



David
Huebert
Chemical
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I KNEEL DOWN and reach for the nearest bird, hydraulics buzzing in my teeth and knees. The pigeon doesn't flinch or blink. No blood. No burn smell. Sal's there in seconds, his face a blear of night-shift grog. He rubs his bigger eye, squats by the carcasses. Behind him the river wends and glimmers, slicks through refinery glare.

"Poison you figure?" Sal thumbs his coverall pockets.

"Leak maybe."

Suzy appears next to Sal, seeping chew-spit into her Coke can. She leans over and takes a pigeon in her Kevlared paw. Brings it to her face. "Freaky," she says, bottom lip bulging. "Eyes still open." She wiggles her rat face into a grin, a frond of tobacco wagging in her bottom teeth.

I can't afford to say it: "Saving that for later?"

Suzy flares: "What?"

"The chew."

Suzy puts a hand over her mouth, speaks with taut lips: "Enough of your guff."

I snort. "Guff?"

She sets the bird down, hitches her coveralls. Lips closed, she tongues the tobacco loose and swallows. "Clean 'em up," she says, nodding at the pigeons. She spins and walks away, trailing chew-spit across the unit.

WHAT YOU MIGHT find, if you were handling a dead pigeon, is something unexpected in the glassy cosmos of its eye: a dark beauty, a molten alchemy. You might find a pigeon's iris looks how you imagine the Earth's core—pebble-glass waves of crimson, a perfect still shudder of rose and lilac. What you might do, if you were placing a dead pigeon into the incinerator, is take off your Kevlar glove and touch your bare index finger to its cornea. What you might do before dropping the bird into a white-hot Mordor of carbon and coke is touch your fingertip to that unblinking membrane and hold it there, feeling a mangle of tenderness and violation, thinking this may be the loveliest secret you have ever touched.

I'M TELLING EILEEN how I want to be buried, namely inside a tree. We're sitting in bed eating Thai from the mall and listening to the 6:00 p.m. construction outside our window—the city tearing up the whole street

along with tree roots and a rusted tangle of lead pipes—and I'm telling Eileen it's called a biodegradable burial pod. Mouth full of cashew curry and I'm saying what they do is put your remains in this egg-looking thing like the xenomorph's cocoon from *Alien: Resurrection* but it's made of biodegradable plastic. I'm telling Eileen it's called "capsula mundi" and what they do is hitch the remains to a semi-mature tree and plant the whole package. Stuff you down in fetal position and let you gradually decay until you become nitrogen, seep into soil.

Contemplating panang, Eileen asks where I got the idea about the burial pod and I tell her Facebook or maybe an email newsletter. "You click on that shit? Why are you even thinking about this now? You just turned thirty-four."

I don't tell her about the basement, about Mum. I don't tell her about the pigeons strewn out on the concrete and then going supernova in the incinerator, don't mention how it gets me thinking about flesh, about bodies, about waste. I don't tell her about Blane, the twenty-nine-year-old long-distance runner who got a heart attack sitting at the panel in the Alkylation unit. Blane didn't die but he did need surgery and a pacemaker and that sort of thing gets you curious. Which is how you end up lying in bed at night checking your pulse and feeling like your chest is shrinking and thinking about the margin of irregular and erratic.

Picking a bamboo shoot from her molars: "Since when are you into trees?"

She says it smug. She says it like Miss University Sciences, and nobody else is allowed to like trees. I don't tell her how we're all compost and yes I read that on a Facebook link. I also do not tell her about the article's tag line: "Your carbon footprint doesn't end in the grave." Reaching for the pad Thai, I tell her about the balance, how it's only natural. How the human body's rich in nitrogen, how when you use a coffin there's a lot of waste because the body just rots on its own when it could be giving nutrients to the system. Not to mention all the metals and treated woods in coffins. I tell her how the idea is to phase out traditional graveyards entirely, replace them with grave-forests.

"Hmm," Eileen says, gazing out the window—the sky a caramelized rose. "Is this a guilt thing, from working at the plants?"

I tell her no, maybe, I don't know. An excavator hisses its load into the earth.

"Is this why you were so weird about your mother's funeral?"

I ask what she means and she says never mind, sorry.

"Do you ever imagine they're ducks?"

Eileen asks what and I tell her the loaders and the bulldozers and the cranes. Sometimes I imagine they're wildlife, ducks or geese. And maybe why they're crying like that is because they're in distress. Like maybe they've lost their eggs and all they want is to get them back and when you think about it like that it's still bad but at least it's not just

machines screaming and blaring because they're tearing up old sidewalks to put new ones down.

"Ducks," Eileen says. "Probably still be one working for every three scratching their guts for overtime pay."

She stacks the containers and reaches for the vaporizer on the nightstand, asking if I love trees so much why didn't I become a landscaper or a botanist or an arborist. I shrug, not mentioning the debt or the mortgage or the pharmaceutical bills. Not mentioning that if I wanted to do something it would be the comic store but there's no market in Sarnia anyway.

I tell her it's probably too late for a career change.

"No," she coos, pinching my chin the way I secretly loathe. She smiles her sweet stoned smile, a wisp of non-smoke snaking through her molars. "You could do anything. You could be so much." Eileen lies down on her back on the bed, telling the ceiling I could be so much and the worst part is she means it. The worst and the best all coiled together as I reach out and thumb the curry sauce from her chin, thinking about when she'll fall asleep and I'll drift down to the basement, to Mum.

IN 1971 THE Trudeau government issued a ten-dollar-bill picturing Sarnia's new refinery metropolis as a paean to Canadian progress. Inked in regal purple, the buildings rise up space-aged and triumphant, a *Jetsons* wet dream. Towers jab through the sky and cloudlike drums pepper the ground, a suspended rail line curling around the scene. Smokestacks and ladders and tanks and tubs. Glimmering steel and perfect concrete, a shimmering fairy city and the strange thing is that what you don't see is oil, what you never see is oil. The other strange thing is that this is how Sarnia used to be seen, that not so long ago the plants were shiny and dazzling and now they're rusty with paint peeling off the drums and poor maintenance schedules and regular leaks and weeds all over, stitching concrete seams.

