

Lavender Masks for Breathing in Haze

A week before he drowned in garbage beneath a gray tempest sky, the Father Mitchell pried the crib up, corroded and dripping, from under the steel-scrap layer of the north coast's sludge surface. He was a wrecker, a salvager of the swamps that were once the beaches, and he was experienced, years on the stilts and countless boat skeletons extracted with his extending titanium pliers – but experience doesn't matter when rain boils out of the western haze, out of nowhere, and the oil tide rises and rises, rising so high that greasy waves batter the trash reefs and black liquid plunges through the cans and bottles and disintegrated box slush; Father Mitchell whispers to me, in the hiss of the fluorescents sputtering out, long after the masks of the other Families rasp asleep: he would never drown. But he did, he lied, and now he lies twisted under tons of barbed rusted sediment that just a week earlier had born him a detonated locomotive's grill; the crib for our Sister Maria, Father Mitchell said, bending the iron ribs and setting the grill upside down but upright, tilting against our rooms metal walls, and the bundle of blankets and stained cling wrap fit snug in the barred cradle's groove.

Now, a week after the Father's gone, Mother Eva rocks the crib in tune with the rains pounding. The sound upon the floors chipped metal is soft scrape and scratch, not loud enough to hush the acid sizzling on the outside walls or the whistling from the droplet-wide hole smoking in the roof, not distracting enough to stifle the sulfur stench sinking from that hole. Fluorescent bulbs dangling from sharp-tipped hooks drape the room with sporadic buzzing, product of the acid's fumes burning at their tangled wires. Steam rises in indiscriminate wisps from the duct-tape clusters claiming the walls like posters and tapestries of old. An acrid fog remains, having built up from the days-long storm, and the only respite for inhabitants of our

tenements is the rare breaks in the rain when, crinkling back the thick plastic curtains over our wide square doorways – though with no relief because the fumes cloy beyond our confines and because the breaks are only seconds-long – we rasp in the outside air through our masks’ vents.

Father Mitchell used to tell me that the Gods would punish me if I breathe in the outside air. If I removed, for even a single second, the mask that covers and protects and embeds, with the tubes, my nostrils and my mouth and my lungs. The Father used to laugh about a man, another Father of another Family who once occupied this same room. This man took too deep a breath of the toxic air and harsh coughing stumbled him through the curtains. That wasn’t the funny part though, Father Mitchell went on. The funny part was that the man somehow missed all the tiny holes in the nets – those spiked iron nets woven between the cranes to catch the people who fell – on his hundred-or-so foot fall to the concrete below.

What wasn’t funny: after evicting the aftermath, with the Landlord’s permission and with the Gods’ blessings – given the indignation shown by the man in his own demise and in the destitution of his Family - Father Mitchell had to hang up the new curtains at his own expense.

Peering out a slit in the curtain’s corner, I mark iridescent drops amidst the washed silver torrent and track those golden neon lines as they collapse from my vision. Those are the drops that melt through the skin and to the bones. *This is the storm that killed Father.* But if the winds turn suddenly, I’ve got the goggles, but getting hit on the cheeks or on the bridge of the nose stings almost as bad as the eyes. *His nerves burned as he drowned.* If I embrace the rain and venture out, trekking the northward miles of viscous glistening vista to dive within the sharp edges and blazing cold tightness of where the oily avalanche festers, would I find a body? *Or is his entire being now glowing ash?*

According to Father Mitchell, beyond the Fence is a lake of yellow barrels and crackling mud deep as the ocean and stretching nearly as long, an earthly parallel to the Lake of Acid awaiting blasphemers and alchemists, and only beyond that perilous hike is the site of the wreckers scavenging. *Not today though. They're not out today.* Since returning to the gate with what bodies that they could rescue, the wreckers had dispersed to their Families, and they wouldn't chart out again until the storm's passing.

