Straight on to the Exit

David M. Chess

There are still things that we need to know about you, beyond what you've written on the forms, beyond what is in the public record. Understanding will come from intimate acquaintance, from knowledge of detail, from the shape of the mirror in the morning, the number of hairs on the back of your thumb.

Not that we need to know you at quite that level.

There are concerns we have about your life. You are a mass of contradictions. We have not yet formed a coherent image of you in our minds. A coherent image is what we need, if we are to be successful. If you, as well as we, are to be successful.

Look up at the light and relax.

Stories

"The skilled liar is shunned by all societies, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. Mankind discovered at a very early age that trustworthy communication is the most powerful weapon it has against the world. It was with that discovery, in fact, that mankind became mankind. Society is the essence of humanity, and communication is the essence of society."

Hunter isn't looking up as the Professor talks, nor listening to more than the bare flow of his words. Neither is most of the rest of the class, nor (Hunter suspects) is the Professor himself. The classroom is hot from the sun shining warm through the windows and the floating dust, and the air smells of time, of age and erasers, of generations of students not quite listening to generations of professors.

This morning the Professor seems relaxed, at ease, something like beatific. His gaze wanders around the ceiling of the room, and his fingers are laced together across his broad stomach as he leans back in the ancient wooden swivel-chair behind his desk. His voice too is relaxed, deep and soft and floating with his gaze up into the high corners of the room.

"There would be a great advantage to the individual in being an expert at the art of lying. Normal men are terrible liars, worse at lying than at anything else. We take this for granted because we have grown up with it, but in itself it is amazingly strange. Why should we squint our eyes when

we lie? Why do our minds and manners tangle themselves into knots, and make us stammer and hem?

"The expert liar could be a king among men, a thriving parasite in the body of society. And to defend itself against this parasite, this terrible danger, society employs the strictest of sanctions."

Hunter is looking down at the surface of his desk, at the book that lies there open at random to a paper on the effects of expectation on social performance. His hands are beside the book, holding a postcard. Hunter is wearing a thin dark turtleneck sweater and black pants with many pockets. The Professor is wearing a thick wool vest over an old cotton shirt, and worn khaki pants with a hole at one knee.

"But by shunning the liar, by bringing the full force of despite and isolation against anyone who seems too adroit at the art, society cannot in the same breath insist on absolute truth in all interactions. I don't speak of white or honest lies, Dr. Stern will fill your heads with wisdom on that score; I speak rather of stories, of those lies that are not lies, because everyone listening knows that they are untrue."

Hunter stares at the postcard. His mind shifts between the picture there (he is looking at the back of the postcard, or the front; the side with the picture rather than the address), and his own inner spaces; between an attentive gaze and a mindless stare. The picture is black-and-white, grainy (intentionally grainy? made grainy by the postcard company, to reinforce the age and perhaps therefore the authenticity of the image? to connect it with other grainy images that the viewer, or more to the point the purchaser, has seen before, and thus to borrow some virtue from them, or at least take part in a kind of collective virtue?). The woman in the picture sits on a block or a stone seat in a square in some city, with her feet up and her skirt hanging down from her legs.

"Stories, fiction, anecdote, fable." The Professor is out of his chair now, animated by his subject, beginning to pace the aisles between the bolted-down desks of the old classroom, looking down at his students. They are too large for their seats, his students, too long and lean and lanky, or too robust and well-fed and thick-waisted, to fit in the old chairs, designed for a more timid and wasted generation of students.

"Love stories," he intones, taking a dog-eared paperback with a luridly-colored cover from the desk of a long-haired woman with large paisley eyeglasses, holding it up and turning it in the air, a specimen for display, and then returning it to its owner. "Science fiction, aliens, death-rays!" holding up another book from another desk. (The students have without exception scattered or piled their books on the tops of their desks, or in the metal cages suspended underneath their chairs, or on the clean dusty floor beside them, for ease of access.)

"And here," unaccountably, the Professor lifts the postcard from Hunter's hands, holds it up, turns it this way and that before his own eyes, "the fiction of society itself." And he lets it drop, and Hunter has to snatch at it to keep it from falling to the floor.

Earlier that morning, on the way to class, a student walking just ahead of Hunter stubbed her toe on a gap in the pavement, stumbled, and uttered a most unladylike curse. Hunter was reminded, and is now reminded again, of a story that someone, perhaps his mother or his grandmother or his Uncle Shaytl, told him years ago. This is the story:

A long time ago, a rich greedy man summoned the Devil, Lo Toyfel, to make a bargain with him. In those days Lo Toyfel would appear openly to men, unlike today when he has hidden himself in advertising signs and the seats of buses and the linings of wallets, and he appeared to the greedy man and most ingratiatingly bargained with him.

"So here is our pact," the man said to the Devil after a surprisingly short space of negotiation, "I will go with you about the world, and find souls that you may take as your own, and in return you will provide me with all the riches I desire."

He was especially proud of himself for "all the riches I desire"; rather than demanding a fixed sum which the Devil might twist to be too much or too little for his happiness, he had asked for an amount that would unfailingly be just what was wanted. Lo Toyfel had resisted this at first, but the man had insisted, and was now quite pleased with himself for his sharp dealing.

"It is agreed," said Lo Toyfel, and after providing the man with a bagful of jewels and gold pieces as a token of his good faith, the two set out to look for souls that the Devil might take, to keep the man's side of the bargain.

They came first to a crowded street, where people shifted to and fro, passing narrowly by each other about their business. A merchant, impatient with an old woman hobbling along the walk in front of him, began shouting at her to make way for him.

"The devil take you, old woman, make way for a busy man!"

The greedy man grinned and nodded and gestured at Lo Toyel to take the woman's soul, but the old Enemy shook his head.

"No, friend," he said, "that man does not have the power to give me that woman's soul. He speaks thoughtlessly, mouthing words that he has heard others mouth before, but there is no power, none whatever, in them."

And the greedy man frowned, thinking that perhaps his task would be harder than he had thought.

They came next to a road by a farmyard, where the stable master was rebuking an apprentice for laziness.

"Move your lazy ass from that seat, you useless lump, and may the Devil take me for having ever hired you!"

The man grinned again and nodded, for surely the stable master had just given himself to the Devil of his own will?

But Lo Toyfel again shook his head, and little puffs of smoke came from beneath the dark hair of his human form, and the corners of his diabolic mouth turned up, his lips pale and thick, and he said that this man also had spoken thoughtlessly, reciting insincere phrases without meaning, and that no one could think that he had really consigned his own soul to eternal torment.

"But patience, my friend, for I am sure we will find a sincere curse before the day is out, and your side of our bargain will be fulfilled."

And as they passed the house of that farm where they had seen the stable master, the door opened, and an old belledam came out to sweep the step. Looking up at them in the road, with an old brass crucifix dangling from her neck, her eyes opened wide, and she took a long astonished breath.

"Ah," said Lo Toyfel confidentially to the greedy man walking beside him, "this one knows me."

"Who are you," declaimed the belledam, "who are you who walks with Lo Toyfel himself? Do you not know who it is that goes beside you? If you are plotting mischief for us, you sinner, may he take you away with him to Hell before you can do us any harm!"

And with that, of course, Lo Toyfel put his arm around the shoulders of the greedy man, and conveyed him straightaway to his infernal stronghold, despite the man's protestations and his urgent haggling.

And as he passed the man through the gates, into the care of the demons and their pitchforks, and the seething lakes of fire and brimstone, he took from the hand of the man the bag of jewels and gold that he had given him just hours before.

For the man would have no need of them, and Lo Toyfel is frugal.

Remembering this story, Hunter missed the next several paragraphs, or pages, of the Professor's lecture. The class now half over, the Professor settled himself down behind his desk again, and resumed his quiet and abstracted discourse. Hunter looked at the woman on the postcard, idly turned a page in the textbook on his desk, and reached under the waistband of his pants to scratch himself at his waist. Under the turtleneck Hunter wore only a thin grey undershirt; under his pants only a worn pair of boxer shorts.

The undershirt is one that he brought with him to the city. The boxer shorts he has forgotten about, could not tell you if you asked him where they came from, partly because he never knew. They are someone else's boxer shorts in fact, accidentally carried away from the laundry when Hunter put his own dried clothes down on the counter without first looking, without noticing the abandoned pair of shorts, just his size, crumpled in the corner. So they went home with him, and now he is wearing them, under the pants with all the pockets, on a bright but sleepy morning of scholarship, while the dust dances in the sun and the Professor lectures half-asleep but earnest, addressing the corners of the room very pleased with himself, and at peace with the world.

Years before, in another city, Klara, sitting on the stone bench with her feet up on a discarded wooden box, watched the birds in the square, and watched the water sliding by in the river to one side. She turned her head at the sound of the camera, and the photographer waved and smiled at her. She was a pretty woman, young for her age, well-shaped and well dressed, with a thoughtful face used to smiling.

Questions for Chapter One
Your impressions of the setting and characters

How do you picture Hunter, the protagonist? How old is he? How tall? How long has he been in school? Identify passages in the text that support your impressions.

Where is the classroom of the first scene? Is it urban or rural? In what nation?

What does the Professor look like? How old is he? What subject or field does he teach? Is there any merit to the argument that he puts forth in this chapter?

How old was Klara when the picture was taken? How old is she now? Is she still living? Is this the first time she has met the photographer?

Have you heard the story of Lo Toyfel and the Greedy Man before? Is what language, if any, is "Lo Toyfel" a name for the Devil? Besides the obvious moral message, what meaning might the story have to Hunter? What other stories do you know about humans dealing with the Devil, or other personifications of evil?

Why does the author tell us the detailed history of Hunter's boxer shorts? Does the reference to undergarments make you uncomfortable?

Kinds of Flower

In his youth, in the earlier parts of his youth, before the sunny dusty classroom and the beneficent Professor, before the light making long shadows in the courtyards late in the afternoon, Hunter learned to draw. Or, as Mother Canna would always insist, Hunter discovered that he could draw.

The fields of Hunter's youth were, at least as he remembers them in later years, sun-drenched and warm, moist with dew, and bright with the buzzing of insects. He lived, they lived, for awhile (for an eyeblink, for the long eternity of a childhood) on the second floor of a large old house on a hill above the river, and while his parents worked he played in the meadows with numberless other children, and had his lessons from Mother Canna, and his Uncle Shaytl, and dark Maria, through some arrangement that he never entirely understood, that at the time seemed to need no explanation. But they were, as he remembers it, happy.

One afternoon, in a trodden-down place among the meadow grasses on a long afternoon with the clouds white in the sky, he and the other children gathered around Mother Canna, with her skirts spread out around her as she sat on the blanket, and took their slates and their papers and their pencils (special pencils brought out from somewhere in the house, for the day), and gathered around the stately old woman, she had them draw.

In the years since, Hunter has forgotten the details. But in the beginning of that afternoon he drew a flower, and a tree, and he drew the edge of the blanket, and then he drew

all the children gathered around Mother Canna, a tiny picture drawn as though from the eyes of an eagle circling on the winds far above them; clustered with heads inward and feet outward, lying on their stomachs facing the woman in the center, they looked in the drawing like the blossom of a small flower.

And Mother Canna (not really an old woman, not then, but old to Hunter and the other children as adults are always old to children) smiled at the children's drawings and patted their heads, and when she saw Hunter's, with the flower in one corner and the flower of the children and herself in the other corner, and sketches of the tree and of the ragged edge of the blanket in the center, she raised her eyebrows and looked at him in a different way, and said that tomorrow he should draw for her again, if he wanted to.

The next day while the other children were flying kites and learning sums from dark Maria, Mother Canna sat with Hunter on the blanket again, now under a blue sky without clouds, and they drew. She showed him how to look at a plant, ways to hold the pencil that he would never have thought of himself, and what happened when the pencil pressed harder against the paper, or touched it softer.

At the end of the day she smiled at him again, and shook her head with some unspoken adult thought, and he went in tired and sniffling and sneezing from the pollen of the meadow, but also excited, and puzzled, and proud.

In the next weeks Hunter carried a sheaf of papers with him, and two of the pencils that Mother Canna had given to him to use, and he drew things.

Later, not long before he left the big house and the river, when he was no longer carrying paper everywhere and when Mother Canna was only a friend of his mother's and not a teacher or an enchantress or a queen, she told him a story.

"There was once," she said, "a young man like you, who found he could draw. But with him his drawing was like bread and water, like blood and air. As he spent longer and longer at his drawing, it became the world to him, and he withdrew from the rest of his life. His friends came and marveled at his skill, and wondered at the depth of his devotion to the page, and tried to draw him back out into the world.

"But he could not be drawn, and his friends despaired of him, and left him to his isolation. He had paper and pencils to last him longer than he would live, and except for the need for food and sleep he was content. In his drawings he created worlds and people and animals, love and death and fever-dreams, and endless pictures of flowers and birds and broken trees.

"One day, soon after his last friend gave him up, he drew a crowd of people, and at the front of the crowd stood a woman. He had drawn countless women before. Liking the way this woman stood, he drew her again, standing in a forest valley. Then he drew her face, looking off the paper in surprise. Then he drew her sleeping, naked, in a bower on a hill, under a crescent moon.

"For weeks he drew this woman, and of course he came to love her. He loved her more than sleep, more than food, more than life. And as he drew her and did not eat, his body wasted. And as he drew her and did not sleep, his eyes were ringed and his hands shook, except when he was drawing.

"One morning, as he lay before the closed door drawing and dying, he tried to draw the woman again, and found he could not. His pencil did not slip, but what he drew was not her face, but a melon, or a leaf. He drew other people, men and other women, and his hand was as deft as ever, but he could not draw his love. He felt she was hiding from him, and looked to his older drawings (as he never did, for he loved the drawing itself, not the looking). But he could not

find her there. Her figure had disappeared from every drawing scattered around the filthy rooms.

"In despair, he found that without her to love he had no more reason to live; he had been drawing now only to draw her. With the last of his strength he gathered all his papers, not looking at them, and threw them into the paltry fire, which blazed up and consumed them. Then he curled himself on the rug, weeping, to die.

"There was a knock at the door, but he did not answer. The door opened, and of course it was the woman herself, come out of his drawings to bring him back into the world."

Hunter had thanked Mother Canna for the story, but said he was not sure he understood its lesson.

"That is not quite the end of the story," Mother Canna had said. "The woman picked up the artist and fed him and put him to bed. And they lived together for months, and he loved and adored her, and through loving her he came back into the world. But after a time, and not a very long time, he found her insufferable. Because, being in the world, she was no longer a creature of his mind, whom he could control with an easy stroke of his pen, but was a being with her own will and wants, and a mind of her own. So one morning he spoke curtly to her, demanding some particular obedience. And that afternoon she left him forever."

But that was long after the day that Hunter found he could draw. And many things would touch him in the meantime.

