

“... –elt that chill coming in off the lake? Goes right through you!”

“And how! I was up visiting folks Appleton-ways last week and felt like I was gonna get frozen over. I hadn’t been near the shore lately, though I reckon it’s gotta be worse coming south.”

“No word of a lie there. Had to pick up some favors around the marina and let me tell you, I couldn’t barely stand to keep an eye open to see where I was headed - darn near bowled over Sister Westervelt whil– ...”

The voices passed under the window. There would be others, chattering about the same thing. Every year, the dead air of it would nibble at the edges of his sanity. He chewed at the raw flesh of his cuticles. Something squelched like gristle between his teeth and he spit it onto the growing pile beneath his perch. A thread of saliva hung from his mouth and he absentmindedly wiped at it, leaving a trail of spittle and several uneven gouges in his arm that wept. Rolling his shoulders, he shifted on the wooden beam, splinters desperate to find purchase in the gnarled callouses of his feet. From his new position, he watched the two figures shuffle down the narrow street, billowing clouds of hot breath. A large dog trotted between them, looking up between the two as if following their conversation. Bile rose in his throat. *Doubtless it can*, he thought. *Probably cleverer than them*, he chuckled to himself.

Hot flesh pressed through the ragged ends of his fingers and a knot of hunger twisted in his gut. One of them went left at the end of the street, the dog trailing behind, and the other went right. A fake smile and a cheap wave. Pointless lies extruded through gaping fish-mouths. The decision was an easy one. His suit hung on the adjacent rafter, stiff and stained. He licked his thumb to wipe away a few harder to clean bits and slid it on. *Still slightly damp around the ankles*, he grumbled, and fastidiously prized the loose corner of bricks from the chimney. The cold sank into him as he crept into the flue, and by the time he’d placed the corner back it had dug into him like a parasite. He hurried up and out, clambering down to the street, and made sure he was walking the right way as he followed after the one on the right. He moved slowly but purposefully, a practiced routine of mediocrity that sickened him. His mouth moved over the words he would use, simple and direct. The way you would speak to an animal. *It is such a lovely night*, he would say, *that you can see all the stars in the sky*. He would move his head, as if to look up. They would mimic. It was efficient, quick, and left little room for error.

The figure was only a block further along. Mostly empty streets, occupied only by the occasional car. He moved faster, the gnawing in his guts urging him forward. He could do it quickly, but he’d need to time it correctly. The dog turned to watch him approach. *The dog? The dog went left. I saw it*. Sure enough, there was no dog. He thought to turn and double check but stumbled. Loose rocks

scraped under his interrupted gait and the figure turned around. He straightened himself quickly, and in the low light of dusk he passed easily enough. He opened his mouth to say his line. As he did, a deep *bark* came from out of sight.

“You say something, sir? I couldn’t quite make it out,” the figure said.

He affected a cough, and began, “*It is su—*” BARK.

It stepped forward. “One more time?” Headlights shone from around a corner. There wasn’t much time.

His head rocked left and right, trying to find the dog. Nothing. It was getting closer now. Too close.

“*It i—*”

BARK.

He and it stopped. He could see it wrinkle its nose. “Is that you, mister?” It walked closer, and he pitched backward, unaccustomed to the motion. “Golly, are you... alright... ?”

He knew what happened next. The widening eyes, the greedy gulp of air; a purely physical, *animal* reaction. Some turned, others raised their hands or reached for weapons. None of it mattered. He was on his feet before this one made a choice, the seams of his suit shredding from the exertion. He worked his jaw unconsciously, and with a click it unfurled, stretching, ripping open. All they would see in these last moments were up to them. *Something hopelessly droll*, he imagined, *a bicycle, perhaps, or Jesus*. He never understood it. The Void would pull them in and he would do the rest. A delicious syncopation. He waited eagerly for the draw of warmth and the bounty of his harvest.

BARK.

It screamed and ran. Halogen beams blinded him for a moment as he stood dumbstruck. He heard a scream from the inside of the car and the squeal of tires. He screwed his eyes shut and only opened the second lids as he scanned the street. The figure was gone, a distant dot punctuated by gouts of hot air. His mouth hung limply, deflated. It was only him now. Him and the dog. Pitch black, even against the growing night, it stared at him with golden embers. It didn’t have an edge, no end or beginning. It lived in the places between light. There was a moment of silence. Then understanding. He would sleep hungry tonight.