"Dalton?" I hear. "Brother Dalton?" Mother Eva's tone gurgles from under her hood. She squats before a deflated tire and tends with gnarled fingers and squeaky trimmers a cracked pot of lush violet lavender; the pot balances on the crumpled hubcap, as if balancing *for* her, heedless of her actual touch. Her other arm cranes from the red patchwork of her robes hanging sleeves. The crib rocks and the floor grates. *Squeak-squeak* when her trimmers snip. "Shiva will direct the drain of his flaming dribble-river unto you should you pursue this defiance." A lock of her lavender petal alights on her composted dirt. She'll crush those petals in a pestle and mortar then rub the powder into her rebreather's filtration vents. That's what she's done with the trio of masks that preceded her current mask, a tradition that one Mother taught her, and I never knew what was most arcane about her; that she's had more than one mask, or that she somehow cultivates a miniature garden of herbs despite the fumes, and all on a single ledge hidden behind a curtain in one corner of our room. Camphor daubs for Sister Maria's mask as well, just as she used to daub Father Mitchell's, and she'll offer me, and I'll decline. *Sister Maria will remember the smell. But I don't. And I won't, because I can't.*

Those susurrations of the unbreaking rain are successions of gray and gray, gray cords racing gray cords to see who topples faster, but none fast enough – none had ever been fast enough, according to Father Mitchell – to topple our tenements. We live in shipping containers.

They're stacked and piled and bolted upon one another's rust, thirty ribbed boxes high at their peaks, each of the distorted pyramids rising only two-deep, with the rear walls of the rooms facing, and all supported by a wild-reaching cage of the same leviathan-armed cranes that bore them up as their last task before eternal hibernation. Obviously, lower floors, rooms near the stacks centers, and especially rooms not facing the sea are all at premiums – but that's not to say that our twenty-second floor room glaring to the sea ever shakes or sways, at least unduly, and that's only ever on the days that are particularly whiney. *Whiney. Not windy. Whiney.* The days when the wind whips, when gusts thrust through the sky haze, strong as tsunamis, spattering the sides, leaving acid on the outside tarps whining and whining for hours after; *whining and whining, ruining everything, punishing us with the whining – just like the Mothers and the Sisters*; what Father Mitchell called those days, whiney, and what Father Mitchell said of the women.

“What did Father Mitchell say of the Flood, boy?” Mother Eva croaks. “Why does Shiva direct His unceasing drool upon us?”

“Because Shiva is pregnant,” I murmur, too low for her to hear. She's hysterical with hunger, ever-salivating, and all because Her sister Eve lost the immortal seeds of the apple – that's what Father Mitchell –“

“Did he say that Shiva flows His flaming spit over us because spit is all we're worth? Did he say that Shiva is aiming for the serpent Adam, the seed-thief, and did he say that emulations of Adam's arrogance are temptations for Shiva's aim? This insistence on looking out, boy, is a threat not just to yourself, but also to myself, to the Sister Maria, and to the entire world. The next Flood will not begin in this room. I've lived too long for *you* to be my undoing, so either

jump through that curtain and tumble into the Lake, or close them and tape them – whatever you do, I *will* remain dry of Him, and I will not tell you that twice.”

“What if they come to evict us?” I ask. “Shouldn’t I be prepared to fight them?”

“They won’t come. And you’re not the one fearing them from coming. So settle, boy, before I drown you in enough valerian that you’ll sleep until your next Father.”

My next Father. *But I only want the last.* “Will the women still come to you for treatment after this storm’s broken?”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“Will they still pay?”

“Feared that your time’s come to wreck?” As she rocks the crib, the top tips of the ribs clang against the wall. “Don’t be. I am not the meek of your last Mother - I am the fierce of being presumed by Him of being a nothing consort. You will work when your will wills you work, and not before, and that is my will, even if He not share that.”

“Father Mitchell said that I could probably start work early. That I’m big for my age.”

“And slightly cleverer than Shiva, though that’s not hard, and that’s not why Father Mitchell liked you. Big, that’s all he claimed, that you were big? Strong? Beastly hands, good for gripping those disgusting pliers? Scrounging, digging fingers, massive worms, good for delving those abominable heaps – did he never tell you he liked your hands most of all? You’re eager, boy, to inherit the swamps? A life of rust and metal?” From beneath her hood and behind her mask, she always sounds as though she swallows her laughs. “Wouldn’t be much different from your life of rust and metal now. But are you so insolent as to not have any gratitude for me? You’ll stay here, boy, with Maria and I, and you don’t have to go to work wrecking for a few more years.”

“I know I can stay. You keep telling me that. But you won’t tell me why nobody will come to evict us. You won’t tell me whether we have enough scrap to make rent, or whether something else is keeping us here, what kind of contract you’ve got carved with the Landlord – you won’t tell me anything.”