Questions for Chapter Two

Hunter remembers his youth as a sunny, happy time. Why does the author stress that these are Hunter's memories? How might the reality have been different? How old do you think Hunter was when he learned to draw? Why?

Who is Mother Canna? What is her role in the family? Why do you think she is called "Mother"?

We have now been told two different stories. How are they similar? How are they different? Both story tellers are older members of Hunter's family group. How might the differences between the stories reflect differences between the story tellers? What do the stories that you tell say about you?

Three and Two

The group of children with whom Hunter grew up, in those seasons by the river in and around the big grey house with its porches and meadows, remain in his mind largely as a mass, an undifferentiated mob, a shifting crowd of anonymous arms and legs and heads and here and there a fist. There were not as many of them as he remembers, nor did new ones arrive or old ones leave as often as he remembers, but still they were a mixed and mixing group, being the children of all the gracefully poor people who lived in the scattered houses of the river valley, and whose parents worked as servants or tailors or clerks for the tall wealthy people in the newer houses on the hill.

Of all the children, in particular of the children who were gathered around the outspread skirts of Mother Canna on the afternoon when Hunter learned that he could draw, only two remained firmly in his memory, two who had come into young adulthood with him, and whose lives brushed against his.

The three of them were marked, or so they told each other, by an extra degree of refinement and sensitivity, an extra measure of intelligence and delicacy that set them off from the others. Hunter was one; the other two were a girl and a boy. Ona was willowy and pale, with long arms and legs, and Marc was her reflection, with light hair, narrow feet, and a broad forehead. Their families lived in a pair of brown houses just down the river from the meadow. They

were always taken for siblings, or cousins, although as far as anyone knew they were not related.

Hunter saw himself through Ona and Marc, and for much of his late childhood his image of himself was taller and thinner, paler and whispier, than the reality of his body. Full-length mirrors would surprise him. Hunter remembers all three of them as quiet and studious, staying away from the rough games of the boys and the giggling gossip of the girls; although in fact he and Marc played chase and tackle with the boys, and Ona sat and gossiped with the girls, on any number of forgotten September days.

As the other children began to grow up, to pop one by one into adulthood like bubbles through the surface of a lake, Ona and Marc and Hunter stayed behind for a time in their childhoods, embarassed by the curves and fullnesses coming out in their bodies, turning away in disgust from the children, the former children, who would sometimes creep away from their tutors into the grasses of the meadow, to court and to spark.

"As children," the Professor said, on a different day in a different season, off on a tangent even longer and more wandering than usual, behind his desk in a room full of large and mostly well-fed former children, "we need to practice every motion and every task. A young child will do the same simple thing a thousand times; he will go and fetch a stick from among the leaves over and over all day, because he needs to learn every motion and every thought involved in fetching a stick. As adults we will still do some old thing a few times, simply because it reminds us unconsciously of childhood, and so gives us pleasure in false memories of purity, but because we no longer need to learn those motions we tire quickly, and we wonder what has become of our former selves."

Here are the three of them, Ona and Marc and Hunter, small and thin in the morning light, sitting together on stones by the edge of the river. The water is thick and

green-brown in the shadows of the weeds in the eddy. This is before Mother Canna watched them draw, before Hunter learned that he could draw. They are sitting with their heads together, two heads of light hair almost white, Hunter's a light pearly brown. With long sticks they are stirring a piece of damp earth into mud. It is a game with no reason or object, but they are too young to need reasons or objects.

Ona's stick clicks against Hunter's, and the tip of Marc's burrows into the soil. Hunter thinks of them, Ona and Marc, in the same mental breath, as though they were part of the same thing. He met them, in the way that children meet without ceremony or self-consciousness, only a few weeks before, when their parents came to the big house and up the stairs to where Hunter's family lived. Avoiding a knot of louder and rougher children had brought them together, and their natures had fit at once.

The soil by the river is dark and rich, full of seeds and the roots of grasses. Their sticks stir up insects and worms, small white rocks and larger brown stones. They shift around on the rocks, now one of them and now another on the wet flat stone that rests on the bank itself. No one will fall into the river today.

Ona reaches down and picks out a white stone that Hunter's stick has turned up. She puts it next to the rock she is sitting on. Her fingers are thin and pale and muddy, and there is a long streak of green algae from the lake on the back of her hand. Then Marc picks out a white stone and puts it next to hers. Ona picks out another. After a long time of only mud and seeds and crawling things, of writing in the letters of unknown languages and shapes from the back-end of dreams, Marc's stick, scraping into new ground, turns up a sharp whitish stone, and Hunter picks it up and, after a moment, reaches across and drops it onto to the pile.

By the end of the morning, when the adults call them in for lunch and lessons, they have churned a wide mud hole

into the earth beside the water, and dozens of white stones are piled between the sitting rocks.

His Uncle Shaytl once asked him, when he was playing in the sand with a shovel, if taking one grain of sand away from a sand pile could ever stop it from being a pile.

"What do you mean?"

"Look, if I have a pile of sand, and I take away one grain, do I still have a pile of sand?"

"Unless the wind blows it away or something."

"The wind doesn't blow it away; I just take out one grain, and the other grains all stay there. Is it still a pile of sand?"

"I guess."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"And so I still have a pile of sand. And if I take away one grain from that pile, do I still have a pile of sand?"

"Yes."

"Yes. And so every time I take away a single grain from a pile of sand, I still have a pile of sand. But if I take away every single grain, I have no sand at all! Do you see? How can I have a pile of sand still, when I have no sand at all!"

"You can't."

"Yes!" And his Uncle had laughed, and then looked at Hunter as though he expected Hunter to laugh too. But Hunter had gone back to his shovel and his sand, and his Uncle had shaken his head and walked off, chuckling to himself.

Here is Hunter later, long after finding he can draw, walking in the meadow by the edge of the woods, with his pencils and a handful of paper, a downy mustache on his upper lip, his arms and legs awkward and unfamiliar, but his hand as sure as ever. He draws what he sees: the curve of a branch, a clump of meadow grass, the way the shadows cross each other down at the level of the ground, the texture

of the earth. He sits for awhile on a fallen log at the edge of the woods, and looks back up at the house.

He has never really been in love with drawing; it is more something that his body needs to do, or that irritates his mind like an itch. Some of the things that come in through his eyes need to be drawn, or ask to be drawn, and his hands are always quick and eager on the paper. Mother Canna has told his parents that he must go to the city, to college or to an art school, as soon as he is old enough. His parents are not, he thinks, quite sure yet whether to believe her. Thinking about the city makes him feel passive, and he surprises himself by what seems an indifference to his own life.

Finishing a picture of the house, the roof and chimneys of the house showing above the crossing lines of the grass, a picture different from all the dozens or hundreds of pictures of the house he has drawn before, Hunter stands and walks along the margin of the meadow, by the edge of the wood, away from the river. Here a narrow path ducks under a tangle of brambles and winds back into dimness under the trees. Where the path wanders into nothing is a flat dark rock, covered with green moss, that Marc and Ona and Hunter have used for years (for months, for days) as a private meeting room, a lodge, a refuge.

He avoids the brambles and starts down the path, thinking of nothing and of the shape of the house against the sky, quiet and distracted. The ground under his feet is firm and clean.

In their private place, on the mossy rock, Ona and Marc are sitting entwined. Hunter stops by a thick dark tree, half behind it, and sees their figures as an odd shape, as something to draw. But his face is hot. Ona's hands are spread open on Marc's back, and Marc's lips are slowly pressing against Ona's. Their eyes are closed, and small sounds come from their throats.

Hunter breathes, and Ona's eyes open. The two long pale former children turn and look at him. No one is surprised.

He stands, there in the quiet of the woods. Nothing comes to him to say. Ona's arm is around Marc's back, comfortable there. Hunter turns half away from them, back toward the path.

"No," says Ona, "come here."

And he sits between them, and Ona's mouth touches his lips, and Marc's mouth touches his cheek, and he closes his eyes.

The next day Hunter draws Marc and Ona sitting on the porch of the house. He is not a portrait artist; his people are shapes and forms and arrangements of line. Between the Marc shape and the Ona shape, he sketches in the lines of himself. He shows them the picture, and the three of them smile, and walk hand in hand in hand to the river.

At the end of that summer, Hunter started college in the city, and Marc went north to his Uncle's horse farm. Ona stayed by the river, cooking with her mother in a kitchen on the hill, and later she met two other men, and married one. Sitting in the dusty classroom, holding a postcard and dreaming, Hunter has not seen her in many months. But he will again.

The photographer has invited Klara to take tea in a cafe on the square. Amused, she has accepted, and allowed him to flatter her. "You are very kind," she says, "but it would be unkind of me not to tell you that I am pregnant." It occurs to her that this young man with the bulky camera, this stranger, is the first person that she has told.

Questions for Chapter Three

This chapter centers around the three children and their relationship. Are Ona and Marc really as similar as Hunter remembers them? How are they like, and unlike, Hunter himself?

There are a number of stories and story-frames in this chapter. Name three, and discuss how they might illuminate Hunter's life, and his relationship with Marc and Ona. How do the stories change, and how do they remain the same, as the children mature and begin to enter adulthood?

How does the relationship change, if at all, when Hunter comes upon Marc and Ona "sparking" in the woods? What is the significance of the drawing that Hunter makes the next day?

Klara again appears in the final paragraph of a chapter. How might this paragraph relate to the rest of the chapter, or to the previous paragraph in which she appears?

Black and White

The end of the class period is marked by the Professor taking an old watch from his pocket, squinting at it, yawning hugely with his arms above his head (threatening to tip the chair backwards into the wall or onto the floor), and nodding benignly at the class. Some of the students have been looking at their own watches for many minutes, sitting poised with their books in their arms, and spring for the door at that nod. Others, Hunter among them, have been daydreaming or reading or lost in the paths and byways of the lecture itself, and shake themselves back to reality, blinking.

There is a round black and white clock on the wall of the room, but although it always runs it is always slow by an unpredictable number of minutes, and the class has learned to ignore it.

Hunter closes the postcard between the pages of the book. He piles up his two other books, a spiral notebook, and a sketchpad, and pulls himself to his feet. The floor of the classroom, clean and dusty yellow wood with years of scratch marks from the metal feet of the chairs, creaks as he walks to the door, the last student to leave the room. The Professor has settled back in his chair with his hands behind his head, apparently returning to his contemplation of the corners of the ceiling. Hunter pictures him, after the last student has gone, resuming the low rumble of his lecture in the empty room.

In the small room that he shares with Courant, a fellow student from the south (a quiet, almost truculent, student of art and the law, who bathes twice a day but keeps his clothes in undifferentiated heaps under his bed), Hunter sits in one of the two chairs, and puts his feet up on the table. The last class of the day is over. Tomorrow when the light is still fresh he will be at the drawing studio with his paper and his pencils. In an hour it will be time for dinner in the dim dining hall of the college, eating the unremarkable food in company with his fellow scholars, under the time-darkened portraits of past dignitaries, the smell of baking, the gentle clatter of forks. But an hour is a long time, in a quiet room with nothing moving.

Hunter takes the postcard from his book and sets it on the table, leaning against a green glass jar full of lentils. He takes a pencil from his pocket, and begins to draw the woman sitting on the stone block. As the light from the windows fades, he reaches across the table and turns on a yellow-shaded lamp, and returns to his drawing.

That morning in the corner of the window of Hunter's room, a spider built a web. To three surfaces of painted wood it anchored a long strand of silk, and then wound a sticky spiral between and among them, an invisible glyph in spider language graven in the air. During the day the spider has been dozing in the center of the web, now and then roused by the sweet impact of a gnat or a mosquito straying into the trap. Then it carefully picks its way down the main cables, and feeds.

As Hunter came into the room and dropped his books onto the floor, a large beetle, startled by the vibration, flew up into the window. It beat itself futilely against the glass three times, a clockwork of wings and legs running an ancient program written long before there was glass, and then it careened into the sticky strands of the web, tearing a hole in the delicate structure and tangling itself tightly in silk.

The spider, sensing from the frequency and volume of these new vibrations the striking of some disaster, swung itself down a cable to the edge of the rift (investigation prevailing over skittering flight in the scanty tangle of its gangly brain), and began cutting fibers, sacrificing the structure of its web to be rid of this too-large intruder, this frantic bumbling behemoth, this misfortune. The beetle's mechanical struggles wound it tighter into the web and spread the damage, as the spider's more careful but not less desperate cutting worked to set it loose.

Of this struggle only a few taps of beetle-carapace on glass have reached Hunter, who is still leaning back in the chair with his feet on the table, his eyes on the postcard and his fingers on the pencil, drawing.

A few lines, light but thick, outline the essential field; the woman and the block on which she sits are a single rough shape on the page. Hunter's mind, the part of Hunter's mind that does the detail work of drawing while the rest of him dreams or rests or looks on, considers whether to separate them, to unify them further, or to emphasize one over the other. The woman is the subject of the photograph, a simple and pleasant composition. But the subject of his drawing could be the seat she is sitting on, the drape of her skirt over the lines of her legs, the light on her face (half-averted, looking at something outside the frame, the curve of her cheek just visible in the grain of the print), or the line of the street beyond the edge of the square in which she sits.

(In fact what looks like the line of a street in the photograph is the stone bank of the river, toward whose wide and lively flow Klara's face was turned when the photographer, taken by the beauty and simplicity of the woman sitting in the square, swung the awkward bulk of his camera toward her, hoping to catch her on his film before she rose or turned entirely away.)

On the wall above the desk is a drawing, a sequence of four panels on a single page, from a class on sequential art

from Hunter's first term at the college. In the first panel three shapes sit, lit from the side, on a featureless flat plane, with a hint of trees or mountains or shadow on the infinitely distant horizon. In the second panel something, an indistinct blur, arrives at great speed from somewhere high above. The something itself is made indistinct by its velocity, and the shapes of the stationary objects are also distorted, leaning toward (away from, along) the line of approach, anticipating the event. The third panel is all explosion, the forms of force, jagged lines of happening and energy, bold words in some artificial alphabet standing for sound. And the fourth panel is almost identical to the first, the same three shapes, apparently unchanged, drawn from the other side.

Hunter likes this page, for reasons he doesn't completely understand. Once, on another long idle evening, he said to Courant that the panels said something about the relationship between drawing and plot. In the written word, he said, plot is clear and evident, and anyone can point to it. In drawing, the plot is the way the viewer's eye moves on the image, and gives motion to (or withholds motion from) the static ink on the still paper. Putting obvious plot into drawing, as sequential art does, is at best, he said, adding a superfluous layer of story, built out of the inchoate plots of the panels themselves. At worst, it is an excuse for ignoring the individual plots, the movement of the eyes and the flow of attention across each frame, and building (attempting to build) an edifice out of haphazard blocks; if the bricks are cracked and crumbling, he asked, how can the structure be solid?

