

# Flowers from the Void

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GIANNI  
WASHINGTON



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To you, dear Reader

I rehearsed emotions, naming them: joy, peace, guilt, release, love and hate, react, relate; what to feel was like what to wear, you watched the others and memorized it. But the only thing there was the fear that I wasn't alive: a negative, the difference between the shadow of a pin and what it's like when you stick it in your arm...

—Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*

Even so, why can't I do what others have done—ignore the obvious. Live a normal life. It's hard enough just to do that in this world.

—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

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# Prelude: The Glass Terminal

*You got a lighter?*

I think so. Yeah—here.

*Ooo, a Zippo. Fancy.*

Damn.

*What's wrong?*

This thing's dryer than your scalp.

*Girl, shut up. I think I have some lighter fluid under the sink.*

Is it the whole complex? I can't see lights on anywhere.

*Probably. It's happened before. Maybe we got a wannabe Frankenstein up in here somewhere, blowing the power out with his nonsense. I hope they find him and evict his ass.*

Me too...

*Oh yes—let there be light.*

The scrawniest light ever. I can't just carry it around like this.

*Why not? Better than nothing.*

It's fire, fool. You got any candles? I'd rather have more than an inch and a prayer between my thumb and this open flame.

*If you lose your thumb, I'm sure Frankie'll sew it back on for you.*

Pshh.

*Hahaha. Hold on.*

*Woo-wee! Got ourselves a lil seance in here!*

Don't say that shit, Denise.

*Why not?*

It creeps me out. I'm glad you found votives. Otherwise we'd be holding a lighter between the two of us like idiots. Why do you have so many candles, anyway?

*Oh, you know. It helps, when I speak to the darkness. The flames carry my messages whenever I ask for a little guidance.*

From who?

*Whoever's listening.*

Okay, you're really freaking me out now.

*Girl, I'm just messing with you. Don't worry; this house is safe from "demonic forces."*

Except the ones you already let in.

*Nothing bad's gonna happen! Damn! I thought you were a grown-up.*

I am! I just... don't like sitting in the dark.

*We can watch something on my phone.*

And waste the little bit of juice you got left? No, thank you. We'll need it if something happens. Anyway, I do *not* wanna have to press my eyeballs to that tiny-ass screen. Too much blue light is bad for you.



*That why you don't have a smartphone?*

Bingo.

*Whatever. If my laptop weren't dead we could watch something on that.*

Is that all you do in life? Watch stuff?

*Nope. Sometimes I watch other people watch stuff and react to it. Then I react to their reactions.*

I am officially done with you.

*What else is there to do?*

Um... read? Talk to the friend who came to visit you in this janky-ass apartment complex?

BO-RING.

You know what...

*I'm KIDDING! Jeez! You're like a different person when the power goes out.*

I told you—I don't like it.

*Look. You wanna pretend something's on TV, like we used to when we were kids? We can act like we're watching that show you like about people pretending to buy a new house they've already bought. And no electricity means no blue light.*

No. That's creepy.

*What is?*

Watching a TV that's not on. The screen is just... black.

*So are you.*

Shut the hell up.

*Hahahahahaha!*

I'm serious! Isn't it weird?

*It's just a blank screen. See?*

What is you staring at it supposed to prove? It's not like we share a brain. If it's creepy to me, it just is.

*It proves that you're a whiny bay—*

What?

*You see that?*

Man, I swear to God, if you're tryna scare me...

*No, really! Don't you see that? Look. There's... something there.*

I slap her arm, but she doesn't say anything else; just smiles wide enough to split her skin, and I almost laugh until I notice how vacant her stare has become. I wave a hand in front of her and call her name but she doesn't move, except to gurgle sounds that aren't quite words. I seize her hand before the signals from my brain grow stale, but what I'm clutching has no life in it. I want to call for help, but there is a buzz mounting in my brain that won't stop. This is my fault. I broke my own rule.

I looked.