ON THE DRIVE to work a woman on the radio is talking about birth rates as the corn fields whish and whisper. Eileen doesn't know this or need to but I drive the long way to work because I like to pass through the corn fields. What I like about them is the sameness: corn and corn and corn and it makes you think that something is stable, stable and alive and endless, or about as close as you can get. If Eileen was in the car she'd say, "As high as an elephant's eye in July." Then she'd probably say her thing about ethanol. How the nitrogen fertilizer comes from ammonia, which comes from natural gas. How the petrochemical fertilizer is necessary to grow super-huge varieties of hybrid corn products that mostly turn into livestock feed but also a significant portion turns into ethanol. Ethanol that is then used as a biofuel

supplement to gasoline so what it is is this whole huge cycle of petroleum running subterranean through modern biological life.

The reporter is saying how first it was the birds and then it was the reserve and now they're getting worried. Now they're seeing plant workers producing only female children. No official studies on the area because Health Canada won't fund them but the anecdotal evidence is mounting and mounting and the whole community knows it's in their bodies, in their intimate organs, zinging through their spit and blood and lymph nodes.

"HEY," SUZY SAYS, slurring chew-spit into her Coke can. "What do you call a Mexican woman with seven kids?" I try to shrug away the punchline but Sal gives his big-lipped smirk and asks what. "Consuelo," Suzy says, her mouth a snarl of glee. She puts her hand down between her knees, mimes a pendulum.

I smile in a way that I guess is not convincing because Suzy says, "What's the matter, Jerr-Bear?" I tell her the joke's not funny.

"Fuck you it isn't."

"Think I'll do my geographics."

"You do that," Suzy says, turning back to Sal. "Can't leave you here with Pockets all shift." Pockets being what Suzy calls me in her kinder moments, when she doesn't feel like "Smartass" or "Thesaurus" or "Mama's boy." Something to do with I guess I put my hands in my coverall pockets too much. I walk away while Sal starts saying something about Donaldson or Bautista and Suzy makes her usual joke about me and the Maglite.

Before she got sick, Eileen used to work in research, and on slow days, that is, most days, I used to think up towards her. I'd look at the shiny glass windows of the research building and imagine Eileen working on the other side. Mostly what they do up there is ergonomic self-assessments and loss-prevention self-assessments but sometimes they do cutting and cracking. A lot of what they do is sit there staring at glove matrices and gauges and screens but I'd always picture Eileen with her hands in the biosafety cabinet. I'd picture her in goggles and full facemask and fire-retardant suit, reaching through the little window to mix the catalyst in and then watching the crude react in the microscope. Because when Eileen was working she loved precision and she loved getting it right but most of all she loved watching the oil split and change and mutate. Say what you want about oil but the way Eileen described it she always made it seem beautiful: dense and thick, a million different shades of black. She used to say how the strange thing with oil is that if you trace it back far enough you see that it's life, that all this hydrocarbon used to be vegetables and minerals and zooplankton. Organisms that got caught down there in some cavern where they've been stewing for five hundred million years. How strange

it is to look out at this petroleum Xanadu and think that all the unseen sludge running through it was life, once—that it was all compost, all along.

IN 2003 THERE was a blackout all across Ontario and the northeastern United States. A blackout caused by a software bug and what happened was people could see the stars again from cities. In dense urban areas the Milky Way was suddenly visible again, streaming through the unplugged vast. What also happened was babies, nine months later a horde of blackout babies, the hospitals overwhelmed with newborns because what else do you do when the power goes down. But if you lived in Sarnia what you would remember is the plants. It was nighttime when the power went out and what happened was an emergency shutdown of all systems, meaning all the tail gas burning at once. So every flare from all sixty-two refineries began shooting off together, a tail gas Disneyland shimmering through the river-limned night.

THE DAY SHIFT crawls along. QC QC QC. The highlight is a funny-sounding line we fix by increasing the backpressure. Delivery trucks roll in and out. The pigeons coo and shit and garble in their roosts in the stacks. Freighters park at the dock and pump the tanks full of bitumen—the oil moving, as always, in secret, shrouded behind cylindrical veils of carbon steel. Engineers cruise through tapping iPads, printing the readings from Suzy's board. Swarms of contractors pass by. I stick a cold water bottle in each pocket, which is nice for ten minutes then means I'm carrying pisswarm water around the unit. I do my geographic checks, walk around the tower turning the odd valve when Suzy radios, watch the river rush and kick by the great hulls of the freighters. I think about leaping onto the back of one of those freighters, letting it drag me down the St. Clair and into Erie just to feel the lick of breeze on neck.

In the Bio unit, we deal with wastewater. Like the rest of the units we heat and boil. We use hydrobonds and boilers and piston pumps. We monitor temperatures. Unlike the other units, we don't want to make oil. We want to make clean water. There are standards, degrees of toxicity. There are cuts, enzymes that we put into the water in the right doses to break down the hydrocarbons, to reduce the waste.

Time sags and sags and yawns. By 10:00 a.m. I can feel the sun howling off the concrete, rising up vengeful and gummy. Doesn't matter that it's mid-June and already there's a heat warning, you've still got to wear your coveralls and your steel toes and your hard hat, the sweat goosing up the insides of your arms, licking the backs of your knees. The heat warning means we take "precautions." It means coolers full of Nestlé water sweating beside the board. It means we walk slowly around the unit. As slow as we can possibly move but the slow walking becomes its own challenge because the work's still got to get done.

The river gets me through the shift: the curl and cool of it, its great improbable blue. The cosmic-bright blue that's supposedly caused by the zebra mussels the government put all over Ontario to make the water blue and pretty but if Eileen were here she'd say her thing about the algae. How she learned in first-year bio that what the zebra mussels do is eat all the particles from the lake, allowing room for algae to grow beyond their boundaries and leading to massive poisonous algae blooms in Lake Huron and Lake Erie. So you think you're fixing something but really there's no fixing and how fitting that one way or another the river's livid blue is both beautiful and polluted, toxic and sublime.