Courant was not impressed by this thesis, as frankly Hunter was not himself, but he made no particular answer. The best reply, Hunter has come to think, the wittiest and most insightful, would be to lean back in one's chair and lace one's fingers across one's stomach, and stare with all good will into the corners of the room. Hunter is alert for

opportunities to use this riposte himself, but none have presented themselves.

Hunter's fingers move the pencil in a broad curve, joining the figure of the woman and her seat to the line of the street (the river in the photograph, the street in the drawing) and then upward to a line that he has drawn in the sky, perhaps a bridge in the background or the line of an overhead wire. The curve does not correspond to anything in the photograph, or in the world of the drawing, but it guides his mind around the drawing's emerging logic. The curve makes sense to him.

Perhaps in reaction to Courant's jumbled piles of socks and shirts and hats under his bed, Hunter keeps his own clothes neatly folded in the top two drawers of the room's standing chest. The drawers are wide but shallow, bowed out in front with small carved handles dark with age and the finger-oil of generations of students. The inside surfaces of the handles are smooth, smoother than anything else in the room, and touching them is a pleasure. Hunter takes his clothes to the laundry once a week, runs them through the machines and carries them back to the room in a cardboard box. Only once has he accidentally picked up a bit of someone else's clothing, the boxer shorts that he is wearing even now, as he draws the drape of the woman's skirt as it flows from her legs to the ground.

Two pieces of Hunter's own clothing have gone astray in the laundry (and one pair of his socks is currently in one of Courant's piles under the bed, mixed with Courant's clean and dirty linen). One of Hunter's undershirts is lying crumpled in a corner beside a washing machine, where is it gradually attracting dirt and cobwebs (has the fatal struggle between the spider and the beetle, in the corner of Hunter's window, come to some conclusion?). And one of his cotton collared shirts, the one with a torn pocket, is in the closet of a young woman sculpture student, who found it among her clothes on a rainy Wednesday morning, and wears it when

she feels tired. Not knowing who else has worn it, or how it found its way to her, makes her happy.

Hunter finishes the drawing, as much as he plans to finish it, and leans it next to the postcard on the desk. He sits back and looks at the two images. Like many of Hunter's drawings, this one can be seen as an abstract collection of shapes, or as a representation (a surprisingly realistic representation, given the abstractness of the shapes) of a piece of the world. Becoming sleepy in the quiet evening, Hunter sits in the quiet room and enjoys the ambiguity until dinner.

In a clean tiled kitchen, the day before the photographer took her picture, Klara made soup from peas, lentils, a large fragrant ham bone pink with shards of meat, a thick bunch of carrots, and a pile of red potatoes. Slicing the clean vegetables with the water boiling in the pot, she hummed a nursery rhyme to herself, and wondered about the tiny life just forming, deep in the roots of her body.

How far have you come, to reach this point? We regret that we cannot take the time to fully appreciate the complexity of the path you have taken. But we are concerned at this moment with your present state, not your history.

Whatever you have left behind along the way, let it be forgotten in this place. If you have lost your innocence, tell us the story of your new maturity. If you have lost illusions, tell us your truths.

Hope for redemption, hope for the future, hope for a justification of the present. In the background of the sound-field of this instant, listen for a unifying theme.

You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door.

There is a small mailbox here.

Power and the War

Hunter's Uncle Shaytl seldom mentioned the war. When he did, it was in a story about the bumbling inadequacy of human nature, or a cautionary tale of things not to do. The war was not a popular topic at any time on the second floor of the big house across the meadows from the river; to the children it was only a piece of dead history. Once Hunter asked his Uncle about it, asked the inevitable "what did you do in the war?" question, hoping for a story with thrills and guns and daring raids. But his Uncle had just snorted and turned away, looking out the window and puffing harder on his pipe.

"War!" he had growled. "Foolishness."

At the start of the war, Shaytl was the assistant manager at an electrical substation near the heart of the city. By the time the bombing raids began, he had risen by attrition, and was the general manager of the main power plant. He and his wife had sent their infant children off to the countryside, to the care of rural relatives (into, in fact, an earlier version of that big worn house, that mixing mob of children, that nurtured Hunter like a Petri dish). They discussed leaving the city themselves, but were torn in a bewildering number of directions.

"Why should we stay?" he asked one night in the plant's central office, sitting before a bank of switches and dials, smoking a heavy brown cigar. The smoke curled around him and up into the dimness of the ceiling; the lights in the

plant were all set low, to save power. Every other bulb was unscrewed. "Why should anyone stay? We have no prospects in the country, but what are our prospects in the city? To be bombed to death? To have the walls come down around us?"

"The people still need power," rumbled Georgi, his remaining assistant manager. Georgi was a thin man, tall and brown, with long arms poking bare-wristed out of a company uniform a size and a half too small for him. His hair stood out about his ears like tufts of grass.

"Pah," Shaytl replied, smoke billowing from his wide red mouth, "will one man's leaving, will my leaving with my wife to the country, close down the power? You will take over here, or someone else will. The city is still full. What is one man less?"

"Would any grain of sand on the beach be missed?" asked Georgi. Shaytl did not always understand Georgi.

"Of course not! My point exactly. Shaytl and Leona leave for the plateau, and Georgi and Anna, or Peter and Mary, or Boris and Betty take over. One grain of sand is nothing."

"And if every grain of sand thinks this?" continued Georgi, "If every grain of sand leaves, rightly thinking that one grain cannot make a difference? What then?"

"Pah!" Shaytl frowned and his forehead creased.

"Then," finished Georgi, "why then there is no beach at all, and no sand, and no one to say which grain's leaving broke the back of the camel."

The first wave of bombers, on that moonless July night, had gouged jagged holes in the city, in the runways of the airfield, the proud bulk of the armory, a random scatter of office buildings along the Mile, and killed three men at the substation where Shaytl had worked. In the aftermath, normal sounds stunningly quiet after the drone of the bombers and the shouts of the bombs, the city had hung its head. The stream of refugees, people fleeing down every

outbound road in their cars and carts and on their bicycles, had abated for a day (people too frightened to leave their homes, a husband or wife dead, a road destroyed, plans changed), and then redoubled. No more bombs fell the next night, but a building collapsed, and the hospitals began to run low of medicine. The bombers will be back, the street said, and where will the food come from?

Shaytl and Leona stayed, two grains of sand on the beach.

An order came, to cut the power to the three main districts between sundown and dawn. "Why," Shaytl angrily asked the functionary who came with the message, "why do we cut the power, and why was I not asked for my advice in this decision?"

"The city must be dark, to keep the bombers from their targets. Your job is only to throw the switch, not to ask the question. The Council has the advice it needs. Or so we must hope."

Shaytl had no desire to cut the power. The thought of the dark bulbs, the silent radios, the cold ovens, was oppressive to him. "This will be another blow to the people. Can the Council not issue a proclamation requiring lights to be turned off? Appoint wardens to walk the streets and enforce the rule? I do not want to turn off the stoves and the radios of the city."

"Just throw the switch."

"The people will put the blame out here, on me. There will be a riot at my gates."

The functionary frowned, his eyes narrowed. Shaytl felt for the first time that he was not, to the Council, a person, an independent and valuable player in the game of government, but was rather a part in a machine, a part perhaps valuable and awkward to replace in this time of shortages, but a part none the less, a part not expected to be giving advice to the operators of the machine.

"Perhaps we will send you more guards."

Shaytl had, at this time, only three guards left for his station, and they were not even sufficient to prevent looting of anything left between the gates and the locked doors of the plant itself. A storage shed had been stripped and dragged off for its metal and parts. But if the power were cut, he would be dealing with anger, not only with greed.

The Council did send him guards, a tired but disciplined gang of short-haired young men in drab uniforms, with sidearms and rifles. When the announcement came that power would be cut each evening, some people did come, in ones and twos, and three times in a mob, to shout and plead before the gates of the plant, but the hard eyes of the soldiers discouraged further trouble. For a week, the city lay in darkness each night. No more bombers came.

"Do they think the bombers will stay away just because it is dark?" Shaytl and Georgi in the central office again, banks of dials and switches again, still, and no droning of planes in the sky. But always rumors. "If they want to bomb, they will bomb, and not care what they hit." The power plant is a huge old coal-fired thing on the plain outside the city, connected by a long umbilicus of empty highway. Impossible to aim at the city and hit the plant (or aim at the plant and hit the city), lights or not. At least so Georgi says. Not that either of them know about bombers, except from below.

Distant explosions the night before, far off to the west. A fuel depot bombed, someone said. Saboteurs blowing up a munitions factory, someone said. No one killed, dozens killed, a town wiped out, hospitals in ruins, a clean miss and no casualties but one boy out in the fields with a cut on his face from a flying branch. No telling.

His Council guards have been replaced by a squad of police. Leona says the Council have left the city, and the chief of police has put the Premier under house arrest. The newspaper no longer comes (too many grains of sand blown away by the wind). He no longer trusts the plant out of his

sight at night; he sleeps on a cot in an alcove off the central office, waiting for Georgi to wake him up with news of disaster, waiting for the mobs to outnumber the police.

He has received orders to continue the blackouts, and now even if he wanted to defy them and run the boilers and the turbines all day, keep the power flowing, they do not have the coal. Their reserves are emptying fast, too fast, and the trucks and trains that once flowed in across the peaceful plains, down from the mountains and the mines, are a jerky ragged trickle, coming in at night under cover, escorted by grim soldiers and harassed by bandits. Now two bulbs out of three are unscrewed.

Should he ask Leona to join him out here? He hates to leave her in the city. But they might bomb the plant, or burn it down, with them trapped and screaming inside. He is not sleeping well.

One night, rumors flying fast and hot through the anemic threads of the city's whispering mill, he kisses Leona good night at the door of their flat, looks out at the sunset pale and purple against the hills, and sighs.

"Come out with me to the plant tonight," he says, "I miss you."

"Mrs. Vonchoy needs me to look in at her." She closes her eyes. "And I hate the plant." She looks up. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

He shakes his head, kisses the part in her hair, and goes out into the night. The sky seems far away, and indifferent.

That night Georgi does come to his cot to wake him, but the plant is safe. Somehow he has slept through the sound of the bombers, and the explosions in the city.

"You should go home, Shaytl, see to Leona. I hear... that some flats are hit." And he turns away into the dark.

Rushing through the city, the wail of sirens and the pop and boom of anti-aircraft still loud in the sky, and fire and smoke on the near horizon, Shaytl tries not to listen to rumors. Streets are closed off, he is forced far out of his

way. To reach his own street, thick with smoke, he has to show his papers. He sees running shapes, smells fire, chokes from the smoke. His Leona, he is sure, is dead.

But she is not. Mrs. Vonchoy is dead, and young Grazio from the first floor is missing (his wife, eyes and mouth a wounded red that looks black in the turgid light, crying in a corner and grasping at sleeves). But Leona has only (only!) a broken leg, and she can smile at him when he squeezes her hand, and they wait together for a stretcher. He says something to her (something, anything; what do you say to the mother of your children when you find her crumpled in the corner of a crumpled street, her leg bound to the slat of a crate with none-too-clean bindings, a tiny thing with a tired face, but still the same, still the same?), but she only shakes her head. She is deaf from the blast.

He tries to touch her face gently, to smooth the hair from her forehead. Like a young lover, he thinks. Was I ever a young lover? Leona is a strong woman, forearms strong from kneading and lifting, from carrying a child on each hip, from a life's worth of days. The stretcher takes entirely too long to come (so many, so many, and each one the most important). She begins to sob and shake, and he holds her carefully. No more bombs fall, but the fires come all too close before the rushers in the dark (is it safe to use lights? is it safe not to? the portable generators are louder than the planes) douse them with water and they steam out. Shaytl strokes the face of his dear broken wife, and she grips his arms and cries.

The next day, Shaytl gets a call through from the hospital (crowded, of course; bloody, of course; but also still the same; he passes it every morning on the way from the flat to the plant; but there is no flat anymore) to the plant with only an hour of trying. Georgi has stayed on duty, has heard, is ready to take up the mantle. Has already picked a new assistant manager, one Tolgey, the most competent of the boiler engineers that remain.

"We will continue," Georgi says. The telephone is sticky in Shaytl's hand, and fragrant with medicine and sadness.

"I regret that the wind is blowing me away," he says, and at the other end of the line Georgi raises his refulgent eyebrows.

"Don't waste your regret," he says, "if every grain waits for a wind this strong, the beach is secure."

Questions for Chapter Five

This chapter is a story in itself. How does it relate to the other stories that we have heard?

Hunter's Uncle Shaytl used the paradox of the pile of sand in a very different context in Chapter Three. Does that story tie these two sets of events together in a significant way? Does the story have different meanings the two times it is told, or is there a unifying meaning?

A Rainstorm

Hunter is walking back across the city toward the college as the sun sets. He has spent the end of the afternoon on a hill that rises like a curl of hair above the fishmarket. The hill is windswept and dirty, but covered with tenacious trees; from the top (among the dust and the stones and the half-dead shrubs, scrap paper brought up from the streets by the wind caught in the thorns and heaped in the cracks of the rock), the city unrolls under your feet (under Hunter's feet, under the feet of the lovers that stray up there on violet evenings in the summer), inviting the eye, and inviting the pen of the student. Hunter has brought back with him, stuffed in his brown portfolio, a picture in charcoal that he thinks he likes.

The fishmarket is more than half-empty this late in the day; the fish arrive in the morning, having rattled and clanked their way from the sea in pungent crates the night before, to be laid shining-eyed and split-gilled on the long tables, and haggled over by the servants and the wives of the quarters of the city. By mid-day the best of the catch is long gone, and by the time Hunter passes through with his portfolio under his arm the fish are present only in their lingering scent.

He passes a woman in a heavy shawl, walking with her head bowed and humming a tune he doesn't recognize. He passes a street vendor pushing his cartload of indefinitely-shaped fried dough from one side-street to another. He

passes a man and woman with four little children in tow, hurrying through the quarter, and after they pass by he stops and turns to watch them. There is something about the motions of their feet that he would like to draw, but they turn a corner and are gone. It occurs to him that the rows of dead fish, shining in the sun and shadowed by the bodies of the people, would be a good image. Perhaps he will come back and draw that.

As he walks through the streets (fishmarket to greenmarket, alley to plaza), the clouds close and thicken. The day has been sunny and cool, and windy on the height. He is wearing his jacket of ochre boiled wool; warm but too small, tight in the shoulders. He squints up at the clouds as the wind begins whistling down the street. He walks faster, no longer looking around for things that he might draw (a woman's leg, a splintered chair lying in the corner of a building, a streetcorner where the wall is an odd truncated shape, only half-rebuilt from the war), but he is only half way to his door when the rain starts.

