

Proof Of The Monsters

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Proof Of The Monsters

May Ninth

I found a novel, at the library, after work today. Basically, that was all that happened. Monster season should begin in about a week.

May Tenth

Well, this year the bodies came early!

I didn't have to work today. Living in the attic, above the trees, from the (somewhat grimy yes) lattice attic window I can see the beach. A point of land. A narrow strip of black sand. There weren't any bodies yet. The beach was deserted. While I'd slept, a bit of yarn had gotten tangled in my beard.

I ate a few apples. Red skin with gold flecks, very good, tasty. I read some of the novel. I ate a grapefruit. I composted the seeds, the stems, the peel. The novel has gotten strange. Although it began in a seventeenth-century city—ballrooms, carriages, a neurotic soldier with debtor troubles—it has since relocated to a mythical city beneath the Arctic Ocean, constructed over the course of several centuries by omnipotent czars with impotent kholops. The debtor soldier is seated at a feast. For one hundred and eleven pages the narrator has been describing a certain woman's hat. I understand now why obscure seventeenth-century writers remain obscure.

Afterward I was lonely, I felt like being around people, so I considered walking to the cafe in town. Straightaway, however, a new problem occurred to me. To sit in the cafe, you must buy a coffee. To socialize, you must consume. Now: the cafe stocks paper cups and plastic cups. I could ask for a paper cup for my coffee, but that would hurt the planet, ∴ paper is made from trees. I could ask for a plastic cup for my coffee, but that would hurt the planet, ∴ plastic takes approximately three hundred years to decompose. ∴ I should use neither a paper cup nor a plastic cup. However. The paper cups and the plastic cups have already been manufactured. Whether I drink from them or don't drink from them, the tree has already fallen, the plastic already been made. ∴ I could use a paper cup or a plastic cup. However. If I use a cup, the cafe will have to buy more cups from the manufacturer, which means the manufacturer will manufacture even more cups, felling more trees and making more plastic. ∴ I should use neither a paper cup nor a plastic cup.

I could ask for a mug, but afterward the baristas would have to wash the mug, which would consume water, soap, electricity.

I never bought a coffee.

I never went to the cafe.

Instead I rambled down through town, to the beach, wearing the same boots, the same jeans, the same baggy forest green woolen sweater as always. I had the novel, a tattered paperback, bent in half and stuffed into the seat of my jeans (the pocket is worn with the faded outline of a vanished wallet, the wallet of whoever wore these jeans before me). The ocean lunged onto the sand, crept away again. I stepped across rocks, still arguing with myself (silently) about coffee.

That's when the seals began washing ashore. A body—another body—a few bodies bobbing on the same wave. Disfigured, skinless, bloody. Misshapen carcasses. Only the whiskery snouts, the bulging eyes, untouched. The crumpled flippers. The surface of the

ocean was littered with dead seals, from the sand to the horizon. I stopped, watching the bodies float to shore, like indecipherable messages from a faraway land.

It always begins with the seals. But never this soon, before, and never this many. Most people consider the beach unlucky, jinxed, during monster season. I sat on a boulder and read the novel a few minutes, then got spooked and trudged home.

May Eleventh

When Grandpa Uyaquq could still speak, he often spoke of his childhood, and how the monsters were back then. In those years, according to my grandfather, the monsters never killed other creatures. The monsters were peaceful. The monsters lived in the depths of the ocean, drifting through kelp forests, enjoying their monstrous lives. Then—here my grandfather would frown, puff at his cigar, glance beyond the porch railing—something, nobody knows what, happened. One summer, bodies began washing ashore. Seals. Then worse. This was in the seventies. Only Alaska, only our town, only this stretch of beach. Nowhere except here. The monsters must have been reacting to something. Something we had done. Even monsters have motives. And how else could ocean dwellers communicate with us on land? Would we have listened to anything except for bodies? Even then, with all of the bodies, had anybody listened? Here Grandpa Uyaquq would laugh, and cough, and stub out his cigar on the porch railing.

I have never heard the monsters referred to with a name. Simply, “the monsters.” Or, occasionally, “the bloodsuckers.” (An illogical moniker, considering the monsters leave the blood, yet take the skin!) Whether the monsters are nonextinct megafauna, evolutionary aberrations, maybe products of abyssal gigantism, is unclear. There has never been a reported sighting.

At daybreak my stepbrother came by the house. I was sitting on the table in the attic—

reading through yesterday's entry, chewing an apple, still blinking awake—saw him arrive through the lattice window. He parked his truck, crossed the driveway toward the backyard. He was dressed for work: dark blue suit, light blue tie, leather brogues; an unbuttoned trenchcoat; a bright red woolen hat. The attic has a separate entrance—I heard the rusted attic staircase groaning on its bolts, the ramshackle attic balcony shuddering—my stepbrother ducked into the attic through the doorway, pulled the chair out from the table, sat there chatting with me.

“There must have been sightings,” Peter said.

“There haven't,” I said.

“Then how do people know they're like us?” Peter said.

“Like how?” I said.

“Anthropomorphic. Humanoid. Merfolk,” Peter said.

“Are they?” I said.

Peter ran his fingertips across his cheeks, squinting, as if he had just discovered that stubble was growing there. His brogues were crusted with mud and soil, which for him wasn't usual, to have less than shiny shoes. A murky dim light was filtering through the lattice window. On my mattress, my sheets lay tangled together in a coiled shape, the inscrutable conclusion of my movements throughout the night, a pattern somehow representing my dreams. The spider that lives above the cupboards was asleep on a shut cupboard door. I don't own this house. Grandpa Uyaquq owns this house. He lives at the pioneer home, now, where he shares a room with a stroke victim. Peter asked me to live here, to watch the house while our grandfather is “away.” Peter is in denial. Grandpa Uyaquq has dementia. Grandpa Uyaquq isn't coming back. Peter asked me to live in the attic, for Grandpa Uyaquq, so that when he “returns” the house will be “exactly” how he “remembers.” It is illogical. I don't mind. For somebody like me, the attic is ample. The attic has a

sink, a stove, a toilet, a bathtub, even, but I rarely bathe, ∴ bathing wastes water. I wear only castoff clothing, ∴ that clothing already exists. I salvage food from dumpsters, ∴ otherwise that food would go to waste. In any town, meeting somebody like me would be difficult. In this town, meeting somebody like me would be impossible. I am the only person here who salvages food from dumpsters. Sometimes I feel like a lone member of a rare species, cut off from the rest of its species by geological formations. (A species whose diet, understandably, revolts all other species.)

Peter had tilted the chair backward, with only its back legs touching the floorboards, was poking the loaf of (somewhat moldy yes) pumpernickel on the counter.

“That does not look okay,” Peter murmured, frowning.

He turned toward me. His trenchcoat had swung open, exposing the inner silk lining. The chair was still teetering, just balanced.

“You want to grab a beer tonight?” Peter said.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Even if I buy?” Peter said.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Please?” Peter said, grinning.

I made some gesture that was supposed to be an apology.

Peter pouted, and tipped the chair forward, its front legs clacking down onto the floorboards. The pout was exaggerated, but beneath lay some genuine hurt feeling. He slapped his knees, then rose from the chair.

“Had to try,” Peter said.

Before leaving, Peter fixed the sink in the attic (a drip) and fixed the steps on the porch (a creak). He jogged to his truck (shouting he was late), bent to check something under the cab, then drove away. Peter works for a bank, which is a good cover for an ecoterrorist.

His degree is in economics. My degree is in philosophy. I work for the city, planting flowers and shoveling snow. I don't pay rent, and I don't buy food, so my only expenses are the monthly payments on my gigantic loans.

1. To pursue something pointless is illogical
2. The point of earning a degree is to become qualified for a job
3. Earning a degree in philosophy does not qualify one for anything
4. (2, 3) \Rightarrow Earning a degree in philosophy is pointless
5. (1, 4) \Rightarrow It is illogical to earn a degree in philosophy
- \therefore It is illogical to earn a degree in philosophy

Consequently,

6. One is a philosopher \Leftrightarrow one has a degree in philosophy
7. (5, 6) \Rightarrow Philosophers are illogical
- \therefore Philosophers are illogical

That's a proof I've been working through for some time now. Still, there is a noticeable difference between carrying an idea around in my head and putting an idea down onto blank paper. A feeling of relief—just having somebody to talk to, to vent to—even if that somebody is a glittery notebook with rainbow unicorns on the cover, salvaged from a garbage can. (Sorry—I don't mean to insult you—that's just what you are.)

