable problem-creating problems themselves. Poor Hilarion must have felt like he was the whole time chasing a stitch across a town-sized sock. If one can get a little distance—and one cannot, without allowing more problems to be created—the structure of this fissure, always branching off into little regenerations, would strike a person as beautiful, and probably we would appear the ones who are chasing, as it were, against the natural thing.”

The woman on the ground maneuvered herself into a better sitting position and massaged her ankle where it disappeared into the stove's belly.

“Yes,” Clystra went on, leaning yet further into the melodrama, “only an ingenious fate could have taken out both of this house's engines in the same moment. It would be bad enough if the farmer's wife here had fallen ill, in fact even that would have had its special consequences, but to lose the stove at the same time is a hardship that rings out over my head, even when I'm sleeping. Since the stove cannot be turned on while she has her foot stuck inside, the house has lain cold for some months; as a result, the farmer has been forced to store his produce—what little he was able to collect in the early emergency harvest, for someone had to take care of the poor woman—in the cold basement, undried and unpreserved. As a result, much of the fruit burst open with frost and snakes were able to get in. What's more, as she is obviously unable to keep the house in good condition and the farmer simply doesn't know how, a great deal of bacteria and mold have crept in; the whole back wing of the house is lost. There are not so many farmers in the town, so any loss to the yield is a dangerous one for us. And they have been eating from the yield raw, infested as it is, for how could they be expected cook? Hilarion sent a blessing—it was towards the end so he could not come in person—and the fire department spent an entire afternoon here working at it, and *still* it goes on. Please, Hesychius, something must be done.”

I muttered something, I don't remember what. I did not like to hear so many speeches in one night, but there isn't much one can do to stop someone once they have begun; it can be a serious danger to get in front of someone holding forth. I sat on the floor next to the farmer's wife. She was blinking too much. I asked her how her foot had gotten stuck.

"I put my shoes in the stove to dry them off because they get very wet in the rain one day. They are my only nice pair of shoes. In fact they were my wedding shoes. I sat all evening by the stove, often opening the door to look at them and make sure they were alright. I also touched them and moved them around with that stick there." There was indeed a stick on the countertop. "As soon as they were dry enough to wear I couldn't bear to wait and I made the mistake of putting one shoe on before taking it out of the stove. Now my foot can't fit back out the door." She demonstrated, or at least made as if demonstrating, but I couldn't see anything in the black of the stove. As she tugged her leg around in the opening a good deal of ash poured out over the side and across her lap. She brushed it glumly off, raising a short cloud.

"Couldn't you take the shoe off?" I asked.

"Maybe," she said, "if I hadn't tied the sort of knot I did. I was a sailor in a past life, you see, and in my excitement at the dry shoe I opted for the strongest knot I know."

"Mm. Then it seems the solution will have to be a destructive one," I said, not willing to argue. "The stove cannot be destroyed, that much I can say is obvious." I saw Clystra nodding. "It is the strongest thing involved and probably the most valuable. So, between the shoe and your foot, which would you rather have injured?"

"Well," the farmer's wife said, "I am extremely averse to physical pain, which I have only been in once. If I were to break or sprain my ankle I would likely never walk again."

"Mm. There is some chance we could light a fire in the stove to expand the shoe. You might be able to get out that way, so long as your foot can expand a little slower."

"No, the heat would certainly kill and cook my foot. And changes in size are bad for things, including shoes."

"Then there is no option but an immediate annulment of the marriage." I said, and felt my annoyance slide easily into the satisfaction of petty revenge. "The farmer will have to find a new wife. I am declaring—it is well within my power—the end of this union." I imagine you'll be keeping the stove, I wanted to say. Clystra began talking; it was only to round out my verdict. The farmer's ex-wife remained on the floor. I thought she looked relieved, but I don't know her very well. We left.

Clystra drove us back along the mirror road. Her demeanor had changed. "You are good at miracles," she said to me. She no longer drove so urgently, cornering easily into the city. I watched Uncle in my side mirror. He had fallen asleep with his cheek against the window. When the car made stronger turns his loose skin dragged along the glass, stretching grimaces into the sleeper's peace.

She stopped the car outside a building she called an apothecary. It was the size of a smallish house, but appeared much smaller, set atop a long stairway. It was surely a new building erected where an old one had collapsed, for there were a broken columns preserved in the foyer. These were of the same marble as the steps, a perfect milk stone with occasional pale veins. The scrolls along the base were all worn down; it's a shame the top sections seem to have been lost—

probably there would have been less damage to the parts out of reach. At each column, Uncle bent down and ran his fingers along the detail.

Clystra led us to a room in the back of the apothecary. The door was locked, but the key was hanging on a hook just to the right of the door. “This is my room,” she said. It was not especially large—barely larger than my cabin, in fact—and filthy. A mess of indistinguishable objects covered the floor. It crackled as you walked over it; I stood mostly in place. There was a desk pushed all the way against one wall—really it was just a chest of drawers—and a table abutting it at the corner. This whole uneven counter-space was busy with different things: glass and metal caught the light first, bottles, beakers, jars—many of them broken, taped over and holding liquids—and trays of metal beads, probably various ores and gathered slag, gnarled iron instruments of unclear, foreign design, some gleaming with an edge as if ready to slice right through the table. Other shears and tongs had been twisted once, twice, three times around themselves. It seemed they could not be opened, whatever was clutched in the rusted claws would be contained that way forever. And there were also bear traps with bones in them, drilled with many regular holes, ready for threading? I wondered, and shuddered. On the walls were countless pages pinned; they held geometric designs, anatomical drawings, pictures of screws with right angles and beautiful, impossible furniture. Mostly the pages held numbers—not calculations—in short sequences, with arrows drawn from one to the next, following the natural reading order. A shelf interrupted the wall decorations. It was heavy under the weight of its contents. It sagged, bent its square braces, and presented its collections at a vertiginous angle to the viewer, like a waiter brandishing a tray. Cloth sacks sat among wax-paper parcels, all tied off with lengths of wild string, which sprung, un- and re-coiling, back and forth in a seemingly infinite kinetic vigor, often kicking up colorful dust from the mouths of the conduit sacks. High in the wall above, a grate had been kicked out from the ventilation passage, leaving only a square hole through which rattle sounds leaked into the room. The vent drew a mild draft. It pulled on the flame Clystra had just lit, blackening the sides of the burner.

“Come closer,” Clystra said to me, “and stand there.” She positioned me to block the draft. The flame settled. She set a dish over it for heating.

“This is your room? What do you do here?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “I do many things here. It depends on the season. Sometimes I come here just to have some time away from my life and work with my hands for a little while. Other times of year I spend twenty, thirty hours at a time in this room, drinking and eating the few potable and edible elements from my supplies here.”