“A Mother and her money are her own business, boy.”

“Your money’s not what matters though. I can tell.”

“Can you now?”

“Yes.”

The sea is concealed beyond the haze. Neither are far, just a shimmy along the plankways and a teetering ride down the rope-pulley elevator, a picking through the ragged throngs that swarm the plastic-table marketplace amidst the concrete warehouses, then a creaking over the docks under the faint gridwork of the cranes shadows, with the brackish brown water bleeding beneath the planks into slits of void blackness; the docks head lurches into the thick swirling swells, and the weaving of the docks’ darkened wood pillars leave sights of the sea as shaky as the haze is opaque. The sea is pungent shades of black, brown, and gray, with sounds of bending timbre, with sounds of tides swishing, and with the rushing shouts and the crashing sounds from the pock-marked overall workers and with the drumming of the wheels of their lifters and unloaders and stackers and the barrels’ clattering and the boxes’ thudding and the protective tarps bellowing – but a freighter hadn’t yawned into our port in what seemed like weeks, weeks before Father Mitchell died, and Father Mitchell had always told me to never chase freighters. *No matter how curious I am of the sea beyond the haze – what lays beyond the sea - somebody my size would be chained to a freighter’s behemoth oar before my oil signature even dried in the carved metal tablet. Before I even realized I had signed my life away in an immovable contract. I*

only went to the sea when the sky was at rest and no boat lights were blurring through the haze – but even when I went, and no matter how calm, there always was the haze.

“My money’s not what matters, oh? I’ll tell you what matters, boy, and you’ll hear me louder and clearer than you ever did your beloved Father Mitchell. All that matters is Shiva’s appearance; that the prophecies state that He is a he, and that the prophecies state: when His crucified form reappears, the Second Coming looms, and *finally* the end of the world; when Shiva dances in His constraints in imitation of the sinner intoxicated off his own arrogance or lusted silly off his own image – when Shiva raises his left leg over his right, and when the ring of fire descends upon the acid and –“

A roar douses Mother Eva’s voice. The blast engulfs the room, a titanic yawning, inundating the dripping from the hole in the roof and even the grinding of the crib and, with a warmth penetrating the sweat-drenching heat of the fumes, I smile for the first time since Father Mitchell died. *A freighter! And slithering into port at the exact time that prophecy is invoked! Is this a convergence?* Father Mitchell spoke of convergences. Of chance unions in nature, by nature’s happenstance, and therefore through the blissful convenience of Ganesha – this must be convergence! As the clarion horn dies and before she can strike up again her hot prongs of guilt, I ask: “Mother Eva, where did Father Mitchell find me?”

“He didn’t deign to tell me. Our Family’s been together less than a year. Not enough time for secrets to bubble to the surface. There was a Father before him, I know, but that’s all I know. I cannot peer into your past, boy. Had I that divine power, I would be glimpsing far before your existence was even considered.”

“There was a Mother before you too.”

“Two. Your original mother, and your first mother. There was your birthplace, then there were these tenements, and then your first Mother dies and the Father thought you needed another – so finally there’s *this* tenement. And there’s me.” Her mask churns out a static cackle. “And I tolerated him, I suppose, but I will not miss the stains that his impurities dripped upon our Church. The gambling away the profits from his metal-sales. Guzzling ethanol, gasping adhesive, the dancing with the cheap women in the warehouse frameworks and the defiling himself in the dead of the lamps stifling – I could not share a cot with that man, with any man, with any being turned or turning from the proper sight of sickened Shiva –“

“Mother Eva.” I’d asked Father Mitchell before, where he found me, but I had never asked her *this*: “Where did you find Sister Maria?” A pale eye sparks in the deep haze distance. No wider or taller than a pinpoint. The freighter’s beam, that round ray of light, the guiding unto the docks, the mirroring of the light *on* the docks – that guiding light built onto the foremost warehouses roof – and I imagine, as I always do when the vessels glide out of nothing, what our tenements might look to a freighter sailor. We must be a horizon of mountains in far-off silhouettes and, closer in the approach, as we extend over the sailors, we must be the dulled gray-brown teeth of an immense monsters jagged black maw. *The first time a new sailor sees us – does he think we’re going to topple at any time?* I didn’t ask her about Sister Maria – I just said her name. “Mother Eva,” I say again, because I couldn’t bear another word from her.

