

DAVIS SCHNEIDERMAN

Old Lake Michigan Dub Circus vs. DJ Desert Burial (Organ Grinder Mix)

—[when we step blithely through the desert, we towel off with skin]—

The telescoping travel toothbrush combs Bush-Bush Bush's long hair as a koi fish might guard a mansion. Uncaring, she raises the open-topped Vibraphonic Everywhere Vehicle (VEV) mirror sail toward the still-distant borders of planned community #37, Consecration. The brush separates each strand as if picking apart lice from the mane of some ancestral Cro-Magnon; she keeps silent amid the crank of gravel and sand kicked through the sound-dampening VEV processor. Square-framed glasses block her eyes with pieces of cloudy construction paper. Washington Jefferson Lincoln Qui, all but invisible, thinks about his long-dead sister Filmore and the strange experiences of the day—the recording tape cancelling the noises of her body, the intrusive examination from his boss at the Quadrilateral commission, Zebediah Dooger.

Several hours later, Qui notices the façade of yesteryear's model, Quadrilateral city #32, Jubilation, already fading in bad reception as they pass over its mid-lake VEV path; the village green decomposes into a transistor array of mechanized row homes and manicured, animatronic lawn elves. Qui sighs. He must *raise* this new town, Consecration, from nothingness—a blackhead on the skin of the desert set to overtake one of the last and strongest Cultist

settlements, “Venus Flytrap.” Not to mention their patriarch Fulcrum Maneuvers’s disappearance there. Qui has long read the patriarch’s supposed diaries, each filled with existential terrors, glimpses into the sublime of their hoary deity, the World Worm Umma-Segnus.

Now though, old Jubilation stands as a facsimile of itself, boasting the largest concentrated population in the Wildland-Urban Interface, formerly Lake Michigan; still, a profound emptiness penetrates as they speed through her streets, turned inside out by some acidic malfeasance. If people live here, then some dark Chernobyl must have irradiated half. Something isn’t right. Qui has never been deployed on this type of assignment with anyone before—let alone an attractive woman, who must be no more than twenty, the scent of hanging puberty.

They pass Jubilation, heading vaguely northwest. He half-suspects that the occasional desert garden, undulating topiaries of a fabulist-themes hedge maze (hermaphroditic Gryphon, multi-horned Hydra), makes shift to disorient him by appearing too precisely cultivated. Why, *this one* (Qui surmises the stiff angles of Bush-Bush Bush’s body) refused to crosscheck the most basic statistics with Mayor Gompers in Jubilation. And with increased reports of partisan activity.... She sped right through town, with barely a moment for Qui to surmise the relative success of his prior initiative to have spring begonias mask the increasingly noisome garland of raw eggs and sewage. No, something’s not right.

Over headphones, Qui blasts feral spaces of blank data whispering inarticulately to the brain’s digital processing centre. And what of the possibility of memories becoming tape recordings? Qui keeps his own counsel on such matters, but when the low electronic hum of computers and toasters and automatic doorbells and VEVs and headphone noises finally moves into the background of every journey, there remains just enough *hiss* to keep him jittery.

He shifts, scratches his leg; his arm jumps from his lap to his ear with difficulty as the open-air VEV faces a particularly virulent headwind. Qui adjusts the noise-cancelling headsets to the highest setting. Still, a hiss—where? Her head, Qui’s mind, the sun-as-burning-gasball hanging low in the muggy sky, or, the crackling horizon fires? Perhaps something underground? Buried, yes, but present, the proverbial ghost in the machine that mimics the sound of his breathing and the beating of his heart.

Washington Jefferson Lincoln Qui does not remember, exactly, the reverse-coloured image of his sister Hayes Garfield Filmore Qui as anything more than a buried negative from the past. Yes, this is it, he decides, a memory doctored by over-exposure to the incidental radiation of the earth’s deteriorating atmosphere. As far as he can tell, she exists merely as a fragment of the porcelain plate of his life shattering daily, but strangely, without a sound. If her lips did move in his memory, and this is by no means certain, then Qui *must be speaking for her*. No one could hear anything with those fires raging around the horizons of old Lake Michigan. And she was in the fire when she disappeared. But, now, with misplaced shrillness, *This is her*: blank hiss at the tape-end.