I nodded, but it still was not so clear to me. “I see,” I said, “and why have we come here? I thought there was another miracle to attend to tonight ... I’m very tired, you know, it was a long journey here...” I left it like that. She was distracted, grabbing at different bags and jars. Eventually she found what she was looking for on the main work-surface, nearby the burner.

“I understand,” she said. “I’m very tired too—you know, I have my own journeys. Here’s one,” she held up a clear rock crystal, a quartz, “... why, it must be over two years now I’ve been working on it. That is extremely sad.” Shaking her head, she placed it in the dish and began sprinkling it with powders, spoonfuls of which she meted out from the stores on the shelf. “Rock crystal,” she told me, “is known to be congealed water. You are learned; you probably already know as much. It has a pure nature—as water does.” She began grinding dark leaves in a stone

apparatus. “It would be good for the world if we could get at the water congealed in the crystal and store our own water that way. Look how incorruptibly clean it is—doesn’t it make you thirsty?” She added the leaves to the dish and stirred it with a glass spoon. The powder was quickly blackening and the leaves, dry as they already were, quickly went up in flames. Pungent odor and smoke streamed up, caught the draft, and began blowing directly into and past my nose and eyes. I stepped to the side, but Clystra moved me back over again. In my lightheaded pain I could only hold onto the countertop. “I’m sorry about the fumes,” she said, “but I promise its almost done—or rather, this is the point where you will have to intervene. You see, I have been able to weaken the congealment, just for a brief window,” she gestured at the crystal in the dish, which was growing dirty with a waxy residue, “but I cannot get it past this final point, back into water. It is only this small miracle that I’m requesting. Just as melted wax carries the technique of its reconstitution in its liquid form—and can set the wax of other fats and tallows—so I’m confident that once I had a taste of the defrosted water I could set the mechanism off at will. When water congeals into rock, you know, it squeezes out the impurities and takes a true form. We have never tasted this true water—aren’t you thirsty for it? I would let you have some. Prometheus asked for the same miracle, when the world was only ice; now, we have complicated roads, insane weapons: it’s time for the next kind of water! Please, Hesyclus, the crystal is so close, so ready! Can you see the condensation? It has been crystal for too long; it has been kneeling on a rough edge and was beaten badly—it’s crying, can you let it cry?”

Someone grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the smoke’s course—Uncle! I put my arm over his shoulder, for I could barely walk. Clystra called to me and I wanted to respond. I was going to tell her I would be right back, but my thoughts were too thin to act upon. Uncle put me in the car and we drove away. He handed me his flask because I couldn’t stop coughing. It was sugar-water. I drank it and fell asleep.

I dreamt of the army’s dark horses; or else of my own ones. And though I don’t dream my memories (and rarely remember my dreams), there is often an affinity in material between the two. I woke up during the night and remembered: once I had tormented myself with a story about a horse breaking away from its owners. I was young, but not a child; I can’t recall where the story came from. The horse had pulled a dear little carriage far into a strange land. It was hot and though there was plenty of ground-cover, they had bad luck finding water. A few times they’d had to stop and drill into the hillside in order to refresh themselves—they were a mother, a father, and two daughters. Anyhow, perhaps the horse noticed that it always drank last. It broke off while they were stopped, after it had been unhitched for a moment, and bolted into the grassland. There was nowhere especially for it to hide or run to, but neither did it have to get very far away, for the travelers had no way to catch it and no will to hunt it down. It ran a couple hundred feet away and stopped, realized it had got free, then ran some more just to enjoy the sensation without the carriage behind. It no longer ran away from the people but around in random directions. They could see its dancing from where they stopped; it was only a few hundred yards away. Without any other option, they stopped where they were and pitched camp. They developed a settlement there. First they lived out of the wagon, then they found a way to get some wood and built a little house and were able to get by just fine. They made enough to live on by trading with other folks who came walking through and keeping by garden or something. Sometimes they would see the horse out on the fields, grazing or trotting along, generally

attending to its own business. It would often go to the lake and they would see it there, wading timidly in, nosing at floating leaves, drinking in the heat. It was always alone; there were no horses in this part of the world. It was always alone, even at night—they didn't know where it spent its nights—and it never came back to them either. Once one of the daughters, who was by then an actual woman, got close enough to it to show it a sugar-cube from twenty paces, she held it out in her palm so that it could see it and then tossed it lightly at the horse's feet. It ran completely away and even trampled the sugar-cube by accident. The girl had seen that its eyes were very far apart and that its coat was healthy and all the same color. Eventually it must have died; after some point they stopped seeing it. I used to tell myself this story just to get upset about it because for a while it had a feeling that I didn't get from life. I would return to it on too-peaceful days, or days when I was bored by the kind of sadness that was same and proper to my life. The lonely horse was a special trick.

In the morning I went outside and did prostrations in the sun. I walked over and surveyed the bush behind the cabin. The earth beneath it shone wet from recent turning. The bush had caught too much wind in the night and rolled slightly onto its side, propped lazily up on a few thick branches near the base. If they wanted it to stay upright they ought to have cut off the leaves. I walked around the cabin, pinching leaves off the branches of bushes and trees. I let my thoughts wander—within bounds, of course. I set them out to pasture, but I also set myself circling them, leading them this way and that and sometimes barking madly. It's better to stampede away from a cliff than pass too close, for one looks over a cliff and no sooner are they fallen, at least in imagination, and that is an injury received. Every time one looks out to the ocean, for instance, something drowns a little. Every time one looks down a sheer face, some part of the mind splits open on the rocks. You don't get these dead selves back. That's why old seamen are like automatons, and the alpine transhumanists (and their livestock too) can barely organize themselves to amble—or rather, it is too easy for them to amble. They have lost the discordant note that makes a choice into a piety. It is fine for them, but I do not need to be annihilated yet. If I circle myself, I am only inscribing a limit for convention, so that I might walk freely in the area described. There is enough directly underneath my shoes, I think. I could live forever in a footstep well. And I could be stepped on, and pounded into the soil, which we have already established is loose and wet enough. I am each my homeland, you see, that's something I once had to learn. The first time I felt alone in my life, I went into a cave to make sure. (Forgive me these emotional recollections ... they are a stage in the morning.) This was more than twenty years ago, and many miles to the north. I brought to the cave one hundred or one thousand matters to sort out, and my idea was to make use of the quiet to think down the list until my mind was clear. Not five minutes in, I saw something scuttle across the wall opposite me and forgot everything. Instead, I tried to hold a solid tone, humming into the back wall of the cave. At first I amused myself by starting very low down and moving slowly higher, with no regard for any scale or note division, until I found the resonant frequency of the hollow. Every space has a note that it is obliged to help louder, and the smaller the space the more help it can give. The note, each time that I neared it, would start to waver and chatter against the one I was on, knocking up troughs and clattering, piercing next to the phase. For the first days I would not give up the precise note, although I had located it exactly by approaching as close as possible from either side. I could sail down from the highest note and stop just above it, or climb from the

low tones only to fall on its lower doorstep. When I was feeling especially cruel, I would sing the two bounding notes in alternation, fluttering between the two until the tremolo kicked up a terrible discomfort in the chamber, as though some insect were stuck deep in my ear or had hatched there, beating its wings in a narrow passage. A trill holds the majesty of small difference. It provokes the note in-between. The trill is the sound of two things actually not approaching—you can hear ground held. So I could make do in a footstep, in fact it would be better, for dissonance reigns in tight quarters.