THERE'S A TRAIN that runs beneath the river, from Sarnia to Port Huron and back. An industry train, bringing ethylene here and PVC there. On shift I often think of it running back and forth down there, fifty or a hundred feet below the ground where we stand and work. I picture it wending through the underground, the strange world full of the dried-up oil reservoirs, salt caverns where miners have slipped and fallen to suffocate in a great halite throat. It's hard to detect with the hydraulics and the million different vibrations but sometimes I feel or at least imagine I feel that train passing beneath me. Trundling among the ground-water and the salt and the drained chambers where peat and mud and seaweed cooked slowly for a hundred million years. Sometimes when I think of the train I think the river Styx. How Mum used to tell me about Charon the ferryman, who brought souls to the underworld. Charon travelling across the river again and again, plucking the coins from the mouths of the dead and if they couldn't pay they'd have to walk the riverbank for a hundred years. And the souls that are down there are the souls of primordial beings that died suddenly and then stewed underground for eras and epochs and finally came up gushing and were gone.

"HEARD ABOUT THOSE bodies?" Sal asks, thumbing through his phone as I pass by the board. I ask what bodies and he says the ones in Toronto. "Like a half dozen of them, some kind of landscaper-murderer stashing bodies in planters all over the city."

"Isn't that old news?"

Sal shrugs, his thumb swiping through newsfeed blue. Hard to say, sometimes, how those cycles work. "Doesn't make it less fucked up."

I kill the shift as usual: walk around wiggling the flashlight thinking about the different spots in the river and diving into them with my mind. Thinking about what might be sleeping down there—maybe a pike or a smelt or a rainbow trout nestled among the algae and the old glass Coke bottles. Sometimes I think my way across the bridge, over to Port Huron. Wonder if there's an operator over there doing the same thing, thinking back across the river towards me.

I drive home the long way which means corn fields and wind turbines in the distance as the sky steepens crimson and rose. In the thickening dark, I think of those bodies, the ones Sal was talking about. Bruce McArthur. I remember hearing about it—this killer targeting gay men in Toronto and the more planters they dug up the more bodies they found. Body parts buried among the city's carefully strategized vegetal veinwork—a jawbone in the harebell, a scatter of teeth in the bluestem, a pair of eyeballs forgotten in the bergamot. In the rear-view a flare shoots up from the plants. Getting closer, I pass through a gauntlet of turbines, feeling them more than I see them. Carbon-filament sentries. Once I passed an enormous truck carrying a wind turbine blade and at first I thought it was a whale. It reminded me of videos I'd seen of Korean authorities transporting a sperm whale bloated with methane, belching its guts across the tarmac. The truck had a convoy and a bunch of orange WIDE LOAD signs and I passed it slowly, partly because of the danger and partly because there was a pulse to it, something drawing me in. The great sleek curve of the blade, its unreal whiteness.

EILEEN'S STILL UP, vaping in her chair by the window. "Sorry," she says, spinning her chair to look at me. "Couldn't sleep." I tell her she can vape in the kitchen or wherever she likes but she looks at me with her stoned slanting smile and tells me it's not that. Says how she's been looking out into the yard a lot and when she does she thinks about the teenagers. She looks at me like she wants me to ask for details. I don't, but she continues anyway. Rehearses how those kids in the seventies got trapped in the abandoned fallout shelter. "You know, the yards were so long because the properties used to be cottages and the old shelter was overgrown and the teens were skipping school and smoking up and the excavator came through and started to fill it in and no one realized the teens were missing until days later. The only explanation was that they were scared, so scared of getting caught that they stayed quiet, let it happen, hoped it would pass."

"You don't believe all that do you?"

Eileen shrugs, still staring out the window. "No. Maybe. I just like the story."

I ask how's the pain today and she says manageable. Turns her face towards me but doesn't meet my eyes. I ask her out of ten and she says you know I hate that. She asks is something wrong, something else. I tell her no. "Seems like there's something you're not telling me about." I don't respond and she doesn't push it.

We watch the original *Total Recall* and when we get to the part with the three-breasted woman Eileen asks if I find that strange or sexy and I tell her neither, or both. Eventually Eileen drifts off but when I stand up she lurches awake. She asks where I'm going and I say just downstairs

to read the new *Deadpool* unless she wants the bedside lamp on. She says no, asks when I'm coming to bed. I tell her soon and she says cuddle me when you get here. "Don't just lie there," she says. "Hold me." I tell her yes, of course, and head down to the sweet dank sog of the basement.

Mum listens with tender quiet as I tell her about my day—about Suzy, about the pigeons, about the construction. Mum nods and smiles, gentle and sweet, her gold incisor catching light from the bare pull-string bulb. Eventually I check my phone and see that it's pushing eleven and I should probably head upstairs if I want my six to seven hours. I give Mum a good night kiss and tell her to get some rest and then I notice something strange in the floor, stoop down to inspect.

A hand-shaped imprint in the foundation.

Mum looks on, her face a void, as I toe that dark patch with my basement-blackened sock and find that it's wet, somewhat soggy. The hole's a bit sandy and when I get closer I smell it. Muskeg. Skunky Lambton crude.

I prod a little deeper and become a stranger, become someone who would stick a curious thumb into such a cavity. The oil comes out gooey and black and smelling sharp, a little sulphurous.

I DREAM OF the bodies buried in planters in Toronto. In the dream the bodies aren't skeletons, not yet. They're in the active decay stage: their organs starting to liquefy, the soft tissue browning and breaking down while the hair, teeth, and bone remain intact. I see them crawling up from planters all across the city. Not vengeful or anything. Just digging, rising, trying to get back.

"WOULD YOU HAVE liked to become an engineer?" Eileen sips her iced tea in the bug tent. Eileen's just finished her shift, run the algorithms, the computer humming in the basement searching all the contests in the world. Outside the tent the charivari of loaders and bulldozers, the air heady with the lilt of tar.