Hunter shelters in a concrete alcove at the side of a squat and bulky building as the rain pours down. He sighs and squats on the cracked surface, stretching his knees and looking up at the falling water, wondering how long the rain will last. How absurd, to be crouched here helpless, not knowing something that will be common knowledge, will be clear, certain, in a few hours. How long will the rain last? Where is his heaviest pencil, the one he spent twenty minutes vainly searching for this morning? Of all the women in the city, which one would he, marrying, be happiest with, and which one would, marrying him, be made the most happy?

Once upon a time (this is another story that his Uncle told him, he thinks; or perhaps his father) there were in a far-off country two Gods. One God lived on the highest mountain in that country, and one lived on the coldest mountain. Each God knew all that there was to know about

the country; the flow of every river, the name and fate of every man and woman, the hairs of every head, the sound of every sigh (and, Hunter thinks, the whereabouts of every pencil, the length of every rainstorm).

Both Gods knew everything there was to know about the country, but: neither God knew who he was. The God that lived on the highest mountain knew everything there was to know about the country, and knew that the country had two omniscient Gods, but he did not know "I am that God that lives on the highest mountain". The God that lived on the coldest mountain knew everything there was to know about the country, and he knew that the country had two omniscient Gods, but he did not know "I am that God that lives on the coldest mountain."

Every man knows who he is, and every woman knows who she is. So these Gods, high and omniscient as they were, grew jealous of the poor ignorant mortals, for their self-knowledge. The God on the highest mountain plotted to rain fire on the valleys, and kill the men and women (and he knew "the God on the highest mountain is plotting to kill the people", but he did not know that that was him). The God on the coldest mountain resolved to become a human himself, sacrificing knowledge of all things for knowledge of himself.

On the day that the God of the highest mountain was set to release the killing fire, the God of the coldest mountain perfected his magic, and entered the mind of the country's tiniest infant, just being born and crying the cry of his birth. Then the God of the highest mountain knew "there is only one omniscient God in the country", and knew it must be he, and withheld his fire. And the God of the coldest mountain, now only an infant bloody and wailing on his mother's stomach, sucked in air, and knew who he was, and knew nothing else.

The first blast of the rain, the downpour, the cloudburst, has died down, but the drops are still constant and heavy.

Hunter sighs again and stands up, surveys his temporary (how long?) prison. The alcove is an arched cell in the side of the building, unevenly walled with cement and brick. In one corner the wind has built a pile of paper scraps, dirt, and blown leaves, now moist and contentedly rotting in the rain-dampened air. The back wall of the space, against the building, tapers backward to a narrow flat place where the floor is a metal grate and the wall shadowed dark. Two streams of water drip and flow down the wall there, leaking rain from somewhere above.

Hunter is intrigued by the shape and shadow of that space, in the dripping darkness. He reaches for his portfolio, his paper and pencils, but as he does a gust of wind pushes a burst of rain into the space, splashing his hand and arm; it is too wet here, now, to draw. He runs his eye over the shapes, and wrinkles his nose. He will come back when it is dry.

When the rain does stop, Hunter hugs his portfolio close to himself and walks out into the street. He notices the buildings nearby, the block he is on, so he can find the place later. Then he starts across the city, the second half of his walk back to his room. Rain still drips from cornices, from wires, from the few branches of the few trees, from awnings on storefronts, but the clouds are clearing. It would be sunny, but the sun has set.

As Klara ladles the soup into bowls, the rain begins to fall in her story as well. This will mean extra mouths at the table for her, most likely. She gets out two more bowls, and reduces the portions one half-ladle each. The corner of the windowsill does not begin dripping with dirty rainwater until long minutes after she has put a pot there to catch the drips. The city could use a good washing, she says to herself. And she rubs her stomach with her palm.

Questions for Chapter Six

This chapter is full of symbols. What does the hill symbolize? The rain? The fishmarket? The shiny eyes of the fish? The metal grating? How do you know?

What is the lesson of the story about the two Gods? How is it similar to previous stories? How is it different?

Klara appears in the last paragraph of this chapter also. Is the storm outside her window the same one that Hunter shelters from? How do you know?

Square Worlds

The dining hall is crowded and noisy and warm, full of people who would otherwise be out in the damp cold. Hunter has stopped at his room just long enough to put his portfolio safely away, and now is sitting at one of the long tables eating black bean soup, dark crusty bread, and a tomato stuffed with something shapeless and sweet. Courant is near by, on the opposite side of the table, and others Hunter vaguely knows; Paul Gavisko (a large young man with an enormous beard), Gretl Tayne (a bold young woman in a long black skirt, come over from the women's side of the hall to continue some dispute with Paul, started in a history classroom earlier in the day), Geoff the Monk (no one remembers his last name; he is slight and stern and dressed in heavy sober clothing, and does nothing to discourage the nickname).

The ceiling of the dining hall is high; in the dim spaces among the rafters mix shadows and smoke, smells and the echoes of noise. High on the walls huge old portraits in gilded frames stare down at the diners, or across at each other, or up into the ceiling. The portraits are dark, with time and cooking smoke and the aging of lacquer. Once a year they are taken down and cleaned, if the Steward remembers, but any cleaning that would remove the darkening would also destroy the images, so every year they are darker, and since little light reaches them at any rate, and the students seldom look up, the faces they bear are obscure in every sense. The only painting that is ever lit by the sun

is the immense one at the extreme end of the hall; for an hour not long after sunrise, a beam of light through a high dusty window in the roof of the hall will sometimes light it like a flame.

Most of the framed pictures on the long walls of the hall are portraits, conventional paintings of past Presidents of the college, done in oils by an especially promising student, by a visiting artist, or by one of the Portrait Masters in those years when the college had Portrait Masters. A few Provosts, and one especially notable Steward, have insinuated themselves in among the Presidents. Three Presidents share their canvases with their wives, and the Steward's wife has a frame all to herself. That was an odd year.

Daniel Prado was President of the college when the war began. He maintained order when the students threatened to riot, and he shut the college down when bombing seemed inevitable. He fled the city the next day; the Steward stayed to deal with the panic, the looters. For the most part the college was spared any physical destruction. When the war ended and the nation re-opened, Daniel Prado returned to the city, but found he no longer had a post.

Arkity ten Drummon was President of the college many years earlier. The third President to serve the college in its current incarnation, he was a small bent man with only one ear. He came that way from the womb, small and bent and one-eared, the space on the left side of his head that would normally have contained an ear having only a tentative whorl of skin, with no opening or organs of audition. The college flourished under his hand, troubled only by the Church's suspicions of witchcraft, devilry, and general forbidden knowledge.

Brith Salien, the tenth President of the college, is pictured with his wife, or the woman that many assumed was his wife. She was in fact a sometime bawdy-house singer and former Nun, whose talent for the pianoforte was unmatched among college wives, and whose taste in

clothing was the talk of the back benches for years afterward.

In the portrait, she is holding her (nominal) husband's arm and smiling most freely out of the canvas. President Salien, by comparison, appears hesitant, perhaps confused, perhaps a bit puzzled about how he got there, in a yellow-lit room full of books, standing beside a globe of the world, his arm in the arm of this happy large-bosomed woman with the thick mole under her right eye. And then how he got there, high up on a wall, in a chipped gilded frame, suspended above the heads of chattering students, engulfed in the smell of bean soup.

The college is of ancient vintage and variable fortune. Here are Hunter and Courant and Geoff the Monk, lingering late on another night, with the wind rattling the windows.

"Courant, your family has money. They pay your fees and don't care if you are good for anything. But the rest of us grind our fingers to pay for this, and then learn nothing to enrich us." This from the Monk, his hood thrown back and his legs stretched out under the table.

"It is your own fault if you learn nothing."

"Pah! The faculty are dodderers and fakes, serving their time and collecting their dole. I labor at the drafting boards for pennies, and it all goes to buy booze for Professor Sniker and his doxies. The glory days of this place are long past; it lives on its old repute, and our gullibility."

"Hunter, you work; is your toil at the drafting tables worth the tutelage it buys you?"

Hunter lifted his eyes from the tabletop, where they had been studying the pattern of scratches. He smiled and put his hands together.

"The work isn't hard. And I'm here to draw in any case."

"Feh!" blew the Monk, "you say that only because you are the star of the drafting room, and Gleel overpays you for little work, just because your fingers are magic. Magical

fingers, he has, and what does he draw with them? Women's elbows! The shadow of a turd in the gutter. Sheer waste."

"Are the Masters dodderers and charlatans? How would we tell?"

"It's you that sits in endless lessons on the meaning of life and the history of Human Civilization. I can barely afford pencils for Elementary Bum-Scribing."

Courant, here, threw a buttered roll at the Monk, who put up his hood and went silent. Hunter returned to the table top, his eyes and fingers idly decoding the palimpsest of old gouges and knife nicks in the brown varnished wood.

The painting at the end of the hall, the one that the light strikes on certain spring mornings, is different in oblique ways from the others. Its frame is heavier, and it pictures no definite elder of the college or the city. It shows a man in a red robe, thin pointed beard hanging from his thin pointed face, squinting out of the canvas with his hand resting on a skull, by a table full of books, in a room with odd and sketchily-drawn apparatus barely visible behind.

The plaque on the painting, too high to be seen by anyone but the Steward's assistant in the annual taking-down, says "The Philosopher". He is meant as the figure of knowledge, of the thirst for knowledge, of the desire for understanding that so disturbed the Church in the Presidency of ten Drummon, among others. But the painting is a copy of an older (and much better) work, which was itself a copy of (or, at least, inspired by) an original portrait taken, by this time, four hundred years ago, in a different city by the same river.

The man in the frame, or the original man whose portrait was painted before steam was harnessed, whose portrait was then copied by an itinerant painter of considerable skill, the copy hanging for centuries in an armorial hall in a stone barony, and finally copied itself into the approximate work that hangs largely unremarked in the smell of

bean soup, that man was Seamus Archer, a contemporary and sometime colleague of John Dee, and like him a scientist or scholar or wizard or charlatan or seducer of wealthy idle wives, to your taste.

The skull under his hand (or the original skull under the original hand of the original man) is the skull of a badger, kept on a shelf for study, and brought out by the portrait painter (the painter of that original portrait) as somehow representative of the man, or complementary to his image. (Then as now painters and sculptors and artists being allowed their intuitions, their inchoate notions of proper and improper relations of space and frame, color and shape, in return for their willingness to live in garrets, to suffer, to be picturesque.) For momento mori, Seamus Archer had in that same room a human skull, now and again used to hold a candle and in consequence heavy with sightly wax; but the painter did not consider that object a good fit.

The original of the book beside the skull (unremarkable in the copy of a copy that hangs over Hunter's head as he eats, but thick and heavy and portentious, or ominous, in reality) is the memorable Hypnerotomachia Poliphili; not the artistic but theologically almost safe version that has come down to us (and that exists in one and a half copies in the college's own library, in the Medieval Art Special Reserve shelves), but the suppressed first version, which raised questions in its text (and more disturbingly in its illustrations) that John Dee and Seamus Archer were glad to have asked, but that the Church (then, as now) would prefer remain unanswered.

The other books on that same table were the journals or daily books of Seamus Archer himself, now for the most part lost to scholarship due to the offices of rats and bookworms and dry-rot, with the exception of a set carefully kept behind glass in a small private gallery outside Paris; also a volume of the "De Polis Humanus" with its lewd illustrations, and a folio of obscene plays by the man

called Soutis Drome, both kept at hand by this Seamus Archer both for study and for diversion (the two were not as separate in that day as they are in this).

At the time the portrait was taken (the original portrait, you will recall), Archer (sometimes called the Magister Archer, or Archer Sapienta) was at work on three books of his own. Two, concerning the nature of sound and the transmutation of substances (milk into butter, water into ice, food into excrement) were to be promulgated under his own name; the third, speculations on the nature and origin of the world that stepped well over the line into heresy, to be printed anonymously or (as it ultimately turned out) over a name picked out of the air on the moment, passing into history as the "Speculations" of one Mercutio of Egypt. All elegant in form and construction, almost entirely mistaken as to fact, but closer to the truth for all of that than almost anything else to be found at the time.

Having finished his soup and cleaned his bowl with his bread, lingered for a long ten minutes listening to the warm voices around him, Hunter gets up and goes out into the chilly night, to squint at his books for an hour, and then to sleep. Ravens circle in the sky far above his head.

Questions for Chapter Seven

Describe two other portraits that might hang in the college dining hall, and the lives of the persons they picture.

What is a momento mori? If you were constructing one today, of what would it consist? Be specific.

Would Hunter really draw the shadow of a turd in the gutter? Would you? Describe the relationship between the three young men.

The Dry Corner

Hunter wakes with an early bell, changes one set of clothes for another, and goes out into the day. The light is slanting down clear blue and orange through a thin layer of cloud. Sitting at the desk under the window, listening to Courant snore, Hunter tries to memorize a passage from Pliny on governance, looks out at passing birds, waits for the next bell. There are no classes today; he is waiting only for his body to finish waking up.

Out in the square, his boiled wool around him against the cold and his pouch of paper and pencils under his arm, he looks for the hot bun vendor to break his fast. The bun is salty and sweet and hot, and he lets the thick pulp of it dissolve in his mouth, casing his tongue with soft heat, before he swallows.

Halfway across the city, the corner is still there, the stolid building, the arch and alcove in the wall. Now the sky is nearly clear, the dawn haze burnt or blown away by the day. The quality of the light is fine. Hunter sits on the pavement, propped against the inner wall of the cell, and takes out a sheaf of paper. Paper is the one thing the college has in abundance. He rubs a sheet between his fingers, feeling the texture of the rag and the flatness of the fiber.

He draws quickly, with a quiet mind. The frame of the page holds half of the back wall of the alcove, the metal grate on the ground, the rusty marks from the drip and flow of the rainwater leaking in from above. A few curves hint at

the water itself, a stroke of shading captures the slant of the light. Part of Hunter watches as another part draws, in a sort of disinterested appreciation. And the part of his mind that itches for the pencil is, for the moment, appeased.

He finishes one drawing and starts another. These are not ones that he is likely to keep, to husband and put on the wall above his bed. Like that picture of the roof of the house in the meadow long ago, like most of the snippets of vision he has ever drawn, these will be added to a pile under his bed, or folded into a book, or given casually to a friend, a teacher, or a passerby.

The picture of Ona and Marc, with himself hinted by a few lines between them, he gave to Ona, or left to her by default, when he left for college, on a bright morning much like this one, the breeze newly chilled by Autumn, and birds calling in the trees.

Here are Hunter and Marc in a tower room in the old house, a room owned by no one (the stairs are dark and twisted, and not entirely safe, and the floor has begun to rot), sitting as young men sit across from each other, talking extensively of nothing, tired after a long afternoon carrying wood to fill the bins for winter.

"What do you think I hear of Peter Kale?"

"His arms have dropped off and been eaten by bears."

"Besides that."

"His mother has been named King, and now he is a Princess, with a castle and a garden of his own, and closets full of dresses."