Clystra was inside my cabin when I returned. She was sitting on a chair that had certainly not been here before, either inside the cabin or on its little porch. She had been writing symbols and numbers on the floor with a stick. I didn't get a good look, for as soon as I came in she rubbed them out with her shoe.

“Good morning, Hilarion,” she said to me, laying the stick across her lap.

“Good morning, Clystra,” I replied, somewhat cautiously. I hadn't seen anyone outside. “Where has that chair come from?”

She was surprised by my question and looked around the room. “What chair?” she asked.

“That one,” I said, and pointed. It was a good opportunity to take a direct tone and make an unfriendly gesture. Afterwards I felt like I had made my reprimand for last night's scene clear, and relaxed. I sat on the cot with my knees up.

“Oh!” she said, grasping the chair's arms anew, “I brought this chair for you. It's bare in here and it wouldn't be much of a place without a chair in it. Besides, that other chair,” she indicated a bent wooden thing in the far corner, “is too broken for any adult to sit on. Best only to allow children or small animals to sit on it, for anyone else would crash through it and probably get seriously injured.” I didn't say anything, so she went on, sounding more nervous. “In fact, if you like I could just take that broken thing with me when I leave; or I could break it right now so that you don't accidentally sit on it and break your arm or something. You know what I'll do?” She rose from her chair and began walking toward the broken one. “I'll sit in it right now to show you how dangerous it is, and also it will have the effect of breaking it for good so that no one else gets hurt. Only I won't get hurt, since I know well enough what's going to happen when I sit on it. Want to see?” She asked again, and drew the little chair into the center of the room. As it skipped on the uneven floor, one of the lateral pegs holding the left and right legs together fell out and rolled around on the ground between the legs, which now, freed of any obligation to hold each other at a fixed distance or position, bent left and right like the legs of a slalom skier. If she had not been holding the back of the chair up, it would have likely fainted over. She had noticed the peg come out and now seemed uneasy about sitting in the chair even for demonstration purposes.

“Just leave it be, Clystra,” I said, and made a waving gesture. “Perhaps I'll fix it on my own or use it when children or small animals come by. It can stay in the corner.” She smiled and carried the chair back into the corner, kicking the loose peg along as her hands were full. The legs swung about in the air. She managed to prop it up against the corner walls and laid the peg softly on the seat. “Thank you for the new chair,” I said, relieved she had finally let it alone.

“You're welcome, blessed Hilarion,” she said, and sat back down in it. “You could also put it on the porch. And you will need one for visitors anyhow.”

“Yes, that's true,” I said. It was. “What sort of work do I have before me today?” I asked.

“Oh, there’s nothing too much,” she said, picking up the stick again.

“Oh,” I said, “I thought you’d mentioned another person last night.”

“Well yes,” she replied, holding the stick with both hands now and bending over the ground. “There was a young boy, Herrick, who was very ill last night with a wet cough. Normally, such a case wouldn’t require a miracle, but Herrick is the only child of a very weak family, the Cegas. They had lobbied, quite successfully in my opinion, for a miracle solution to the illness. In consideration of their difficult circumstances, the town had agreed to grant them a miracle—even though the case would otherwise have been thrown out due to its relatively minor status.” She stopped speaking earlier than I expected.

“I see,” I said, not terribly interested. “I assume the matter has sorted itself out then. If it’s alright with you, I might ask for a little peaceful time today to mourn.”

“Certainly, certainly,” she said, and drew a circle with her stick. “That can be arranged, of course. And yes, it has been sorted out. Unfortunately, it seems Herrick was sicker than any of us knew. He went on away last night. Probably it was peaceful, for no one heard anything.”

“What?” I asked, confused, “the boy died last night?”

“Yes,” she said, “or it could have been this morning. No one heard anything.”

“Poor soul,” I said, and meant it. “Why didn’t I get to visit him last night, instead of the stove woman? I would have liked to have been able to try to help, at least. No one should die lying up for a miracle.”

“Yes, or it could have been the morning too,” she replied in a strange, forceful tone. “It has to do with the order in which things ought to be done. I explained this yesterday. We went to the farmer’s wife first because it was the hardest thing to do, much farther away and more difficult to solve than Herrick, who probably only needed an extra blanket or a cookie and only lives a short walk from here anyhow. It was virtuous to deal with the farmer’s wife first, or rather, the farmer’s now ex-wife. I must applaud you again for your miraculous intervention in that case. Already produce is returning to the town markets.”

“I remember that,” I said, “and I appreciate Hilarion’s system. However, it seems to me that it would have been good to make a visit to the sick child, especially in light of what we now know. I am not casting blame,” I held my hands up to make this clear, for blame appears on the palms, “but merely lamenting the fact.”

“Yes,” spoke Clystra, and nodded. “It is a shame. And I am not casting blame either,” here she too turned showed how empty her palms were, “but you are the one that left before we could go see Herrick. I would have taken you there direct from the laboratory, if you hadn’t run off.” She picked up the stick again, rolling with her fingers against her hand. “If you’d like,” she began, carefully, “well, I know it’s not ideal ... but if you’d like to ... I could take you back there today, to the laboratory. Perhaps it would be best to finish up what we’d begun there, since the crystal had gotten so close. Although I never heard him talk about my project, Herrick always loved water, drinking it and, and—”

I interrupted. “Clystra, I should not help you with the crystal.” I hadn’t been looking straight at her, but I saw her head hang down. I added quietly, just to be done with it, “it’s beyond my power to enact that sort of indirect miracle. I can do small things. I wish you luck, however, and you have my blessing.”

It was quiet in the room, and we sat there in its insulated lull. After a few minutes had passed without Clystra lifting her head, the wind blew open the door. The light and sounds of day joined us, resizing the moment. I stood up. “I should like to make a visit to Herrick’s family, at least to offer my sympathies. Could you take me to them?”