When I'm alone, I do my best to avoid reflective surfaces because I know, with an itching certainty, that if I look long enough, I'll see something I don't want to. Have you ever caught them watching? Shapes with no center, chittering at the edges of everything. I take pains to distract myself because it is vital (if living is something you enjoy) to keep your attention away from the corners they call home. No one seems to clock the things that beckon from the outer rim of creation. Our collective consciousness spins past them, axis tilting forward. Like we can sense in that deep-down place we all have, the tower receiving unseen signals, that perpetual motion is key. Pause long enough, and the monsters make themselves known.

I wanna drop everything, grab Denise, and get the hell

out, but I can't move. We paused for too long. Now the abyss has claimed us in the name of every creeping, border-dwelling thing. Swirls of pixels shimmer in ribbons across the television screen. It undulates, a puddle made of glass, boiling with life. We are swimming in the cells that make it up. We live here. It is primordial, this ooze I am peering into. Am part of. As un-there as a breeze and as hard as a diamond's teeth. I've lost my purchase on this world; there is only static here.

Laughter and squeals rend the nothing like knives shearing through fog. I open my lips because I am hungry for the noise. As I pull this scene apart and let its pieces revolve in my mind, I detect a figure being drawn before me. When his outline reaches the swarming floor, he is instantly whole and I am ashamed because he has been there all along—waiting for me. Unlike the rest of us, he has a center. It shifts with his thoughts. I watch each dart of cognition streak across him, alive. He is talking to me. *We tell stories here*, he says. *It's a nice way to pass the time*. What's that? I think to myself, and he laughs. *The time until?* I ask, and he laughs louder, inspiring the tittering chorus to swell. I join in without meaning to. It's a hollow sound that ends when he wants it to.

*Let us begin*, he says. Underneath the thick layers of puppetry that now command me, I don't actually want to hear anything he might say. I don't want any part of this, including sharing myself in slices with the eyes that now sting us with their never-ending regard. Their greed is bottomless. They want. They need. And I am not enough.

My neck won't turn; I can't look for Denise, though I feel her life-force crackling somewhere, just out of reach. *Don't worry*, he says. *She is preparing for her role*. I wonder

what parts he intends for us to play, and whether there will be others, strangers in costume yanked from their lives, waiting in the wings for their cue. I curse Denise for inviting me over, and myself for agreeing to come. If I hadn't, maybe we both would have spun on, seen and unseeing. But the shapes are growing more distinct and so, too, are the instructions transmitting from his mouthless head. He is speaking loud and clear, directly into my uncovered ears, and I can only nod. Yes. Tell me more.

Tell me everything.

# Redemption Express

I only knock twice. That sort of thing is off-putting to hear, isn't it? Most brains are conditioned to a third knock, so their heads jerk left and right, poised like a prairie dog's, searching the airwaves for it. It would quiet their thudding hearts to hear it, but that wouldn't be fair. I'm doing them a favor by nudging their paintings askew; I'm preparing them. The only way to set things right is to open the door.

Seeing me tends to go a long way in quieting the disturbed flow of their thoughts. Their limbs slacken and their stomachs ooze forward, their gazes clouded briefly by the bliss of relief. I guess if all they're worried about is whether or not they're hearing things then, technically, yes—everything *is* “fine.” No, you're not hearing things; yes, I am really here. But soon you'll wish you were, and that I wasn't.

This one is pale, bald, and stern. His face prunes in confusion, adding about five years he doesn't need. I watch him redirect his tongue away from *What do you want?* to the more polite *Can I help you?* just in case I'm holding a

petition it would make him look good to sign. I always wait to speak so they can take in the sight of me. White t-shirt, white overalls, white sneakers with white laces. A white ball cap shading the amused quirk of my eyebrows. I don't want them to think I'm laughing at them, even if I am. Even *though* I am. Why lie? I don't need to lie to you.

The bald man spies the orange bandana hanging like a drowsy flame from my front pocket and, almost as soon as it clicks on, the cartoon lightbulb hovering above his head winks out. I wear the bandana like a thuggish pocket square because I've seen people on TV who paint houses do the same thing. I'm not sure why that memory sticks in my mind, or where it came from, but I like to wear one myself because it makes sense to me with the overalls.