Taken together, these desert soundtracks would surely be of interest to his handlers at Quadrilateral HQ. For many years they, well, not “they” so much... but his company-sponsored therapist, Dr. Sonia Auslanspacher, forced him to provide approximate *sounds* for his many remembered *images* of sister Filmore. The sound of her voice and the beating of her heart reduplicated in old cassette fizz. Quadrilateral wants something, all right. Quadrilateral *desires*, always. Something from Qui’s past, from his own record: a rambling suicide note processed in a teepee of fire, a heat cone bursting into the sun.—Natural hallucinations of loss,— remarks Dr. Auslanspacher into her digital recorder shining diamond bright against the dankness of the

inspection room; her eyes penetrate to the centres of outmoded satellites. —This Filmore is nothing to be taken seriously, Lincoln, never to be acted upon.—

From this electronic tincture, Consecration looms ever distant on the horizon, because it is *expected*, and perhaps because the chance of any breakthrough here, without the comfort of the Doctor's therapy room (and its array of warm herbal teas, alpine sound machines, bright Tahitian birds of Paradise), offers an odd sort of clarity. With a word, this will certainly force his hand. So Qui must scramble, ignite the Interface desert in a paste of dusty sand, Via Negativa, a smoldering fire flue, away from Quadrilateral ash.

She lacks conventional beauty...pulses throbs and thrums the way a shadow from a tree might suddenly break from its border to overtake a neighbouring sapling. Except there are no trees indigenous to this empty lakebed; everything is artificial, imported. The figure overtakes the two other shadows in a long-hooded burnous, approaches the clearing with a shawl of burnt muslin, a death rattle mandrake root. Fire signs in a flux of dead languages: Sanskrit, Etruscan, Algonquin, Nostratic. Patterns of wondrous orange yellow and the skin of the woman melts into decayed film bubbling in silver spots, pulsating anxiously from an image track of 24 shots per second to a lingering close-up of flesh shrivelling in oven-crash blaze. If there are screams, they are overwhelmed by the spectacle of burning figure, overtaken by the hiss of the metallic salts, the carbon electrodes providing the scene with a sepia colour shared with blue movies flickering through an outmoded projector.

Qui moves in and out of this vision as Bush-Bush Bush drives with a rare precision along such tentative roadways, overhangs cantilevered from rocky cliffs. The rhythm of the VEV's vibrating intestinal track encourages the sky, a sheltering canopy of fantastic red and orange through-lines, to slowly supplant itself with a stretch of long toffee-coloured clouds. Everywhere

past Jubilation, twisted husks of polymer swamp marsh trees, artificially aged beyond the four decades since the lake went dry, collapse in kindling piles sized for a dioxin-hungry god.

Suddenly, gigantic X-shaped sentinels rise ramrod from the earth. Thirty-feet tall, some fifty. Everywhere at once. Branches of overgrown sagebrush cross slats of wooden pole and aluminum siding; anthropologists have hypothesized that the structures lay dormant under Lake Michigan for thousands of years, pushing up like giant sequoias in the first months after the 2000 drainage. Did the Maeuverians, the Cultists, add the aluminum siding? X's gleam proud under the remains of the baking sun. Heat lines shout arcane hosannas from the highest edge of the highest lodge-poles. Everything here is *shiftingsand*; the clouds are grey and long, fields of brown stratus punctuated by the fading lights of Interface summer... all cut to shreds by the angle of Qui's eyes leaning back against the VEV passenger headrest. This plain in the sky is fallow, he thinks, trying his best to ignore the subtle come-ons of Bush-Bush Bush: her shirt unbuttoned to the bosom, a pair of oversized wind-goggles now enlarging her eyes to enormous showers of flickering lash in direct linkage with the mysterious X's.