I am still sitting on the table, overlooking, beyond the window, the gravel driveway, the swaying pine branches, the ocean blue shingles of the terraced houses on the hillside, the distant beach below. (Through camouflage binoculars with chipped lenses—also sal-

vaged—I'm surveying everything magnified.) Just now, a walrus washed ashore. Bent whiskers, a snapped tusk, strips of skin hanging from the carcass. A blubbery gouge torn into its belly. Its body dwarfs the dead seals.

Usually, walruses don't begin washing ashore until midsummer.

May Thirteenth

Yesterday was heinously boring, so let's just skip ahead to today. (Are you rainbow unicorns bored easily?) (Yes, yes, you are.) (Don't worry then, ∴ today was a disaster.)

Work was grueling. I came home with pine sap crusted in my beard, burst blisters on each thumb. I felt too drained to climb up to the attic, so sat in the backyard a few hours, on a rusty foldout chair, sipping from the hose. I had nearly exhausted my food supply. I wasn't ready to think about that. I dug through my backpack (also salvaged, with bright neon straps, the pouch is phosphorescent!), ate my last apple, tossed the core into the woods for the squirrels. The birdfeeder was empty. I wasn't ready to think about that. I zipped my backpack, read some more of the book.

Each chapter opens with a brief quotation from an imaginary novel. This latest chapter opens, "The planet itself was alive! — Mohiam Yueh, *The Sharif's Orrery*." After the accidental destruction of the undersea city, the novel has relocated (again) to a mythical city in the skies above the Arabian Desert, constructed from gigantic golden balloons by despotic sultans with oppressed kapikullari. The debtor soldier is slated to be beheaded at dawn, for a combination of mistakes, miscalculations, and misunderstandings, including the inadvertent deflowering of the vizier's daughter.

At nightfall I tramped down through town to the local grocery store to harvest some groceries. I have a rule, which is that whenever I see litter I have to stop and pick it up and then properly dispose of it (compost or recycle, if possible, otherwise garbage), so getting

around can take me a while. Fortunately, the first thing I passed tonight was an empty plastic bag (fluttering against a guardrail), which I could use to gather all the litter that came after (plastic soda bottles, plastic water bottles, a wet rag, a plank of wood, a tattered gardening magazine, a cigarette carton, cigarette butts, an empty condom wrapper). Otherwise I would have had to use my backpack, and I try not to mix my food with litter.

The grocery was closing soon, the parking lot nearly empty. A runaway cart had gotten almost as far as the street before having its breakout thwarted by a speed bump. I set my bag of litter on the pavement, climbed into the dumpster, and sifted through today's garbage. Bruised apples, withered carrots, hardly stale oats. Bent cans of chickpeas. Inexplicably, an entire box of raw almonds. As I stocked my backpack, a pimply employee in a dirt red apron emerged from the grocery lugging knotted garbage bags. He nodded. I waved. He flung the bags into the dumpster. I found overripe bananas there, added a few bunches to my backpack.

Hiking back to the house, I felt dizzy suddenly, probably from thirst or hunger. I stopped, sat on a guardrail, ate mushy bananas, my bag of litter between my boots. Across the street, the windowfront of a closed shop glowed with stacked televisions, the televisions all flickering with the same image, electricity pouring into unwatched screens. On-screen, a presidential candidate was faking emotions for an audience, appearing to hold back tears. He had been coached by his consultants to exhibit these emotions, had rehearsed and now performed a scripted scene. Politicians were people once. Animals, with cravings, feelings, idiosyncrasies. Now politicians are products, manufactured by teams of consultants. The candidate wore a necktie that was not the candidate's, but was rather the necktie that had tested best during marketing research. The candidate wore a wristwatch that was not the candidate's, but was rather the wristwatch that had tested best during marketing research. The candidate professed beliefs, asserted convictions, claimed inten-

tions that were not the candidate's. Like the design of the label on a plastic container of dog food. Whatever consumers will buy. I do not vote. Consumption of this politician, like any non-degradable product, would be wasteful. His legacy will never decay. His policies will pollute this country forever.

The bananas tasted great. Afterward the dizziness vanished. Just then, I saw a girl with gray hair and monstrous gauges was staring at me from the windowfront with the televisions.

"Are you homeless?" she shouted.

I stared at her.

"A bum? A hobo? A tramp?" the girl shouted.

A couple pushing a stroller passed. They glared at me, as if I were the one shouting at the girl, rather than vice versa. I tried to clear my name.

"No," I shouted.

I had assumed that would end things. Instead, the girl hopped over the curb, then crossed the street (without checking for oncoming traffic), tugging at her sweatshirt as if trying to stretch the collar. Her sweatshirt looked preowned, but her jeans looked expensive. She tripped somehow on the pavement, caught herself. She stood under the streetlamp, at the guardrail, the circle of light.

"From over there you looked too cute to be homeless, but from over here you look too homeless to be cute," she said.

She laughed, like something that had only ever observed laughter trying to imitate the sound. Her mascara was smeared. Her hair was damp. Her gauges were the size of muskels.

"Let's eat something," she said.

"How old are you?" I said.

“Twenty-two,” she said.

I stared at her.

“Twenty-one,” she said.

I stared at her.

“Eighteen, but that’s the truth, so stop giving me that look,” she said.

“I only eat raw food,” I said.

“Raw?” she said.

“Uncooked,” I said.

“I like raw fish,” she said.

“I don’t eat meat,” I said.

“I live for meat,” she said.

“I don’t eat at restaurants,” I said.

“Why?” she said.

I don’t know why but having to say it out loud was incredibly embarrassing.

“I try to avoid consuming resources unnecessarily,” I said.

“That’s annoying!” she said.

She yanked me standing by the straps of my backpack.

“Whoa,” she said. “You’re a giant.” She did that laugh again. She patted the straps of my backpack, as if brushing off invisible dust. She nodded. “Alright, giant, you’re coming with me.”

She began walking. To get home, I had to go that way too—so, well, I did. We both walked toward town (not together, but together), past the roundabout, a hotel with vacancies, silhouettes of humans leashed to silhouettes of dogs. She had an unplaceable accent. Like a lisp, but not?

“I hate chitchat, so before you ask, I don’t go to school, I don’t have a job, and my par-

ents are dead,” she said.

She tripped somehow on the sidewalk.

“I’m a cryptid fanatic. I’m here for the bloodsuckers. I’m going to catch one, to bring the world proof that the monsters exist, which will vault me like automatically into the cryptozoology hall of fame,” she said.

She glanced at me, guiltily.

“There isn’t actually a hall of fame,” she said.

(Yes, yes, I was in love by now.)

“Oh and my name is Ash,” she said.

As we passed the cafe, the smoky taverns, the overpriced steakhouse patronized exclusively by tourists from cruise ships, I argued with myself (silently) about the girl, counterpoint after counterpoint after counterpoint. Despite my (admittedly) disheveled appearance, and my (okay) sour odor, this girl was actually talking to me. However. Maybe that was actually more concerning than comforting. (What was wrong with her?) (Didn’t something have to be wrong with her?) However. I was really curious about her, suddenly. However. She was very young, and would be easy to hurt, accidentally. However, however, however, however.

“This place looks amazing!” she said.

She had stopped at a diner (pleather booths, checkered linoleum, chrome stools along the counter), pressing her hands to the glass, her face lit from light within. She stepped to the door, tried pushing it open, failed, tried pushing it open, failed, tried pushing it open, failed, squinted, frowned, scowled, tried pulling. The door swung open with a whoosh of heat and music. She did that laugh again, triumphantly, standing in the doorway.

“Hey, giant, aren’t you coming?” she said.

I felt that familiar plunging sensation (like being hurled off some cliff) (the ritual sacri-

face) I get whenever confronted with something I want to do that I know would hurt the planet. I stared into the diner. People laughing, chewing hamburgers, tearing apart napkins absentmindedly, shoving aside plates dolloped with unused ketchup, sipping cola through plastic straws that never would get used again. Electric lights shimmering, electric heater whirring, electric stereo blaring country songs. The cook dumping a tub of wilted lettuce into the garbage. There was so much waste in that diner I could hardly breathe.

“Sorry,” I said.

I left the girl there, standing in the doorway, looking heartbroken, fragrant heat and twanging music billowing out around her.

Why does the wrong thing always feel like the right thing? Why does the right thing always feel like the wrong thing? Do there need to be so many feelings?

I was much happier before I knew that girl existed. Now I can't stop thinking about how at this exact moment she exists and is doing something somewhere and how I could be there but I'm not. I want to split some fries with her and listen to her talk. I want to split a pitcher of beer with my stepbrother and listen to him talk. I want to drink coffee and eavesdrop on strangers. The worst thing about trying to live an ethical life is how it isolates you from other people. I am going to die alone.