"I am one. A chemical engineer." I can see Eileen wanting to laugh and fighting it. Not like I've got any delusions about my four-year Lambton College diploma but technically it is a credential in chemical engineering.

"Maybe an urban planner," Eileen says. "Have you heard about all this stuff they're doing in cities now? Condos with elevators big enough for cars. Cute little electric cars that you'll bring right up to your apartment with you."

"Sounds more like an Eileen thing."

A bird lands in the armpit of the oak. A pocket-sized black bird with a slash of red on its wing. The one I love but can never remember its name.

Eileen sips her tea and says yeah I'm probably right but it's just she can tell the hours are getting to me. The hours and the nights and the overtime. She reminds me how I told her, once, that it's like a sickness, the overtime. "You could do whatever you want," she says. "You could be so much."

The worst part is she always means it and the worst part is it's not true. Not true because Mum worked part-time and Dad died so young that there was no money for me to do anything but CPET. I don't tell her because she already knows about the comics store, about how maybe I could write a comic on the side and I already have the character—BioMe, the scientist turned mutant tree-man after attempting to splice photosynthesis into the human genome.

"You're so creative, you could be so much. Like your comics store idea. And remember that musical you wrote in high school, *Hydrocarbonia*?" She chuckles. "There was that three-eyed coyote and the plant worker Village People chorus?"

"I think it was basically a *Simpsons* rip-off. Mr. Hunter went with *Guys and Dolls*."

"Still. You're a poet at heart."

"The bard of bitumen."

"What I mean is I love you but sometimes I feel like all you do is work and all I do is sleep and we never see each other and I just wish we had something else, something more."

A quick haze of stupidity in which I contemplate telling her about Mum. Then I see a seagull in the distance, watch as it catches a thermal and rides high and higher, an albatross floating through the glazed crantini sky.

"One more shift," I tell her. "Then four off."

She doesn't need to roll her eyes. "Look," she says, pointing up at the oak. "A red-winged blackbird."

ON THE DRIVE to work they're saying about the fish. Saying about the drinking water downstream, in Windsor and Michigan. Saying about the tritium spilling into Lake Huron. You think Chernobyl and you think Blinky the Three-Eyed Fish but what you don't think is an hour north or so, where Bruce Power leaks barrels of radioactive tritium into Lake Huron. They're saying how significant quantities of antidepressants have been found in fish brains in the Great Lakes.

I drive past the rusting drums and have to stop for a moment because there are some protesters forming a drum circle. They're holding signs that read STOP LINE 9 and chanting about stolen land and of course they're right but I don't smile or stop or acknowledge them. Just park and walk through security, a new sting in the awful. At the gates the bent-toothed security guard is sitting in his white SUV next to

the NO TRESPASSING sign. The guard waves, tweaks his wraparounds, the river glowing purple in his mirrored lenses.

WAYS PEOPLE DEAL with constant low-level dread: the myth that the wind blows the fumes south, towards Aamjiwnaang, towards Corunna, towards Walpole. That the airborne toxicity lands ten kilometres to the south. That the people who live north of the plants won't get sick or at least not as sick. As if wind could really dilute the impact of living beside a cluster of sixty-two petrochemical refineries that never sleep, could change the fact that you live in a city where Pearl Harbor-style sirens sound their test alarm every Monday at 12:30 to remind you that leaks could happen at any moment. There's a joke around Streamline, a joke that is not a joke: the retirement package is great if you make it to fifty-five. Which is not inaccurate in my family seeing as Dad went at fifty-two and Mum followed at fifty-six and they said the lung cancer had nothing to do with the plants and the brain cancer had nothing to do with Mum's daily swims from the bridge to Canatara Beach. The strange pride among people who work the plants: spending-your-oil-salary-on-Hummers-and-motorcycles-and-vacations-to-Cuban-beaches-with-plastic-cups kind of pride. A live-rich, live-hard kind of pride. The yippee ki yay of knowing that Sarnia is the leukemia capital of Canada and the brain cancer capital of Canada and the air pollution capital of Canada but also knowing that oil is what you know and what your parents knew and all your family's in Lambton County so what else are you going to do but stay.

WE'RE PUTTING ON our facemasks and backpacks while Don the safety protocol officer explains for the hundredth time about the new model of self-contained breathing apparatus and the new standard-issue Kevlar gloves. Telling us once again that personal safety is paramount even though all of us know that what operators are here for is to control situations.

I'm sitting there watching sailboats tack their way across the lake while Don goes on about the hydrogen sulfide incident that happened two years ago. Incident meaning leak. Telling us again how the thing about hydrogen sulfide is that you can't see it, so there's almost no way of knowing when it's on fire. Two years ago when a vehicle melted in the loading dock an invisible sulfide fire came through and before the operators could shut it down the truck in the loading bay just melted. The tires evaporated and the air hissed out of them and the whole truck sank to the floor, a puddle of melted paint on the concrete and nothing left of the truck but a gleaming skeleton of carbon steel.

WE USED TO swim in the lake at night, just the two of us. Dad was usually home watching the Blue Jays so me and Mum would drive up to a secret little beach in the north and we'd swim out into the middle of

the river where the lights from Port Huron gleamed and wiggled in the darkness. Sometimes it would rain and the rain would make the water warmer than the air. I'd seen a water snake at the beach once and I always imagined them down there among our legs. Though Mum had assured me they were nonvenomous, I saw them sharp-toothed and cunning, biding their time. Sometimes Mum would dip down below the water, her head disappearing for what seemed an impossibly long time and I don't know how she found me but she'd wrangle her arms around both my legs and pin me for a moment while I kicked and bucked and then we'd both come up gasping and squealing and giggling in the black water, a gelatin dazzle of refinery lights.

"SO WHAT TREE?" Eileen asks, watching the sun bleed pink delirium over the abandoned Libcor refinery. Eileen in her chair and the van parked behind us. In front, the overgrown refinery that shut down thirty years ago after a mercaptan leak. When they left, the company kept the lot. Took down all the tall buildings and left a waste of concrete with a railway running through it, surrounded by a barbed-wire fence.