“I’m tired,” she said, and suddenly sounded it, “but you can get there yourself. Look, it’s close.” She drew a diagram on the floor with the stick, indicating the cabin, the train tracks, and the Cegas’ house. It all amounted to showing that theirs was the next house over. I left, telling her to get some rest, and shut the door behind me.

Although the Cegas lived the next plot over, one couldn’t get there through the woods. I’m still not quite sure why this would be, but I do remember that it was. So I walked back out along the inroad out to the military pathway. The sun had come closer by, and the once fleshy leaves of the lower plants now waved like thin laundry, long dried and shrinking. Only the dark of the ivy green had retained the watery look, and those clotheslines fluttered between their anchorpoints, from stones and up tree-limbs, refusing to bleach or blanch. I kept stopping to rub the ivy leaves. I had always loved the cream, the deep well-water of their green. One can admire a vine or a serpent for the complete distrust it brings. One can admire con artists and self-aware sneaks. Or I do anyhow. I’m not sure the relevance.

I found their house hung with black flags. Outside, three people were gathered around a wooden object, working. It seemed at first to be a small shed, but it was not fixed to the ground, for while I was walking up I saw them lift it up and turn it onto one of its sides. A few times I saw them reconfigure it and continue work on the new exposed surface. It must have been light, made of thin boards. All three workers nodded to me as I came by. I thought at first it was the grave silence of early mourning, but soon I saw they all were holding nails in their mouths, pinned in swallowed lips. They would take a few out at once and hammer them in in one blow, one bite each. I wondered at the quality of wood which could accept nails so readily.

I went inside and found the family. They were only a couple, a woman and her husband, yet I felt as though they had, at least for now, held onto the title of family. Seated at a table looking out on the yard, they seemed to live in the preserved three-ness of former times. There was so much triangular about the place that I felt on my entrance like a sort of substitute son, and it was as though I was addressing my own parents, whose faces now turned to the window would soon return my child’s plaintiff interest. Even the small table at which they sat inaugurated our trinity: pushed up against the window, it had deformed the pleasant geometry into a childhood. Four sides became three seats, and I stood behind the fourth—or rather, third—and spoke. “Hello, I don’t mean to disturb you. You need not even turn. I only wanted to come by to offer my sympathy in your difficult time, for which there are few good words. Although it will probably mean more to me than to you, I wonder if you would allow me to sit for a moment with Herrick’s body to bless him. It would help me to calm the guilt I feel for not making it here in time.”

They didn’t yet turn, but one of them spoke. I caught the mild part of the voice, directed as it was out over the yard. “Sadly, young Herrick was taken from us entire. These things, you might know, they can happen when one is still young and has not reached a certain stability. His body, having barely made any progress in its own constitution, never had much of a chance to stand up against death. There is a way in which it is more pleasant, this having no remains, but

there are also ways in which things now become difficult. One wonders whether there ever really was a Herrick at all, and not just a sort of idea or sliver of thought.” Now the other one interrupted: “A fancy? No son of mine was ever a fancy!” There was a pause, not strained, in fact, quite relaxing. No one seemed much to want to talk and the first speaker may even have been grateful for the interruption. We eased back into the lonely moment. There was the muffled sound of hammer blows, powerful and swift. I imagined being operated upon by some massive, masterful dentist, sinking screws and tangles of wire into my mouth with odd implements. As a child, I had once watched a farrier going to work on an unkempt horse, seized after years of neglect on the death of its owner. He, the owner, must have been a debtor, because all his property had lapsed or else been seized by the state and was auctioned off in the time between the wake and the funeral. The policemen had hauled everything out of the house and onto the lawn and were sorting it first by type and then into lots, so that these two chairs would be set aside with this little end-table here, and these photographs set up on the dresser like so. It was as though they were reconstructing a crime scene, or conducting an elaborate trapping maneuver. A sting is really not so different from a practical joke, and there was a trickster spirit in the whole business that day. Sometimes a funeral can be like a dare to the dead. A corpse is on its heels. As the policemen put the house back together all jumbled on the front lawn, one saw the prank in focus. It would have been funnier had not it killed the house, which now sat so empty that you could see the sunlight entering in the back reach the front windows, crawling up to the sills, like a home for visiting light. It was as I was circling the dead man’s house, fascinated by these windows that went all the way through, that I found the farrier. He was sitting on a stool around the side of the stable. He had one of the horse’s knees on a metal stand, like a crutch, and the hoof in his lap. With broad, sharp chisels and hooks he took inch after inch off of the hoof, which looked wetter and more rubbery the deeper he went. He dug handfuls of pulped leaves out of the crotch of the foot, really a nail, and when it was all clean and trim, he took measurements, packed up his tools, and set off. I realize now he was going to the smith or some improvised forge nearby, but at the time I couldn’t imagine why he would leave the creature in such a state of partial relief. The discarded horseshoe lay on the ground near the crutch. It looked to belong to a different animal, much larger and more fearsome than the little country horse peaceably braying in front of me, who didn’t even bother to take its knee out of the crutch. Some natural anesthesia kept it in indifference—or better yet, the preemptive anesthesia of nervelessness, of a part without feeling. By comparison the other hooves now appeared monstrous and infected beyond repair. A hybrid of a beast and an animal, or a horse and something worse, I pictured it galloping at a slight tilt, arcing toward its prettiest leg. A horse has no feeling in its hooves. It runs on points of unregistered contact. In my life I think I have ended up the same way, going forward on my anesthetized parts. My sensitive elements, the fragile, dear and nervous ones, are so far from each day’s work as to approach its opposite, and this was always my intention. That is not to say that I do not approach my work with passion; I do. It is just to say that the source of my commitment is the reassurance that the commitment brings. Devotion guarantees a place for me without bothering the tender areas that I would like to keep unbothered. Often in the day I think, even as I was thinking then, in the Cegas’s house, that even the greatest discomfort in my work is still a part of the distraction I set out to create. Each miserable task leaves me feeling safer with my secrecies, or safer from them, as work brings me to a place as distant as this, a

stranger's house in a foreign land. Away from myself, I can be all extremities; I could walk with both feet in the crutch. The pounding of hammers, the zip of nails into soft wood, and it could have been me they were nailing into, could have been my feet being shaved down to stump—such was the moment of my indifference at this zenith of my work capacity.