I've got one arm behind my back, but I'm sure he hasn't noticed seeing as I'm dressed like an emissary from the light side of the chessboard, which is probably distracting. Maybe he assumed I only had one arm since his eyes bug when I pull the other seemingly from nowhere. I hold my hand out to him and he looks down. It's a brown package with cream-colored twine. The kind people get in the movies. I folded the paper just like he did once upon a time, but he gives no sign of recognition. It was a long time ago, after all. Every package corresponds directly to its recipient, though it doesn't always arrive when people think it should. Don't look at me—not my department. This one takes his from me more readily than expected, all things considered, and starts turning it every-which-way. There's no name or address. No *to* or *from*.

“Who sent this? Do you know?”

I shrug.

“How do you know it’s for me?”

“It’s for you,” I say, his little mynah bird, but with a special kind of emphasis that makes him stop turning the thing and look up. My smile is smack in the middle of reassuring and threatening. I know because I’ve practiced. We have a staring contest as I stand there, wondering if he gets it yet. Maybe he’s blocked it all out. Or considers that chapter (man, I hate when people say that) of his life long over. He was a young man with a young man’s zeal. When he got away clean, the memory went to work obscuring itself like an odd dream whose morning wisps were too thin for his tired mind to keep hold of.

He is warier now than when he first took the package from me. Moisture bubbles up through the pores in his scalp, little globules that soften him into a lesser Pinhead. Now it’s me he’s turning over and over with his eyes, looking for any detail he might have missed. I have no connection to what happened, so I’m no kind of clue; I wasn’t even around back then. Not in this body, anyway.

He’s staring at my hat. The thread embroidered there is the exact same hue as the cap itself, so most people don’t notice it. They just want what I’m there to give them, so they grab it and turn their backs, which doesn’t offend me. It’s easier if you want what’s meant for you. I’d rather not chase anyone down. And what reason could they have to run unless they know why I’m there?

He squints. “FedEx?” Close. He searches me all over for any familiar sign, then shakes his head. “Major uniform upgrade, huh? Pretty big change, and I never heard a word about it! Guess I should get out more.” He’s waiting for me to join in, to confirm or deny. Why not? Let’s have some fun.

“No one ever sees this kind of thing coming,” I say, stretching my smile like taffy. He takes this as confirmation of one of those things that sometimes happens. A random choice made by the marketing wing of a ubiquitous company that ultimately doesn’t affect him as a consumer, but is still pretty strange. He won’t even let himself suspect we might be talking about two different things.

“No idea who the sender is, huh?” he asks, pleading with his eyes for any trade secret I’d be willing to part with. He’s making one last-ditch effort, which I can respect. I pegged him as a thorough guy. Detail-oriented. He’d have to be. Would have had to be, more like.

I fold my mouth into the shape of regret and shake my head in a grave way. Kind of shitty of me, I know, pretending sympathy, but this is the role I’ve been given. It separates me from what’s going on in the tradition of worker-bees everywhere. *This is above my pay-grade. I don’t make the decisions—I just work here.* It’s the kindest, most banal fuck off you’ll ever get in this life, and it’s all lies. No, my colleagues and I don’t run things, but of course we know more than we’d ever share.

My face is stiff from holding approximately the same expression for thirty seconds. Not quite a smile, but something verging on warmth that says *I understand how inconvenient this must be, sir, and I am so sorry.* My cheeks are cramping. I’m ready for him to shut the door.

“Well, alright then. Thanks,” he says. I stare into his eyes and say nothing. “See you around,” he says. He steps backward, the door clicks shut, and we’re done. Good. He didn’t give me time to lie again.

I have to walk down the porch steps in a way that won’t



alarm him if he's watching me go. Not too fast, not too slow. Some people like to watch me leave—it extends the transaction and adds to their anticipation. I pick up speed once I clear the last step and reach the empty sidewalk. I don't turn around. Not even when his living-room windows explode, raining scorched glass onto the pavement like old diamonds. I keep walking until I reach my truck, which is maybe thirty feet from his front door. I get inside, but I don't start her up. I've got a clear view, so I think I'll watch for a while. At least until I know whether or not he survived. It's not like I'll be devastated either way, but I can't know these people's fates without watching everything play out in front of me. Usually there's one of us who makes the delivery and another who handles things from there, but I tend to do both. Not that it'll earn me Employee of the Month or anything—I just like to. After so many years, I have to get my kicks how and when I can.