I ask for clarification and Eileen asks what tree I'd want to be buried in and I pause to think about it, looking out over the crabgrass and sumac and firepits full of scorched goldenrod. "Think there are any animals in there?"

Eileen says yeah, probably, like Chernobyl. She knows about Chernobyl from a documentary. In the Exclusion Zone, there's a place called the Red Forest. It's a bit stunted and the trees have a strange ginger hue but the wildlife is thriving—boar, deer, wolves, eagles. Eileen says how nuclear radiation might actually be better for animals than human habitation.

I stand quietly, holding Eileen's chair and watching the sun pulse and glow and vanish. She reaches back and takes my hand, rubs the valleys between my fingers. Eventually, without saying anything, we turn for the van.

"You ever think about concrete?" Eileen asks as I'm fastening her chair into the van. "How it seems so permanent. How it's all around us and we walk and drive on it believing it's hard and firm and solid as the liquid rock it is but really it's nothing like rock at all. Weeds and soil beneath it and all of it ready to rise up at the gentlest invitation. It's very fragile, very temporary."

On the way home we pass by the rubber plant and the abandoned Bluewater Village and beyond it Aamjiwnaang and Eileen says, "Incredible shrinking territory." The reserve used to stretch from Detroit to the Bruce Peninsula before being slowly whittled down through centuries of sketchy land deals. Eileen's maternal grandmother was Ojibwe and she has three cousins on the reserve and we go over once in

a while but mostly her tradition is just to say "incredible shrinking territory" when we drive by.

It comes to me when we pass a bungalow, spot a clutch of them crawling up from the cleft of the foundation. "Sumac, I guess."

"What?"

I say sumac again and Eileen clues in and says aren't those basically weeds? I tell her no, they can get pretty big and I like the fruit, how they go red in autumn. I like how they're sort of bushy and don't have a prominent trunk. How they're spunky and fierce and unpredictable.

"Sumac." Eileen does her pondering frown. "Noted."

It's dark now and the lights are on in Port Huron, flickering out over the river. Looking out the window, Eileen asks me to tell her again how the county used to be. I hold on to the wheel and steer through the great chandelier and tell it how Mum used to. I say about the plank road and the Iroquois Hotel, how Petrolia was incorporated the very year Canada became a country, so we're basically built on oil. I tell about the gushers in every field, soaring up fifty feet and raining down on the fields, clogging up the river and the lakes until the fishermen in Lake Erie complained about the black grit on the hulls of their boats. I tell about the notorious stench of the Lambton skunk, and about the fires. No railway or fire trucks and so when lightning hit and fire took to the fields they often burned for weeks at a time, a carnage of oil fire raging through the night.

"Wild," she says. "Can you believe all that's gone now? That whole world."

I don't say it's not gone, just invisible—racing through stacks and columns and broilers. I tell her what a perfect word: "wild."

EILEEN GOES TO bed early so I head down to the damp lull of the basement. The hole is the size of a Frisbee now, and it's starting to stink. I sit on the old plastic-plaid lawn chair and talk to Mum about work, about Suzy, about the fish and the pigeons and the ratio.

There's a long silence. I didn't know the whole thing was getting to me. Didn't know how it was building in me, fierce and rank. I tell Mum I'm worried. Worried I'm going to lose her. Worried about the smell, the secrets. Worried someone's going to figure it out, maybe talk to Virgil the taxidermist. And I can't tell Eileen and the whole thing is sorry, rotten, and what are we going to do, what am I going to do?

Mum sits there and listens sweetly. Then she twinkles her golden incisor towards the muskeg hole and I see something strange, something wrong, something white. So I step closer, grab an old chair leg and stir the muskeg a little and yes it definitely is what I think it is: a small bone that could easily be a piece of a raccoon thigh but could also be a human finger.

I WAKE UP at 5:00 p.m. and find Eileen making pesto, which means a good day. She's got the contest software going on the table. "Six wins already!" she says as I'm making a Keurig. "Want to go to South Carolina? There's these subway cars. Fake coral reefs. Vina and Phil are planning a trip."

I pour milk into my Ninja Turtles mug and she tells me there's another one in the toilet. "Sorry." She winces, pouring olive oil on a mound of basil and parm. "I wanted to. Just didn't have the energy." She presses a button on the KitchenAid, makes whirling mayhem of leaf and oil.

I put on my spare Kevlars and head into the bathroom, pull the lid up to find the rat floundering, scrambling, its teeth bared and wet with fresh blood from where it must have bludgeoned itself against the porcelain. The water the colour of rust. The rat keeps trying to run up the side of the toilet, losing its purchase and sliding back down in a carnage of thrashing legs and splashing water.

Without quite knowing why, I reach in and pin the rat and squat down to look into its eyes. I guess I want to know what it's like to be a rat. Its head flicks back and forth in rage or terror, never meeting my eyes. Maybe it doesn't know how to.

If I let it go it'll just end up back here, in the toilet, in pain. So I hold its head under the water. Pin it as it thrashes and bucks and wheels its legs, switching its ghost-pink tail. Exhausted, the creature doesn't fight much. More or less lets it happen.

I walk it through a Stonehenge of pylons and descend into the guts of the exhumed city street. I lay the rat in a puddle at the mouth of a culvert and throw some sludge over it. Walk back between a mound of PVC piping and a wrecked Jenga of blasted asphalt.

Back inside, I tell Eileen I released it alive. "Good," she says. "I'm getting tired of this. Must have something to do with the plumbing, the construction."

"Should be over soon."

"What should?"

"Want to go down to the river?"

We park at Point Edward and I wheel Eileen down to the waterfront, where the river curls and snarls and chops its dazzling blue. Underfoot there's a belligerence of goose shit. We watch a pair and Eileen tells me they mate for life and get fierce about their young. They've been known to attack adult humans to protect them. I look at the geese and wonder how long their families have been nesting on this river.

"When did they stop migrating?" Eileen asks.

Which makes me think of a book I read once, where the main character keeps asking where the ducks go in winter. I can't remember what book or what the answer was, if there was one. I tell her I don't know and she tells me how weird it is that there's this whole big thing

about Canada geese flying south in winter but as far as she can tell they never leave.