(I didn't capture the proper moments, didn't capture the moments properly, but if you had been there, unicorns, you would have loved her, too.)

At the harbor, moonlight shone gleaming on the propellers of seaplanes. Waves crashed against the beach. Among the flayed seals, the shredded walruses, the sand was littered now with the carcasses of porpoises. Their fins battered. Their mouths yawning, frozen in terror, ringed with nubbed teeth. For me, nothing is ever as hard to see as the porpoises.

Back home, I filled the birdfeeder with pinched morsels of banana, a shake of oats.

Some bulky animal was lumbering through the underbrush just beyond the backyard, in the darkness, huffing. (Oh, be sure to tell Peter: the gutter above the porch got knocked off, blown loose, something?) I haven't sorted through the litter yet, will have to tomorrow.

May Fifteenth

Another grueling workday, yesterday!

I do not work alone. There are a few other workers. We shovel together during snowstorms, plant together in the rain. Their impression of me seems to be: quiet, pleasant, young. They are not aware of my lifestyle. When they ask about my life, I murmur something vague, smiling, then change the subject. The thoughts in my brain would only upset them. I usually avoid talking about anything except the weather.

But I cannot just keep the thoughts in my brain. The thoughts are volatile. My brain would explode. So instead the thoughts end up here—the worst thoughts, the worst ideas, the worst notions, all the theorems I would never speak aloud.

But I have other thoughts too. I have best thoughts. Thoughts about how coral and krill and clams can glow bright neon colors. Thoughts about how mouthbrooders like jawfish hatch eggs in their mouths. Thoughts about how tuataras have third eyes on their foreheads, as if enlightened, coated with opaque scales. Thoughts about lavender thunderheads swelling above an otherwise empty sea, headwaters swirling through leafless deadfall, amber beetles coated with gritty pollen, rainbowed minnows frozen underwater, dewy toadstools sprouting from honeycomb cliffs, macaques soaking together in thermal springs, owls on gnarled branches grooming downy chicks, galloping reindeer trampling alphabetic patterns into the chalky rims of crater lakes, frosted grasses on otherwise lifeless prairies, icicles dripping in grottos, creeks white with muddy silt, deserts of flaky cracked earth, vast briny salt flats flooded with glassy water, frothy waterfalls shooting

from a gap in the side of a ridge and plummeting dizzily past crags past nests past weeds and misting the snowy rocks below, and there is lava, and there are forests, and there are islands, certain flowers grow only on the slopes of certain mountains, moose grow antlers, geese lay eggs, snakes shed skin, bees make honey, all of the cliches actually are true. I love this planet. When I think about things like, “our planet has a moon,” I feel awed.

(Honestly, unicorns, using words like “awed” embarrasses me. Having emotions is archaic, outdated, as unfashionable as wearing periwigs. Sentimentalism is a practice society has rejected altogether. But I’m my own society. A rogue country. Here, I will offer refuge to that hoary exile sentimentalism. Here, I will exile what others won’t. I exile apathy. I exile cynicism. I exile the emperor himself, sarcasm, that frightened tyrannical prick, ungrateful grandchild of sentimentalism, ruling on a stolen throne. It’s everything sentimentalism is. The same face, the same blood, the same feelings. Only younger. And false. Hiding itself behind a sneering mask.)

Today, I had the day off. Even after dawn, the sky stayed dark. Winds shook the attic. The clouds poured rain. A moth had gotten inside, which I caught and then set free on the balcony. I ate a few handfuls of oats, a couple apples. I brushed my teeth (salvaged baking soda), trimmed my fingernails, snipped my toenails. Then I zipped myself into my raincoat (halfway) to go visit Grandpa Uyaquq. (The zipper is broken, is why the raincoat only zips halfway.) Thunder crackled above the ocean. My umbrella shuddered under the force of the rain. As I passed the diner, the wind blew out my umbrella, snapping its frame through its fabric like bones through skin. From there I ran to the pioneer home, leaping puddles with the broken umbrella, rain battering my hood.

In the lobby, dripping rainwater onto the carpeted mat, I overheard a group of nurses quarreling about the monsters. Most locals don’t believe the monsters exist, refer to the

monsters as a “superstition” of the “natives.” Still, this season is always tense around town! There is a direct relationship between the level of tension and the number of bodies on the beach. Even for those who don’t believe in the monsters, the possibility is terrifying. That the monsters themselves might come ashore. That this town might get consumed alive overnight.

“The monsters have gotten bigger,” whispered a nurse blinking through browline glasses.

“No one has ever seen one,” laughed a plump nurse.

“But an octopus?” said a nurse with a flattop haircut.

Oh, yes, I forgot to mention: that night before, a gigantic scarlet octopus had washed ashore, its arms tangled dementedly, its mantle crushed like a piece of rotten fruit. It is rare for the monsters to kill something of that magnitude. Until last night, an octopus had not washed ashore for seven years.

“The animals get killed by boats,” the plump nurse laughed.

“Propellers,” called a passing nurse embracing a clipboard of paperwork.

“Or poachers,” the plump nurse said.

The nurse with the flattop haircut was shaking his head, huffily.

“The monsters can take human form! That’s why no one has ever seen one! We probably have but didn’t know!” the nurse with the flattop haircut argued, his hands on his waist.

I racked the broken umbrella, keyed the code for the elevator, rode to the floor above. It wasn’t illogical to think that the monsters could take human form. Organisms often evolve cryptic features. Jellyfish have evolved transparency. Sharks have evolved camouflaged skins, turtles have evolved camouflaged shells. Squid have evolved skin that changes color, sea slugs can mimic coral polyps, frogfish can mimic stones, pipefish can mimic seagrass, scorpionfish can mimic dead brown leaves. So the monsters might mimic us. That sort of

crypsis would have an obvious logic, evolutionarily. Another species might have been living among us for centuries without us knowing. Perhaps so many centuries that the monsters themselves had forgotten, by now, that they were mimicking, that they were something separate, that human form didn't mean human, necessarily.

The hallway upstairs is the length of an escape tunnel, although, for people who live there, it never leads to that. My stepbrother stood gazing out a bank of windows, lightning flickering across him, a puddle forming around his heels. Bright red woolen hat; unbuttoned trenchcoat; red tie, charcoal suit, polished brogues. A nurse was murmuring somewhere, checking charts.

"He's still sleeping," Peter said.

He was gazing at the mountains in the distance, through the haze of rainfall.

"More loggers came," Peter murmured. "They're clearcutting the backside of the mountains." Lightning flashed again. "Destroying the whole ecosystem for a bit of profit."

Peter and his girlfriend share a rundown drafty lodge in the mountains overlooking a logging road. The lodge is smoky, and cramped, and leaks during storms, but nevertheless gives Peter and his girlfriend and his coconspirators an isolated location to prepare for their fires.

Just then, a number of seemingly unconnected details connected in my mind, images from that morning in the attic a few days ago: his unshaven cheeks; his mucky brogues; the fresh scrapes (barbwire, probably, maybe thorns) that had marked his palms and knuckles. It finally dawned on me where he had been, what he had been out doing, before coming to visit me. He had been scouting.

"Are you planning another event?" I said.

Peter blinked, glanced at me.

"Do you want to be a lookout?" Peter said.

“No,” I said.

“Because we could really use another lookout,” Peter said.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I said.

Peter grinned, teeth flashing. His grin faded. His voice lowered.

“Did you see the news last night?” Peter said.

“I don’t have a television,” I said.

“It’s like the media can sense the fires are coming,” Peter said, voice lowering even further. “Yesterday the stations in Juneau ran recaps of the other fires. Maps of the locations, photos of the buildings, random theories of different citizens.”

“There probably aren’t any other stories to run,” I said.

“Everybody interviewed referred to us as ‘ecoterrorists.’ Never ‘activists,’ never ‘guerillas,’ never even ‘extremists.’ The ‘ecoterrorists.’ Every single time,” Peter said.

“Just, whatever you’re planning, please don’t get caught,” I said.

“Terrorists,” Peter grumbled, digging through the pockets of his trenchcoat. “With that word, in this country, you could hang anybody. In three hundred years we’ll have museums about terrorist executions, same as we have museums about witch burnings now. If Guantanamo isn’t the new Salem, I don’t know what is.”

Peter slipped a pair of date bars from his pockets. Date cashew cardamom, based on the color of the wrappers. Or, maybe, date pecan ginger. I no longer have the colors memorized.

“Hungry?” Peter said.

“Those have wrappers,” I said.