Qui can't be sure of anything. Scale surrenders itself in the Interface; the traveller fluctuates on the lip of sanded rivulets and in the centre of dried-up springhouses *at the same time*. Lincoln Qui may as well be stranded in the stomach of the relentless Gobi, digested by the impermeability of endless sand, subject to the omnipresent Ghoul whose laughter can flake the skin off a leper's rotting arms, and whose spittle causes the transubstantiation of black clay balls baked with margarine and salt, a penny delicacy, seared against the dead skin of a beggar boy's face. There are no borders here really, world without end—and just for a moment, Qui can picture that deity of the first settlers, Umma-Segnus, the World Worm, sluicing over the barren

flatlands and sucking up pools of lake water into its bloated corpse, burping out a counter-sun and anti-moon, shitting comets, vomiting stars. Just for a moment, there are such things.

—[when we wish for distemper, we acquire diphtheria]—

—These X's originally marked this section of the upper Interface into fire and non-fire zones, Mr. Qui,— Bush-Bush Bush begins while navigating a field of sand-traps.—Like the heads on Easter Island, don't you think?—

—I can't hear one fucking word that you are saying.— Grunts. Endless sand. All that endless sand. Tiny bugs grizzle his voice like an overcooked rib.

—The *siding*—. She screams, —THE ALUMINUM *SIDING*! It *wasn't* added by the Umma-Segnites at all, you know. I know that seems unbelievable, but we've discovered from soil samples that go at least sixty feet below the X's that the siding could not have been applied *after* the structures emerged from the lakebed. And since aluminum siding has only been around since the late 1940s, and Lake Michigan, of course, only drained at the start of the twenty-first century... well, let's just say this we're keeping this...er... disjunction, quiet...—

—Who the fuck are you, even?— He hears her this time, but lowers his voice so she can't do the same, his eyes skirting over her business suit as his mind makes an allowance for the press releases: SIDING ON MYSTERIOUS INTERFACE X's FOUND TO PREDATE DRAINAGE EVENT. LENDS CREDENCE TO WORLD-WORM CULTISTS. Qui isn't certain how the Maneuverians would even spin such a tidbit, but of course they would: Lake Michigan, they claim, before it became a lake during the last ice age 10,000 years ago, was actually a series of settlements with their own advanced technology and "aluminum siding" and these X's thus prove.... Qui cracks a malicious-looking smile that catches in reflection against the mirror sail

above the VEV. —Bush-Bush, right? The whole thing is ridiculous, of course, perfectly ludicrous!—

—Mr. Qui, we’ve done our best to spread myths about their significance, the X’s, I mean... that the Umma Segnites, the first trappers in this area after the lake’s drainage, well... this was their warning to those who would follow that something mysterious was happening here. They were *building a society that refused to play into the consumerist paradigm of Post-America proper, outside the lake*. Isn’t that it, Mr. Qui?— citing one of Lincoln’s early Quadrilateral position papers. —We’ve published records of Fulcrum Maneuvers shipping truly monumental amounts of aluminum siding in from his Home Depot in Kalamazoo. Why, Maneuvers even wrote about this adventure in the Cultists’ precious book.—

The Book of Maneuvers. Qui knew this portion well. Why tell *him* about a campaign he had spearheaded? The idea, in fact, had occurred to Qui almost a full decade past... his way of explaining things to the federal government when it was time to secure Upper Interface zoning permits. No one had been out here for any length of time, except the Cultists, so one story was as good as the next.

—“*The bounty of Post-America becomes useless....*”—

—“*decoration for the Worm,*” — Qui finishes under his breath, having helped the ghost of Maneuvers to compose this line in 2030, eleven years after the end of Fulcrum’s long and increasingly troubled life. An expert in the prosopopoeia of Fulcrum Maneuvers, Lincoln Qui can barely speak up for himself these days.