The parents offered me tea and I accepted. The tea things were on a tray on the table in front of them, long since drunk. It was a mourning set, tin-white on the outside with lazy blue details, spinning finials, but glazed matte black on the inside to prevent the reading of its leaves. One of them, the one that had interrupted, brought the tray over to a dumbwaiter in the wall behind me. Distracted, they forgot to close the door that accessed the shaft, so I watched the little capsule rise upwards as they pulled down on the nearby rope. At the sound of a bell ringing, they let go of the rope and went back to the table, facing the window once more. “The kitchen is upstairs?” I asked, peering down the dumbwaiter shaft. For some inexplicable reason (and by a yet more mysterious method) its interior walls had been painted white. “Yes,” one of them replied, “the kitchen comprises the second and third floors. We designed it that way to save money on electricity. At first, the idea was that so long as meals and tea are always being lowered down, there would never be a need for an electric motor. The attendant upstairs would simply place the dish into the dumbwaiter and carefully let out the rope. After its installation, though, other problems having to do with the needs of the two stories of servants up there meant that the design was no longer feasible. It turns out that far more weight of material need enter a kitchen than leave it, and so we were constantly having to send items up to them. At the end of each day I could no longer lift my arms above my head from the strain of transporting those pails of water and sacks of flour, or whatever other items their recipes called for. There were times we even talked of going up there ourselves, and perhaps we would have had not an engineer friend of ours once come over for dinner. Seeing the sweat into which I broke out hauling up the pig that was to be that night's roast, the engineer proposed a modification to our system. Work began at once. Soon the stairwell was demolished to make way for a second dumbwaiter shaft, right behind the original one, and a new, longer rope fitted to run in a loop through both shafts. As one dumbwaiter is sent down heavy with food, the other is naturally brought up, for they share a common rope that has turned a corner. The only downside to the new system, besides the loss of the stairwell and therefore any chance of movement between floors (including between the second and third), is that the cellar had to be converted into a sort of maintenance room. In cabinets that once stored my father's wine collection (since auctioned off to help fund the renovations), there is now a large set of weights and measures, everything from a one milligram pebble to a forty kilo anvil. The crew down there works in tandem—though totally without communication—with an identical crew on the third floor to ensure that the two dumbwaiters are as evenly weighted as possible. The result of all this precise weighing out is, paradoxically, the near weightlessness of the dumbwaiter to use. It glides very easily up and down.”

As if in response, the ropes began moving again. The dumbwaiter was lowered back into view, the tea replenished. I took the tray over to the table. Even clean, the cups kept their bottoms in shadow. For a little while, we drank our tea—me, standing by the edge of the table, and the parents in the same positions as before, knees against the window wall. With some discomfort I began to suspect there was no pane in the window, for the ants that crawled along the outer windowsill never made the slightest movement toward the room inside of the house. I've never

seen such an indifference to an interior from any living thing; we stalk about in search, usually, of something to be under. If I were out walking and saw a deer walking calmly along the edge of a clearing, never bothering to go even a few feet into the trees, I would do what I could to kill it then, humanely, and bury it to protect its flesh from dissemination, inseminating the river water in the rain runoff. Whatever chemical adventure an insect feels on discovering, say, a wet space beneath some floorboards, was not raised by the room I stood in. I felt uncovered. I looked again: it's possible there was a pane there after all. Before I could get in a position to touch it, a sound rang out behind me.

The ropes were moving on their own. Every foot or so they would catch against the pulley's braking mechanism (which had not been undone) and then, with an ugly sound, pull through. Very slowly, the dumbwaiter was moving downwards, exposing first the dusty face above the empty cabinet and then, suddenly—we had been too focused on the event to really notice them—two small hands, straining to get a grip on the top part of the wall opening. I ran over and undid the brake. Soon, a small boy was climbing out from the opening. He walked over to the table and assumed my position at the side. The parents reached out to him; they pinched the skin on his legs, turned over his hands in theirs. "Herrick," one of them said, "we were just worrying about you." The boy was looking at the teacup I had been drinking from. As he spoke, he moved his head about in examination of the dark object. "Yes," he said, "I heard some of what you were saying and it upset me! I never intended to be gone for as long as I was, so first off I'm very sorry for that. You see, I rode the dumbwaiter upstairs last night because I'd always been curious to see the other floors of our house. I'm too young to remember the time before the stairway was demolished. Playing in the yard, I have always been drawn to those unsettling second and third floor windows in which the blinds seem always to be drawn, glowing like a paper lantern by some strange fire within. Smoke pours from our chimney constantly, but we have never kept a fire. It could be that you are not curious because you know already the world that I have just visited—or otherwise because you desire not to know it—but I am a small boy. I am investigating everything these days." He raised the cup above his head to look at its underside. Some tea sloshed over the side and fell into his squinting eyes. He blinked it away. "As I say, I did mean to come back sooner. It's just that I ran into trouble navigating the world up there. When I first went up, I was too nervous to get out on either the second or third floor, and as a result was sent down to the cellar, where I could see practically nothing. They must have mistaken me for a weight, for I spent a long time in a pile of stones of various sizes, and occasionally a new stone would be thrown onto the pile just as I was. After an hour or so in that basement room, I was scooped up in a large shovel and placed into a pail on a balance beam nearly the size of a seesaw. Fortunately I was one of the last weights to be added, for those that I received into my lap were small items: two horseshoes, a few pebbles, and finally a single feather. They are very exact about the work down there. Together with the rest of the pail, I was loaded into the other dumbwaiter, which, empty on the top floor, had been exchanged for the now empty main dumbwaiter in the cellar. Riding up on the counterbalance side, I passed through the ruins of the old stairway. From the moonlight that entered through the curtains I learned that it was still nighttime. As I ascended slowly through the abandoned rooms (the counterbalance dumbwaiter swings freely, there is no shaft), I made out family photos I had never before seen and in which I appeared as an infant speck in a crowd of unfamiliar, familial

faces. These, I imagine, were the grandparents, cousins, and godparents who were displaced by the downsizing of our unit to a single floor. Gleaming in the blue after night, I wondered how the pictures had stayed so free of dust even as the carpet, littered with stones, had molded and in so many places rotted entirely down to the floorboards. I found my answer in the rippling of the stairwell windows' curtains: these windows were open. Air flowed healthily through the disused wing. In fact, the discovery answered another question as well: I had long wondered how the rocks that I threw at these upper windows from the garden below seemed always to be so painlessly absorbed. Now, in the round stones scattered on the landings and steps, I found my answer. When the dumbwaiter stopped at the third floor landing, I got out and spent a minute loading my weight's worth of those projectile rocks back into its cabinet. Soon it was moving again, and I wandered up and down the abandoned stairwell. A few times I took a photograph off the wall and over into the moonlight by the window to see it better. Still, it was dark, and when I tried to draw the curtain to the side it crumbled at my touch. There is a passage that leads from the third floor landing to the third floor in the main house. I can not go into detail in my descriptions of that floor or the one below it, where the kitchen is set up, for there was so much going on that I took in very little of it. They did not much mind my presence as I am too small to get in the way of anything, but neither would they respond to my questions or explain what they were up to. Each floor spoke in a different dialect from which I could only make out certain nouns and numbers, so I mostly wandered around getting tired. Sooner I wanted to come back down to our floor than I was able to do it, for they would not agree to send me down in the dumbwaiter no matter how much I pleaded or cried. Eventually, I jumped on top of the cabinet as it was heading down from the second floor with breakfast in it, planning to get off when it passed from our floor to the cellar. I had forgotten about the door that covers the shaft on our floor, and the first time that I had an opportunity to get out I was stopped by the door." Herrick had traded the teacup for its saucer. He rubbed it with his thumbs. "When I heard your voices just now so clearly, I knew the door had been left open and seized the opportunity. I hope you won't be too cross with me and the you can see that it was only ever slightly my fault. Sorry I was gone so long."