"I think it's the northern ones, more so."

"And what, they migrate down here? Winter in scenic Sarnia?"

Beneath the bridge a teenager launches into a backflip. Executes perfectly to uproarious applause. His audience: a chubby red-headed boy and three thin girls in dripping bathing suits. Eileen stops for a moment and I can see her watching them and maybe she's thinking how comfortable they are. How cozy. How nice it must be to just have a body and not think about it.

Above them, transport trucks arc through a highway in the sky.

THE FOUR OFF blurs by in a haze of Domino's and Netflix and assuring Eileen there's no smell from the basement, that it's probably just the construction. Eileen and I watch all of *Jessica Jones*, then all of *The Punisher*, listen to the bleats and chirps of loaders and excavators. On Saturday I find a bone like a human elbow joint in the muskeg, another like an eye socket. Rodent hip, I convince myself. Raccoon brow. Squirrel bits. More rats.

Then it's Sunday, meaning back to night shift for eight more on. I'm whizzing past corn fields on the way to work when I notice something strange, something I've never spotted. Which makes sense because it's in the very back of the field and it sort of blends in with a little patch of windbreak trees behind it but there it is: a rusted old derrick in the middle of the corn field. An iron steeple rising up through the swishing haze like a puncture in time, a throwback to the days of gushers and teamsters, when the fields were choked with oil and fires burned for weeks.

Eileen texts me to say there's still that weird smell in the house and she's pretty sure it's oil or gas. Maybe it's the stove, should she be worried? She's thinking of texting her brother to come check it out. I tell her no, don't text your brother, I'll open the windows when I get home. Which is when I hear the enunciator.

The blare of the Class A and then the radio crunches and Suzy comes on saying there's a few malfunction lights on in Zone 1 and a flare shooting off. "Main concern is FAL-250A. Flow transfer failure could be a big one, let's get on it."

When a Class A sounds, everyone goes. So it's not just us Bio unit operators scurrying around, it's also CDU and Naphtha and Alkylation and Plastics and the unit is full of bodies. Doug puts on an SCBA though nobody's sure why. Derek and Paul smash into each other at full speed on the Tower 1 scaffold causing Suzy to yell, "No-fucking-running rule still fucking holds." Stan, one of the night engineers, says maybe it could have something to do with the sludge blanket level in the wastewater valve.

Suzy wheels on him. "How the fuck is that?" When Stan starts to explain she tells him to go back to his craft beer and his Magic card tournaments.

Jack tries again: "Backpressure?"

Suzy glares at him, leaking chew-spit onto the floor. Stan walks off muttering something about valve monkeys. Suzy stares at her board and calls orders out while the rest of us scramble around checking valves and lines and readings.

Sal finds the problem: a release valve is down and there's buildup in the main flare. A buildup of hydrocarbon waste in the thirty-six-inch flare where the tail gas should be burning off, which means a lot of flammable gunk and Suzy's board is telling her the flare's going but the flare is not going.

"Looks like a problem with the pilot flame," Sal shouts from halfway up the tower.

"Getting enough oxygen?" Stan shouts back up.

"Should probably call research," Sal says. Suzy says fuck those fucking lab monkeys then moves towards the tower with a gunslinger strut. Grabbing a rag from a maintenance cart, she starts tying it around a plunger. She sets a boot down on the rubber cup and yanks the wooden handle free. Then she climbs up the tower to the first platform. As she's heading up Sal races down and I'm backing off too as Suzy leans back, shouts, "Heads up," and sends the plunger handle arcing towards the mouth of the flare.

The workers scatter—scurrying into the warehouse and the delivery building, hunching behind trucks and the board. I find a dumpster and cling to the back of it. Sal hits the concrete and joins me just in time to watch the plunger arc and arc and land in the maw of the stack.

The air shimmies and buckles.

The flare lights.

Lights and blasts seventy feet into the moon-limned sky. Air swirls and booms and I clutch my chest because I can't breathe.

The dumpster jumps.

The dumpster becomes a toad and leaps ten feet across the floor. The flare lights, a hissing rage of tail gas, a seventy-foot Roman candle stabbing up at the sickle moon.

No one gets hurt. No one gets in trouble. Stan walks away shaking his head along with the ten or twelve operators gathered on the floor. The enunciator goes quiet and Suzy walks down from the stack brushing off her knees.

Sal looks over at me, muttering something about being too old for these shenanigans. He walks away huffing, pauses to curse towards the dumpster's skid mark, which is longer than a car. Suzy calls me over and tells me I didn't see shit, then tells me to look after the flare for the rest of my shift.

"What do you mean 'look after it'?"

"Stand there and watch it, Stephen fucking Hawking."

So I stand there and watch it.

The moon grins down and the flame shoots up beside it for ten minutes, then twenty, with no sign of abating. I pace around Tower 1, checking pressures and temps and turning valves as needed but always keeping that flare in eyeshot.

One hour. Two.

Down by the river I see the lakeshore going liquid and sort of throbbing. At first I think it must be gas. Then I think I must be hallucinating because the shoreline itself has turned semi-solid as it refracts the flare's corona. It looks like there's flesh down there, a great beast sidling up to the fence.

I walk down and shine my flashlight on the shore and see that it is flesh. Not one creature, but thousands. Smelt. Thousands and thousands of smelt cozing up to the shore, coming as close as they can to the flame.

I don't notice Suzy until she's gusting sour breath over my shoulder. "The fuck is that?"

"Smelt."

She stands there looking at the fish awhile, spitting into her Coke can. Then she turns back to her flare, gives it the up-down. For a moment I think she might genuflect.

"Fucking smelt," she scoffs, walking away.

I spend the rest of the shift watching the smelt shudder in the balm of the flare. Thousands of fish inching towards the tail gas column as it roars and rages through the punctured dark. Light licking them silver and bronze, the smelt push and push against the shore—close and closer but never close enough.