Bush-Bush slows the vehicle in time to the engine vibration. They travel almost in slow motion, a crossbow bolt suddenly piercing a zone of brown sugar molasses. The ambient noises fall away: gravel pressed through the wheels of the VEV, the dodecaphonic scales tinkling in a

minor key. Qui's head swims. Bush-Bush comes across clearly —Something awful up there, Qui. Vultures on the rims of the X's—

Yes, he agrees: there *are* vultures, a disquieting amount of vultures, perched on the tips of the X's, replacing the smaller sage thrashers reborn as carrion birds after cavorting in the smokestack fires. Thousands of vultures, hunched backs, red necks strung out in the elongated details of a Modigliani painting, camouflaged now on the enormous X crossbars. For vultures, a gas leak in the desert smells oddly of rotting flesh, and under this blazing sun, Qui can't be sure that they care to know the difference. Opaque brown, red and black over dark grey sky, they blister the firmament in welts of red feather, patches of hollow bone.

—My worm—, Qui says without thinking. —They must be waiting for something quite massive to die.—

—[when we drive in a shadow, we break with the sun]—

The position of Qui and Bush-Bush Bush's VEV, like the advance of a rainbow across some massive waterfall, becomes a question of vantage. Nonetheless, the vehicle locates itself seemingly thousands of miles from the rusty skyline that was once the city of Chicago, an azure jewel set against the crown of the lake's impenetrable end: the now desiccated Lake Shore Drive sucks heat from somewhere beyond the phosphate-covered remains of Michigan Avenue; Navy Pier abandoned as a post-apocalyptic Coney Island collapses under the weight of its carousel, buck-toothed horses crushed under the margarine-coloured fadeout; congestion Armitage through Adams as the skyline comes into view for the sage thrasher, for the bevy of red night vultures... green highway signs, Morton salt, Miller time, thousands of cars become tiny rats winding and weaving out of the subaltern speedway, the arterial blockage. A slick rhythm to the

terminus of roads... drive and drive but Lake Michigan evaporates into nothing, an oasis of smoke and char... salty fruits of paradise, belly dancers made of industrial smoke, hookahs burning raw sand silicate, blue magnesium scoring the lungs. The border between the Interface and the Post-American mainland folds as a double-curtain: *Make a move from either side, and you'll never get anywhere.* There is nothing but the ground, the cracked killing floor of the endless Wildland-Urban Interface, porkmaking by applied mathematics.

—So Mr. Qui, now that we are alone,— She gestures to the expanse. —Question time.—

She heaves lightly along with the bumps of the broken road, undulating as a superhighway collapses the contours of the landscape into the illusion of flatland. Her pelvis shakes in a strangely mesmerizing fashion, and Qui feels the liquid heat of her legs rushing into a cordial glass, served with a plate of dark-chocolate-covered cherries. The vultures trailing above their VEV are iron filings stuck to this core.

—Depends... if I can ask you one first?—

—Shoot, Mr. Qui.— Her cheeks red with maraschino stain.

—Why “Bush-Bush?”—

She bats her eyes, twice, and the road enlarges into a projection of Qui’s swollen head. — Same reason I’d guess that you are Washington Jefferson Lincoln Qui, Mr. Qui.—

—“Lincoln,” please. But aren’t you from somewhere in the Midwest, Iowa maybe?—

Barn raising. Cotton spectres.

—Sure, but well... when I came to the Interface about seven years ago, must have been in 2032 or ‘33, I wanted to, well... the tradition of Quadrilateral children given the first names of US Presidents, well, you may not realize how useful this... —

—So “Bush-Bush Bush”? I suppose it fits. If that is indeed your last name.—

—There is a certain status to names here. Goes back to the Cultists fires in 2005, I think.
Wouldn't you agree... Lincoln?—

Qui scans the language of the horizon. A tinkling curtain of smoking sentences and blazing paragraphs, punctuated by the glyphs of silence and introspective phrases, diagrammed with flaming underlines. —So much fire.— Something isn't right.