"You are an ass."

"What do you hear of Peter Kale?"

"Who?"

"Hee-aww, hee-aww!"

Steps creak on the stairs, and here is Ona, her cheeks admirably pink from the air, slightly winded from the stairs, her slim pale body visibly taking and releasing the air, her blouse tight cross her stomach and chest, for they are all

growing, have all grown, and clothes are clothes. Hunter has not seen her for a week, as she has been in town visiting an Aunt or a cousin or some other branch of her family, all tall and pale, but none as lovely.

Marc's face lights, and Ona is in his arms, and their mouths and bodies are together as the mouths and bodies of young people come together, urgent but immortal, eager but with all the time in the world. Hunter looks at them and aches.

Ona pulls back from Marc's embrace. "Brother," she says, although he is not her brother as far as anyone knows, but they play at brother and sister at the most implausible moments, "that is a lovely welcome. But Hunter --" and she uncoils one arm from Marc's back, a gesture that he remembers, that he sees in his dreams for years after, and he stands.

Her lips are sweet. Both their arms around him, all their arms around each other, he stands in a moment of joy. Ona, he realizes, has the same smell as Marc, an elusive mercurial scent of herbs and earth. "Three again," Marc whispers, his breath warm on Hunter's cheek.

He adds another drawing to the pile, this one quick and simple, a few strokes mirroring the curve of the water stain on the wall, a piece of the archway to the street. Then he stands and flexes his back, stands for a moment on the tips of his shoes, crumpling his toes. He walks over to the inner end of the cell, where the wall is cracked over the grating. Looking down through the crossing metal, he sees an unexpectedly deep space, going down into the street into darkness, and he is reminded that the street, the sidewalk, are just the thinnest of skins on the deep deep earth, the wilderness on top of which all civilization floats like scum, or like the lightest cream on a jar of milk.

He moves sideways, the better to see downward, and sees that the wall is not only cracked but holed, and there is a space wide enough to step into. He does.

The space he has entered, the accidental room behind the alcove within the arch beside the street, is a close and dusty place, its walls the inner surfaces of the building wall, rust and dirt hanging from the beams and joist-ends like stalactites in a cavern. Enough light filters in through the hole in the wall to see that there is nothing here, nothing purposeful, just the nests of mice, the patterns of debris blown in by the wind. Hunter goes out to the alcove again, gathers his drawings and his pencils back into his pouch, and putting it under his arm slips again through the crack, through the hole, over the grating, into the enigmatic empty space.

There are shapes here to draw, but he is content for the moment to stand and look. The light from the street fades quickly as he looks further into the cell, but his eyes adjust. The space is close and narrow, but now he sees that it is long, perhaps as long as the width of the building, receding to his left into darkness. Carefully, he steps forward. The light is just enough to make out a rough scrawl on the inner side of the broken wall, in charcoal or old paint. A name, or a pair of names, perhaps a date, a smudge, a line.

Many slow steps away from the entrance hole (he is a miner in a mine, an explorer in a cavern, a philosopher following into the outer darkness some dangerous but inexorable train of thought, one slow syllogism at a time), where the darkness is almost impenetrable, his hand lights on a metal railing. Squinting into the dust, he seems to see a rough flight of steps, leading downward.

"Lantern," he whispers to himself, and backs out of the narrow place, back out through the crack, back out under the archway and into the street. Back to his room, where Courant has a lantern.

A month before, his architecture class copied some drawings of Giovanni Piranesi. Hunter chose two plates of the Carceri, Piranesi's imaginary fever-dream prisons of stairs and arches and balustrades and columns massive

enough to support the world, and tiny flecks of humans lost in the stonework. He went home with his head full of them. That night he drew his own room, his hallway and his building, in the same style, twenty times life size and full of grand and sinister stairways, and then he drew basements and dungeons beneath (adding on sheet after sheet of paper below the panorama of the first two). Stairs led to stairs led to sudden drops into vast and stygian abysses; arches and columns supported each other in beguiling but impossible ways, chains dangled, water dripped. He drew a wide wrinkled river flowing far beneath the sun, from stone arch to stone arch and vanishing into the gloom. He drew humans, lost in the labyrinth or standing with their tools engraving new names on the walls, as tiny specks of ink.

When he finished, spent and sated, the drawing covered twenty sheets of paper. He pushed it under his bed without looking at it, tossed his pencils onto the desk, and collapsed into bed. He slept without dreams that night.

Now he is walking back through the streets, lantern in hand and pouch again under his arm, as the sun rises higher in the morning sky. A woman passing the other way looks at him oddly (or simply looks at him, or looks in his direction, or looks somewhere else entirely, but he gets the impression she has looked at him oddly), and he wonders if it is strange to be walking quickly (for he is walking quickly, against all habit and usage) through the streets in the growing daylight, holding a lantern.

As he crosses a street, his eye is caught for whatever reason by a man, or a figure, in a long dark coat, crossing the same street, one block to his left. Crossing the next street at the end of the next block, he sees the man again, or another man dressed the same way, still walking parallel to him. There is nothing at all unusual or noteworthy about this, he knows, but he feels a chill. He pictures (as in a drawing) a city full of parallel streets, and in every street a man in a dark overcoat, all walking in the same direction,

with a long deliberate stride, quick but unhurried, all darker somehow than the shadows around them, as if the light is gathered into them and absorbed.

In the next block, Hunter looks both left and right, but there is no man in a long dark coat walking parallel to him. As he dodges into the archway (feeling for the first time furtive, as though he should try not to be seen, as though he should make sure no one is about or directly paying attention to him as he slips into the bloodstream of the building), he thinks for a moment that he glimpses the man again (or a similarly-dressed person again), but on leaning back out and looking up and down the street, he sees no one but a woman and child walking away from him in one direction, and an idler facing the other way in the other.

The best of the light is now gone from the little cell off of the street. Now that the sun is higher in the sky, less light reaches into the crack, the hole in the wall, and Hunter can see even less well once he is inside. He does not light the lantern at once, though; his new furtiveness brings him to hide its light as long as possible. It occurs to him that someone must own this building, that it probably has tenants, that he has no business poking at its fundament and foundation. But he slips deeper in, carefully feeling with his feet as the darkness becomes absolute (the only light the blue smudge of the hole behind him; ahead is nothing). When he finds the cold metal railing with his hand, he stops and lights the lantern. Now he can see.

Questions for Chapter Eight

Hunter has found an odd place in the city, and gone to explore it. What is he likely to find? What significance is there to the fact that he drew the crack in the wall before he knew it could be walked into? That he drew it before he entered it?

Who was Giovanni Piranesi, and what are his Carceri? There is an obvious connection between the vast dungeons that Hunter drew, inspired by Piranesi, and the enticing staircase that he has seen (or thinks he has seen) in the dark place within the wall. Find at least one other connection between a drawing of Hunter's and the events of this chapter.

How do Hunter's thoughts on looking down into the grating prefigure what he finds within the wall? How do they relate to the man that Hunter saw, or thinks he saw, walking parallel to him on his way to the crack with the lantern? How do either or both of these relate to his memory of a reunion with Marc and Ona in the old house by the meadows?

Metal Rods, Heartbeat

The lantern's glow illuminates dirty walls converging to a point, and a metal staircase (once painted, now bare metal and lines and patches of dark green paint, clots of dust) leading down under them into another narrow space.

Hunter goes carefully down the first few stairs. The lantern bobs with his steps, and light and shadow swing unnervingly around him. A step, a step, a step, and he feels himself going down below the skin of the world; not just into a basement, but into a channel in the body of the earth. A step, a step, a step, the hand that holds his pouch also holding the cold railing, a step, a step, and he is down below the skin and in the flesh.

The wall to his left ends, and the narrow space opens out into a larger chamber. Metal rods cross the space in all directions, seemingly at random, reinforcing the walls and the stairs against unknown stresses, or holding together the mass of the building above. At a distance, where the light of the lantern (more feeble than he remembered, expected, less like a small sun than a tiny uncertain moon) begins to be swallowed up by the bars and lost, something like a heavy chain is draped across a bar, leading down into the dark below. A step, and the space is full of echoes for an instant.

This is a thing Hunter needs to draw. He sets the lantern carefully on a step (there are railings on both sides now, but they are thin and their posts are far apart, and one could

easily fall, although it is impossible to say to where). He sits down on the step below it, rolls his shoulders, takes out paper and pencil, and looks up. His eyes roam over the rods and the shadows and the railings, and the logic of the image imposes itself on him.

For a month or more, years before, Hunter had drawn nothing but bits of houses, cooking utensils, pots, the legs of furniture.

"These are wonderful," Mother Canna said one evening, after a light dinner, looking over a handful spread on the table. He had left them scattered around his room, pushed under things and crumpled out of the way. Mother Canna had gathered a dozen of them up and brought them into the open, like kittens rescued from drowning.

"Marc says I am an odd duck," Hunter replied, sitting cross-legged on the floor, watching the shadows of the fire playing over the underside of the table.

"What is this one?"

"Hm. That's the left side of the teapot, that curve there, and that line is..."

"The side of the window," she said, finishing his sentence for him. "What is the shape that they make?"

"Just a shape."

This place, Hunter thinks sitting on the metal stair and watching himself draw, is the perfect place to lose track of time. His fingers sketch lines, a few heavy a few light, for the closest of the rods, the light of the lantern, the feeling of depth and deepness. The chain enters the picture as a trio of curves. The pencil sketches the shape of the darkness. He stops, looks at it once, slides it folded into his pouch, and starts another. This one is a part of his boot, a piece of step, and the rods going like crazy ladders down into darkness.

Both pictures secure in his pouch (will he put them on his wall, give them away, stuff them under his bed, burn them? no need to decide), he picks up the lantern, shakes his head slightly (disoriented for a moment as the world

changes from subject to place), and continues down the steps. What time is it?

A step, a step, a step, and he feels that his steps on the stairs are the heartbeat, or echoes of the heartbeat, of this place. A step, and below he sees the hint of a floor. The rods are thinning out. The far wall may be approaching.

A step, a step, a step, and his is only a few steps from the bottom, where something like a room, or something like a corridor, stretches away in two directions into the dark. He thinks of Geoff the Monk, the catacombs of an abbey, a story by Poe, the sound of water.

A step, a step, and he is down. The ground is packed earth with chunks of cement, or cracked cement with thickly layered dirt. Sound echoes, but is smothered at once. The smell is moist and earthy, but sterile. His face is cold, the hand holding the lantern is hot.

At the bottom, a decision. To the right is a corridor into the darkness. Ahead is another, perhaps slightly wider. Hunter thinks of the mass of the building above him, the streets, the steam tunnels. What is this abandoned space? He has strayed before into the intimate functional spaces of buildings, into the halls where servants move, the stone and cement places where trucks deliver and men pile crates, where stacks of chairs sit for days or years, where parts of broken machines are tossed.

All those places have their people, their habitués; for all that they seem deserted and forgotten when you happen into one (chasing a shadow, looking for a compelling shape, finding something that needs to be drawn, or a place to sit). For someone, each of those spaces is familiar, routine, the office, the playground, the closet. This place feels emptier than that.

There are three ways he might go, of course. Right, or ahead, or back up the stairs, toward the light, the street, and places where he has a right to be. He thinks again of the man, or men, or person or persons in the long dark coat (or

coats), striding through the city a block away from him. Has that person gotten to his (her, their) destination (destinations), gone inside, taken off the coat and hung it on the hook? Is he (are they) sitting now, reading a newspaper, feet on a footstool?

His foot kicks something on the ground. A bottle, old and dusty and broken, half-buried in the dirt until the toe of his boot dislodged it. Near it the rotted ends of two ancient cigar butts are returning to the soil. People have been here, but not recently. He moves forward, into the dark. Does he hear the sound of water? Or does he imagine it in the silence?

On the righthand wall, there is a door. It is metal, painted a drab brown. There are slats in it, at eye level, perhaps to let air in, or out. The knob is pale metal, dusty but not dirty, and it shines dully in the light of the lantern. Hunter puts out his hand (why is he reluctant to touch this dust, no thicker or dirtier than the dust that must have been on the railing?), and grips the knob in his fingers. But it will not turn. It is locked, or frozen or stuck with age. He feels no desire to throw his shoulder against the door, or even put much force into turning the knob.

He walks onward.

There are gaps in the base of the wall on either side of him, dark rectangular holes extending up two feet from the floor, each perhaps twenty inches wide. Standing, he can see only darkness inside them. Kneeling down and holding out the lantern, some seem to be meaningless shallow rectangles cut from the wall; others are deeper, going back further than he can see into ducts, or rooms, or further open places. There are a dozen altogether. He sits against one wall, puts his back on the space between two of the gaps, and draws the gaps on the other side, the shadows cast by the lantern, and hints of strange rich spaces beyond them. He folds the picture and puts it into his pouch.

Standing up and reaching for the lantern, his foot slips on a round stone and he falls, right arm and cheek scraping against the hard earth. He rolls over onto his back, rubbing his face (is the skin broken? is there a cut on his cheek with the dirt caked in it?). He shakes his head and gets to his feet, picks up the lantern, and walks onward. A step, a step, and now he feels his own heartbeat (the sting in his cheek, the pace of his steps) echoing the earth his is embedded in.

Another door, brown-painted metal and square vanes, this one on the left. His right arm, holding the lantern, aches. He tries the knob, and it turns.

Something Written on a Scrap of Paper in the Room Hunter is About to Enter

Imagine the color of work. Imagine the color of tiredness. Imagine the colors of birth and death.

How fast does the world change? How long was your childhood? How long will you live?

In the Dark

Klara is sitting on her sofa with her legs on the low table in front of her, resting. It is the end of the day and her feet are sore. She rubs her stomach through the thin dress with the fingers of her left hand, and lies her head back against the worn cushion.

"Oh, little creature," she murmurs, "aren't we tired?" And she hums a cradle-song to the child in her body, and she smiles.

Down under the skin of the world, Hunter opens the door; it opens with a hard push, breaking the stiffness of the hinges, scraping against dirt and debris around the lower edge. He reaches into the room with the lantern. The space is musty and compact, neither small nor large, dirty with the dust of years. There are sticks that might once have been furniture, there is something like a chair, something like a table. Leaves, or papers, or both, are drifted on the floor, piled in rough piles, overlapping and spilling into one another.

Something square and heavy-looking, the most definite object in the room, sits on the probable table. The walls are gray and patterned. A cluster of pipes crosses the ceiling, running in a jagged zig-zag from one corner to another, coming and going through holes in the walls.

The patterns on the wall catch Hunter's gaze, and he holds the lantern closer. They are worn by time and damp, faded to blankness in places, but he can still read them, and

they are in a language he knows. These are drawings, drawings of enormous complexity and peculiar form, drawings of birds and buildings, of birds that might be buildings, of buildings that might be trees. The wall just beside the door is covered with them, bold sweeps of line and tiny intricate details (surviving only in the smoothest and driest bits of wall), scrawled and inscribed on the grey wall in something charcoal (inky, midnight) black. And entwined in the drawings there are words.