I open my glovebox and grab the little wooden pipe with my true likeness carved into it. Pretty badass, amirite? I've got a dime bag of indica stashed there, too—company-issued to take the edge off. They want us to pay our dues, but to enjoy ourselves in the process. I can appreciate that, even if it kinda muddles their ethics. Not that I'm an expert. I open it and give its contents a sniff. With two fingers, I pack my pipe full. Then I flip my lighter into a small somersault before swiping it from the air as neighbors swarm the sidewalk in front of my unwitting client's house. Most of them have their phones out, but none of them are calling anyone. They're holding the tiny machines up like solar panels, sucking up the energy from this disaster in case the recording catches fire, too, and they get blessed by at least

one algorithm with a few hours of interest beyond their pool of relatives and old schoolmates. I light up and breathe deep. He still hasn't come out yet. Considering what he did, I guess it's only fair if he doesn't survive. Then again, maybe he's learned something in the years since about why what he did was unacceptable, and even feels bad about the whole thing. But then *again*, again...

There's a little girl at the front of the crowd using her whole hand to hold the ring and pinky fingers of the woman standing beside her. Her dark brows are furrowed and she's chewing her bottom lip, hypnotized by the flames and the noise. She's practically the only one other than me watching the proceedings without a screen as liaison. If we stood side-by-side, I'd probably be pegged as her big sister in this particular skin-suit. The after to her before. I wouldn't mind playing that part. Holding her hand as everyone points and shouts all around us. Assuring her that she'll be okay, at least for now; it'll be years before her package comes, if she gets one at all.

I always retract what I need to and oil my costume before stepping inside it so nothing snags. The suits are custom-made—you wouldn't believe how tricky they can be to fix. This one is a gorgeous, deep brown. Wide eyes shaped like almonds, with whites that stand out like pearls against the dark pools at their centers. This is a favorite guise I often circle back to, even if it means taking more care to go unnoticed before the cops arrive. As long as I get to my truck in time, I'm good; no one remembers seeing me once I'm inside. The bosses really have thought of everything.

Wearing this little number electrifies me, like I'm tiptoeing across a taut cord between buildings, five hundred

stories up. The wire's end is my horizon line, tauntingly out of reach no matter how close I get. Each time I lower my weight onto it with a new step, the wire shudders and droops just enough to make me afraid. The crowd's stares come from too far below for me to gauge their hostility, or lack thereof. In the moments when I'm most unsure of how things will end, I lift the thick mane from the back of my neck and let it go, bit by bit. The box braids hit the space between my shoulder blades in a widening spill and I breathe out a decadent sigh. Whatever your opinion of me, I am thrilling.

I don't think I could handle the strange melange of optimism and dread 24/7, but I do enjoy a good cameo.

I wonder what the little girl's guardian will tell her about what happened here today. Small scrolls of burnt wood turned to ash are floating through the air and the girl is stretching her fingers out to them. They must look like fireflies with their glowing orange tails, until they land, dead-gray. I wish I could remember what any of this was like. It's why I watch so much TV and listen to the radio and all. When you're out of practice, it can be hard to recall even the simplest things.

My head lolls as dissonant sirens bloom from a pea-sized whine into full-blown whale song. I guess someone called for help after all. Each howling note falls one after another against my ears. I love this part. Eventually, every type of emergency vehicle roars past my foggy window and skids to a halt in front of the house and I feel the thrum of every movement shimmy up through my tires and along the metal skeleton of my truck. A cop car does half a donut that scatters the crowd of oblivious onlookers, waking them at last

to the possibility of real danger. Shit... this is just like those crime dramas where the title is all letters that don't spell anything. Anachronistic? No, that's not it. Anyway, you know the ones I mean: where a ragtag bunch of enforcers, each with their own principles, puts their differences aside to form a found family they can kick ass and fight evil with. And "evil" is usually a terrorist who wants nothing more than to destroy the regional way of life. Only this time, the terrorist is me, and it's not their way of life I want to destroy—just this guy's. I actually enjoy their way of life. Especially in this kind of high-definition. Gives me chills.