She relinquishes noise to the crib’s grind and the neighbors din. Above us, there’s twin girls stomping and shouting. Their echoes cascade down the face of our metal mountain. They’re playing a game where one of them is a wrecker, the other is a valuable trash husk, and the goal for the wrecker is to catch that husk. From another side of us, or possibly from below us – I can never tell – an ecstatically clear shout from a man with a crisp-clean mask – and I wonder how

he got his new mask and how Mother Eva got hers – and from *another* side and from *another* man: a scream. Acid must have splashed at him. If his legs or arms got scorched bad enough, that might be the end of whatever occupation he had. *Just from dawdling in the doorway, from peering out, his Family loses their home. Like that idiot who fell.*

Sister Maria coos from her crib. She'll awaken soon.

“The rains’ break is lasting,” murmurs Mother Eva.

“I know, I say, flinging open the curtain. Plankways groan beneath my lead boots. The salvaged garbage bags wrapped to the wood are ripped, and the holes reveal wood thinned by acid, blackened by age, nails protruding and bending and corroding, and I pass a railing with but a shred of a black bag left whipping, looking like a flag flapping of stained defeat; the railing is decayed, the planks fold inwards, and the decay is flavored of spoiled meat fresh from the can. Beyond the railing, twenty-two stories down, haze. Even just a story down: haze.

Our neighbors to our left are a sailor Family. The Father’s off heaving oars month after month and the Mother’s often over at our container to rasp with Mother Eva, hour after hour, about the newest ocean fantasy of her daughter’s, the kraken with the buzz saw teeth or the skyscraper paradise in the abyss, or otherwise about whatever book they’re reading. Most of the Mothers on our row, in fact, attend these daily discussions. In a scattered circle around and across our container, everywhere except near the herb curtains and the cots, they squat in their robes and cloaks, rebreathing masks churning, clinging to their cling-wrapped devices – these ridiculous lit-up tablets – and they just...talk. Or, rather, one talks, and the others listen. With their devices only rarely synchronizing with the same text – and with the added rarity of more than two of them having the same text – the onus is on the reader to explain the text they read to the others. Some add dramatic flair to their full-on readings, injecting voice and character into

the recounted prose, and some even act out the scenes of love swooning in fairytale ballrooms, of pirates swashbuckling across crystal-water seas, of detectives seizing bloody-handed killers. Most don't, most just listen, and Mother Eva always just listens, flitting through the crowds with salves for burns and tinctures for eyes, collecting scraps for payment – sometimes refusing payment if she saw the Landlord had been late with the Fathers' payment – and only interjecting if a story got too violent or romantic. *Profane stories are for godless men, she says.* I suspect her censoring is less about morality and more about her own desire for control. The devices, after-all, were hers originally, and she's the only one with the cables to energize them should their lights fade; she made the cables, she told me, with wires and tape – so why should she have to suffer needlessly?

The only woman on our row without a device is the woman at the end of our row. Whereas our other neighbors have their curtains closed on account of the just-passed storm, which creates with the haze a corridor of off-white and gray, this woman always has her curtains closed. She's no Mother, and she is therefore no Sister, Mother Eva says. *The woman refuses to care for a child or tolerate a Father. "A Mother to each Father and whichever Father." She refuses to contribute to The Family.* How she affords her rent without a pairing with a Father who has a work contract with the Landlord? *Mother Eva alone knows; just another mystery she will not unveil to me.* From where I stand beneath the tall plastic umbrella bolted and taped to the railing's center, from where I turn the groaning gear to rattle up the elevator, I can't see our container or the woman's container. All I see are the curtains to either immediate side. One parts at the corner as the elevator arrives. I lock a loop of the rust-orange chain into the crank, to hold the elevator.

Sister Sarah sticks her hooded head out. I can't see her face, but I hear her mask snort,
"The calm's for real?"

"If Shiva blesses."

"Off to the market before the hawkers start scrambling? Can you fetch me a can of mushrooms? I'll pay you back."

"I've no scraps."

"Here."