Hunter closes his eyes tightly; he can hear the beat of his heart in his ears. When he opens his eyes the lines are still there.

Some of the drifts on the floor of the room are indeed leaves, and fragments of peeling paint, and flat clumps of debris and dirt. Others are scraps of paper, some rotted to nothing, a few blank, but the rest covered with the same universe, the same riot of line and shade and unreadable meaning. Hunter struggles to keep his gaze on a single piece, to begin some sort of understanding by holding his eye on a single something, an unmixed object.

Ridiculous to be so overcome here under the world. In the light of the sun, he thinks, this would be comprehensible. But in the dim yellow of the lantern, he is for this moment quite helpless. Kneeling on the ground, he puts his hand on the chair (it is, he decides, in fact a chair), tests it for steadiness, and sets the lantern on its seat. With the light at least steady, if still dim and unilluminating, he takes a breath and sits back on his haunches. The room waits in silence.

Here, on this bit of paper in his hand, the rest ignored, not there. This bit of paper, the one between his fingers, is torn and moldy and rotted at two edges. Drawn on it is part of the head of a bird, or an odd graceful awkward shape that could be the head of a bird, and behind it part of a staircase, and written on the staircase smudged spidery words, most of which he cannot read. "Mother", perhaps, and

"climbing", and something like "afraid". He puts the scrap, carefully, in his pouch.

On another scrap, no discernible mark survives. Another is only a dry leaf, that sheds in his fingers. Another, another among the hundreds or thousands or millions scattered in this cell in the body of the earth, has two intersecting triangles, or the corners of squares, and where they cross there is an eye, and the eye is a fountain. The water of the fountain (the fountain that is an eye) rises into the air and forms a word, or a name, in some language Hunter has never seen.

He closes his eyes again for a moment, but the room is not spinning. When he opens them again, he is looking at the shape on the table. He takes up the lantern again.

His way to the table passes through more drifts of pattern and dirt. He does not drop the lantern, there is no explosion, no sheets of flame in the old paper and dry leaves, no cleansing destroying conflagration. He bends and takes a few papers in his fingers as he steps across the room, passes them through the light (a city of faces, a monster of string and bolts, a tribe of mice carrying a bloody crown, a mass of close print too small to read), lets them fall. On the table, of course, the shape is a massive impossible book.

Leona and Shaytl joined the refugees, the endless stolid chains of people, families, carts, honking engines, leaving the smoking city. The way was long and slow. After some days they reached the country, the place they had sent their children, and found it startlingly untouched by the war. They held their small ones, and they wept.

Leona's hearing never returned, except that if you put your lips to her ear (and only Shaytl and her children and her sister did this) and spoke loudly, she might sometimes hear a whisper of your words. Over the next years, at the same time that she learned to listen by watching the shapes of mouths, her voice drifted and became odd. Shaytl and

the children understood her perfectly, but to neighbors and strangers she might have been speaking an alien tongue. She became quieter. Her leg did heal, although it always pained her in the autumn.

Questions for Chapters Nine and Ten

How likely is it that a building in a city would have a crack in the wall, leading to a long flight of stairs down to a dark mysterious hallway? Is Hunter surprised by the existence of the place? Is he more or less surprised than you would be?

What sort of lantern is Hunter carrying? Is it, for instance, an oil lamp, or an electric light? Whose lantern is it?

What might be the function of the set of low gaps in the walls, either functionally or symbolically? What is the significance of Hunter's fall? Do you think he has cut his face?

What are Hunter's feelings on discovering the drawings in the dirty room? How do these drawings relate to his own drawings? How are they similar? How are they different?

In Chapter Ten, Hunter's examination of the scraps of paper, and his discovery of the book, are framed by brief sketches of women: Klara and Hunter's Aunt Leona. How are these women similar, as they appear in this chapter, and how are they different? What relationship might their stories have to the main story of Hunter?

What the Book Said

Hunter tests the table with his hand, decides that it is a table, and it is strong enough. He sets the lantern down, next to the book. It is thick, thick and huge, or seems huge in the light of the lantern and the strangeness of the place. The covers are heavy leather. He kneels on the dirty floor (filthy leaves beneath one knee, sheets of paper beneath the other, pictures of flames, of children carrying crosses, of enormous roses growing out the windows of palaces) and opens the book carefully, slowly, not to destroy anything within.

The pages of the book are not bound, not because the binding has dissolved with age, but because they were never bound. They are hardly pages, in fact, less pages than single sheets of paper, variable and irregular in size and shape, that have come by accident to rest, squeezed and compacted together, between the heavy covers on this table, somewhere in the flesh of the world.

The first page, the first sheet, his eyes rest on is covered half with writing, half with a drawing of a weed growing beside a stone wall. This is what the writing says.

Ten Days After Drowning

My imprisonment continues. There is no way to tell day from night. When last I awoke, there was a woman in the corridor. Her body was composed of flames, and

her hands were the heads of cats. She spoke to me in the language of the Gods. Thirty years before I was born, she said, the Gods in their wrath caused a great storm. The storm engulfed the land for many miles up and down the coast; the cities of Arsh and Manemnon-Tier sank into the sea, and leopards spoke with the voices of men. For thirty years, the anger of the Gods did not cool, until with my birth they were finally mollified. The cause of their wrath is forgotten now, even by the Gods themselves.

I am hungry. This room, and the room of the black curtains, are both filled with food. I am thirsty. This room, and the room of the ambitious machines, are both filled with drink. My eyes are heavy with sleep. You shall be my cushion. I shall plump your thighs and your belly under my head, curl my body up on your body, and sleep. While I sleep, you will weave me dreams out of the threads of memory.

That is the first page, its drawing and its writing. Hunter sits for a long time touching it with his fingers, moving his eyes over it by the light of the lantern. "Ten Days After Drowning" it says. He shakes his head, turns to the next sheet. It also has its image and its writing, its shapes and its words. The image is abstract and disturbing; perhaps a face or a crouching animal. The words are smudged, but with his eyes close to the paper (it smells of ink and age and damp) he can read them all.

Eleven Days After Drowning

The world has been changed while I slept. Where the corridor was, there is a field of wheat. Where the window was, there is a portrait of an asp, holding a baby in its teeth. The mice have eaten the feast that was on the table, but I broke my fast with the bread that they left behind. It was savory, and tasted of meat. When I

was a child, we made cheese from the bones of old men.

Have I described the conditions of my imprisonment? I am permitted to eat and drink all that I can find myself. I am permitted to write, but I may not read what I have written. I am required to make my own clothes from cloth that drops from the ceiling when my back is turned. In all other things, I am my own master, except that I must remain in these rooms forever, and I may not speak without first closing my eyes. These rules were explained to me when I arrived, by one of the children that rule here. His name is Tenderness.

The writing is, mostly, delicate and dense, the writing of spiders or watchmakers. Here and there (the word "wheat", the phrase "In all other things") it becomes larger, darker, more bold. The shapes of the letters are that of an old-fashioned hand, but their connections are odd and awkward. There are wide spaces between the sentences.

Turning the page carefully over, Hunter is suddenly chilled. A gust of wind, dank and unpleasant wind, has blown in through the hole in the corner, one of the holes that accommodate the pipes in the ceiling of the room, and blown out again by the open door. The lantern flickers, and Hunter suddenly sneezes, a loud and violent sneeze that takes him completely by surprise. The sneeze throws his head forward, and his cheek stings. Touching it with his fingers, he feels pain and stickiness; the fall in the corridor did break the skin. He feels stiff and sore and cold. Another gust of wind breaks through the room, and the piles on the floor move restlessly.

"One more," he whispers, and turns many pages at once, the bulk of them thick and solid in his hand. This page is blank, except for a small square and a circle, perfectly ordinary, in the center. The next page has a thick diagonal

line, surrounded on both sides by the most delicate, intricate, and meaningless curves imaginable, thousands of arcs on a sheet the size of his palm. On the next, only the writing, spider-scratches in uneven lines across the paper.

One Week After the Maiden

Now I name my days after the frozen maiden sleeping in her tube of ice. She has been there at the last seven of my wakings. She is the steadiest thing in what remains of the world. So I name my days for her.

Ways that the human body may be transformed. The human body may be transformed into ice. The human body may be transformed into vegetable matter such as trees, grass, or moss. The human body may be transformed into a mass of snakes. The human body may be transformed into clockwork. The human body, additionally, may be transformed into glass, water, or air. It is not known whether the human body may be transformed into light.

To transform the human body into glass, first purify the essential spirit. The essential spirit may be purified by a regime of fasting, abstinence, and chastity. The essential spirit may be purified by an all-consuming joy. The essential spirit may be purified by intense concentration. Once the essential spirit is purified, the material substrate must be stabilized. To stabilize the material substrate, bathe the body in the light of the sun refracted through crystal. To stabilize the material substrate, hold the body motionless in extreme cold for one day. Once the material substrate is stabilized, the dross may be transformed. To transform the dross, soak the body in the alcohol extract of lemon, diluted in one hundred parts of pure water. To transform the dross, wrap the body in spun glass and hold it motionless in the darkness for one year.

In this way, the human body may be transformed into glass.

The process for transforming the human body into ice is recorded on the forehead of the frozen maiden. The words are written in the language of the Gods, and I cannot read them. The process for transforming the human body into air is written in the clouds. The words are written in the language of the Gods, and I cannot read them.

Hunter shivers again, and sneezes. He touches his forehead. He gets to his feet, suddenly, spasmodically. He picks up the lantern. The book, the hundreds of scraps and leaves and clods of dirt on the floor, lie motionless in the swaying light of the lamp. He puts out one hand, in a vague grasping motion, but then (leaves and scraps scuffled under his feet, a picture of two lions tied in a knot, a picture of a burning carriage, a picture of dust) he turns and rushes (a slow, awkward, sickly rush) from the room, back into the corridor, past the gaps in the walls and the place where he fell (is there blood of his there, mixed in the dirt? blood of anyone else?), and he puts his foot on the bottom step of those long metal steps.

The next morning, he is lying in his bed, tangled in the sheets. The human body, he thinks, may be transformed into a mass of snakes. Then he opens his eyes and groans.

"You're a mess." Courant, sitting at his desk, looks at Hunter over his shoulder.

"I don't remember..."

"You stumbled in here just before sunset last night. I think you had a fever."

"Just before sunset? But, I--." Hunter shakes his head, touches his fingers to his cheek. Dirt and a scab. The sheets are grimy.

"You weren't dying, so I just showed you the bed. At least you returned my lantern. Did someone beat you up? Should I call the doctor?"

"No, no I'm all right. Just tripped..."

Hot water, light, the sun on his feet, a sticky salt bun from the vendor, feel good. He is clean, he has a plaster on his cheek, he has stretched and swung his arms around himself, and changed his sheets. But he is lightheaded, and perhaps, he wonders, a little feverish still. But he has energy, not the drained aching tiredness of fever.

"So what happened?"

"It's hard to explain."

"So don't tell me."

"I went, well, into a building, down some stairs."

"What building?"

"Just a building, a place I noticed from the street."

"And you went in?"

A sudden thought. "Did I have my pouch with me?"

"Don't you always? I think you kicked it under the bed."

Hunter stoops, pulls the pouch from under the bed (among the scattered leaves of drawings, drawings of the heads of women seen from the window, water flowing down a drain, the shape of a lamp; no burring fingers, no women with bodies of fire and hands of cats), dumps out the contents. Blank paper, pencils, an apple, some drawings.

"So this is where you were?"

"There's a crack in the side of the building, just there, and these are stairs going down into a sort of basement."

"And you tumbled down the stairs."

"I just tripped once in the dark."

"Breaking and entering for the sake of your art. I suppose if you'd been caught they would have believed you were just looking for things to draw."

Hunter smiles, a bit weakly, and gets back into bed, into the clean sheets. He is at once content and confused.

Courant puts on his jacket and leaves for a class. The process for transforming the human body into air is written on the clouds. Hunter closes his eyes.

Questions for Chapter Eleven

What is the significance of the repeated metaphor of the skin and flesh of the earth? Support your answer with passages from the text.

How are the images and texts that Hunter sees in this chapter similar to the drawings and stories we have seen earlier? How are they different?

If you were to write a question about this chapter, what would it be? How might an observant reader answer it?

One and Two, Two and Two, One and Three

Weeks before, the midwife had pressed her fingers into Klara's stomach (wrinkled knobby fingers, but still delicate, something like tender, on the vibrant smooth swell of her belly).

"What do you think?" she had asked Klara, smiling up at her, deep creases at the corners of her mouth upturned.

"I think this is the most squirming child ever quickened," she said, "and that I may never sleep again." Although in fact the writhing and poking of the little limbs at night woke her only into a gentle doze, a happy awareness of being full. Now that the sickness was over, her pregnancy lay lightly on her.

The midwife's cracked smile broadened further, "My dear, that is because you are carrying two."

Now Klara lies on her sore back on the bed, sheets piled all around her, with her knees in the air and her body straining. The midwife has given her a specific, and she is not thinking well, but her muscles are clenching in that demanding rhythm, and she is shouting from the pain.

She has told the midwife that the father is dead, although she hopes that is not true. In the shallow places between the impossible contractions of her body, she thinks of him, the broad planes of his shoulders, the rich pale brown of his hair, the muscles of his arms. Memories of his face and his body are some comfort to her, and the midwife

is some comfort to her, and she still hopes this will be an easy birth, as her mother long ago told her that she was an easy birth. The pain and pressure begin again, and despite herself she thinks, Twice?

Shaytl and Leona sit in gray wooden chairs on the porch of a house. He is robust, aging into size and strength like a big cat. She is small and frail now, and looks ten years older than her husband, though in fact she is five years younger. They watch the children playing in the meadow, passing in and out of the house.

"The children do you good," she says in her personal voice, her eyes smiling on him.

"Look at those two rabbits, hand in hand down to the river." He rumbles and puts his hands on his knees, benignly regarding the world. (When he speaks, he turns his head automatically toward her, so she can see his lips.)

"Children's hands," she says, "what does it mean?"

"It is good to see them touching each other. It is good when people reach out beyond themselves, learn kindness, learn to look for someone else. Two rabbits hand in hand."

"Ah, Shaytl," she says, reaching a thin arm across to smooth a strand of hair off of his forehead, "two can be as cruel as one."

Hunter wakes again at noon, his eyelids sticky and his mouth tasting of something vile. He rises and washes again, swings his arms around him again, changes his clothes, and sits at the desk in the light from the window. He has missed, he realizes, a handful of classes, and he has lost something like a day out of his memory. I may not speak, he thinks, without first closing my eyes.