—I said, “WOULDN'T YOU AGREE?”—

In the heat, Qui's eyes close. His chin, a weight of shale and soapstone, sinks into ruddy loam. Vertebrae of dirt. This is return, homecoming. The fire moves evenly here, below things, catching the roots and wax-covered seeds along the green lips of the long-buried salt worm. A subterranean flicker holds his backbone, oily eye sockets spinning slot-machine lemons, Uncle Sam hats, dollar signs. Skin dry and scaly, salted in the lizard thickness on the sternum, over the ribcage, tiny scars that might evolve into mud gills. The reptile on the rock, Qui, rolls silently in the sun, wallowing in tractionless sand.

—Yes, Bush-Bush,— his lips move of their own inertia. —Names *are* important here.—

Qui smells the ferment of bulrush reeds and bitter dirt cakes, disembowelled termites releasing their stomachia. Numberless vultures circling above like a locust cloud. Red demons embossed with layers of crimson beetle lacquer swooping over the slowly humming VEV. Sand penetrates Qui's face, tiny bullets eroding the skin as sandpaper burnishes balsa wood, until both of them, Qui considers, become nothing more than a sack of discarded offal, nameless and rotten under the heat of an unforgiving sun.

—[when we look through the glass, we take it in the eye]—

Qui emerges from a state of motion sickness as one might wake from a dream. Sand smears his visions; he scratches and rubs, but tiny granules of silicate still cling to the folds that form the slice of the eyes. The landscape cycles sand more quickly than he can rub it out. He surrenders, burning his right arm along the hot chromium strips of the VEV, a smooth vertebra manufactured in a digital imaging lab.

—Lincoln! Good, you're awake; it's a windstorm. Hold on.— Bush-Bush tacks the VEV into the current, burning Qui's arm against the vehicle's side door. He rubs the growing welt with his left hand; the topography of the sore feels mountainous. The VEV tacks suddenly through the opposite angle, and Qui, a quick study, grips tightly. Sand obscures rumped molehills rising on the horizon. Bush-Bush Bush tacks three more times before carefully opening the VEV's glove compartment, exposing a set of rusty silver, wind-shielded binoculars to Qui's lap. —Try these, Mr. Qui—

The binoculars clarify much of the landscape, or appear to, as an unexploded landmine might clarify the memory of Vietnamese rice paddy. Qui can't be sure how far they have journeyed toward Consecration. He discerns the mole humps: a Cultist shantytown, an abandoned settlement. Quadrilateral Commission policy absolutely *forbids* construction of planned communities over top the Umma-Segnite settlements. An old goodwill gesture to the aging Fulcrum Maneuvers... the Cultists kept their tiny communes but still fall under the doleful influence of Quadrilateral systems. Trash suburbs. As a child in the town of Calibration, Lincoln recalls his visits with Filmore to the outskirts of the old Cultist community. What was it called? Something like "Asterisk Falls"? Filmore would buy tiny salt cakes to eat on her way to school. Just moving the cake to his lips rubs an open sore with lemon juice and hydrochloric acid, but

Filmore ate them whenever she could, purple berry stains drizzling into the enamel of her front teeth.

Now here, in the bones of the backland, twenty years from the melodramatic death of his sister, also twenty years from the end of Fulcrum Maneuvers, Qui wonders if such zoning gestures are even necessary. But then he remembers that, yes, Consecration is the most sacred place for Cultists. The “Descension” of Fulcrum Maneuvers somewhere in this land, but how many of them linger?