“I’ll recycle the wrappers,” Peter said.

“Those kind you can’t recycle,” I said.

Peter ate the date bars—four bites apiece—and stuffed the wrappers in a pocket.

“And whoever made those bars must have consumed electricity, with overwhelming odds the electricity was sourced from a coal plant or a nuclear reactor, which profit from the destruction of whole ecosystems,” I said.

“You have to make certain concessions, if you’re going to live a life,” Peter said through a mouthful, still chewing.

“That’s what the loggers say,” I said.

He swallowed, and laughed, and grinned again.

“Time to work,” Peter said.

He slapped my back, and turned to leave.

“Make sure he eats his breakfast,” Peter called.

As his footsteps receded toward the elevator, past doorway after doorway of wrecked bodies, I stared at the mountains, thinking through another proof.

1. Terrorism is the use of violence in pursuit of political objectives
2. The purpose of a soldier is to use violence in pursuit of political objectives
3. (1, 2) \Rightarrow The purpose of a soldier is to perform terrorism
4. One is a terrorist \Leftrightarrow one performs terrorism
5. (3, 4) \Rightarrow Soldiers are terrorists
- \therefore Soldiers are terrorists

Consequently,

6. Practically every government in the world has a military with soldiers
7. (5, 6) \Rightarrow Practically every government in the world maintains terrorists
8. Practically every government in the world has avowed hatred of terrorism

9. (4, 7, 8) \Rightarrow Governments hate funding some programs

\therefore Governments hate funding some programs

Grandpa Uyaquq's room faces the ocean rather than the mountains. Filtered through the storm, the daylight cast a sea green tint across the curtains, the wallpaper, the furniture, the motionless shapes of sleeping men. I sat in an upholstered chair alongside Grandpa Uyaquq, holding his wrist with my hand. A nurse pushing a cart clattered past the doorway; Mr. Nome, Grandpa Uyaquq's roommate, blinked awake. He stared at me. He reached unsteadily for the eyeglasses on his nightstand, hesitantly hooked the eyeglasses to his ears, carefully adjusted the eyeglasses on his nose, and then stared at me, again, through the eyeglasses. After that he ignored me. He unbuttoned and rebuttoned the upper button of his pajamas, performed a grooming ritual involving his eyebrows, and then began writing an entry in his diary (just a plain leather journal, no unicorns, sorry). Mr. Nome has no family, never gets any visitors of his own. Since his stroke, he can use only a single hand, a single arm, a single leg, a single foot. Only half of his face can frown and smile. Furthermore, he has lost certain brain functions, suffering from a condition known as *asemia*. This means that Mr. Nome cannot understand symbols. All signs, all symbols, to him are now meaningless. The letters of our alphabet, with their loops and tittles and tails, are as inscrutable to him as the tildes and cedillas and breves of a foreign alphabet. Ditto marks, pound signs, ampersands, pilcrows, commas, are indecipherable. Numbers are incomprehensible. An exit sign, a voltage warning, the gender symbols on public toilets, are utterly unintelligible. Cautionary crossbones might as well mean "recyclable," slashed circles "support fascism," curved arrows "beyond this point no hats allowed." There are authors who experiment with asemic writing—writing novels and poetry in meaningless symbols—but he is not experimental. He simply cannot express himself

any other way. Nonsense symbols are now his only outlet. Like glossolalia. Speaking in tongues. Writing the symbols seems to calm him.

I'm writing in my own now. A nurse has wheeled Mr. Nome off to the cafeteria for breakfast. Grandpa Uyaquq is wheezing in his sleep, drooling a bit on his pillow. I don't know what he dreams of. Maybe he dreams of the monsters. Grandpa Uyaquq always wanted proof. He has six hundred dollars in an account at the bank where Peter works, reserved for whoever can document a sighting. Maybe that's the truth about why I've been watching the beach so closely. I don't want the money. But, just once, before the dementia totally consumes him, I wish that he could hold it. A photograph, a sketch, a description, anything. Proof he wasn't wrong.

May Sixteenth

Just read some. This latest chapter opens, "Feelings? Feelings? Any animal can have feelings! — Octun Odrade, *A Makeshift Homunculus*." After the accidental destruction of the floating city, the novel has relocated (yet again) to a mythical city in the volcanoes of the Congo Basin, constructed in gleaming magma chambers by sovereign ngola with enslaved abika. The debtor soldier, concealed behind the stuffed hide of a mountain gorilla, is eavesdropping on a bizarre ceremony, after being forbidden, on eleven separate occasions, from watching.

Take note, unicorns: I've decided that just holding the proof isn't enough. I want my grandfather to see the monsters himself. ∴, after work today, I walked to the pioneer home, signed him out, and wheeled him down through town to the harbor (stopping occasionally to pick up some crumpled aluminum, a stained napkin, a pink rubber band). A plaid woolen blanket was slung over my shoulders, and the camouflage binoculars hung from my neck, and the novel was stuffed into the seat of my jeans. Grandpa Uyaquq was

zipped into a sky blue down parka. His hair was plastered to his forehead in the front and matted chaotically to his neck in the back and puffing out wildly on both sides, which if it had been an actual hairstyle might have been called a “napper.” His wheelchair has wheels that squeak with each rotation. Along the way, I tried to talk to him, but his mind wasn’t there. A seaplane with bright pontoons landed in the harbor with a splash, which made his eyes widen, but that was as alert as his mind ever got. Unlike Mr. Nome, Grandpa Uyaquq can still use both sides of his body—both hands, both arms, both legs, both feet—and the linguistic consequences of his dementia are also different than those of asemia. He can’t speak anymore, but he can still comprehend written language, and he can still communicate. When his mind is there, he can shake his head “yes” and “no” to answer your questions. He can smile and frown, can laugh and groan, can rap his knuckles on your chest to scold you.

At the end of the boardwalk, I helped him stand, collapsed the wheelchair, and (lugging the wheelchair) then helped him totter across the black sand toward the point in the distance. The beach was deserted. There weren’t even footprints, just rippled divots molded into the sand by the wind. Flies hovered above the seals, the walruses, the porpoises, the giant octopus with the tangled arms. Birds fluttered from carcass to carcass, scavenging rotten meat. Crows, magpies, shrieking crested jays. At the point, I expanded the wheelchair, and helped him lower himself into the seat. I wrapped him in the plaid woolen blanket, set the camouflage binoculars on his lap, and then settled onto the boulder. Okay! We were ready now! Let the monsters come! I thought.

“If you see anything, use the binoculars,” I said.

Grandpa Uyaquq was blinking as if about to fall back to sleep. Behind us, the pines obscured any view of the houses looming on the hillside above the beach. Pinecones occasionally dropped from the branches into the underbrush.

We hadn't been there long when back toward the harbor a distorted blurred figure stepped from the boardwalk, into the sand, and then began, like a mirage, flickering toward us along the shoreline. The figure gained definition gradually, took on form, but not until it somehow tripped over the sand, caught itself, did I recognize who it was. She was marching directly at us. That girl. Ash. I was overwhelmed suddenly by contradictory emotions: joy; dismay; relief; panic. I became very aware of the stain (chocolate, salvaged) on the sleeve of my sweater. I was possibly blushing, and definitely sweating. (None of this made any sense, whatsoever. But you unicorns deserve to know the truth. I can be that illogical.)

For the entire length of the beach, the girl marched directly at us, intently, resolutely, without wavering—and then proceeded to walk directly past us. Not far, but did. Then stopped, and—still ignoring us—bent to look at a dead seal. (One of the hundreds—who knows how she chose it.)

After perusing the carcass, and sniffing the air, and gagging dramatically, she straightened again. She glanced at us. As if just noticing us sitting there, she waved, and strolled back over.

She stood between the wheelchair and the boulder, her hands propped on her hips, scrutinizing my grandfather, then turning to me.

“So, giant, you're on monster duty today too?” Ash said.

I pointed at Grandpa Uyaquq.

“He's the expert,” I said.

Her face changed abruptly—an aspiring musician in the presence of a rock star.

“You know stuff about the bloodsuckers?” she said to him, in almost a whisper, awed.

Grandpa Uyaquq blinked at the ocean, oblivious.

“Sorry, his mind isn't always there,” I said.

She frowned.

“Oh,” she said.

She pursed her lips, and cocked her head, peering at him.

“Hey, gramps, I like your hair,” she said.

Grandpa Uyaquq blinked at the ocean, oblivious.

“I like his hair,” she whispered at me, like a secret.

