



We head West.

The sky bruised and throbbing indigo. Three months from the Kingdom. A straggling Afflicted squirms **parallel** in the distance. We're headed the same way, after all.

Charlie says we're close. I believe him. The air is different this far out. Molasses-thick and **heavy**. Like standing at the bottom of the ocean. We keep the masks on to sleep now.

One of the taller Patrons glances left-right. Motions back. The Afflicted is closer, though whether it can see us is impossible to tell. I don't look too long. White milky gelatin. Wriggling pools of filmy mucus. Nothing moves like that.

Long hours on the four. Circle down an old interstate ramp. Arms interwoven. When we started back **east** we brought a few glove-compartment maps, but we need them no longer. Whatever's out West has its own luminous pull.

(Burns the brain like a coal or beacon. I think of geese and calves - that magnetic sensitivity. I'm not sure we could turn back if we wanted.)

We stop with the moon, though the West still

itches behind our eyes.

Overhead, the Mansions wheel and divide. I see Bond, and Stomach, and Turtle Beak, then the deeper asterisms - Mausoleum and Celestial Boat. Crushed glass in the black of the Tiger.

We walk in his safety. We sleep in his home.

Wake by first light without speaking. Spill forward in rough, musty clumps. Sun to our backs. Something I remember, briefly: *Make it as if I were dying in my sleep, instead of in my life. Amen.*

The Afflicted waits up ahead. Crouched low. Soft bubbles ripple through its bulk. It must've slowed in the night for us. Like a mother whose youngest lags behind.

Charlie is the first to approach. Spear loose and at the ready. Steps light, close to the ground. They face each other. For one ridiculous moment I imagine a tumbleweed bouncing between them.

Then the Afflicted roils and snaps forward.

I had the dream again last night. Deep thrush, tangled by the road. Streetlamps grown tall and ancient. The corner of Fallon and Kingsmill. Chainlink fence run low and warped round the lawn. No cars out front, as far as I know, and no driveway in any case. One story. The paint job creamy and peeling. It doesn't sit. It hunkers. I pass the fence. Tap a post, right-hand, for luck. I must be six, seven years old. The house stretches far above me, yawns, fills the corners of my vision. Curls and smiles. I realize, for the first time,

how deep it has fallen into disrepair. Cracks in the wood twist like veins in the mass of a giant. The summer has leathered and wrinkled the paint into something like elephant skin. I am not afraid of this sagging, forgotten thing. Mostly I feel sorry for it. Wade through the lawn, brown and waist-high. Up the steps and to the door. Slight current on my face. It's not the wind. The house sighs and inflates, humid, asthmatic.

I barely register. It blurs, contracts, bridges the gap. Charlie doesn't even have time to raise his weapon. Shutterlag glimpse of the thing *unfolding* - slick, massive, coiled outwards and impossibly high.

It floods down over Charlie, engulfing his face and body. He thrashes, frantic. Visible for an instant as a rubbery subsurface outline.

Then the tremors settle. Equalize. The Afflicted squats and pulls itself together. Pores open in its back. Bulge and expand. Excreting the indigestibles.

His mask and spear.

We break free of an unconscious horrified hypnosis. Sprint forward. The creature whips around, too slow. Still pushing the toxins from its body. On some level that doesn't bear thinking, I know this was

Charlie's intent.

Swing low. Feint with the tassel. The Afflicted spins, snaps, but two Patrons pincer from behind. Catch it through the torso.

Full stop. Spears exit perpendicular. The entire cystic mass in perfect freeze.

The Afflicted pitches forward, liquifies, collapses a steaming mess. Its entire body transmuted into a thick gaseous fog. The smell is pungent but not unpleasant. I think of override peaches.

We don't hunt. We exorcise, and in the sweet frothing clouds I remember.

As the moon makes Her way back around, we stand vigil. No body. Pulling Charlie from that de-composition as likely as scooping spilled tea from a river. His weapon stays in use, double-wrapped round another Patron's waist. His rations equally distributed round the rest.

But his mask.

His mask, and the cartridge holding his last word. These we carry with us. We will keep the wake for a night, joss on the flame, then walk on West, and when we see the Divine we will lay them at its feet.

The Mansions open above us, sharp, unclouded. Change shifts by the hour. Mine near the end.

I empty the Coalition wallet, bill by bill, into the fire. Powder and dissolve on their way to somewhere else.

Ghost money.

We don't sleep for the next few days. Not out of mourning. The West is so near that it gleams with a psionic, impermeable light. Visible first as a faint glow behind the eyes, then a shimmering expansion as we advance. By the time we reach the outskirts, cresting over Sierra, it expunges the night completely.

Hums through the head and deep in our bones. Weathers away the grime and every dreg of fatigue.

