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05: DISSOLUTION

I have never done well in cities, even though I lived in one by necessity—because my husband needed to be there, because the best jobs for me were there, because I had self-destructed when I'd had opportunities in the field. But I was not a domesticated animal. The dirt and grit of a city, the unending wakefulness of it, the crowdedness, the constant light obscuring the stars, the omnipresent gasoline fumes, the thousand ways it presaged our destruction ... none of these things appealed to me.

“Where do you go so late at night?” my husband had asked several times, about nine months before he left as part of the eleventh expedition. There was an unspoken “really” before the “go”—I could hear it, loud and insistent.

“Nowhere,” I said. *Everywhere*.

“No, really—where do you go?” It was to his credit that he had never tried to follow me.

“I’m not cheating on you if that’s what you mean.”

The directness of that usually stopped him, even if it didn’t reassure him.

I had told him a late-night walk alone relaxed me, allowed me to sleep when the stress or boredom of my job became too much. But in truth I didn’t walk except the distance to an empty lot overgrown with grass. The empty lot appealed to me because it wasn’t truly empty. Two species of snail called it home and three species of lizard, along with butterflies and dragonflies. From lowly origins—a muddy rut from truck tires—a puddle had over time collected rainwater to become a pond. Fish eggs had found their way to that place, and minnows and tadpoles could be seen there, and aquatic insects. Weeds had grown up around it, making the soil less likely to erode into the water. Songbirds on migration used it as a refueling station.

As habitats went, the lot wasn’t complex, but its proximity dulled the impulse in me to just get in a car and start driving for the nearest wild place. I liked to visit late at night because I might see a wary fox passing through or catch a sugar glider resting on a telephone pole. Nighthawks gathered nearby to feast off the insects bombarding the streetlamps. Mice and owls played out ancient rituals of predator and prey. They all had a watchfulness about them that was different from animals in true wilderness; this was a jaded watchfulness, the result of a long and weary history. Tales of bad-faith encounters in human-occupied territory, tragic past events.

I didn’t tell my husband my walk had a destination because I wanted to keep the lot for myself. There are so many things couples do from habit and because they are expected to, and I didn’t mind those rituals. Sometimes I even enjoyed them. But I needed to be selfish about that patch of urban wilderness. It expanded in my mind while I was at work, calmed

me, gave me a series of miniature dramas to look forward to. I didn't know that while I was applying this Band-Aid to my need to be unconfined, my husband was dreaming of Area X and much greater open spaces. But, later, the parallel helped assuage my anger at his leaving, and then my confusion when he came back in such a changed form ... even if the stark truth is that I still did not truly understand what I had missed about him.

The psychologist had said, "The border is advancing ... a little bit more every year."

But I found that statement too limiting, too ignorant. There were thousands of "dead" spaces like the lot I had observed, thousands of transitional environments that no one saw, that had been rendered invisible because they were not "of use." Anything could inhabit them for a time without anyone noticing. We had come to think of the border as this monolithic invisible wall, but if members of the eleventh expedition had been able to return without our noticing, couldn't other things have already gotten through?



In this new phase of my brightness, recovering from my wounds, the Tower called incessantly to me; I could feel its physical presence under the earth with a clarity that mimicked that first flush of attraction, when you knew without looking exactly where the object of desire stood in the room. Part of this was my own need to return, but part might be due to the effect of the spores, and so I fought it because I had work to do first. This work might also, if I was left to it without any strange intercession, put everything in perspective.

To start with, I had to quarantine the lies and obfuscation of my superiors from data that pertained to the actual eccentricities of Area X. For example, the secret knowledge that there had been a proto-Area X, a kind of preamble and beachhead established first. As much as seeing the mound of journals had radically altered my view of Area X, I did not think that the higher number of expeditions told me much more about the Tower and its effects. It told me primarily that even if the border was expanding, the progress of assimilation by Area X could still be considered conservative. The recurring data points found in the journals that related to repeating cycles and fluctuations of seasons of the strange and the ordinary were useful in establishing trends. But this information, too, my superiors probably knew and therefore it could be considered something already reported by others. The myth that only a few early expeditions, the start date artificially suggested by the Southern Reach, had come to grief reinforced the idea of cycles existing within the overall framework of an *advance*.

The individual details chronicled by the journals might tell stories of heroism or cowardice, of good decisions and bad decisions, but ultimately they spoke to a kind of inevitability. No one had as yet plumbed the depths of intent or purpose in a way that had obstructed that intent or purpose. Everyone had died or been killed, returned changed or returned unchanged, but Area X had continued on as it always had ... while our superiors seemed to fear any radical reimagining of this situation so much that they had continued to send in knowledge-strapped expeditions as if this was the only option. *Feed Area X but do not*

antagonize it, and perhaps someone will, through luck or mere repetition, hit upon some explanation, some solution, before the world becomes Area X.