The parents watched the boy work on the saucer. One of them moved the teacup, presently staining the table, onto the windowsill. "We can be happy, at least," one of them said, "that it is so difficult to get in here from there." "Yes," said the other, "that is a relief." They smiled at Herrick, who nodded. I couldn't think of anything to do with myself, so I blessed the boy and left, back out the front door, past the carpenters with their box, and out onto the road. It was midday. I went back.

I walked the perimeter around my cabin, searching for people in the forest. It's best to be timely with one's paranoia. Everyone has their insane behaviors and in the end it's probably only the method of their deployment that constitutes sanity. So I went out privately to determine my privacy, while it was still light out. Once it had grown dark I knew I was safe. Then I went behind my cabin and set to work.

There is something to taking things slower than necessary. It is a corrupted sort of joy. Before I found my way in the world, I would go about any odd task deliberately. If I was gardening, I would move so slowly down the row that if I started by picking unripe fruits those at the end would have turned fragrant, soft, and flushed by the time of my arrival. Pace has very

little to do with time. Instead, a rate is an unfolding ratio; something measured by division and absolute. I often find myself working slower with each return, so that what once took only a few minutes of careful work grows, over the course of weeks, to take an entire night of concentration and threatens to expand into the day. I have never worked with a schedule, for I would not like to get things done—a project comes to fruition, in my view, at the moment when it has expanded so far beyond its original allocated working time that one feels they are *always* at work on it. Work on a successful project never stops, only reaches the condition of total integration and becomes not only a part of each day, but its entirety. I have never understood the purpose of taking on something only to finish it. If I make a chair, when it is finally a chair, what then? I can sit in it, and now I won't even be able to look at it. Or I could stand, having done poorly by my legs, and think: there is something in which I no longer have any involvement. There is something that represents a historical me, who died the night he finished it. Why keep a dead man's chair in my house? I should burn the prototype, and immerse myself again in the work of planning. I should let my soul work on a chair to sit in every day.

So work by the cabin proceeded slowly and grew more laborious every day. Although the task could only have been getting smaller, each night I lay down in bed more exhausted than the last. It was as though cumulative, and I suffered pleasantly under the progressive overload. I seemed to end up deeper and dirtier each time, and when my sheets began turning black I brought a basin of water up onto my porch. This too turned black, but it still worked to remove most of the grime and only left a thin gray layer on my skin. In the sun of the next day, the gray residue would bake into an ashen powder that the villagers took for a sign of my holiness. I sat languid in the country tangle, drinking a glass of something I found, and heard out the appeals of those who visited.

Often, I was obliged to make more house calls. Every day for what could only have been months, Clystra would lead me to some sad place, where confused people explained what was troubling them. Sometimes a problem is just a problem. In fact that is almost always the case. What are you supposed to do about a problem, I wondered with them each. "Yes," is what I most wanted to say, but "yes" is not ordinarily understood as advice, although it ought to be. Many of them are like me, I know, and they do not want the problem gone. They have done as I suggest and it is now a life of problem, a day that is the problem, and every week and month the problem too. A vine sometimes seems to have the attitude: if I could just get over this unfortunate fence, the punishment of these brick facades, then you would see the sort of things I could do! But when it runs out of trellis it just waves its tendrils around in the air before getting back to work on another part of the support. And when the vine gets old maybe it, too, will say to someone like me, or my equivalent in the plant world (which is probably a simple flower): you know, if you could only have untied me from this damn fence, then I'd have been able to get going back when it made sense to. If I were to help these confused people, they would be left like a climbing vine torn down from a tree, lying loose and formless in a heap, far from any energy, and likely with many parts left up above clinging to the stronger organ. Hold fast to your problems, gentle folk, for they live in a world of beautiful forms and you are a tether, chained thereto. The chain would like to consider itself shackled to the bird.

Oh, but I lose myself in these frustrations. I do not think the people ever appreciated me very much. Gradually, I received fewer and fewer appeals. Those who I had helped, like the

farmer and his wife, had not made miraculous recoveries. In fact, I believe she got her foot caught in something else before her mandated departure from the house. This I heard in passing from Uncle. This time they did not request my presence to sort the issue out. Uncle would often come to visit in the afternoons (presumably when little taxiing was needed in the town) and sit with me by the road, at the mouth of the path that lead to my cabin. I had taken to taking visitors there as a sort of point of interception, to keep them from getting too near to the place, and also in order to watch the occasional trains and military chariots come by. Three, four trains a day, at the fewest. I couldn't believe it. How could it be more use than not to send empty trains flying through such wilderness? The line just passes through here. Perhaps a hundred years ago someone owed a favor to a local mayor and bent the line a little, as a hill to a contour line. It seems equally possible that it was an enemy of the town, aiming to injure its pride. Surely it does more damage to be passed over than to be difficult to access. Uncle didn't react to the trains, but when the soldiers rode by he would nod and smile. Once, late on in the season, he asked me to come see a project of his.

It was the day before a festival so he parked on the edge of town, near the station, and we walked in. People I had never seen before stood around in the road, gesturing to people in windows, directing a massive hanging of flags, throwing bundles of rope up from the street to house across. Lines unspooled in the air, still kinked as if shocked out of the sleep of winding. Arms and flags waved back in forth, as if in exchange. One suspected that the flags themselves had picked up semaphore by immersion. The crowd, half or more fabric, generated such a din of visual language that I lost my bearings; I was like a child in a clothing store. The crowd unbuttoned in front of me (I had held on at least to some status) and yet they seemed to be signaling in all directions. At least, lost in the dresses, the child can imagine a mother, but here—what strange laundry! what body wears a flag? Of disorientation, I kept returning the same part; of disorientation, I realized I was back in the roundabout, no wonder. I don't think he had any purpose in bringing me here—even on foot, without the meter running, Uncle took the same routes—but the scene disturbed me. When I broke out from the pile and found Uncle again, I no longer rested upon an assurance. A hostility presented itself and walked about the town. It was in windows facing me. As we went down Embassy Row, an old man spit over the side of his porch, not toward the road and not toward me, but it was as though he had spit onto my head, or worse, that it was my own saliva. My mouth dried at the thought and Uncle, who had also glanced nervously back at the spitting man, led me away from the road and out towards a creek.