She nudged the novel aside, brushed the surface of the boulder, as if sweeping off invisible dust, and then sat with me. Her hair hung from the raised hood of a gigantic anorak. Now that her hair was dry, it was a paler gray, almost white. There wasn't any rain, today. Nevertheless, just in case, I had brought my umbrella, which is fixed, partially. (At the pioneer home yesterday, while I was sitting with Grandfather Uyaquq, a nurse found the umbrella on the rack in the lobby and—probably assuming it had been abandoned—garbaged it. I had to dig it out of the dumpster, afterward.) Ash examined the umbrella, touching the duct tape, hesitantly, as if attempting to read the pulse of a sleeping animal.

“How did your hair get that color?” I said.

“Dye,” she said.

She shoved her hands into the pockets of her anorak.

“I have to use special shampoo,” she said.

She hunched, shivering.

“If you knew how much the shampoo costs, you'd hate me forever,” she said.

She turned toward the horizon. I couldn't think of anything at all to say. Wind thrashed across the ocean, making the waves whitecaps.

“We aren't going to be lovers,” she said.

“Okay,” I said.

“Good, great, you didn't even put up a fight,” she said.

I hoped Grandpa Uyaquq hadn't caught that line about lovers. (I did agree though that anything romantic was totally out of the question.) She tucked her hair, within the hood, behind her ears. Her lips were crusted with something like raspberry jam.

"Let's pretend that I'm a monster," she said, "a monster that ran away, and now I've come here searching for the others, waiting for my kind to come for me, but, I haven't decided yet, whether I actually want to go back."

She examined the novel, flipping past dog-eared pages, water-damaged pages, the varicolored marginalia of library patrons.

"Maybe I'm only eighteen—nineteen in a month—but I've already been everywhere and seen everything," she said. "My parents wear boring clothes, my parents have boring haircuts, but my parents are into cryptids. Teachers, totally ordinary, except for that one weird thing. We didn't take trips to monuments, to amusement parks, to sightsee big buildings. Every trip we took, we were looking for cryptids. Here, there, all over the country."

"But your parents are dead now?" I said.

She squinted, thinking.

"Yes," she said.

She set the novel aside again.

"Thanks for reminding me," she said.

She batted at some flies hovering near the boulder.

"We took camping trips looking for Urayuli, Sasquatch, Chasquatch. We took road trips looking for the Grassman, the Goatman, the Mothman, the Beaman. We took boating trips looking for Bessie, Tessie, Chessie, Sharlie, Champie. We took hiking trips looking for Wampus Cats, Skunk Apes, Thunderbirds. The Beast of Bladenboro. The Mogollon Monster. The Fouke Creature. The Jersey Devil. The Dover Demon. The Loveland Frog. Momo, which supposedly has a head the shape of a pumpkin. Melon Heads, which sup-

posedly have heads the shape of melons. Chupacabra, which suck the blood of goats and sheep. Pukwudgie, which are supposedly scary, but are probably cute. Even things nobody else considers cryptids! The lights in Paulding, Michigan. The lights in Gurdon, Arkansas. The lights in Ballard, Utah. The lights in Marfa, Texas. The lights in Hornet, Missouri. The lights in Oviedo, Florida. The totally unexplained humming sounds in Taos, Arizona, in Kokomo, Indiana, in Hilo, Hawaii. My parents thought the hums were from some unidentified species of giant bat, like their song or their call or whatever, when the bats were mating.”

She inhaled, as if gathering breath to launch into another list, but then exhaled and was quiet.

“Did you see anything?” I said.

“We saw some lights in Paulding.” She scraped at the raspberry jam with the curved rim of a thumbnail. “My parents thought the lights were these living fossils, like maybe enormous fireflies that are born underground and live there and molt there and mate there and then after laying their eggs there finally come aboveground and float into the sky and die.” She glanced at me, sheepishly. “They looked like headlights.”

\forall those monsters, \exists a sighting of that monster. Theories of their existence are based on claims of these sightings. Our monsters, however, have never been sighted. Their existence is instead implied. By the bodies. Death must have a cause.

The seals, the walruses, the porpoises, an octopus occasionally, are the worst things ever get. The otters never wash ashore. The otters never die. Sometimes a few scamper along the beach, weaving through the carcasses, looking puzzled. Like, why so much wasted life?

“Hey, gramps, did you know this guy eats dumpster bananas?” Ash said.

She had turned to Grandpa Uyaquq, was adjusting the blanket, patting the wool smooth.

“You saw me in the dumpster?” I said.

“Will you please explain to me why you’re such a freak about food?” she said.

“I probably shouldn’t,” I said.

“Because I don’t get it,” she said.

“I don’t want to make you feel bad, or make you upset, or hurt your feelings,” I said.

“And I want you to tell me,” she said.

“I actually would rather not,” I said.

“Just say it!” she shouted.

I think that shout is what got my blood going. I felt this rage, suddenly. Technically the question was about dumpsters, but I apparently had quite a few other topics that had built up, ∴ I immediately strayed into unrelated territory and never came back around.

“Okay,” I growled, “obviously, if I stop driving cars, that isn’t going to change anything, if I stop using plastic, that isn’t going to change anything, if I stop using electricity, that isn’t going to change anything, the oceans will still rise, the landfills will still rise, the nuclear reactors will still dump radioactive waste with a half-life of a million years, and if I stop eating meat, yes, obviously, that isn’t going to change anything, the meat companies will keep electrocuting cows, and braining cows, and gassing cows, and culling chicks, and trimming beaks, and leaving chickens in overcrowded unventilated factory farms to trample themselves to death, none of that is going to stop, unless everybody, all together, the whole country, stops eating meat, but somebody has to start, and I’m part of everybody, so I’ll start, I’ll take the lead, and if everybody follows, the killing will stop, and if nobody follows, then I tried, I did my part, and the rest of you can blame yourselves.”

I had gotten so upset that I had begun trembling, but now wasn’t upset, anymore, only mortified, and ashamed. I couldn’t even look at her. I pretended to wipe something from my beard, picked up the novel, put down the novel, frantically needing choreography,

something to do. I could feel her staring. I looked at her finally. Her eyes were huge.

“I just remembered I left a light on at the hotel,” she said.

She beamed.

Just then, Grandpa Uyaquq stirred—grunting, and shifting in the wheelchair, and fumbling for the binoculars.

“Grandpa?” I said.

He raised the binoculars to his eyes, focusing on something out in the ocean.

“You see something?” I said.

Ash had ripped her hood from her head, had whirled toward the water. I scanned the waves, searching for something other than whitecaps. Seagulls, water, seagulls, water.

Together, we glanced at Grandpa Uyaquq as he lowered the binoculars back to his lap.

He shook his head: “No.”

But there was a spark in his eyes. Things weren't too late. His mind was still there. He wanted that proof, too.

May Nineteenth

Assume every person has, at the core of their psyche, an idea. One lone axiom. One idea given primacy over all others. The origin of the whole spiraling chain of logic behind each of their mundane, everyday, predictable choices.

I have been obsessing over this, all day, trying to work out the precise wording for the cores of different people.

Grandpa Uyaquq's core idea: protect yourself. He obviously felt some empathy for animals—a memory of seeing him tending to, scratching the belly of, whispering into the ears of a neighbor's ill dog—but he still ate animals, ∴ he knew meat would give him energy, vigor, health, and, at his core, that axiom overruled all others. He kept a shotgun at the

door, ∴ given the choice between shooting a trespasser or risking bodily harm, he would have shot the trespasser.

Peter's core idea: save what you can. Though rooted in selflessness, the idea gives a nod toward compromise, toward certain limitations, toward exceptions that inevitably must be made. A memory (photographed) of a fifteen-year-old Peter picketing a local cattle ranch in a pair of leather loafers. A memory (televised) of a nineteen-year-old Peter chaining himself to a pine tree scheduled for removal from his college campus, only to unchain himself hours later when threatened with expulsion. A memory (firsthand) of a twenty-three-year-old Peter buying a truck, a gigantic gas-guzzler, for the sole purpose of hauling around drums of still further gasoline, so he and his coconspirators could burn paper mills and shale mines (unoccupied, always) to protest industrial pollution, which fires, obviously, consumed gasoline and created garbage and polluted the ecosystem with smoke and with ashes and with drifting particles of noxious burned plastic. ("A few bombs dropped in the right spots can save a billion lives," Peter said.)