I'm taller than Sister Sarah so, standing before her, I glimpse into her container. Mother Christina hovers between little plastic basins across the room, gauging how much more acid from their roof-holes could drip-drop in before they're overflowing. Brother David, my peer in age, lies on his cot. His snore deadens the pitter-patters. Sister Sarah's rubber glove brushes my rubber gloves. "That's enough for a can of mushrooms," she says. "Don't lose that." *I'm not Eve, girl*, I want to say – but I'm already back holding the chain, and the rickety elevator teeters as the stone counter weight lifts, and lifts, and lifts, and I'm descending past white curtain after white curtain with the only break in the haze the pale saucer of the freighter growing and growing with each chipped chain link chewing at my protected palms.

Vague shapes resolve out of the gray. Gridded stems of the cranes, disparate but many, and the jaggedness of their nets, covered over by haze like the mistiness over a branch-dense forest in one of those stories from the Mothers. The bones of the collapsed warehouses are metal bowels simmering off mazes of fumes. Abandoned containers in brown molten heaps, molted into - and indistinguishable - from their once-contents. Concrete ground swells below, darkened and bubbling, and the elevator crunches down. The haze is gray here and grayer there, changing with the overlapping of the fume breezing over the oil breezes and, on those breezes, under a din

of wordless voices awakening to the rain's break, the grating jingle of the chain rings through. I tighten my cloak and step out onto the popping black surface.

The people living in the bottom floors of the tarped warehouses are the richest in the dockyard. They're the merchants who the Landlord bids sell the metals from the wreckers. Most in the containers can't afford their wares, but there are trinkets and miscellaneous parts for appliances, string necklaces with scraps, boxes with outlets for cords, spare fluorescent lights and wired bulbs – and beyond that, for the husks of boats or cars that yielded recyclable metal, the desired customer wasn't those of us in the containers. Brahman caravans were frequent visitors and bulk-buyers, so long as they paid in scraps for permission with the Fence guards – which of course went right to the Landlord – and there were also the freighters, and occasionally even smaller boats, detached Families trying to thrive on house-boats who roped onto our dock for canned rations, and there had once even been a plastic canoe presumed to have come from the harbor a few miles to the south; the canoe had been uncovered, all that was found was a scalding skeleton, and according to the Mother's gossip, the Landlord sent an envoy to the harbor to deliver the bones in hopes of avoiding war. *If ever there is a war, the wreckers will be recalled. The most productive salvagers will get the few guns of the dockyard. Those less productive get nailed-pole spears.*

Besides merchants, there are the few bartenders with ethanol licenses, a pair of competing banks both authorized by the Landlord, and there's even a section of the warehouse devoted to detaining sinners. There's more; stalls selling cotton swabs and bandages and stalls selling tools, stalls specializing in blender repair and blender blades and just blenders and just stalls with straws that fit through the rebreather vents – and all the stalls in a gridwork of stalls, curtains, and aisles. A stall with the singular church to Shiva, housing this dockyard's

Grandfather, and I jog past the massive gray doorway of the warehouse that contains both church and jail – then slow back to a walk.

None of these doors are yet open, and I'm grateful for this gray alley of gray concrete and voices muffled by gray metal; I've always thought that living in those confines would be worse than living in the containers' height and tightness – at least the containers' separation was metal and not just curtain.

The long alley ends at the dock. Blackness swims around splashes of brown like oxidized ink. A shout for more rope rises over the turgidity. Boots rumble across wood. The burnished bow of the freighter curves out of the gray, lumbering so high overhead as to blur from sight, and the dockyard's only operable crane whirs from somewhere deeper in the haze. I'm a quarter of the way down the dock when a pair of workers appear, overcoated, helmeted, and with industrial rebreathers.

“Excuse me?” I ask.

One of the workers shrugs a drawstring satchel over his shoulder and shakes his head. The other doesn't even glance.

“I'm looking for work. I think I can afford the signing fee.”

“The Captain. He contracts with your leader.”

“Where's he?”

Another shrug. Their forms fall away into the haze I had just come from.

I stare after them.

Then start after them. Not to catch them. But to follow them back towards the warehouses, back down the gray alley, where I'd stop following them, and back to the elevator, and back up to my container and back to Mother –

“You’re looking for work?”

“Yes,” I say, turning, before I can realize: the voice is from a woman.