In answer, pitiful crowds, mechanical fires ants, surge suddenly from the aftermath of the flooded Amazon; they grab each other’s antennae in an animal disk of disposable bodies floating on a watery meniscus. The weaker ones will drown, their thorax’s keep the oilskin nightmares of the others afloat, or be simply nibbled away in pieces by the carnivorous teeth of evolution-rejecting reptile fish. And so rise the remaining denizens of this once “Venus Flytrap”—custodians pulling artificial brooms, bakers carrying sheets of salt-clay cakes, tailors threading needles with home-spun cotton thread—a procession of distorted cretins rendered in crude fisheye by the sand-blown binoculars. Outlined by smazy twilight fire. A Whitmanesque carnival of animals: puss-in-boots with an anvil and forge, octopi lollygagging on sedan chairs carried by flaming sea squids, snakes dancing behind the song of pied piper alligators, pouring water on each and every golden scale—all followed closely by the impoverished bourgeoisie of “Venus Flytrap”—dot.com workers holding golden calculators and scrolls of html code, cardboard millionaires thin from lack of nourishing newspulp, infomercial shrill-mongers presenting indigenous fair-trade carpets braised in simmering Interface liquid, failed day traders carrying a flicker box, and behind them... the great unwashed, trailing pathetic cords of meandering mucus, rubbing themselves into moon-baked orgasms. Certainly more than the original five First

Families and descendants, Qui determines, the sand obscuring everything as it rushes to the looking glass. Will these people relocate once Consecration opens? Bush-Bush mutters another quotation from Lincoln Qui's juvenilia, from *The Book of Maneuvers* later sections. The plenum of the lakebed is pure emptiness.

The VEV makes another final tack away from the group, then back once more; silver binoculars fixed on the horizon, Qui focuses on a young girl hobbling in the rear, a small desert animal, an armadillo, limping behind her... its tail burned to a stub. A few feet in front, what appears to be a mother, although the colours are all wrong through the glass UV filters—the girl is off-purple, the mother more yellow-green. Still, she is a mother, Qui knows, instinctively: someone's mother, hair waving over shoulders, rough lay lines steaming in the magnification.

Qui tastes the skin of the young girl... primitive human; it is salted, preserved meat, a ruddy corpse doused in preservative fixer just before it dies, the hand of a nervous surgeon reaching into the heart and squeezing blood back into the brain, into the eyes. There is something about these people, igniting then diminishing in proximity to the burning horizon. Do they glow the same as those of Fulcrum Maneuvers, flaring at his death in some nearby hovel? Qui drops the binoculars; sand covers his hair like a bee's beard, buzzing to the back of his neck, under his shirt and down his pants before the windstorm falls to manageable levels as the VEV finally nears the Cultists, a mass steamed and crushed. Bush-Bush stalls the VEV engine. An apparatus to make it all go away.

—Get out, Mr Qui.— Bush-Bush puts the VEV top halfway up, the underside of its mirror-sail pointing straight to the sky.

—What do you want with this riff-raff?— Qui hesitates. —The Consecration site is at least forty miles to the north by my map.— He bluffs.

—Must be an old map, ‘cause we’re here.—

—Nonsense.— Qui grabs toward the ignition with his bruised right arm; mixing with these Cultists will be no doubt more odious than he remembers. Bush-Bush Bush, though, is quicker. She digs her claws into the palm of his hand, and rips the keys from the ignition.

—[when we lie in the dust, we return to the light]—

Lincoln Qui watches Bush-Bush Bush’s rubber body bounce to the Cultists. Sand glistens beneath her feet, clumps of pyrite and soapstone shimmer along the footpath. Something’s not right. The VEV mirror stands high, a butterfly unfolding from a long cocoon. The land begins to move. The sail undulates in the wind, transfixing Qui’s gaze in a vortex of false steps. He looks forward but comes out behind. In this mirror sail, warm soil climbs rapidly over his shoes and ankles as he steps backward from the vehicle.

Qui understands much in the world, but not these people... if they worship emptiness, what can he ever be? Yet they refuse to be vacant in the *presence* of Qui’s perspective. Carving out a non-place in land that is, officially, nowhere at all. The new town of Consecration, Qui thinks, must engulf these reductions.