My core idea, in college: pursue happiness. (Worldwide, possibly, the commonest core idea?) When I felt like grilling steak, I bought a steak and grilled it. When I felt like drinking beer, I bought a beer and drank it. When I felt like driving around, watching television, microwaving leftovers, taking an hour-long shower, I did it, I did it, I did it, I did it. (If I didn't have the money for a laptop, my core idea overruled my sense of financial responsibility, and I bought the laptop on credit.) Like anybody, a number of other ideas hovered around the edge of my core, which accounted for certain idiosyncrasies. (I bought cage-free eggs, free-range chevre, pasture-centered pork, purportedly humane beef, precursors to my veganism.) But only when those edge ideas didn't interfere with my core idea: that was the idea that ultimately dictated my choices, and ∴ my actions, and ∴ my nature, and ∴ my life. Then one week Peter visited me at college (his alma mater) and,

during a drunken (whiskey) dispute, drew a complex diagram on the wall above my bed illustrating all of the tangled connections between honey bees and corn syrup, light bulbs and nuclear reactors, chimneys and acid rain and shampoo and algal bloom, a vast network of cause and effect, and there we were, two stick-figure stepbrothers, tangled up in it. His basic argument: your happiness \Leftrightarrow this suffering. He wanted a lookout (the burning of a slaughterhouse), which he didn't get. Instead, he managed to dislodge my core idea, and a new idea thumped from the edge into my core. The transition was gradual but unshakable. Within months, I was scavenging. (Peter later claimed fault for having "created a monster.") Now, basically, my core idea: avoid causing suffering. Or what an ex-girlfriend (already an ex, the breakup had been with the steak-grilling, beer-drinking, showering me) characterized as: push away everybody close to you by pretending to be a hero. Or what an ex-roommate (not yet an ex) characterized as: be a total slob because you're sad about some dying penguins.

I am not, obviously, a hero. I am a bottom feeder, a brainless detritivore, the hollow-eyed greasy-haired man picking through the local dumpster. Peter is a practical vigilante; I am a psychotic vigilante. I do not make exceptions. \therefore I can't. You cannot choose your core idea. You can try to dislodge your core idea, but that takes a lot of force. Peter didn't dislodge mine just like that. Pressure built for years—an exhibit at a zoo, a boring lecture in a random elective, a photo of beached kelp black with tarry oil, a roadside billboard, a television commercial, a spot of pavement shimmering with a rainbow of spilled petroleum—until, that night, Peter flicked it, and that final pressure sent it pinwheeling off into the outer limits of my psyche.

That was also the point at which I became unable to read modern novels. Novels were fiery once. Opinionated, with messages, lessons, morals. Now novels cannot have opinions. Now if a novel has opinions, it has to undercut those opinions elsewhere, disprove

anything it's proven. Affect apathy. Pander to conservatives and progressives alike. I prefer older novels—novels with opinions—novels that breathe fire.

1. Society has rejected moralism
2. Moralism is the expression of belief in a right and a wrong
3. (1, 2) \Rightarrow Society has rejected belief in a right and a wrong
4. One is a moralist \Leftrightarrow one practices moralism
5. (2, 4) \Rightarrow Moralists express belief in a right and a wrong
6. (3, 5) \Rightarrow Moralists believe things deemed nonexistent are existent
- \therefore Moralists believe things deemed nonexistent are existent

Consequently,

7. One who believes things deemed nonexistent are existent is a cryptozoologist
8. (6, 7) \Rightarrow Moralists are cryptozoologists
- \therefore Moralists are cryptozoologists

(True to form, unicorns, this latest proof likely would earn a flunking grade!)

Anyway, sorry not to write the past few days, but the monsters have been occupying all my spare time. Each day, after work, I meet that girl at the roundabout, and from there we walk to the pioneer home. (Along the way, she tells me things, unprompted, about her day. An exemplar from yesterday: as we rode the elevator to the hallway upstairs, she announced, “Today I ate a hamburger with bacon, threw away a whole bottle of nail polish for being the wrong color, and kept using a hand dryer even after my hands were dry because the air felt nice.” She glanced at me, curiously. “Do you hate me yet?”) We sign out

Grandpa Uyaquq and Mr. Nome, and wheel them through town, to the harbor, in their wheelchairs.

At the beach, we set up our makeshift camp: a salvaged beach umbrella spiked into the sand, shading the wheelchairs; assorted woolen blankets bundling the old men; for her and me, rusty foldouts from the house; the camouflage binoculars, and a disposable camera, set out on the boulder. (Ash says film images are best for proving the existence of a cryptid, ∴ digital are easy to forge.) Ash buys a carton of milk, a stack of cups, a container of frosted vanilla cupcakes, sets all of that out onto the boulder, too. Grandpa Uyaquq and Mr. Nome (whom Ash refers to as “hairy gramps” and “baldy gramps,” respectively, or, sometimes, “our chaperones”) sip their milks, and chew their cupcakes, and nap, occasionally. Ash sips her milk, and chews her cupcake, and monopolizes the binoculars. I eat mushy bananas. Together, we scan the ocean, and keep lookout for signs of monsters.

Mr. Nome, like me, always brings his journal along, and writes sometimes.

Ash, meanwhile, has ceaseless questions for Grandpa Uyaquq.

An exemplar from yesterday:

Grandpa Uyaquq had just shut his eyes for a nap, creased face relaxing into a drowsy smile, when Ash suddenly dropped the binoculars into her lap and nudged him awake again.

“Hey, gramps,” she said.

He blinked, blearily, his face a startled grimace.

“I’ve heard the monsters live out deep, but have to come in really close to shore to drop off the bodies,” she said.

He wiped some crumbs from his parka, and then shook his head: “Yes.”

“Yeah. Yeah! Or how else could the dead stuff always float to this exact beach?” she said, enthusiastically, and then jammed the binoculars to her face again.

Another:

Grandpa Uyaquq was taking a turn with the binoculars (although had gotten distracted, focusing on a tangerine yellow seaplane circling high above the harbor). Ash nudged him, and leaned toward him, speaking in a whisper almost.

“Is it true that people vanish sometimes? Unexplained disappearances? Like probably just runaways, but maybe not?” she said.

Grinning, he shook his head: “Yes.”

“You think maybe what happened was that they saw the monsters, and the monsters dragged them out to sea, so nobody would ever know?” she said.

He thought, hesitated, and then shook his head: “Yes.”

“So if we see a monster, it won’t let us live?” she said.

He shook his head, and then shook his head again: “Yes,” “No,” he wasn’t sure.

Ash cackled, delighted.

“Gramps, you’re a genius!” she said.

Then handed Grandpa Uyaquq another cupcake.

She seems to have experience caretaking. She’s very good with the old men! Mr. Nome, she keeps his mouth wiped clean, helps him turn his pages, does handstands and headstands to entertain him. When Grandpa Uyaquq gets confused, she waves it away, as if misplacing your memories were nothing to feel ashamed of, and then chatters at him about some random topic for a while so that he doesn’t feel any need to try to think, but can merely listen. (Or pretend to.)

Sometime before dusk, we wheel Grandpa Uyaquq and Mr. Nome back through town to the pioneer home, sign them back in, then say goodnight at the roundabout. I carry home the umbrella, the blankets, the foldouts, the binoculars, alone.

I haven’t dated anybody since college. I never will again, probably. My lifestyle practi-

cally guarantees it. And even if I met somebody who didn't mind my diet, my garb, my lack of phone and car, I couldn't let myself get involved. ∴ of my core idea. In relationships, you can't help but cause suffering. I can't, at least. (I don't mean to speak for you unicorns.) If possible, I would like to go the rest of my life without making another person cry.

That's what's nice about being with Ash. Things are simple. Platonic. We can just sit on the beach together, for a few hours a night, with some old men in wheelchairs.

Oh, I forgot to mention: so have we seen any monsters?

No. So far we have seen nothing. Ash has wasted six photos (of the disposable camera) on pictures of Mr. Nome.

May Twenty-First

Technically, by now today's probably tomorrow. I'm going to try to get all of this down, although I'll have to do so very quietly. (This may turn out sloppy: the patch of moonlight I'm using keeps moving across the floorboards.)

What that last entry said about never dating anybody again doesn't mean I haven't been lonely. Actually, I've been brutally lonely lately. Eavesdropping, chatting, being near people isn't enough. The loneliness is spiritual, yes, but also intensely physical. A need for contact. Lately, waking on the mattress in the morning, I've had this sloshing feeling somewhere in the region of my navel, as if all the loneliness had pooled there overnight. My skin hums like an electrified fence. An object that cannot serve its purpose unless it's being touched. But would only hurt whatever touched it.

This morning that electric feeling was especially bad. I already could tell my skin was going to be humming like that all day. I could hardly bring myself to get out of bed. Nevertheless, I had a job to do! ∴ I ate some oats for breakfast, a few bananas, brushed my

teeth, got dressed and trekked down to work, secretly wishing every person I passed would just reach over and touch me. A hand pressed to my cheek—even that would have been enough. I cannot even describe how intense that longing was. If somebody had bumped me, unintentionally brushed my wrist with some knuckles, I honestly believe that quick touch would have brought tears to my eyes.