Or, I see, a girl. She’s hugging herself against the haze, gripping to the flaps of a worker’s overcoat, and her thin arms shake. Her hair is in a plastic net with a few red strands peeking out here and there. A rebreather of a model I’d never seen before, with a thinner mask and shiny silver vents, and yet the mask is still too much for me to see much of her face, and so I can’t tell whether she’s beautiful.

“I mean, yes, I think I’m looking for work. Do you know who the Captain is?”

“Papa put me in their charge. The Captains are supposed to make sure I’m safe and that I get where I’m supposed to go.”

“Papa?” I’d heard the word before, uttered by the women in their grumblings over books; the word was like “Father,” but for one Father, I’d gathered.

“Yes. Me and Papa are from Angel City. Have you ever been?”

“Where’s that?”

“I don’t know how to get there. That’s what these sailormen are for. I think this is the same ocean that’s along Angel City, but I don’t know. I’ve been on a lot of ships, with a lot of Captains. I just know I’m from Angel City.”

“Is this freighter from there?”

“Didn’t you hear what I said? I’ve been on lots of ships. I’m going to go on one that flies too.”

“A flying ship? Like one that goes into space?”

“Papa says I’m going to the moon. That there are humans there, with big cities, bigger cities that are left on this place, and everything’s cleaner up there and we don’t have to wear the masks.”

“You’re going to fly on a ship to the moon?”

“That’s what Papa says. I’m going to live there.”

Behind the girl, one of the freighter’s gargantuan oars is almost vertical in the water, poking out of a porthole and looking at rest like a sunken crane arm. “Is he a sailor on this ship?”

“Who? Papa? He’s in Angel City. He’ll come see me before I get on the ship to the moon. He’ll catch up to me, he just still has work to do in Angel City so that he can get enough money. He made this, you know,” she says, tapping her mask. “I don’t know if he made yours though. Yours is different than mine. Mine’s better, I think.”

“I know. Do you know where this ship is going next?”

“Not to the moon,” she snickers. “Just to some other place. I think Papa will be there this time, and that this time I’ll not be getting on a ship that goes on water, but the ship that flies. Won’t that be wonderful?”

“This time? You think he’s here?”

“Not this time, I mean, I think he’ll be at the next stop. Wherever this ship is going next. Are you going to get on the ship too? You said you were looking for work.”

“I want to leave this place.”

“So do I. I don’t like being here. Do you live in those big concrete buildings?”

“In the stacks behind them.”

She squints. “I don’t see anything.”

“The haze is too thick right now. Listen, how long will this ship be here?”

“Captain doesn’t tell me. He just heads out of his cabin and yells at the sailors to get to unloading.”

“Will you wait here for me?”

“Are you going to find the Captain? I want you on the ship with me. You’re really nice. I like talking about my Papa with you. The sailors just laugh at me when I say there are flying ships. But Papa tells me there are, and I believe my Papa. So you’ll let me keep talking about him once you’re on the ship?”

“I want to bring you something. Will you wait?”

“Bring me something?”

“To show that this place isn’t all bad. You know, so that you don’t think so poorly of us.”

“I don’t think poorly of you. I just don’t like being here.”

“So you’ll wait here?”

“If the ship’s leaving, the horn sounds. I can’t wait for you if the horn blows.”

“I’ll be back before that,” I say, already starting back down the dock. This was how Father Mitchell approached the women in the warehouse’s upper frameworks: with a gift. With scraps. *That’s all they care about*, he told me, *what you can give them* – but he never told me about the women in the warehouse’s upper frameworks except to tell me to avoid them. If he had told me about them, about the things I imagine him giving them – would I have called him a sinner?

But, I remember, once I’ve disappeared from her sight through the haze, *But I can’t give her anything*. Metal doors and concrete structures are before me, stretching down in a gray slit, and some of the doors are already unfurling, crinkling upwards, to expose the layout of curtained shops within. Clamor arises in the doors’ echoes, and I think of the trinket shops with the scrap-

shred necklaces and molded metal potsherds; I can't afford them. *I could, but that's the scrap Sister Sarah gave me – and I was going to use that scrap on the contract fee, and I was never going to see Sister Sarah again – but if I can get this girl to like me, I never will see Sister Sarah, or Sister Maria, or Mother Eva ever again.* But could ships really fly? Could they really go to the moon? I step under the dimmer gray from where the gray haze passes a warehouse's broad threshold and wisps into the interior.