His project, it turned out, was a woven hut in the trees a little way up the river. Staked out and tied to a point at the top, he was working from the top down. He told me it was because the seal at the top is more important than the bottom, and he was likely to lose energy and care as he went along. It was more than halfway woven, with the bottom few feet still empty. When he was inside, only his knee on down showed through. I told him he could leave it as is and it would survive if the creek flooded. He didn't seem worried about that. For a while I helped him by splitting cane, which was satisfying. It's funny how well a fault, once introduced, can travel through a once-strong thing. An injury grows into a new edge, the flat face of an item in section. As slats, or roofing tiles, the cane sheds water well. Uncle showed me, he scooped up some water from the creek in one of the discarded bottles at our feet and poured it over his hut. It shed beautifully even down in the shape of an overturned cup. For a moment, the hut was a shelter

made of running water. Something about it appealed to me more the longer I stood there. As a child, I fantasized about living under a mushroom, like a fairy. If there were small door in everything, and being small, one would have all that access. It seems related.

At home that evening, I could not rid myself of an apprehension. There was always something to the left of me. Everywhere I felt the distance between my efforts and my intentions, usually a comfort, as a new anxiety. The forest was in need of tidying, and the cabin was barely holding itself apart. Inside, I could tell it was barely containing me—not as a matter of size, but of hermetics. A summer rain fell, and it was quiet inside the cabin. Great dark stains crept down from the ceiling and along the tops of the walls. They made a border with the dry color; it sagged toward the center. Apothecary smells of mold and mulch drifted about the room, joining the more animal decay I was cultivating.

I uncovered my trunk, making a bundle with the blanket out of the items that had decorated it. Some instinct required me to wrap the bundle very tightly, tucking my little items in close and then knotting it all up secure. I dragged the trunk across the floor; it had grown very heavy. It left a trail of grime behind, as much as a dirt floor can be further dirtied. There was at least a displacement of grimes. In the silence of the room, I drummed my fingers on the top of the trunk. Along its seam, edged in brown leather, over the handle, and clinking on the clasps . . . one doesn't even hear the rain on the cabin roof, not once the rain gets going. Softened by the moisture, it just digests the water. I rolled up onto my fingernails.

Someone knocked on the door. It was barely discernible. I ran over to hold the door shut. Standing next to it, I made out a new sound above the expected rain. A crowd of singing. Through the door, I heard the low tones chanted out in straight lines. Those can burrow through small cracks. As I opened up, the rest of the voice stung in: high, wild melodies, foreign consonants. Here was the sound of a peasant radical, an old surprise on a rainy night. Half the town, it seemed, was out in front of my cabin, swaying in the rain. Fizzling lamps swung about on strings like phosphorescent trapezes, caught foxes, suspended between pairs of carriers.

"Hesychius!" they said, and most bowed or made a sign of respect. On the porch was a man in a red cap who I'd never seen before. He must have knocked. On the steps behind him stood Clystra in some sort of costume. The man spoke thus:

"Praise, and so on. It is the night of our festival and we have come to visit the remains of our town's great hero, Hilarion. As the custodian of his place of death, we invite you to join in the celebration." I noticed that the man was leaning on a shovel. Lights in many colors whirled about on the lawn. An accident with a tree became a maypole. "The procession will begin here," he continued, "and continue to the town's far gate. First, though, we will have to discover our gentle Hilarion." He inclined the shovel's handle toward me. "Would you do the honor, Hesychius, of breaking first ground?"

I have never been one to think quickly. Those that do probably mistake acting for thinking. A consideration never ends, for me at least; it is only cut short by action which closes the considerable space. Decisions mark the moment of forfeit, and if they work out cleverly, then it was a clever luck that day. I used to be paralyzed by choice. I had thought I was afraid of wrong decisions, but now I can see I only feared the moment past thinking, which comes no matter the direction gone. There, on the porch, I acted just to keep the pace. They would not slow to meet my speed. I took the shovel from the man and agreed. I thanked him. "First," I said,

“would you return the favor? Could you allow me one moment alone, before the crowd joins me? I have not seen the face of my Hilarion for many, many years. I need to prepare something to say. It means something, you know, to inter into mundane things. Please, wait here, I will return in a moment to lead you around to the burial site. Then we can get exhuming.”

Back in the cabin, with the door shut and locked, there was again silence enough to breathe in. I dragged the trunk from the cot over to the middle of the back wall, where the water had soaked through. Standing on the trunk, I began to work the shovel into the softest part of the wall, near the ceiling. The clay had the feeling of leather, and at first the shovel could only sink in as far as a fingernail. Soon, though, I had gotten through to the softer layers. I dropped the shovel and began to pull away with my hands, I didn't worry about the noise. It was so dark, and between the muffled rumblings of the group outside and the stench of rot that filled my nose as I scooped out handful after handful of muck, clumps of straw and stone, I could have been escaping from the bowels of some horrible animal, a lizard with nails the size of a shovel's edge.

Through a mixed filter, the light appeared. A last layer of insulation, a filmy white like negligee, superscribed by dark patterns, drip-stained into illegible, irregular lines. Illuminated from beyond by the night's forbidden, Prussian blue luminance, lines of foreign script ran in all directions. Symbols swimming fathoms deep, bioluminescing. Once, a friend of mine had shown me a letter her sweetheart had sent back from his military outpost. Every inch had been written on, first in fine pen on the front and back, then at right angles to the first text, in pencil, and finally, in tiny letters, a postscript crawled around the border of each face. The membrane in front of me had the same confused effect, the eye fell erratically through it, as a ball through a pegboard, until an occasion was found to look away. It was slick and tore at the lightest touch. These must have been the newspapers Hilarion had installed. I pulled the whole curtain down at once. I pushed my trunk and bundle through the hole after the shovel, then climbed through myself.

I lowered myself quietly into the mud. My shoes sunk in, so I pulled my feet out of them and stuffed my socks down into the hole. Water was pouring down the back of the cabin, and in many places it had washed all the dirt away from the layer of newspaper. Edges fluttered out now and then in the wind.