At work today we laid sod outside the library, mulched the shrubs. Not too grueling. Fairly minimal blisters. The day went fast.

Afterward, I went home to eat a can of chickpeas, then gathered our supplies for the beach (the umbrella, the binoculars, the foldouts, the blankets) and hauled everything down through town, to the roundabout, to meet the girl there. I sat on a guardrail, getting bitten by mosquitoes, getting bitten by flies, waiting, for about an hour. But Ash never came.

I couldn't wheel both Grandpa Uyaquq and Mr. Nome on my own, and signing out Grandpa Uyaquq by himself felt really wrong now, as then Mr. Nome would be left all alone.

I never went to the pioneer home.

I hauled our supplies back to the house.

I was out of food again, so at nightfall I wandered back through town to the grocery and filled my backpack in the dumpster. Overripe pears, overripe apples, golden potatoes with downy sprouts. Expired cans of soybeans. Hardly moldy raspberries. An expired jar of peanut butter. Sealed bars of (vegan!) chocolate, crusted with spilled sauce (pesto?). Wilted radishes. Inexplicably, an entire box of brown rice. I accidentally stepped on a carton of eggs, had to wipe the yolk and shell off my boots onto the weeds.

Walking home, I passed the windowfront of televisions. I glanced at the screens, glanced away, glanced back. I stopped.

Identical images flickered on the televisions. Shaky aerial footage of a gigantic building, flames jerking in the windows like frantic trapped people waving for help. Another building, company offices, sooty firefighters wandering about the smoking wreckage. Another, a one-story, something like a hanger or a boathouse or a garage, ablaze with golden light.

Not recaps. The footage was live. Three fires had been lit in a single night.

“Nobody came through the gate, the fire just appeared, no warning!” shouted a uniformed guard wielding a lit flashlight.

“Really sad to see your workplace just gutted,” commented a squat bald man either cradling or smothering his infant.

“Senseless, senseless,” commiserated a random woman lugging plastic bags.

“These terrorists have hijacked the whole movement,” explained somebody wearing a tweed suit and gold watch, but nothing else was said of the ecoterrorists, whether they had been captured or spotted or escaped undetected, and then the program cut to commercial, a flashy advertisement for a racing championship, cars whizzing around in meaningless circles.

I had no way to get ahold of Peter, would have to wait for him to get ahold of me. I was worried, but not really. He knew how to take care of himself; he had never been caught before.

I wandered down to the beach, nibbling chocolate. The motorboats and seaplanes were all moored for the night in the harbor. I could smell the harvest in my backpack, a pungent ripe smell. The moon was ripe too, hanging full and gold above the beach, glinting off the crests of waves, the wet stones. The tide was all the way out.

I was about to head home when I saw somebody was standing out at the point, perched on the boulder. Ash was. Gazing at the ocean, her hair rippling in the wind like kelp in a wave, her anorak billowing around her.

I wandered down to the point, went and stood at the boulder, still nibbling chocolate.

Her hair was damp, like the night when we had met, and her moccasins lay abandoned in the sand. Her fingernails and her toenails were painted saffron orange. Her nostrils were flared.

“Sorry, giant,” she murmured.

She glanced at me, then hopped from the boulder into the sand.

“I overslept,” she said.

We sat on the boulder together, as waves crashed quietly onto the far-off tidal shoreline. I offered her chocolate, which she refused. (“Is that dumpster chocolate?” she asked, suspiciously. She pinched the bar between a pair of fingers, flipping it this way, flipping it that way, squinting, scrutinizing. “It looks normal,” she said, less suspiciously. She tucked her hair behind her ears, and bent over the chocolate, sniffing tentatively. “It smells normal,” she said, even less suspiciously. She grimaced, like somebody bracing for a leap from a cliff. She raised the chocolate to her mouth. She cracked her lips—just barely. She parted her teeth—just barely. Eyes shut, she leaned in toward the chocolate—then shoved the bar back at me, and bleghed, saying, “No, no, it’s still just too gross.”) Clouds drifted across the moon. As the moonlight vanished, the bright glints on the waves and the stones vanished, everything vanished, the world was reduced to sounds and smells, the touch of the wind, the temperature of the boulder, the texture of the sand. I glanced toward her, but couldn’t see her, only hear. She had begun to ask me a question, I don’t remember what, ∴ before she could finish, the clouds drifted beyond the moon, moonlight lit the landscape, and her voice caught.

Staring off toward the ocean, her mouth opened and shut, opened and shut, opened and shut, like the mouth of a fish in a net.

I followed her gaze, turning to the shoreline, then dropped the chocolate.

In the shallows there, among the waves, something gigantic was splashing toward shore.

The thing was approximately the size of a dumptruck. Breakers broke against it, splattering foamy water. Moonlight hit a wheeling fin.

“Bloodsucker,” Ash whispered.

Then clouds drifted across the moon again, and the beach went dark.

I now understand why descriptions of monsters are always so imprecise, unreliable, contradictory. ∴ when you find a monster—even if you’re looking for a monster—you don’t actually look. You run.

We hurried along the beach, stumbling over driftwood, slipping over stones.

She whispered, “We saw it.”

She whispered, “We’re hall of famers.”

And, anxiously, “It won’t want anybody to know.”

We hurried down the boardwalk together, passed the harbor, headed into town toward the glowing windows of the restaurants and the neon signage of the taverns.

At some point I became aware that we were being followed. Something was following us. Silhouettes. Merging, separating. Sometimes forming a single six-armed silhouette, sometimes breaking apart into triplet silhouettes with a pair of arms apiece. As the silhouettes marched across the street, a streetlamp illuminated their bodies. Three people wearing black jackets. The people were large—bigger even than me.

Ash saw.

“Did the monster turn into those people?” she whispered.

The silhouettes had crossed back into darkness, merged back into a single shadow.

“Turn into?” I whispered.

Ash clutched my sweater, pointed at the harbor, where silhouettes were marching in off of a dock.

“Are those other monsters?” she whispered.

We stopped, under a streetlamp, as the six-armed silhouette continued drawing closer.

“You’re panicking,” I whispered.

Silhouettes poured from an alleyway.

“I think sometimes the best thing is to panic,” she whispered.

If the monsters could mimic us, that would have an obvious logic, evolutionarily.

If the monsters came for us, it would be logical to come at night.

In the diner, people were shaking pepper shakers, squirting ketchup, singing along to country songs. In the taverns, people were ducking darts, shaking hands, spilling foamy beers across the bartop. In the cafe, people were sipping from paper cups, were sipping from plastic cups, as outside monsters overran the streets. In the morning, newscasters would report a slaughtered town. Hotel rooms, littered with overturned room-service carts, overturned room-service trays, twisted sheets, twisted bodies. Hospital hallways, littered with overturned wastebaskets, overturned wheelchairs, spilled gurneys, spilled bodies. Schoolyard playgrounds, littered with shredded raincoats, shredded backpacks, bodies. Misshapen, skinless, bloody. Carcasses stripped to the bone.

The six-armed silhouette broke apart, merged again, broke apart, rushing toward us.

“Can we run please?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I said.

But as we ran, we ran apart from each other, she vaulted the steps and yanked open the door and didn’t realize until she was in the diner with those other people that I wasn’t there, that I wasn’t with her, that she had gone somewhere I couldn’t follow, ∴ I was already running through the roundabout toward home, my boots pounding against the pavement, my backpack thumping against my back, and then up the hill, where what ensued probably seems ridiculous given the circumstances, but on the hill there just wasn’t

help for me, only heated houses with shining windows, and my survival instinct was telling me to knock on a door to hide in a house, but my core idea was overruling that ∴ if heat escaped from the houses then the houses would have to consume additional energy to heat additional air, so I kept running without looking back, but as I ran beneath a streetlamp I found myself facing a mammoth cloud of hovering gnats, and my survival instinct told me just to bat the gnats aside ∴ stopping might mean dying, but my core idea overruled that ∴ if the gnats got batted the gnats might be harmed, so I stopped, and paced squinting from curb to curb, until I found, finally, a passage through the gnats, but as I ran through and scrambled over a fence and rounded the corner I found myself facing a monstrous garden of budding herbs, each labeled with a handwritten tag, and my survival instinct told me just to cut through the garden, but my core idea overruled that ∴ if the herbs were trampled the herbs might die, and then whoever had planted the herbs would have to buy herbs instead, in a plastic bag, which would take three hundred years to decompose, and those packages of storebought herbs always come with way too much, so that the bulk of the herbs are wasted, so I didn't cut through the garden, but instead looped around, and felt weak, and felt dizzy, and felt hungry, and had to stop to pick up a plastic spork, and a stray hound was barking at whatever was behind me.