Two windows in the front. Punched-out and fractured. The door swollen with moisture. It takes three or four tries to pull it open. Showers of dust and crackling paint. The interior is invisible. Like stepping into a thick inky void. It does not occur to me that the the windows should provide more light, that I should be able to gain some kind of visual purchase. I walk further in, waiting for my eyes to adjust. They do not. The doorway, the only frame of reference by which I can gauge my position, dwindles and contracts. Seems to

stretch away across a vast expanse. My other senses amplify. There is a sweaty, harsh rhythm in the air. Respiration. The breath of an enormously obese animal. Painful and ragged. Choking on its own bulk. I keep walking, and the heat intensifies, dilates, becomes a presence of its own. Probing and pressing my face and throat. Total immersion. I could drown. My own breath is rough and filled with fluid. I stop when I cannot walk any further. The heat is suffocating, monstrous, supersaturated. Like standing at the bottom

Clamber down the slope, pressed up against the rail. Scraps and relics flown and clustered in the ditch. Mottled empty plastics. Half-buried fire extinguisher. A few ragged **newspapers**.

Past the valley, the road to the city rises wide and welcome. The horizon flamed in that blazing Western light. Burning in and around us. Our shadows stretched double. An audible vibration.

And something else. For the first time, I can make out a shape. Faint shadow against the glare, rocking gently. Spiraled over the city and pulled deep into the sky.

A pillar.

We drift upstream. Dry, cracked asphalt dwindles underfoot. Curls and smiles. Gives way to cement.

Hook two fingers under the mask. It falls

away

onto the concrete. The other Patrons do the same.

Buoyed up and outward into the heart of the light. Suffused and surrounded. A glistering nova.

Two eighteen-year-old brothers have been admitted to intensive care this Friday following a rare virus this week. Local authorities were alerted to a disturbance on the subway earlier that morning and an **irritating** and **unconscious**. The two men were transported to a nearby hospital and remain in the **emergency** room.

The third confirmed case of what local authorities suspect to be a transmissible virus was admitted to a separate hospital in Alameda County two weeks prior to this **case**, had recently returned from a month-long trip abroad. Further details have not been confirmed that the trajectory of his condition is more identical to the other two cases.

Two counties. "It's likely that they crossed paths briefly," Zeiss said, "at least a few weeks ago in the immediate proximity have shown no sign of ill health. Based on that, we're thinking that symptoms are very specific kinds of vulnerabilities. But the vast majority of people are likely not to be susceptible."

to follow his course over the usual two-week period.

Dr. Zeiss said that state officials believe the two outbreaks to be related, despite the relatively large geographic distance between the two cases. "It's likely that they crossed paths briefly," Zeiss said, "at least a few weeks ago in the immediate proximity have shown no sign of ill health. Based on that, we're thinking that symptoms are very specific kinds of vulnerabilities. But the vast majority of people are likely not to be susceptible."

D.H.C. Internal Transmission
CLEARANCE RESTRICTED TO DRAGON AND ABOVE
WELCOME, OVERSEER.
Testing on 07/09 indicates the possible presence of a foreign memetic agent within the Coalition. Five personnel of varying rank describe recurrent dreams concerning a specific childhood experience. Common across all interviews is the presence of a **blue** house, situated in and stylistically consistent with the neighborhood in which each individual was raised. Further questioning in

Then the mists part, and we see the pillar for what it is.

Thick bubbling flesh. Bloating ropes of knotted **blue** membrane. Winding skyward, far past vision.

Because the Afflicted went West, too. And here they have

amassed, scrabbling and

writhing and slipped into each

other, fused

and molted into a tower that

stretches,

yawns,

fills the corners of our vision. Sighs,

listened for sounds from inside the house, but it was either in hiding or moving here. The walls were all wet though. Sticky, too. Everyone says I should lay off drinking, but that was the weirdest thing I ever saw

went back a few days later with some buddies and our rifles. We poked around inside, but the here. The walls were all wet though. Sticky, too. Everyone says I should lay off drinking, but that was the weirdest thing I ever saw

of the ocean. Turn and run. Back through the void, towards a tiny pinpoint of light. Dissolved into the dark. I do not feel my feet meet the floor. Swimming or sprinting or tumbling towards a break in the empty, a rectangle that rotates and expands and becomes a lawn, weed-spun and bone dry. Stumble. Collapse into a warm summer morning, bordered by a beat-up chainlink fence.

11:25:44PM
PORTS ALL AFFLICTED HAVE LEFT
AREAS BETWEEN KINGDOMS.
MASS MIGRATION HEADED WEST.
CH FOR INVESTIGATION, EFFECTIVE
UPS OF EIGHT WILL BE ORGANIZED
APPROPRIATE RATIONS.

inflates, draws us forward and

down. I reach for Charlie, my **brother**

my home, drifting beside me as we swim

or sprint or tumble towards a **house**

that

curls and

smiles

and

opens its **mouth**.