In front of me was the bush. Its leaves carried the light with an emerald luster. It rolled out of the ground at a slight touch, roots sliding easily out of the wet. In all the movement, the mud was whipped into a thin slurry; it ran over the sides of my shovel as I dug. The dirt, now suspended in liquid, must have been ground down by my nightly digging, as it now mixed so evenly with the rainwater. The mud of my childhood was different—one could reach a hand in and fish out clods of apparently insoluble dirt, little miraculous packages to break apart in my hands, rubbing over my wet fingers, until the new particulate dissolves into the mud from where it came. As a child, my friend and I would set to work in a patch of this sort, finding and neutralizing the parts of variation, stopping every now and then to stir the fine dirt collected on the surface back into the muck. When the process was complete, the mud took on a special thickness. That was the reward for our efforts: supersaturation. Children take alchemical glee in transgressions of matter, which is really always the desired plaything, the desired manipulation. Or I did, anyhow. If I speak of children I am speaking of myself, who loved magic not because I hadn't stopped believing in it but because it assumed a world where I wouldn't have had to. If we

made rock candy, we were sneaking extra sugar into the water, beyond what it should take, until the idea of water broke down, because the idea couldn't take in that much sugar either. The secret water has a new consistency, like the homogenized mud, and if there are places on earth, paradises and areas of punishment, then this is the method to sneak some water in.

If you forget the stirring stick in the mixture, you will return to find the water liberated. Crystals form at intersections, jewels bead on a borderlines, worn like a necklace on solidity. A crystal is an intersection, unfortunately. It is one of the things you can't have alone.

I found the head in the ground. Dirt had caked onto it, trying to escape from suspension. Ah, the rare sight of nucleation! I held the head out by its hair into the rain. It spun slowly this way and that as the water washed it down. His hair had grown long by the time of his death, and probably a little while after that as well. When it was clean, I set it down softly on the moss that grew near the bottom portion of the back wall. Perhaps, like Perseus making coral out of seaweed, I was engendering a new alpine lichen. Quietly, as if on acorns, I ran to the forest and stowed my suitcase and the items from my bindle. The blanket I wrapped around my shoulders as a cloak and stole back to my position in the back of the cabin.

Now I brought the cloak up over my head and tied the tassels together so that my face was totally covered and the length of my torso unreadable. I rubbed mud all over the cloak until it was unrecognizable. I could see only through one eye, in a whole between the ties. Stumbling as if returning from a bright room into the night outside, I hoisted the head onto my shoulders. It was my own head; I fit it over mine and kept it there with a hand upon its forehead, the gesture of prophets and sleepers. As I walked around the side of the house, toward the sounds of the anxious gathered, I let my free arm describe the longer arc the tall saint's would have. Long legs and arms, withered in prostration—I pictured them, packed tightly in my suitcase, knees bent into the corners, elbows tucked into the knees, a torso flat in the middle. A body is bigger than you remember. There is a lot of a person there.

I stood next to the porch and looked out at the crowd. They hadn't noticed me. They were staring at the front door of the cabin. I screamed, as loud as I could. A light swung onto me and a gasp came out from the crowd, louder still than my scream. I covered his eyes with my hand and shouted out: "Away with that light! I have been too long in a different condition." The light flew obediently away. I moved my hand so as to partially cover my mouth and spoke. "I am risen, yes, with an emergency, so listen now. Every moment here is an agony for me in this body after death. I have been waiting for you to come. There is a villain in my place."

Now there was no gasp. Some leaned to their neighbors and made excited gestures, then were hushed by the rest. "He is a demon, your so-called Hesychius, and he has come to orphan my spirit. Even now, he is inside my chest, killing me, casting spells that threaten my cohesion into the hereafter. He is inside my cabin, scraping out my insulation; he disturbs my rest. He is an angel of disquiet. It may be that he, too, is cursed, or that I, too, am possessing him—what person goes to haunt a ghost? Subjected to me, even in revenge. That is a dangerous place for someone to be. It is the thinnest ledge, obsession. Life in the watchtower is waiting to fall." I raised my voice further away from the resonance. Faint geometries shrieked in sympathy.

"So go, all of you, while he is cornered in my cabin, drag him out. Dip him in the river who loves water. I am blessing you, here, not only in the extermination of this devil but in the rest of your lives. I would free the village from dependency—tend to yourselves and you will be

miraculous! He is injuring me, agh! A thieves' cant, a rhyming ladder ... goodbye, dear ones. I will go to a place on earth. Seek me not. I must have my rest."

They were quiet as I shuffled away, back around the house. Pitchforks appeared. Clystra was knocking on the cabin door with the end of a musket.

As soon as I could, I pulled the cloak off, bagging the head, and swung it over my shoulder. The rain had begun to collect on the surface, no longer absorbing into the ground. I ran, as nimble I can ever remember being. I soared over the ground, flying light across puddles, vaulting over bushes and logs. I went into the forest and took up my suitcase. It felt as easy as empty when full. I was breathing deeply; I went like a stake into the heart of the forest. All around me glistened silver, blue, mercury rolling, boiling in the hand. It was peaceful. Everything reminded me of myself; everything obliged me. I thought: I am the color of every mirror, that and some amount of blue, which is the residue of silver. I slipped, I felt a sinew strain or tear. My feet went behind me, well, so did the trunk, but my feet are attached to me, strange enough. The trunk had to be repacked; my knee felt unusual, it said.

I was lying down in a clearing, like a tree stricken, like a fallen pronoun, —crawled in the mud, —had my nose in the dirt mostly. People don't get horizontal; they grow about up and down. They talk about up and down. Lusting for the radial life of trees, which stand like hair on the back of the earth animal, a tangent had to be imagined. Oh—felt gravely walked upon, or groveling. An impossible even plane, described by radial points, that's as far as people get horizontal. —felt the belly of the pregnant road. —would have lent my ribs to anyone who wanted to try. I moved twenty, thirty feet nowhere. And—was taking the inside of the turn! Oh, you could hug the earth, you could never leave its side, and still you wouldn't get along, for Here is where there's nowhere to go. —is a horizon and I am too; they are nowheres in the world to which you cannot go: a crater, a wicked garden, a carnival on a blade of grass. Never in that one anyhow. To make an eye-mark, —hold my thumb up against the distance. —have the biggest thumb in the world. A road, a train, a chariot approaching. If I should get run down, I would be —, — would become a line and slip through the bars of paradise prostrate.

People do get horizontal, occasionally, and when they have made themselves thin and simple, then they can fit into a dream or a mail-slot. Lying down among vertical things, the body is divided completely up. The dreamer's head has no body beneath it, the knees support nothing, sit atop nothing. Horizontal, —disassemble into autonomic impulses. To each part its just gravity, and from each the light exercise of energies. A hand summons a touch, the tongue a word; they are working on a soup, shared out like a rail over miles of track. A thousand ties face down in the ballast, dreaming a part of some parallel lines—should ask: which way is the next train headed?

And how long until the next breath?