Three figures reflect in the mirror-sail, dispossessed, forming flanks around the receding outline of Bush-Bush Bush. A garland of sighs on the neck of a child, a new figure, while her mother, one of the three, spins her arms in Sufi windmill. The daughter tugs on Bush-Bush’s leg as a statue gazing upon its preternaturally frozen sculptor. The mother shoves to the front of the mirror-scene; Alice, chomping on the mushroom, gnawing on the exposed tendons of her comely child. The mother shrinks, the dormouse bleeds. Qui sinks into the silt, tripped in the mirror-sail, a bullwhip cracking cigarettes from the wide mouth of a carny gal.

Flat on his back, in an open grave, Qui sees vultures ride heat swirls in the reflected sail; winged shadows fall fresh over the umbra of his body, saline phoenixes from oxygenated char. In the mirror-sail, below the birds, the figures don three translucent robes, their skeletal hollows fill with stripes of vertical flesh, peeling and unctuous, pink and sounding sore, crashing into mirror bone. Sand falls about Qui's body like millions of tiny ball bearings rolling blindly toward the earth's metal core. The mother wears a capuchin cloth, clear burnous at the head, and the three figures weave engines of heat into a centre triangle. Kneeling, now sitting, the lotus mother at the tip. Numberless Cultists anoint their three necks with camphor oil, parsing stringy hair in tangled sentences.

A chant with talking drums, undescended testes and cold grey fish stock overwhelming Lincoln's ears; sand runs through the curve of his lips. A flicker, then flames roar into the mirror's foreground, combusting the three bodies under a focused dart of sun. First the hair, three human torches, then burnouses catching in gaseous whooshes.... Lincoln Qui's fingers tighten; tiny needles have been injected into their tips and so he sinks lower under an avalanche of white salt. He stares into the mirror-sail above, his head cradled between pounds of packed sand. Qui is rough-hewn marble caught within a merciless hourglass; he imagines pushing skyward, threading the narrow eye of the sun with the metal mirror-sail fabric unravelled. A fluttering scrim hovering above a makeshift tomb, it will not unwind. Instead, its reflective plane expands, surrounded by a warm corona; sand genuflects against his body, enters his crevices and hardens in wet cement. Qui feels the heat, coating him in a patina of smoky char.

Now he hears it—shrill screams of three burning Cultists, underwater whale cries carried across miles of Pacific trench. Three blazes in the distorted mirror, fire kisses licking his sand-burnished cheeks. Burning to nothing. The mother in front, her face charred and folded,

consumed by the boiling spots of a celluloid flicker. Her eyes smolder over magenta pupils. The house of her body collapses in a smash of cinders. An airplane explodes mid-flight from damaged engine. Crimson streaks verminize the rotting meat of his inner ear. Qui's eyes are candles snuffed by a metal bell, closed tight against the rush of sand flowing through his nose; he sneezes and feels his heart stop. The mirror-sail engorges the outline of the burning woman, eats like the holy host of an ancient demi-god. Finished its profane meal, the reflective surface flies loose, explodes skyward in a fiery rocket before plunging in a canopy over the surface of Qui's sandy bed. Sparks bathe Qui while everything goes dark, suffocated under a parachute of burning tin.

Eons later, the *next* word sounds from the mouth of a shovel: the shake of a fire grate releasing ashy remains to a metal pan. Qui's breath is low, but he rises, for he can still decipher the echo of air, freedom. The tiny girl's next voice is water; sweet liquid crushes Qui's eyelids, into his throat. The stream continues; Qui drinks.

Bush-Bush, exhausted, drops the shovel and wipes her brow with a white cloth. The small girl grabs his hand and leads the staggering Qui up from the pit, wipes off the sheet of grainy sandpaper that were once his legs, and leads him limping toward three piles of charred bones. She stands over the first heap, her mother, and makes a movement to shut the woman's half-smoldered eye. Qui is dehydrated, but even he knows that the dead woman presses flickering images onto the eyelids of her child. She pries open Qui's palm with her tiny fingers and he receives a tiny object; half-burnt, spongy, a partially dried adobe brick.

—Her pancreas,— says Bush-Bush, who tears a bloody knife from the girl's other hand.
—A gift from the world inside.—