Others have come down from the tenements. I recognize Mother Daisy exchanging scraps for strips of duct-tape. Brother David is awake and here too, not for mushrooms, but he disappears down an aisle between stalls of cord replacements and grid-shielded fans. I duck into a parallel aisle and am assailed by the reverberations of merchants hawking their wares. At least one of the warehouses is reserved for housing the assembled brahman caravans and, with the rain's cessation, that build-up of caravanners is let loose; the marketplace is packed. I fight through presses of padded dusters and hordes of jackets sewn with metal plates. Brahmins mingle too, at the ends of chain leashes, their bright tanned flank and guttural moans paving holy space around them, and I even catch a few words of a language I don't know. Words of those languages, I can place, but the entire conversation becomes a region-dependent garble that fades to the clinking of cans, swishing of curtains, and jangling of metal jewelries, metal chimes, metal statues of crude Shiva, and metal spears and metal swords. I'm not sure what I'm after, but when I pass a stall with a wrecker's claw across the counter, I'm tempted to stop.

I could pay back Sister Sarah and then some. Just after the coast's settled, the wrecker contract is carved, and we've set out to salvage – would Sister Sarah wait that long for her canned mushrooms? Would the girl from the ship wait that long for her gift? *Because I'll have to buy her something then. I'll have the scrap. She won't ever want to return to her Papa. Or even*

think of going to the moon. I'll be able to afford a place for us on the bottom floor. That way, even if the tenements do topple, we won't topple. We'll still be stuck behind the wreckage, but we'll be alive – not dead from the fall; from a failure to fly. Father Mitchell would be proud I'd protected my Family. Father Mitchell –

Father Mitchell? He's there, squatting behind a stall of tin statues, and he's Father Mitchell, he has to be; that heavy wrinkled brow and the deep-set eyes behind thin tinted goggles, the sandy hair parting down the middle and the broad neck. I step forward, blinking and rubbing at my goggles, disbelieving of the image, and I get nearer – and the image fades. I know this man, but he's not Father Mitchell: he's Father Abraham, an adhesive-gulper, who on more than foggy night had dragged my unconscious Father through our curtains; Father Abraham, the artist, who had talent enough to impress the Landlord with - whereas Father Mitchell and his salvagers hands were relegated to the tenements. I thread around a sailor haggling for jars of ethanol, angling to avoid Father Abraham as I had avoided the church warehouse – but I'm caught this time. "Brother Dalton! Is that you, Brother Dalton? Mitchell's ward? Won't you please come to my stall?"

My shambling takes me to him. "Father Abraham. I didn't see you."

"Who can see anybody in here?" He waves a spindly hand and a bracelet of distorted beads clinks. "But you are well? You have the old crone watching over you, yes?"

"Shiva bless."

He slaps his plastic counter. "But you were always the funny boy! Not so much boy anymore though – not so much boy as you are a man. You must be, yes, you know, you must be a working man, a strong man, now that Mitchell is gone – you know that Mitchell is gone, yes?"

"The wreckers came by and told us this morning."

“They ambled around, did they? Did they bring you the payments he was owed? Probably not, I’d wager, more likely they drank all that up. Sorry to hear, my boy, so sorry to hear. But I heard the scrap sing from your pockets, my boy, believe me I did. Any of the Sister neighbors giving you the tint? Ah. But I’ve got you now, my boy, don’t I? That blush rising under your mask-straps – I can almost see her in your goggles. Mitchell was good with the women, gave them what they wanted, you know, but he wasn’t good with the Mothers, couldn’t give them nothing cause so much went to the other women, but I’m sure you knew that, but with the women, I mean, the *women* – and ever since he brought you back and showed you to me for that first time, even back when you were this little spit of tar, I knew, you know, *I knew*; you’d never want for Mothers or Sisters or just for women, you’d never want for them, just like him.”

I tremble from what Father Abraham said. Something important was in his words, something about me – but all I can think of is what he said of Father Mitchell – and of how much of what he said sounded like Mother Eva. “That’s not true,” I mutter. “That is sin. What you’re saying about him...outside of the Family. That is sin.”