I can see the eyes of the gathered masses widening from here. Or maybe I just think I can; this stuff's pretty strong. I can't even make out irises in the crowd—just open-mouthed zombies with milky marbles in their heads, knocking shoulders, looking over each other for a way out. I can't see the little girl anymore. Firefighters leap down from the big red behemoth they rode in on, immediately yank the coil of hose from its hook and start to unfurl it. It worms out longer and longer until the guy holding the tail-end reaches a lonely, green-capped fire hydrant I hadn't noticed before. While they fiddle with the hose, a troop of creatures in weird suits covered in pouches and zippers and what look like the military version of Jules Verne diving helmets scurry up to the burning house. They look dressed to walk on the moon, but they're probably bomb disposal. The emergency med techs are clearly itching to leap into action, but the most senior police officer holds out a hand, instructing them to wait. The EMT in the lead flings his arms to the sky as if to say, *Someone could be dying in there!* The cop nods sagely, then offers a reply with his palms held out to placate. *Something*

*has clearly blown the fuck up in there, son. We need to make sure it's safe before you go barreling in like an idiot and get turned bite-sized, alright?* Or something equally dire that makes the EMT's eyes bulge. He hustles back to his team to spread the word.

*Gobble, gobble.*

I don't know why, but that gaggle over there makes me think of turkeys. In which case, they'd be a rafter, not a gaggle, but gaggle sounds better. I like the way the word feels in my mouth. *Gag. Gul.* Saying it is like juggling boba with my tongue. You ever try that stuff? No matter how much you chew on it, it keeps its shape. It's crazy. Anyway, the term gaggle is the best way to describe the jumble of bodies in the street, and should include the fire, catalyst for the chaos, which is dying under the spray of the now functioning hose. The alien beings in their zip-locked suits have disappeared, though I'm not sure when that happened exactly. Three firemen troop out of the building with a fourth following at a distance. The last fireman carries a bundle that wilts blackly over the edge of each burly bicep. The EMTs try to look alive as they dash over to him with a collapsible gurney. Hm. I just realized. I assumed he was alone in that house, but there's a chance he wasn't.

Oh well. Maybe that'll drive the point of all this home for him.

The lead EMT shakes the gurney's folded legs out in one practiced motion. The charred and crumpled form in the fireman's arms is lowered onto the rolling stretcher so the techs can unbend its joints as carefully as possible, before death is quickly confirmed. Then the remains are covered and hoisted into the back of the waiting ambulance. The

emergency workers all clot together in their respective groups while a police officer ties yellow tape across the front gate. As each vehicle pulls away, the crowd lessens. I can just make out a tiny head with tinier afro puffs bobbing at the ear of an adult woman. The little girl, with her chin sunk into her chaperone's shoulder, stares at what's left of the blackened house. I follow her gaze with mine, and can just make out someone standing on the front steps of the destroyed building. They are blacker than soot from head to toe. Skin, clothing—everything. No one from the dispersing crowd notices. They've already decided there's nothing more to see.

The figure heaves itself down each step in such a way that I feel the weight of their movements, like the stairs are made of my own bones. As the being trudges along the snaking path to the sidewalk, something in me expects them to sag to the ground and immediately drift off to sleep. The figure walks on until it reaches the yellow tape. It considers the plastic ribbon, tilting its dark blot of a head, before continuing on as if nothing is there. And the tape stays obediently strung up, as if nothing dubiously corporeal had interrupted its banner-brightness. The little girl is still staring, and the figure stops on the sidewalk to watch her shrink against the horizon. I wonder what their expressions are saying to each other. You'll probably think I'm a monster, but I can't help smiling. Funny—it's always kids who see ghosts.