I DRIVE HOME past the wind turbines thinking as I often do about a hundred thousand years from now when maybe someone would come across this place. I talked about this once, with Mum. We walked into a corn field just to look at the turbines and when we got there I asked what would happen if there were no corn or soy or farmers left, just the turbines marking the graves of fields. How maybe a thousand years from now there would be a new kind of people like in *Mad Max* and they wouldn't remember farms or electricity or the nuclear power plant in Kincardine. How these future humans might find this place where turbines sprouted up taller than any trees, their arms like great white whales. The surrounding farms all gone to wild again. And what else would these new people think but that these massive three-armed hangmen were slow-spinning gods? "That's very well put," Mum said then, as if she were the teacher she'd always wanted to be instead of being a woman who answered the phones at NRCore three days a week.

She stood beneath that turbine, staring up at its bland white belly for a long time before she finally said, "It does sort of look like a god. A faceless god."

Eileen's still sleeping when I get home so I pour some Merlot and head straight down through the oil reek into the basement. Eileen was right. The smell is getting bad. Detectable from the kitchen and almost unbearable in the basement itself and what this means is a matter of days at most. The morning sun winks and flickers through the cracked foundation. The hole is the size of a truck tire now and there are more bones floating at the surface. I grab an old broken chair leg and stir the muck around, transfixed by the bones. One that looks like a splintered T-bone, one that may be a gnawed jawbone, another that I'm pretty sure has part of a fingernail attached. A row of molars like a hardened stitch of corn.

The teenagers. In the yard. The story I've never believed.

"It's all right," Mum would say if she could speak. "It's all right, sweet sonny boy. You're all right, you're here, everything's going to be fine."

And Mum would be right. For the moment everything is nice and cool and dark and we sit there in the gentle silence until Mum wants me to tell her some of the old stories so I do. I tell them the way she used to tell me. I tell about her grandfather, the Lambton oil man who sniffed for gushers and got ripped off on the patent for the Canada rig. I tell about the last gusher and the time lightning struck the still and all the dirty land sales the companies made to get things started in Sarnia. Water, I remember her saying once. It was all about water. They chose Sarnia because they needed to be by the river. I tell her the same now and she sits there smiling faintly, a twinkle in her gold incisor and for the moment the two of us are calm and happy and together.

WHEN I CREEP into bed Eileen wakes up. She reaches for her bedside table, produces a rectangular LED blear. "It's almost noon," she says. "What were you doing?" I tell her I was in the basement. She asks if I was playing WoW again and I say no just reading some old volumes of *Turok*. She murmurs the usual: just don't take up Magic like her brother. I laugh and tell her no, of course not.

Then she rises. Sits up in bed and I can see even with the blackout blinds that she's gone serious. She asks if there's something going on with me lately. I tell her no, of course not, just a hard day at work. And how could you expect what comes next:

"You know I'm never going to get better?"

In these moments I can never find the right thing to say because there is no right thing.

"It's just," she continues, "sometimes I forget, myself, that it's not ever going to end, that it's just going to keep going like this for who

knows how long. And I just want to be sure that you know the full extent of that."

I tell her yeah, of course.

She squints through the dark. "It's just, I know it's hard for you, and if you ever wanted—"

I tell her no, absolutely not, whatever it is. Whisper that I don't want anything different, don't need anything more than what we have. I go big spoon and nestle into her until I'm hot, until I'm roasting under the blankets and wanting to roll away but also wanting just to melt, to seep, to burn hot as compost in nitrogen night.

I DREAM BLACK water, a paddle, a smell, a funk, in front of me Mum standing, holding a punting pole. I can't see her face but I see the reflection of her gold tooth in the thick black morass, a tooth like a sun. She is gone, she remains, I am trying to call her but this is the dream's mute torture and the water is not water but sludge and in the mire there are faces, hands and faces dripping black and reaching up, grasping the pole, each other, the hull. Hands and limbs slick in the gunk the forgotten-vegetable slurry Mum leaning on the punting pole my mouth opening and straining, willing, wailing.

THE DAY DAD DIED, Mum and I sat in the bug tent in the backyard watching a horde of blue jays eat the heads off Mum's sunflowers. Any other day she would have got up and screamed carnage at those birds but she just sat there watching. He'd weighed about forty-five pounds at the end and it was not a nice thing for a wife or a fifteen-year-old son to watch. It ended graciously, in sleep. The ambulance came and Mum went with because there were checks to be done, forms to be signed. After she came home we sat in the backyard watching those ravenous blue jays pick through a row of twenty or thirty six-foot sunflowers. I said how I didn't know blue jays could be so vicious and Mum said oh yeah, everything beautiful has a dark side, just like everything wretched has a loveliness. When there were only three heads remaining and the blue jays were pecking tiredly, half of them gone, Mum told me those sunflowers had been growing in the spot where she'd buried her placenta after I was born. She said she'd always figured that's why they grew so well there. Said how the placenta had enriched the soil and so in a way I was feeding those blue jays, we both were. And so the two of us sat there watching the birds gobble up the vegetation we'd nourished together and I saw each one grow a face. The last three sunflowers became me and Dad and Mum and I watched the blue jays shred those yellow faces into mangled tufts.

I TAKE THE long way to work and when I see the wind turbines I find myself driving towards them. Driving down a farm road and then onto a corn farm with a turbine on a strip of grass and weed and I'm leaping

out of the car and sprinting up to it, kneeling while this terrible white demiurge churns its arms in slow rotation. I kneel there thinking up towards that turbine and feeling overpowered by something blunt and terrible and awesome. The sound of the thing is huge and steady and sonorous, an Olympian didgeridoo, and I remember about the bats. How this strange hum draws them in and then the arms send them plummeting into the fields where the farmers have to burn them so they don't attract pests. The arms spin slow but in their slowness there's something massive, something enormous and indifferent and nearly perfect. I imagine myself chopped into atoms, into confetti. I see tiny particles of my hair and skin feathering over the field, blending with the earth and the soil, becoming vegetable, becoming corn. The wholeness of that resignation, a longing to be unmade, to wilt beyond worry and debt, pension and disease.