There was no way I could corroborate any of these theories, but I took a grim comfort in coming up with them anyway.

I left my husband's journal until last, even though its pull was as strong as the allure of the Tower. Instead, I focused on what I had brought back: the samples from the ruined village and from the psychologist, along with samples of my own skin. I set up my microscope on the rickety table, which I suppose the surveyor had found already so damaged it did not require her further attention. The cells of the psychologist, both from her unaffected shoulder and her wound, appeared to be normal human cells. So did the cells I examined from my own sample. This was impossible. I checked the samples over and over, even childishly pretending I had no interest in looking at them before swooping down with an eagle eye.

I was convinced that when I wasn't looking at them, these cells became something else, that the very act of observation changed everything. I knew this was madness and yet still I thought it. I felt as if Area X were laughing at me then—every blade of grass, every stray insect, every drop of water. What would happen when the Crawler reached the bottom of the Tower? What would happen when it came back up?

Then I examined the samples from the village: moss from the “forehead” of one of the eruptions, splinters of wood, a dead fox, a rat. The wood was indeed wood. The rat was indeed a rat. The moss and the fox ... were composed of modified human cells. *Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead ...*

I suppose I should have reared back from the microscope in shock, but I was beyond such reactions to anything that instrument might show me. Instead, I contented myself with quiet cursing. The boar on the way to base camp, the strange dolphins, the tormented beast in the reeds. Even the idea that replicas of members of the eleventh expedition had crossed back over. All supported the evidence of my microscope. Transformations were taking place here, and as much as I had felt part of a “natural” landscape on my trek to the lighthouse, I could not deny that these habitats were transitional in a deeply *unnatural* way. A perverse sense of relief overtook me; at least now I had proof of something strange happening, along with the brain tissue the anthropologist had taken from the skin of the Crawler.

By then, though, I'd had enough of samples. I ate lunch and decided against putting more effort into cleaning up the camp; most of that task would have to fall to the next expedition. It was another brilliant, blinding afternoon of stunning blue sky allied with a comfortable heat. I sat for a time, watched the dragonflies skimming the long grass, the dipping, looping flight of a redheaded woodpecker. I was just putting off the inevitable, my return to the Tower, and yet still I wasted time.

When I finally picked up my husband's journal and started to read, the brightness washed over me in unending waves and connected me to the earth, the water, the trees, the air, as I opened up and kept on opening.

[...]

A swimming pool. A rocky bay. An empty lot. A tower. A lighthouse. These things are real and not real. They exist and they do not exist. I remake them in my mind with every new thought, every remembered detail, and each time they are slightly different. Sometimes they are camouflage or disguises. Sometimes they are something more truthful.

When I finally reached the surface, I lay on my back atop the Tower, too exhausted to move, smiling for the simple, unexpected pleasure of the heat on my eyelids from the morning sun. I was continually reimagining the world even then, the lighthouse keeper colonizing my thoughts. I kept pulling out the photograph from my pocket, staring at his face, as if he held some further answer I could not yet grasp.

I wanted—I needed—to know that I had indeed seen him, not some apparition conjured up by the Crawler, and I clutched at anything that would help me believe that. What convinced me the most wasn't the photograph—it was the sample the anthropologist had taken from the edge of the Crawler, the sample that had proven to be human brain tissue.

So with that as my anchor, I began to form a narrative for the lighthouse keeper, as best I could, even as I stood and once again made my way back to the base camp. It was difficult because I knew nothing at all about his life, had none of those indicators that might have allowed me to imagine him. I had just a photograph and that terrible glimpse of him inside the Tower. All I could think was that this was a man who had had a normal life once, perhaps, but not one of those familiar rituals that defined normal had had any permanence—or helped him. He had been caught up in a storm that hadn't yet abated. Perhaps he had even seen it coming from the top of the lighthouse, the Event arriving like a kind of wave.

And what had manifested? What do I believe manifested? Think of it as a thorn, perhaps, a long, thick thorn so large it is buried deep in the side of the world. Injecting itself into the world. Emanating from this giant thorn is an endless, perhaps automatic, need to assimilate and to mimic. Assimilator and assimilated interact through the catalyst of a script of words, which powers the engine of transformation. Perhaps it is a creature living in perfect symbiosis with a host of other creatures. Perhaps it is “merely” a machine. But in either instance, if it has intelligence, that intelligence is far different from our own. It creates out of our ecosystem a new world, whose processes and aims are utterly alien—one that works through supreme acts of mirroring, and by remaining hidden in so many other ways, all without surrendering the foundations of its *otherness* as it becomes what it encounters.