I could watch the smoke curl in front of me forever, but he won't let me. He's shuffling this way now, slow but steady. His progress is almost painful to watch, but part of me is rooting for him. *Come on. Come to me.* The closer he gets, the slower he seems to move. The echo of his mind is

probably unsure despite the confidence of his feet, which toil on. He stops when he reaches a point parallel to my passenger-side window. It seems to take a supernatural effort to turn his body to face the glass, but he manages eventually. It probably took less time than it feels like, but I'm way up into the atmosphere now. Here, every moment stretches until it begins to tear.

He mostly looks the same. Same wrinkled, plaid button-down. Same stiff khakis. Same bumpy nose and bald head. His skin's not as pale, but that's because he's made of shadows now. When I look at him, I realize I'm staring into two empty holes. The explosion must have blown his eyes out of his head faster than he could manage to die. I picture them liquidating before he even has time to consider blinking against the blast. I wish I'd recorded it. That would spice up the old video library for sure. He tilts his head like he's wondering what I'm thinking. I hope he is. It'd be nice to be that important.

"Get in," I say.

He looks at the passenger-side door and does not seem to recognize the concept. No more eyes, but he blinks.

"Come on," I say. "It's part of the deal. Anyway, without eyes, you might fall into a ditch somewhere and get stuck haunting that." It's a dumb joke—I mean, he can obviously see well enough to get to me—but I like to lighten the mood if I can. His mouth balls up; apparently he doesn't find me funny. He arches his neck and I wonder blandly when his head will stop moving. It doesn't, until finally the underside of his chin is held up to me like a shield. His face is now a charred plateau with a pile of ash dropped conspicuously at its center, tunneled moistly through in two places. He leans back farther,

then yanks his head forward like a hammer's claw coming unstuck. I take a year to close my eyes. They are shut tight, but my ears are all the way open, waiting for the crash.

Waiting.

I separate my lids the tiniest sliver, pressing them closed as much as I am holding them open. Light slides in, but not enough to see by. I open my eyes all at once and his face is halfway through the window. The window isn't down; he's phasing through it. I knew he wouldn't be able to break the glass, but it's like someone suddenly making like they're gonna hit you, whether they're stronger than you or not, you know? I try to move my mouth, but the weed has dried it to dust. A hacking cough takes hold as I try to say something, anything. He reaches a hand, then an arm toward my thigh and a combination of guttural noises and wheezes tumble from me. As his fingers get closer, I flinch away. I don't like the feel of apparitions. However, instead of going for me, his fingers find the emergency brake. I face front as he hauls himself inside.

Before long, he is upright in the seat next to mine. He isn't melting through to the ground below because he doesn't want to. Well, that, and the truck makes that sort of thing impossible. Last week, one lady kept trying to phase back through the door and escape after we got rolling, but the truck wouldn't let her. I don't think it's alive, but it honestly wouldn't surprise me if it were. Anyone glancing at us now (to whom we were both visible) would think we were pals. Maybe they'd think I was here picking him up on the way to our favorite spot. Or maybe, since we're sitting very still, eyes front, they'd think we've just broken up. I take one last toke and wonder if I look like the dumper or the dumpee.



Weed makes me feel scraggly and unkempt, like my guts are falling out, but not in a clutch-the-sides-of-my-face kind of way. More like... my body is a house that needs tidying and my guts are only on the floor cuz I can't be bothered to pick them up, even if I am slightly embarrassed by the whole thing.

A sound like sacks of gravel being dragged across a sandpaper floor is coming from my passenger seat. His neck is crooked forward and his mouth is in the harshest "o" I've ever seen. He's trying to speak but the ash has grown fat in his lungs, replacing every inch of air with itself like it knows he's already dead and won't need it. It'll never go away—that sensation of being suffocated by smoke. A grinding like rusted machinery comes from him. It sounds like—

*Why?*

"You know why," I say, doing my best to keep the words dull. He goes quiet; all I can hear are the workings of his laboring chest, like sawdust passing from one alveolian grape to another. Ash to air; water to wine.

*I—I didn't know... how many... would die.*

"But the point was that someone would, right?" I ask. "Did you stay? For the carnage? Or did you hurry home to catch the highlights on the news?"

His expression hasn't changed, yet shame radiates from him like heat. Pretty fucking rich of me to say any of this. I guess the system does work. Badum-tsss.