The house of course was pitch-dark. I flew down the driveway through moonlight and shadows, bounded up the rusted staircase bolted to the house siding. From the balcony, I glanced back at the driveway, but didn't see anything following. Still, as I threw open the door, I reached for the lamp, ∴ with a lamp lit, I wouldn't be as frightened. But, as I stood there in the doorway, staring at the lamp in the moonlight, my hand on the switch, I felt another sort of terror, ∴ when I looked at the lamp, I saw the cord, and when I looked at the cord, I saw the outlet, and when I looked at the outlet, I saw beyond the outlet, the whole twisting chain of power (the electricity at the outlet, there, and beyond, wriggling

along its wires through the walls of the house, from the attic into the unlit den below into a wallpapered bedroom into a carpeted closet twisting past the darkened stairway into the empty pantry past the kitchen alcoves into the sunroom and without warning plunging sickeningly into the circuit breaker in the basement workshop, now, and outside, shooting through the electric meter with its spinning dials, leaping through the sky to the transformer on its pole, swooping from pole to pole with the power lines, above the roads, over vehicles with headlights, past a lake of wailing loons, and over the barbwire fence and through the switch tower and into the substation, flailing through the distribution bus and the capacitor banks and the regulator banks there, and then leaping with the power lines over the barbwire fence into the sky again, swooping from pylon to pylon, above the pines, over a farm, above the pines, across a deserted highway, above the pines, past a burning building, above the pines, alongside a flock of scattering bats, above the pines, toward in the distance what looks like another burning building, but isn't, it's not, it's home, the birthplace, the power plant, and as you head toward the billowing smokestacks, against the flow of all of that newborn electricity, you can sense that neonatal fear in the power lines there, the terrified humming, the electricity there existential, already haunted by dreamlike visions, prenatal memories, of the generator's whirring rotor, the turbine's whirling blades, and, beyond everything, that monstrous womb, the fiery furnace of burning coal).

I propped a chair against the door. I sat in the dark, on the mattress, under a heap of blankets, watching the window in the door for signs of movement.

I wasn't there long before I began hearing noises. Gravel skittering in the driveway; the rusted staircase creaking on its bolts, creaking again, again; the balcony groaning. A blurry form crossed the window. Stood there.

I kept still.

The doorknob squeaked. I stopped breathing. The doorknob squeaked again. The chair scraped; the door thudded; the chair toppled, clattering to the floorboards.

The form stepped through the door.

“Hello,” it whispered.

Like a lisp, but not.

“How did you find this place?” I whispered.

“I guess once when I was stalking you,” she whispered.

She shut the door.

“It’s freezing.”

“The heat’s off,” I whispered.

“Have you got any cocoa?”

“There’s an old tin in the cupboard,” I whispered.

“I’ll make some then.”

She sniffed the kettle, cranked the faucet, stuck the kettle under the faucet, dug for the lid (the faucet running, the kettle overflowing, water spilling wasted into the drain), stopped the faucet, poured some water from the kettle (glugging wasted into the drain), wiped the kettle with the cuff of her anorak, capped the kettle with the lid, lit a burner. Beads of water gathered mass on the sides of the kettle, zigzagged abruptly toward the burner, hissed to steam. The whistle on the kettle is broken. Instead, when the water boils, the kettle rumbles. I never use the stove.

She sat on the mattress, hugging her knees like somebody protecting frightened children, as the water heated.

“You live like this?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Your brain is awful to you,” she whispered.

She scooted toward me, under the blankets, her anorak rustling against my sweater. The pale light of the burner flickered across half her face. Her eyelashes were clumped with mascara.

“Is there a lock on the door?” she whispered.

“No,” I whispered.

“Will the monsters find us here?” she whispered.

“Maybe,” I whispered.

She whispered, “The bloodsuck—”

Mid-word, mid-sentence, mid-everything, she grabbed my sweater, kissing me. Her lips to my lips. Her nose to my nose. Her eyes, unshut, at my eyes. She stared at me. I stared at her. She yanked the zipper of her anorak, wriggled out, kissed me again, gripped my shoulders, kissed me again, yanked the zipper of her jeans, wriggled out, kissed me again, straddled me, her sweatshirt swaying, our hands battling, mine trying to block hers, forcing them away as they clutched at my chest, forcing them away as they clutched at my hips, forcing them away as her fingers clawed across my jeans and slipped between my legs and squeezed me there, the kettle was rumbling, my hands pinned her hands, she stopped kissing me.

“Stop thinking,” she said.

“I shouldn’t,” I whispered.

“Stop thinking,” she said.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I whispered.

“Stop thinking,” she said.

“The stove is still on,” I whispered.

“Please, please, please, please, please,” she said.

Then her fingers found my button, my zipper, everything underneath, she eased herself

onto me with a whimper, and as she sat on me, all of my logic broke down, verums toppled, falsums flipped, negations couldn't negate, conjunctions were disjunctions and disjunctions were conjunctions, tautologies weren't, contradictions weren't, things nonexistent were existent, and the truth is that I cried while she moved on me, ∴ she was touching my skin everywhere, and the electrified fence didn't kill her, ∴ she was electric too.

May Twenty-Second

In the morning we ate breakfast together, on the mattress, huddled under the blankets—pears for me, peanut butter for her, dollops spooned from the jar—and she had her cocoa, finally. Something made her laugh, I don't remember what, and she almost spit a mouthful of cocoa across my chest, which, after she swallowed the cocoa, only made her laugh more. We split a glass of water, brushed our teeth (the baking soda scared her, but her breath horrified her, so she had no choice), and got dressed. She claimed my sweater, so I had to dig out my spare from the box under the sink. Now there was daylight, I wasn't as worried about monsters, but, honestly, I was still worried—until, before leaving, I glanced through the lattice attic window at the beach below—saw just how simple the truth was. I laughed, then, too.

I didn't have to work today. We left the house, wandered down through town together, past other couples out for strolls (some probably those silhouettes we saw last night), toward the harbor. A warm, calm, weekend morning. There weren't any bodies littering the playgrounds. There weren't any bodies littering the streets. The only new body was at the beach.

A crowd had gathered—a crowd of people milling about the black sand, a crowd of birds hovering in the bright sky—circling the body. The gigantic carcass of a right whale. Its fins scraped; its fluke crushed; its baleen in tatters. The tide had swept the body in, then

receded, leaving the carcass beached not all that far from the boulder. People were snapping pictures. Children crouched in the yawning mouth. Peter was there (jeans, plaid shirt, leather loafers, bright red woolen hat), had driven Grandpa Uyaquq down to see the body. (We've just sent Peter back for Mr. Nome.)

"We aren't hall of famers," Ash said sadly, standing alongside the body, running her fingers across the barnacled skin above the lid of a shut eye.

It's not proof. But it's the closest thing to a footprint, a sighting, our town has ever had. The monsters have never, ever, killed something of this magnitude before. Grandpa Uyaquq can't stop grinning. He lived to see something this town will be talking about for centuries.

Ash clenched her fists, and set her jaw, and cackled, just once.

"Then that means we've still got work to do," she said.

We've got Grandpa Uyaquq settled on the boulder, now, where he has a good view of the whale, the birds eating from the blubber. I'm lying against the boulder, in the sand, reading from the novel, writing in my diary. Ash is napping, her head propped on my legs, her hair rayed across my lap. The final chapter opens, "Bankruptcy is your inheritance. — Veuillot Al-Ada, *Nuncupative Testaments*." After the accidental destruction of the volcanic city, the novel relocates (still yet again) back to the home of the debtor soldier, a city that, like all of the world's cities now, is in ruins. As the mythical cities were being destroyed, offpage, across the planet, all of the world's cities were being destroyed. Windstorms, sandstorms, hailstorms, floods. The soldier's debts are wiped clean. Humanity's debts are wiped clean. The planet is a wasteland. Among the ruins of his family's estate, somebody, a stranger, is throwing a party. Women in dirty gowns mill about the rubble. A man with an ashy face climbs a staircase to nowhere. Children topple from crumbling pillars clutching glass bottles. It's only after the soldier has begun drinking that somebody mentions what's

in the bottles. What everybody's drinking. Hemlock.

It's a contradiction, but, nevertheless, the book was simultaneously the best and the worst that I've ever read.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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