The farmer whizzes over on an ATV. Behind the quad there's a trailer carrying a blue chemical drum, the skull-and-crossbones symbol on the side. The farmer asks if I'm all right and I tell him sure, fine, never better.

"Well then," he says.

I walk away wondering how much ethanol's in the soil.

THE NIGHT SHIFT sags and sputters. Clouds brood and curdle over the river. I get a text from Eileen saying she's smelling that oil smell again and is she going insane? I text back not to worry, it's just the construction, I'll phone the city tomorrow. I tell myself don't check the phone don't check the phone and then I check and it says that Eileen's brother's on the way.

What I do is panic. What I do is leave, which is a fireable offence. What I do is vacate my coveralls there in the middle of the unit with Suzy walking through shouting don't even think about it but I need to get home and so I just say, "Be right back," and hustle to my car without showering.

What I do is drive tilting and teetering and when I get home Eileen's brother's truck is in the driveway among the shadowy hulks of graders and loaders lurking against the orange plastic mesh. Eileen's in her chair at the top of the stairs saying sorry, she had to, the smell, and then her brother saw what was downstairs. She looks at me, a little broken.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's weird, super-weird. It's fucked, Jerr. But we can deal with it. We can talk about it. You're hurting, you're troubled." She reaches out and I sink my hand in hers, let her squeeze it.

I head down into the basement where Eileen's brother, Gord, stands in street clothes over the muskeg pit, his back to Mum. They've moved her slightly, pulled her beneath the stark light of the pull-string bulb. Up close, she looks bad. Wrinkly and purplish, with a sickly glaze.

I reach out to embrace her and Gord says no, don't, not a good idea. I ask him am I under arrest and he talks to the floor. Says he's sorry, he should be taking me downtown already but he's doing Eileen a favour. I'm lucky he's in street clothes but he's still a cop. He sucks his teeth, looks at me a little pale, struggling to meet my eyes. "This is a serious fucking bind, Jerr."

I nod to Mum: "What'll happen to her?"

He winces. "We'll have to confiscate the body. Evidence."

I step closer and hug Mum tight, press my face against hers and kiss both cheeks. Pull away and look deep into her face, which has been in the shadows but is visible now, a snaggle of resin and vein.

My pocket beeps. A text from Suzy: *The fuck are you? Get back here emergency all hands.* I don't consult Gord, just turn and head for the steps. His voice barking behind me, talking about coroners, about extenuating circumstances and covering his ass. Gord shouting station sooner or later but I'm gone, rising, out of the basement.

THE ENUNCIATOR'S GOING Class A and everyone's running around frantic as I scramble into my coveralls and grab an SCBA and head out to Tower 1. Sal's walking away from the scene, heading for the parking lot. "Fuck this," he grumbles into his SCBA helmet. "Not worth it."

I ignore him, keep going, suddenly beyond worry, over fear. When I look up I can see a red alert light blinking by the broiler on Tower 1, so I head over and climb the stairs.

Suzy's down below and shouting, "Back inside back inside," but she can't be talking to me because I'm floating. Floating very slowly, the world turned heavy and blurry. There's a strange heat and a haze in the air and Suzy's shouting, "Inside inside," but now I'm starting to think she might be shouting, "Sulfide," is clearly shouting, "Sulfide." Which seems funny. Which seems hilarious. Which seems perfect.

The enunciator ratchets up a notch.

Below, the hydrants swivel their R2-D2 heads and let loose. Twenty hydrants sending millions of gallons of water arcing through the air to knock the gas off and that, too, is hilarious.

In the distance, turbines churn and churn and churn like children's pinwheels, blowing all the bad air far far away.

I keep climbing. The hydrants arc and spit and soak me. I slip on the latticed steel stairs and recover and get to the valve near the alert light, start to turn it but it's heavy, wildly heavy. Comically heavy as I lean in and stagger a little and then get it turning, get it shut.

On the way back to the stairs my legs are bendy like bubble gum. I take a step and then wilt into a kind of human puddle. Writhing onto my stomach, I see through the platform's steel grid two ambulances and a fire truck raging into the parking lot. My SCBA's bleating like a duck or

a bulldozer and in the distance there are sirens, beautiful sirens. The hydrants spit their applause, twenty tearful arcs of triumph.

Eileen appears beside me, flapping turbine arms. I move to speak her name but she shushes me, fern-teeth wavering in the bog of her mouth. Her tongue is a hundred sea-snakes and she's saying shush, never mind, she's come to take me away. As I'm clutching the nubs on her scaly green withers, I ask what happened to Mum, to the basement muskeg. She tells me diverted pipeline and the company will pay us off and Mum's all right now, it's time to let her go. And of course she's right, Eileen. Of course she's always been perfect and right and brave, so brave.

She starts to flap her turbine wings and soon we're chugging up and soaring, cruising, swooping high over the river, the hydrants swirling through the sky below. Eileen curls into a loop-de-loop and when we come back up I can see that the hydrants have become gushers. Twenty black fountains arcing and curling through the floodlit night. Down below, a million neon-blue smelt dance calypso at the surface of the river. Mum stands beneath the bridge, looking up and waving, her face no longer discoloured, her gold incisor gleaming.

I glance over at Eileen, her green eyes glowing elfin and wild. I tell her I have something to confess and she says she knows, she always knew. She says it's a little weird, the thing with me and Mum, but what isn't a little weird?

We catch hold of a thermal that takes us up fast, too fast, high above the black arcs of the fountains. The air strobes and changes colour and Eileen twirls a wing and says, "Look." What I see is a sky full of plants. Coral and krill and strange ancient grasses and we're riding it, soaring on the spirits of five hundred million years and for once it is not bad, is not sickening. All around us the gleaming ghosts of sedge and bulrushes, zooplankton and anemones and all of it pulsing green again. Below the river full of dancing neon smelt as Eileen spreads her wings and jags her beak and tells me it was true, was always true: we were all compost, all along. I tell her thank you and I love you, cling to her wings as we rise up burning through the broken brilliant sky.