"Everybody pays." My mouth forms the words automatically, the company slogan now seared into my very essence. Whether we go on thinking we're right all along, or turn some type of corner before dispatch, the only relevant thing is the damage done. He could've ripened into the second

coming of Gandhi by the time I got here and it wouldn't have mattered—I still would've blown him up. That's how this works. If he'd survived, it would've been just as well. He probably would've been maimed beyond recognition and have to go on wearing the reminder of what he did every single day. Either way, he'd have gotten what the bosses had decided was coming to him.

I glance at the pocket watch tied with leftover twine to my air vent. Fuck. I slam the key into the ignition. The engine shakes my entire body and disguises his breathing, which is a relief to me but I don't know why. The houses in his now former neighborhood look like they were baked in a witch's oven. Icing at the windows. Gumdrops in the garden. Homes fit for dolls with breakable bodies. How nice for you, I can't help but think, and am caught off-guard by my own bitterness. He'll probably be disappointed by where we're headed, but then that's part of it, too. Our grass is just as green, though. We've even got a few gumdrops of our own, swaying red, purple, and yellow in the breeze. He'll see them all. See them, but never touch them.

He doesn't speak in the car and my buzz is dying. A new one's replacing it. My head rings like a bell and I can't stop it. I shouldn't have smoked; I completely lost track of time. I have to get back. My foot grows heavier on the gas pedal until everything passing by is a blur. My stomach hurts from trying to hold my current shape, but the stitches in my shoes have already started to snap apart and air is rushing against my exposed talons. Please, let me make it. Not here.

There is always a road, no matter where in the world I find myself, that leads to where we're going. I spot a highway exit sign with a dog's-ear bend in the bottom-right corner

and squeal over to it amidst honks and shouts and middle fingers. We bump down the potholed ramp like we're on a hayride. Well, I bump down it, every so often rising an inch from my seat; he's too weighed down by the events of the day to move. The thighs of my trousers are stretched to capacity as I turn left at the light. The fabric tears just as my red toes begin to curl over the edge of the gas pedal. I can see it, the dirt road a little way ahead. I make the sharpest turn ever to reach it and for half a second I'm impossibly happy because it feels like I'm in a high-speed chase. A crazed laugh escapes me as my shirt rips. Bristles hard as plastic sprout between my breasts and shoulders, shredding fabric as they grow. My tires seem to roll over every rock and into every dip and I try not to bite my tongue. I'm clenching my mouth shut with the organ curled safe inside it like a sleeping serpent, but I yelp because, apparently, I had a bit of bottom lip caught between my teeth without realizing it and they're sharpening and it hurts. The blood trickles warmly down my chin as we pull into the circular drive... and I deflate back into something he might recognize. My suit is ruined.

I turn to my charge and am met with his eyeless stare.

*What are you?* he asks, and there's some tremble to his smoke-ravaged voice. *Is this Hell?*

I wipe my mouth on my torn collar and grin like the joyless jack-o'-lantern I am. "Probably," I say.

He follows my lead and gets out of the truck, but waits for me to direct his attention or his steps somewhere, anywhere. Some of my teeth are still kind of pointy, so I'll just let him take the place in without any awkward audio-bookings from me. Unlike the dirt road and withered trees flanking us on

the way here, the grass in front of the building is vibrant and alive, shimmering like water when the wind rolls through it. I can't tell you how many hours I've spent staring at these grounds, scouring them for a seam in the mirage, but never finding one. The building is colosseum-shaped, minus the hollowed-out center, with rows of barred windows watching like a million cross-hatched eyes. He cranes his neck until he can't anymore. It's impossible to see the top. I know—I've tried. I'd hurry him along, but something in me wants to give him a few minutes more of this serene liminality. That's how it's done on-screen, you know. The prisoner gets a few wistful moments to appreciate the jut of a single blade of grass, or a unique crack in the wall that zigzags down to the ground like an errant hair free of its scalp. He sighs heavily, regretting all the details of all the places he's ever been that he realizes he missed during the more carefree days of his life. That would all be fitting now, especially since once Ol' Smoky here crosses the threshold... well. Anyway, he's my last inductee for a while, so this extra time is as much for me as it is for him, even if I'm not the hero of this particular tale. I take in a few robust lungfuls and look around me. It really is nice out here. Every time my turn comes, it feels like the beginning of everything. Like I have more time than I could ever need to do all the things I've spent trillions of hours watching actual people do in their made-up stories. Then when it's over, I inevitably feel cheated, as if I hadn't known all along when it would end and didn't have a disgusting amount of time to prepare. When I'm out here, I always get caught up in watching events unfold. It's like being back in my cell with my pile of tapes, except it's real and I'm part of it.