He takes from the floor a handful of mostly blank paper, a set of pencils, an apple, and stuffs them back into his pouch. He puts one sheet of paper on the desk, and takes one pencil in his fingers. He imagines the room, the door forced open, the pipes in the ceiling, the papers, the table, the silence. He draws a rough sketch from memory,

frowns at it, tosses it onto the floor. He stands, and puts the pencil back into the pouch. His eye lights on the postcard and the copy (not a copy, but a similar picture, a picture brought to mind by the postcard) that lie on the desk. He picks them up and puts them into the pouch as well, and goes out to find food. At a narrow table, he eats warm bread and yellow cheese.

In class in the studio, his hand is as sure as ever, but his own pictures (a cloud, the corner of a table, the monumental column they have been set to copy) puzzle him. The words, he thinks, are written in the language of the Gods. He shakes his head. Finishing the assigned drawing, he takes another piece of paper, and draws a face. Ona's face, drawn with more detail and care than he uses on faces, the curve of remembered lips, the pale arcs of her hair, the rounded ears and placid eyes. Beside her, looking at her from behind, he draws another face, Marc's, the shadow and reflection of Ona, his lips fuller and eyes rounder. Behind them a few curves are trees, clouds, the world. He draws slowly and thoughtfully.

When the class ends and the other students stand and leave, Hunter is still there, finishing the picture, the shading under Ona's cheekbones, the slant of Marc's eyebrows. The next class files in, and he looks up in surprise, gathers his things, and goes out.

"You are all asleep today!" the Professor bellows, standing among them in the bright dusty room, whose windows are closed now against the gathering chill. "Where are your minds?" And this launches him onto a discourse about mind, and attention, and the locus of consciousness. The ancients, he says, thought that the spirit was in the heart, or in the liver.

"Now," he says, at ease again in his chair, no longer concerned if his students are asleep, scratching his scalp with an idle hand, "now we think that consciousness is in

the brain, and why should we be any less stupid than the ancients?"

Hunter is quiet at dinner, sitting with his friends and acquaintances under the high ceiling and the eyes of Daniel Prado, Arkity ten Drummon, Brith Salien and the dancer, Seamus Archer, the Presidents and the Steward's wife. He eats chicken stew, the flavors warm and familiar in his mouth.

Although he slept until noon, he is fuddled and sleepy early in the night. He yawns hugely, to Courant's puzzled amusement, and crawls again into bed. He is asleep at once. He dreams of a woman whose hands are the heads of cats, and whose body is transformed into glass by an all-consuming joy.

The next morning he awakens early, or early for a dreamy slightly dissolute student of art and the history of thought, takes his pouch of pencils and paper from under the bed (pencils and paper and still that apple, gradually becoming bruised, the postcard and the picture), and steals from the room. The sky is overcast, but the air is sweet with a promise of decay and renewal. There is no real wind, but breezes ruffle the fallen leaves and Hunter's hair.

There is a large and prosperous shop in the city, two blocks north of the line between Hunter's bed and the drawing studio. It is full of objects of all kinds, edible and useful, elegant and plain. It is full also of clerks and proprietors, the servants of wealthy city folk, students with pocket-money, women with dogs on leashes, the sound of doors opening and closing, the smell of dust and autumn.

Hunter goes to this shop (not that his pockets are overflowing with money, not that he does not owe Courant for two dinners and a breakfast), and at this shop he purchases a lantern, a bright lantern, a lantern that the clerk assures him will light a dark room as though it were day. It is heavy and squat, but it gleams on the counter like a coiled star, and Hunter can, barely, afford it. He also buys a

handful of paper bags, and a large cloth sack, and stuffs them empty and folded into his pouch.

He crosses the city, again with lamp in hand and pouch under his arm. He looks up and down the streets as he goes, but (except for one tiny glimpse, far away and easy to discount) there is no sign of a walker in a heavy dark coat, dogging his footsteps a block, or a mile, or an inch, away. The clouds thicken as he walks.

For the third time, the building is still there, the arch in the wall. This time, three young women, perhaps students themselves (at his college or some other, or strayed for an hour from some school for young women, or perhaps servants on a free day, strolling the city in their best clothes), are standing and talking by the arch, blocking its mouth. The tallest of the three, a dark girl with a very red arrogant mouth and hoops in her ears, is addressing the other two as Hunter comes within sight of them. He stops and stands by a light post, pretending to look at the bills and urgings plastered to it. He can barely hear her voice, carried to him or kept from him by the variable breeze.

"Hardly," he hears her say, and "what does that" and "amazing" and possibly "foolish little", and then they are all three laughing, and they put their arms around each other's shoulders (the tall one in the center, the fair ones on either side) and stride off down the sidewalk. Hunter watches them go, and when they turn a corner and are gone he walks to the alcove, looks to his left and right (the street is far from deserted, but no one is watching him in particular, everyone is intent on their own business, their own thoughts, their own objects of pursuit or goads to flight), and goes into the space in the building's side, where the gray light of the sky barely penetrates.

He sits again, out of something like habit, and takes his pouch from under his arm. This morning he draws, beside an imagined arch more graceful and soaring than this one, three figures, or one shape, with three heads and six feet,

and in drawing it he makes it both beautiful (beguiling, erotic, strong with a vital and enticing strength) and disturbing, the six legs not being entirely the legs of three young women, but also the six legs of some truly six-legged and unnatural beast. He holds the picture away from himself at arm's length, and smiles.

Then he stuffs it carelessly into his pouch, stands up, and moves to the back of the cell. Within the hole in the wall, it is very dark. He steps in, and lights the lamp.

A Hundred Years Ago

A man sits in a cramped space, writing by a single short guttering candle. On the surface of the table, or desk, or counter where he writes, objects are scattered in the circle of the light. Two knives, the small pitted skull of a weasel, an empty bottle and a full bottle, folded papers and crumpled papers, a crust of bread, a piece of woven cloth. From somewhere above him comes the sudden sound of a bird's wings.

He sits with his face close to the paper, because his eyes are not strong. The sun dazzles them, and on bright days he does not go abroad. In the evening, and under the clouds, he goes up and down the lanes, and children run from him and follow in his wake, and never dare to throw stones.

Under the table, in the darkness, (but he knows where they are; he needs no light to lay his hand to anything in this room, for it is a small room, and only he touches these things), lie two stacks of books, worth more (to those willing to buy them, to those who can read them) than the tiny house (once the base of a windmill) in which the room cowers, worth more than the piece of land it sits on.

In his youth, he was prone to rage. Frustrated by life, by failure, by a fellow, he would stamp his feet, flail with his arms (thin pathetic arms when he was a child, large and more dangerous arms when he was older), and his face would turn red with the pressure of wrath. He would hit, punch, kick at people and walls, and he would take things in his hand (tightly in his hand, his fingers pulling hard against his palm) and hurl them away from him, and if they

broke, broke loudly, he would feel an instant of satisfaction.

Once in a fit of overwhelming rage he suddenly put his hands to his chest and fell to the floor, and lay there white and still. When he awoke (and he did awaken, against the expectations of most who saw him fall, the ashen pallor of his face, the twitching quiet of his body), he was weak and unsteady. He knew his rage would kill him if he allowed it to return. Now he sits in the dark, shrunken and quiet, and allows any hint of rage he feels to flow unimpeded out his pen and onto the page.

Returns

In the narrow place past the hole in the wall, Hunter lights the lantern. In the brightness of his light, he walks inward, and stops, and stoops to squint at the black writing (or drawing, or scrawl) on the inner wall. He cannot make out the letters, only old smudged shapes. Two names, he decides, standing bent over with the lantern held above his head, his face almost pressed to the wall. "Karel and Annota", or "Karl and Anna", or "Karen and Andreas". Was it one writer, he wonders, or two? An unrequited lover, writing his name here with his beloved's for the magical effect of this obscure space; or two lovers, cuddled close here in the private dark, recording their own (or each other's) names side by side, to pin the passing moment to reality?

He straightens and continues inward.

The metal stair is still there, the cold metal tube, bar, of railing. The lantern is not as bright as he had hoped, no brighter perhaps than Courant's, no brighter than an ambitious moon. The rods and hanging chain inhabit the space in the same bewildering complexity. He does not stop, not this time, to draw them. His mind touches the image of descent through and below the skin of the earth (a step, a step, a step, the rhythm of the heartbeats of the earth echoing his steps), but he will not dwell on it, will not this time let it oppress him. He reaches the bottom quickly (a minute, perhaps two or three; not an hour, by no means a

day, nothing like a year or a lifetime). The lantern illuminates the junction, where the two corridors meet at the base of the stairs. Not quite like day, he thinks.

He holds the lantern high and looks down the corridor to the right, the way he has never been. The light does not penetrate very far. There are no visible features there, only stone walls vanishing quickly into blackness. Nothing to draw his eye, or his mind, or his feet (the shadows are deep, but what are they shadows of?). He walks forward, the other way, the way to the room of the table and the chair and the book, looking at the walls as he walks, peering into the dark, looking down for the marks of his own feet on the dirt ground (he does not find them; is the earth too hard packed, did he leave no prints in his last passing in and out, or does he only overlook them, or have they been swept away, or has he perhaps never been here before, despite what seems to be in his memory?).

Sin

The dome of the sky is broken by sin. The skin of the Earth is broken by sin. By sin and the odour of sin, the human body is transformed into a frog, a flock of geese, a school of fish. My sin is the sin of rage, and the sin of self-regard. The sin of my parents was the sin of generation. The sins of my children shall be the sin of indolence, the sin of curiosity, the sin of pride.

Foxes are without sin, and rabbits are without sin. Sin lives in darkness, and in the sun. Eels are without sin. The hairs on the back of the arm are without sin. The sins of owls are large and quiet, with wings as silent as the wings of owls. The sins of men are small and multitudinous, bright and small as the eyes of men.

The room is the same as before, the same darkness (the light of this lamp is, if anything, dimmer than the other, and

no more steady), the same piles and drifts of leaves and scraps, the same pipes in the ceiling, the book heavy and enigmatic where he left it. He stands without moving for a moment, in the open door (passing the locked door, he turned his eyes away from it; passing the low gaps in the wall, he wondered why they were there, and did not stop to draw them). His arms are cold, and he shivers, but he goes to the center of the room, sets his pouch on the table next to the book, and the lantern next to that, takes a scrap of paper from the floor under the table, and reads about sin. Beside the text on the page is drawn a single human leg, covered with hair.

He lifts the book from the table carefully. It sticks for an instant, the lower cover and the table's surface having begun to forget that they are separate things. There is nothing under it, no stray sheets trapped under the book. He clears the top of the table (besides the book, the pouch, the lamp, there were only a few dry and feathery leaves, a shoal of dirt along one edge), and puts the book back down. He opens his pouch and takes out a few brown paper bags. When he pulls them out, the postcard (the woman still sitting, looking to one side, her skirt hanging from her legs) flutters out onto the floor. He picks it up and looks at it for a moment (grainy monochrome indistinct in the uncertain light) and puts it back into the pouch.

Three Days After Drowning

I arrange my things around me, although they will be moved or stolen while I sleep. I hang a lamp from the ceiling, although it will be moved or stolen while I sleep. I put a pot of water on the table, although it will be moved or stolen while I sleep. I pile my books at the foot of the bed, although they will be moved or stolen while I sleep. I clear the objects from under the table, although new ones will appear there while I sleep.

When last I woke, there were under the table a hundred figures of animals. The shape of each was softened and distorted, like wax before the fire, although each one was solid and hard. I take the half-melted figures from under the table, and array them on the floor between the bed and the wall, although they will be moved or stolen while I sleep.

Through all its history, humankind has speculated on the nature of the forces that move and steal objects while we sleep. Through all its history, humankind has speculated on the nature of the forces that cause to appear under the table, while we sleep, a hundred figures of animals, their shapes softened and distorted, like wax before the fire.

I see that until this moment I have not sufficiently appreciated the inconstancy of this place. It is not only the walls that change. It is not only the floor that changes. It is not only the contents of the room that change. It is not only the ceiling that changes. It is not only the smell of the air. It is not only the position of the door. It is not only the number of the windows.

Hunter puts the page about sin, with the picture of the leg, into a paper bag. He puts the page "Three Days After Drowning", with the picture of a bottle filled with shapes (noodles, or worms, or entrails, or the map of a nightmare city) into the same paper bag. He has steeled himself against disturbing the order and shape of the piles on the floor.

(What if they were purposeful, what if their arrangement had meaning, what if the tenuous signification of the words and images depends on where they are on the floor, in which pile, how oriented and situated relative to all the others? What if even the leaves and the dirt are part of the message, the work, the intent? But, he consoles himself, the

wind that blows around the pipes and into the room through the holes high in the walls will have rustled and turned and shuffled any such ordering into meaningless chaos long ago. And it is impossible that the wind itself and its effects are part of the message, the work, the intent.)

The pages of the book he cannot bring himself to disturb. The first two pages he read, "Ten Days After Drowning" and "Eleven Days After Drowning", are in the book. They could be placed, with the obvious claim to logic, appeal to reason, justification by common usage, in the bag with the "Three Days After Drowning" page (and the "Sin" page, each hair drawn in detail, each pore on the leg visible as a small meaty dot), and he could search the book for "Two Days After Drowning", and for (how much more significant? how revelatory?) "The Day After Drowning" and "The Day Of Drowning", and put them in the bag in their natural (or their obvious, their superficially correct) order.

But perhaps the titles are misleading, he thinks. Perhaps the book intentionally starts, starts for some important reason he does not know (for he knows almost nothing, standing at the edge of a continent, peering only a few feet into the tangled forested wilderland, seeing only thick brush, the tops of a few hills, of distant mountains, and close at hand a maze of shadowed paths leading inward) at "Ten Days After Drowning", and unless the book starts that way, the whole will be forever incomprehensible.

He leaves the book closed, reaches under the table for another bit of paper. On this one, once the leaves and stems and cobwebs clinging to it have been brushed off (the leaves and stems and cobwebs are not part of the book, not part of whatever it is he has found in this room, they are only accidents; he has decided this, and the decision makes his head swim), are a man and a woman standing by the edge of the water (the water reaches to the horizon; it is an ocean, or a vast lake, or the other shore is obscured by

haze). The man holds a sword, and the woman holds a pole. Looking more closely (the smell of dust and time in his nose nearly making him sneeze) he sees that the sword is made from the word "treachery", written over and over in an impossibly tiny hand, and the pole is made, in the same hand, from repetitions of the word "mastery". There are no other words on the page.

Hunter puts this sheet, too, into the bag, under the page with "Three Days After Drowning".

He reaches his hand again under the table (how long to clear the entire floor, all these piles and drifts, all this apparent infinity of word and image; and what to do next after it is clear?).