“What’s that? Sin? He didn’t wrap you too much in that, did he? Or is the crone getting to you? Sin? Who cares about sin, my boy, when all this – everything around us, even the Godsdamned building – is collapsing? Nothing’s good, my boy, except lying your head down another night.”

“You’ll never collapse in your sleep though.”

“What’s that? Boy, you have to speak up in here.”

“How much are the statues?” My voice is quivering.

“You want, yeah, for this girl you’re going on about? I practically know her, you know, all of what you said about her. They’re three good-sized scraps each, but these bigger ones here,

on this side of the counter, they're four each. Three each these, four each those, you hear, okay, but I'll cut you a break, you know, because the storm's been so long and because you were so good to Mitchie, and you know, because of that favor the crone's doing us. You don't have to pay now, but try to get back to me before the week's end, I want to see you again before the week's end. Hear?"

"What favor for the crone?"

He pushes one of the smaller statues towards me, about the size of my fist, and I know he didn't hear me, but I don't ask again.

"That was a mistake, you know, wasn't supposed to happen, and we're not even sure who's it is, but the crone's done right by us not telling the Landlord about the quota violation, and I'll do right by anybody she houses. Just take the lesson there, my boy, you know, take the lesson from me like you took them lessons from Father Mitchell and like you're taking this here statue, right, but you're going to come back to me in a week – but what's that? Right, the lesson: *be careful.*"

I take the statue and back away. There's something else I'm supposed to get, but I can't remember, I can't remember anything, even how to get out of the market – there's people sliding by like how the acid slides down our walls and like how the oil slicks along the ocean, and I'm back before the ocean. I'm back on the dock, the market's tightness is behind me, replaced by the haze, and the haze is all around. The freighter's gone, and I hadn't heard the horn; the crane had only awakened to remove a few new containers, and the sailors are prying their metal doors open – they'll tear them off eventually, once the contents are extracted, and the Landlord will come down and inspect them and then bid the crane add them to the tenements. Two new rooms added, just like that, and wouldn't they get crowded fast?

Brother David was to meet soon with the Grandfather about bidding on a Sister. Father Milton, companion of Mother Christina, was a sailor, and their Family only lived on the twenty-second floor to save scrap – Brother David wouldn't need to wreck to afford a Sister or to afford the price of the Landlord's certification tablet for a Family. He could even make of his Sister Sarah a Mother Sarah if he wanted – but what I wanted? Father Mitchell never brought me a Sister around my age, he never brought Mother Eva surplus scraps to save, and I can't remember the faces of my own Mothers; they must not have been memorable, Father Mitchell might have said, for Father Mitchell was cruel, and he raised me insolent, like Mother Eva says – but Mother Eva protects, doesn't she, just as Shiva blesses? *She says I don't need to wreck. And I show my gratitude with ingratitude. She says Father Mitchell was in violation of his unions with my Mothers, and I can't remember my Mothers faces except for Mother Eva – and Mother Eva is right. Father Mitchell was in violation of his unions with my Mothers. He would have spit in Shiva's eye.*

I hadn't heard the horn. Sailors filter along either side of me as I walk down the dock. When I get to the end of the haze and gaze out on the plane of oil, I'm still holding the statue that the Brother Abraham gave me. Sister Sarah's scrap is still in my pocket. And when I'm back through the haze, churning back up the elevator and when I'm back in my Family's room – that's still there – Sister Maria will still be there, and the Mother Eva will still be there. Father Mitchell won't be there, and neither will the truth of Shiva, whether Shiva is a slobbering man or a sobbing woman, and whether Eve lost the apple or whether she didn't, Eve won't be there. The Mother Eva will be though, hunched over the makeshift crib that within, by Mother Eva's will, the Sister Maria sleeps and lives and breathes lavender breaths - and by her will I live with them, and by her will I won't have wreck; by her will I won't drown, and so by her will, by her

unfaltering and righteous will – by Her will, even if the cause of all this strife be Him - I will be grateful; I will not whine.

As the gray wind of the day picks up again in somber gusts of stinging ocean haze, the tin statue is still in my hand, and the statue is of a malformed tin Shiva in a sagging dance with tin left leg folding over tin right and with all four tin arms in various positions of empty holding and, thanks to the tin's crudeness, with no discernable gender.