I fill my lungs again and heave the longest, loudest, yearningest sigh I can. I'd rather not let my time in this scene go to waste. For a split second, I imagine someone else watching me, and laughter explodes from me until my stomach aches. My eyes are shut tight, but still the tears leak out. My body is wracked by every gasp, which makes me laugh even harder until there's no sound coming from me at all. Ghostman surveys me, the edges of his mouth dangling well past his chin. "What's wrong?" I ask, allowing my laughter to taper off, but still linger.

*I don't understand any of this*, he replies, turning away from me to lock eye sockets with the windows again. Seeing his smallness against this hulking container of souls drains any mirth I've got left. Part of me wants to pat his arm in a way that means... whatever that means to people. I can't remember.

"Let's go," I say. There's a beat of inaction before his shoulders relax into an even deeper slump. He glances again at the immensity before us, then falls into tentative step behind me as I head for the door.

The inside is pretty unremarkable. Lots of light gray, silver, and subway tile. The staircases wind in every direction to every room, splitting here and there at various, twisting inclines. I don't meet the eyes of any of my fellows as I walk. His paperwork was done before my turn began. I knew that if he died, he'd end up here. A room is always allocated just in case, and the number is clear in my mind despite its impossible length. He can't hear what I hear; if he could, he'd have jumped the railing and run by now. I've learned it's best to keep walking, because this time I know he's watching. Soon, the transaction will truly be over. I

come to his navy blue door and hear his Marley-shuffle end somewhere near my right ear. The air beside me fills with his terror, silent and dense, as he waits for the abyss he is sure I will reveal to swallow him whole. I let my eyes rest on him and am not surprised to see his lids closed; he can't even bear to look. My lips curl as I push the door open and stand aside.

The room is empty of absolutely anything. No hair or dead skin cells exist to attract dust. Not even dust exists here. He steps over the threshold, then turns back to me. I nod, which I guess reassures him, so he walks to the center of the room and revolves in a slow circle, searching for a sign. I shut the door just as he is about to face me again. The screaming starts as I descend the stairs.

I've seen this film before, more times than I can count. His victims' last moments will play on an endless loop inside his head, and the devastating grief of their loved ones will seep in, steadily filling all the cracks in his knowing, until it spills from everywhere and he is drowning in it. His transparent teeth will crack against one another, and he will beg for silence. He will try to tear the flesh from his non-existent bones and gouge out eyes that are already gone. He will understand, and wish he had asked more questions, that he had begged to remain outside a little longer. As I take the path that winds back to my own unhappy island, his howls join the violent chorus that is the eternal soundtrack of this place. I slow my pace and close my eyes, until the noise melts exquisitely to static, and I hum along.

# Go, It Is the Sending

Her steps made no mark in the snow for She was lighter even than the bird eggs in Her pocket. She would succeed today. The Mothers had asked that She remove Her scroll from its shelf and follow its dictate to the letter if She desired another chance at initiation. Her only remaining chance. She knew that creation was a tenet of membership, but it was difficult. The incantation required faith in order to work, and this had always been Her failing. After all, She had not been raised to practice this sort of magic. As such, all She had managed thus far were singed feathers and the almond tip of an unfinished beak. She pulled Her hood low against the numbing gale, and trudged on.

She felt the warmth of the hearth even before the cottage door opened. The bottom of the outsized door scraped along the rough wooden floor but She did not hear. The baying winds hid all sound until the door stuck shut behind Her, sealing in the heat. She kept Her head down as She approached the roaring fire. Agnes would have chided Her