I do not know how this thorn got here or from how far away it came, but by luck or fate or design at some point it found the lighthouse keeper and did not let him go. How long he had as it remade him, repurposed him, is a mystery. There was no one to observe, to bear witness—until thirty years later a biologist catches a glimpse of him and speculates on what he might have become. Catalyst. Spark. Engine. The grit that made the pearl? Or

merely an unwilling passenger? And after his fate was determined ... imagine the expeditions—twelve or fifty or a hundred, it doesn't matter—that keep coming into contact with that entity or entities, that keep becoming fodder and becoming remade. These expeditions that come here at a hidden entry point along a mysterious border, an entry point that (perhaps) is mirrored within the deepest depths of the Tower. Imagine these expeditions, and then recognize that *they all still exist* in Area X in some form, even the ones that came back, especially the ones that came back: layered over one another, communicating in whatever way is left to them. Imagine that this communication sometimes lends a sense of the uncanny to the landscape because of the narcissism of our human gaze, but that it is just part of the natural world here. I may never know what triggered the creation of the doppelgängers, but it may not matter.

Imagine, too, that while the Tower makes and remakes the world inside the border, it also slowly sends its emissaries across that border in ever greater numbers, so that in tangled gardens and fallow fields its envoys begin their work. *How does it travel and how far? What strange matter mixes and mingles?* In some future moment, perhaps the infiltration will reach even a certain remote sheet of coastal rock, quietly germinate in those tidal pools I know so well. Unless, of course, I am wrong that Area X is rousing itself from slumber, changing, becoming different than it was before.

The terrible thing, the thought I cannot dislodge after all I have seen, is that I can no longer say with conviction that this is a bad thing. Not when looking at the pristine nature of Area X and then the world beyond, which we have altered so much. Before she died, the psychologist said I had changed, and I think she meant I had *changed sides*. It isn't true—I don't even know if there are sides, or what that might mean—but it *could* be true. I see now that I could be persuaded. A religious or superstitious person, someone who believed in angels or in demons, might see it differently. Almost anyone else might see it differently. But I am not those people. I am just the biologist; I don't require any of this to have a deeper meaning.

I am aware that all of this speculation is incomplete, inexact, inaccurate, useless. If I don't have real answers, it is because we still don't know what questions to ask. Our instruments are useless, our methodology broken, our motivations selfish.



There is nothing much left to tell you, though I haven't quite told it right. But I am done trying anyway. After I left the Tower, I returned to base camp briefly, and then I came here, to the top of the lighthouse. I have spent four long days perfecting this account you are reading, for all its faults, and it is supplemented by a second journal that records all of my findings from the various samples taken by myself and other members of the expedition. I have even written a note for my parents.

I have bound these materials together with my husband's journal and will leave them here, atop the pile beneath the trapdoor. The table and the rug have been moved so that anyone can find what once was hidden. I also have replaced the lighthouse keeper's photograph in

its frame and put it back on the wall of the landing. I have added a second circle around his face because I could not help myself.

If the hints in the journals are accurate, then when the Crawler reaches the end of its latest cycle within the Tower, Area X will enter a convulsive season of barricades and blood, a kind of cataclysmic molting, if you want to think of it that way. Perhaps even sparked by the spread of activated spores erupting from the words written by the Crawler. The past two nights, I have seen a growing cone of energy rising above the Tower and spilling out into the surrounding wilderness. Although nothing has yet come out of the sea, from the ruined village figures have emerged and headed for the Tower. From base camp, no sign of life. From the beach below, there is not even a boot left of the psychologist, as if she has melted into the sand. Every night, the moaning creature has let me know that it retains dominion over its kingdom of reeds.

Observing all of this has quelled the last ashes of the burning compulsion I had to *know everything* ... anything ... and in its place remains the knowledge that the brightness is not done with me. It is just beginning, and the thought of continually doing harm to myself to remain human seems somehow pathetic. I will not be here when the thirteenth expedition reaches base camp. (Have they seen me yet, or are they about to? Will I melt into this landscape, or look up from a stand of reeds or the waters of the canal to see some other explorer staring down in disbelief? Will I be aware that anything is wrong or out of place?)

I plan to continue on into Area X, to go as far as I can before it is too late. I will follow my husband up the coast, up past the island, even. I don't believe I'll find him—I don't need to find him—but I want to see what he saw. I want to feel him close, as if he is in the room. And, if I'm honest, I can't shake the sense that he is *still here*, somewhere, even if utterly transformed—in the eye of a dolphin, in the touch of an uprising of moss, anywhere and everywhere. Perhaps I'll even find a boat abandoned on a deserted beach, if I'm lucky, and some sign of what happened next. I could be content with *just that*, even knowing what I know.

This part I will do alone, leaving you behind. Don't follow. I'm well beyond you now, and traveling very fast.

Has there always been someone like me to bury the bodies, to have regrets, to carry on after everyone else was dead?

I am the last casualty of both the eleventh and the twelfth expeditions.

I am not returning home.