> What will be in the sky on the day of your death? What will be the last flavor you taste? What will be the last color you see?
>
> These are harbingers of death: a cock crowing at midnight, the ticking of a beetle in the wall of the bedroom, the wail of a banshee outside the window, the crying of a black cat. These are the messengers of death: the rat, the brown moth, the red-eyed hen, the shadow of a church steeple.

This scrap of paper, the one about death, has no title, and has been torn half way down. If there was a drawing there, it is gone, somewhere else on the floor, or somewhere in the book, or blown out along the pipes by the wind, or somewhere else entirely, in the studio of the artist (whose pen was this?), hanging in a gallery, stuffed in a pocket, long ago burned to ash.

Questions for Chapters Twelve and Thirteen

What is the significance of the title of Chapter Twelve? How might Klara's "two" relate to Leona's aphorism, "two can be as cruel as one"?

How is the picture of Ona and Marc that Hunter draws in Chapter Twelve different from the picture he drew of them earlier? What do you think this difference represents?

What is the function of the passage titled "A Hundred Years Ago"? Is it another scrap of paper from the underground room? Or does it take place within the reality of the story? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Choose one of the texts or images from the room, and connect it to one of the stories we have read earlier. Use your imagination.

Fading

Hunter's Aunt Leona died when he was very small. She was by that time a tiny woman, thin and frail, with a high odd voice that she seldom used, speaking only to Shaytl her husband and to her grown children, who would lean down low to her where she sat in her wheeled chair or lay abed, or stretched out under comforters on the long porch on her best days, and answer quietly, or silently, while her bright old eyes watched the motions of their mouths.

She held Hunter on her lap once, twice, a dozen times, her hand like a thin branch touching his hair, her fingers twisted like twigs, still gentle. He remembers, he thinks he remembers (but perhaps it is only stories he was told) her hand on his head, the bones of her knees under all the layers of blankets. He does not remember her smell (but might he recognize it if he smelled it again?), or her eyes, often sharp and bright but with moments of dullness, like the sun and the clouds.

One morning, early in a spring that came late, Shaytl and Hunter's mother, with Hunter tottering along beside them, stopping to play with dirt and fall over rocks, wandering off into the edges of the meadow and the mud of the bank, walked along the edge of the river, watching the birds skim the water, watching Hunter learn to walk, and talking between themselves.

"She is weak. Weaker every day."

"Shaytl."

"She is fading away from us. But she has little pain. A week ago, she was bad. It was good of the doctor to come all this way. I don't know if his pills helped, but it was good of him to come. She likes the doctor."

"She is happy."

Shaytl smiled. "She has always been happy. Ah, look at the little rabbit!"

And Hunter was scooped up from the edge of the river, and the mud knocked off of his shoes, and he was hoisted up onto his Uncle's shoulders, though his mother scolded.

"Shaytl, your back."

"Pah!" And he had ridden there a long time, or a short time, on the path between the river and the meadow, pulling his Uncle's white hair as the voices of his Uncle and his mother went back and forth, and the sun dazzled his eyes.

The next morning, the sun slanting down yellow through all the eastward windows of the house, coloring the meadows, Leona was dead. With no sound and no struggle, sometime in the night, she had taken the last small step. Hunter doesn't remember (but remembers being told of it, years later) Shaytl on his knees by the bed, crying in volume and without restraint, holding the twigs of her hand, his broad body bent double and his shoulders shaking.

The children were led in, two by two, to pay last respects.

"You were very proper and sweet, and you kissed her on the forehead and said good-bye."

"Did I cry?"

"You cried that night, at bedtime. You said it was because your Uncle was so sad."

"Uncle is never sad."

"He is often sad. But he is easy with his sorrow, and it does him no harm."

Sitting under the skin of the world, Hunter closes his eyes and breathes in the close stale air. The rat is a

messenger of death, he thinks. The crying of a black cat is a harbinger of death. He moves his tongue against his teeth. What was the last thing he ate? When was the last time he saw the sun? Marc's hair, in the sun, was like gold, or like straw, or like Ona's hair. He imagines the feeling of that hair on his face. Then he opens his eyes again.

How many pages are there, scattered on the ground? How many will fit into his bags? Are any of them too large? Will he have to fold some of them? Are they too brittle to fold, will some of them break, or shatter, or turn to dust?

Two Weeks and One Day After the Maiden

Objects that are the same shape have the same function. A pencil has the same function as a pen, so an apple has the same function as the sun. A shoe has the same function as a foot, so a door has the same function as a window. A man has the same function as the shadow of a man.

People have doubted this. The man who drove my carriage, in the days before drowning, would have doubted this. He would have sucked on his pipe, and looked at his shoes, and spat, and doubted. The woman who cleaned my clothes, in the days before drowning, would have doubted this. She would have tossed her head, and pursed her cheeks like the cheeks of babies or melons, and doubted. But I have never doubted.

The ice surrounding the body of the maiden is in the shape of a tube. Other things in the shapes of tubes have the same function as the ice surrounding the body of the maiden. The volume of air connecting my body to the moon has the shape of a tube. It therefore has the same function as the ice surrounding the body of the maiden. The volume of air connecting my body to the

moon has the same function as the ice surrounding the body of the maiden.

The rules of my captivity do not permit me to write in any more depth of this subject at this time. When last I woke, my room was empty but for the mattress on the floor, the frozen maiden in her tube of ice, and a large hexagonal box. I expect that it will prove to contain my food for the day.

On the bottom of this page is a drawing of (what must be) the top of a hexagonal wooden box. The artist has rendered it in excruciating detail, every knot in the wood drawn in a thousand careful strokes (a knot in a piece of wood is not just a knot; it is a million wood fibres, a hundred different colors and shades, a dozen different textures). The box has a thick wooden cover, and appears to be held on with strong nails. Around the heads of two of the nails, the artist (the writer, the author of whatever Hunter has been reading, dreaming, living in) has drawn blunt circular dents, places where the hammer hit out of true, bruises in the wood.

The lamp is terribly dim, or looks terribly dim to Hunter, as he puts this sheet, "Two Weeks and One Day After the Maiden", into the first paper bag. Somewhere in the center of the book, he knows (he could probably find it, if he opened the book, if he turned over the pages) is the page "One Week After the Maiden", the page that he read on another day, just before he sneezed, and winced, and fled.

He frowns. Some resolution (but had he any resolution?) is fading within him. Rapidly, he takes a half dozen pages, one after the other, from the floor, brushes off the dirt, and slips them into the bag, not reading them, not trying to see the images (a broken knife, winged figures dancing around a pit, three sliced lemons). He clears a

patch of floor with his hands (his fingers dirty, as the knees and cuffs of his pants are dirty, his shoes are dirty), and begins tossing clumps of dust and leaves onto it.

He picks out pages, brushes each one off over the bare place, and pushes them into the bag (words, a face, more words, words written in spirals that form the fronds of a tree). He picks up all the pages that lie in the piles around the space he has cleared; now there is a larger space on the floor where there are only leaves, and twigs, and shards of wood, and cobwebs and dirt: no pages. The space is circular. When he stops and looks up, looks around at the room, the space seems very small.

Objects that are the same shape have the same function, Hunter thinks. This pageless space on the floor is round, therefore it has the same function as the sun. He laughs (a short, barking laugh, or the laugh of a child, or a deep free laugh; the details are obscure), and listens to the echoes swallowed up by the dark of the corridor outside. He sits down and opens the book, somewhere near the center.

A drawing of three drops of liquid, reflecting the sun. Water? Blood? Wine? (Objects that have the same shape have the same function.) He turns the page.

Time Subsides, Two Terraces

The present is inconstant. The past is divided into two parts by an unscalable cliff. Observed phenomena include the motions of your hands, and the formation of sweat under your arms. Another table has appeared in the room while I slept. Sleep divides time into segments.

Spirit forms take part in the replication of the world. Time is relevant to spirit forms. For the material body, the length of a cycle is one hundred years. For spirit forms, the length of a cycle is different with each revolution. I have compiled a list of truths from the writing that appears on the wall when I sleep. I will

return to this place in spirit form after one revolution. I will return to this place in spirit form when this place is beneath the skin of the world. I will return to this place in spirit form when this place is abandoned, and no longer changes. I will return to this place in spirit form, and I will hold this page in my dirty hand.

Hunter stops reading, and pushes that page (the words surrounded by detailed drawings of vague abstract shapes, like faces or sand) quickly into the bag. The bag is getting full, beginning to bulge, the papers inside pushing out the sides. He opens another bag, pulls more scraps from the piles on the floor, averting his eyes from the pages (brushing them off with his fingers, without looking, a leaf or two, a layer of gauzy cobweb sliding into the bag). Under one clot of leaves is a bundle of papers, held together only by time and dirt, but all the same size and shape; he resists more than a glance at them, fills this bag up with them, opens a new one.

The cleared space, the space that has no pages (or no pages unless he has missed some, a small one among the leaves, a corner bearing just a word or two among the cobwebs; but is that word not part of whatever it is he is trying to separate from the other things in the room, in the darkness, in the flesh of the world?), that space is larger now, as the bags fill, but still small, still smaller than even the circle of light from the feeble glow of the lantern.

(Hunter will never remove every bit of figured paper from that room. Years after this, a pair of lovers, stumbling giggling into the space within the wall, finding their way to the stairs by a stronger light pulled from a coat pocket, will pass the odd gaps in the walls, find the room, its door open a crack, find one, two, a dozen scraps of paper, a monstrous eye devouring the sun, an elegant pentagon covered in leaves, words about transformation and pain, and love, and drowning. The child they will conceive in that room, on

that day, will grow to rule, and ruin, a kingdom, and to write poetry that defines a generation.)

Hunter stuffs papers into bags, breathing the stale air, hurried but still careful enough not to destroy much, not to crush or crumple many, working mechanically with his eyes almost shut, more leaves and dirt making their ways into the bags (particles rustling and rattling against the paper, high hissing little sounds as he works). His legs are sore, his hands dirty and somehow raw, the skin feeling tight on his fingers.

With a deep breath (that, reaching to the bottoms of his lungs, makes them feel dusty, congested, like coughing), and a shudder, Hunter stops and stands up. He goes to the table (through the clear space, the space with no pages) and stands looking down at the pool of light, at the book, at the bags (nearly a dozen now, full of unknowns, of dirt and paper and ink), at the pouch. He reaches into the pouch and takes out the cloth sack. He unfolds it and opens it, pulling the mouth open, the drawstring slithering through the hem. It looks large enough to hold the book.

The book is heavier, or lighter, than he remembers. It comes off of the table easily, slides into the sack almost eagerly, staying closed, held closed by its own mass weighing down the sides of the sack so that they pinch in. Hunter slides one, two, five filled paper bags in next to it, pulls the drawstring tight, and ties it off (Marc's fingers making knots in cords, Ona's fingers untying them). And the rest of the filled bags fit into his pouch (bags, papers, pencils, and that apple).

He puts the sack over his shoulder, the pouch (heavy now) under his arm, lifts the lantern, turns (stepping across more papers, papers he has not taken with him, words, bulging triangles, a skull with coins in its eyes), walks through the door (the past is divided into two parts by an unscalable cliff), strides down the hallway, toward the bottom on the stairs.

In the space at the bottom of the stairs, in a dim nimbus of light, stands Ona.

He stops, holding the lantern, holding the sack, the pouch under his arm. The circle of yellow light from the lamp just brushes the standing figure, the figure who cannot be Ona, slightly tingeing the white of her dress (is it a dress he has seen her wearing before?). She is looking up, at something somewhere over his right shoulder. She smiles.

It is the same smile, the same mouth, the same arms, the same body, the same girl. Her mouth moves, but she makes no sound. She raises her arms, as though taking something, or giving something. She takes a step back. The skirt of her dress presses against her legs (the same legs, the same knees, the same flesh). She turns, and walks toward the steps. And vanishes.

Hunter moves, suddenly, into the space below the steps, staring up into the dark, peering, listening, but there is no one, nothing. He looks down at the dirt, the scuffs of his own feet (are there any, this time?). But she is not there, she cannot have been there, she can never have been there, here, at all. He steps back, into the center of the space, his eyes closed.

Then he straightens, and with a half smile (how odd the world is, how lovely Ona's face, how strange and sweet the flavor of memory), and tightening his grip on the lantern, the sack, the pouch, he steps, almost bounding, onto the bottom step, up the first dozen steps of the long stair, rising quickly.

And then his foot slips, and he falls.

Making Tea

The day before her children were conceived, Karla arrived home tired, as always. She slipped her shoes off of her feet and pushed them under the side of the bed. Then she lay down on her back, on top of the sheets, and breathed, and counted to one hundred.

Home, the place she lived at that time, was two rooms, a bedroom (windows looking out over a side street, noisy in the mornings) and another room, with cabinets, a sink, a small stove, a small couch (windows looking out over an alley). In one of the cabinets was an old wood box in which she kept a quantity of black tea. After counting to one hundred, lying on her back on the bed, she rose, reached her arms to the ceiling to stretch her back, and went and opened the cabinet.

The tea was black and fragrant. Beside the stove, hanging on a brass hook in the wall, was a tea-ball, a tea-strainer, a metal sphere with cut-out places in the shape of a climbing vine (stem, leaves, curls), cut in half and hinged, with a sliding clasp to hold it closed. She took this in her fingers, pulled it up and off the hook (her knees tired, an ache in her back), opened it, and used it to scoop out a pinch of tea from the open box. Then she closed it and shut the clasp, closed the box and returned it to the cabinet, shut the cabinet door.

Sitting on one of the stove's two burners was a dented copper teapot. She lifted it with one hand, rocked it to feel

the water move, put it back down on the burner, and turned the dial on the front of the stove. Flame caught with a quiet rumble. She went back to the bedroom (tea-ball sitting filled by the stove, three empty cups in the cabinet by the tea box), and sat on the bed, resting her head in her hands (elbows on knees, looking at nothing), to wait for the water to boil.

Gas flowed through the old thin pipes of the stove (elegantly designed, carrying warmth and death faithfully for months, for years, without being tended to or thought of, like the veins of a heart, like the bones of a spine). It flowed into a ring of fire, taking flame and becoming flame, to light the bit of gas next behind it in the pipe, the heat of its taking flame rising against the curving bottom of the teapot, heating the air, heating the metal, heating the water. The pot pinged and snapped as the cool metal became warm, became hot. Karla closed her eyes, listened to the small familiar sounds, and breathed.

The sound of the pot changed as the water began to steam. Karla still sat, without moving. Something rattled noisily past in the street (a wagon loaded with barrels, ineptly secured, loose and crashing against each other with the jolting of the wheels over the irregular street). Karla was wearing a dark dress that reached the middle of her calves, a grey shift that tied below her breasts, a white ribbon behind her head holding back her hair. Water for tea should not be allowed to boil, or to boil long. The sound of the pot began to change again, and she opened her eyes and stood.

Eating and Drinking Stones

If I find that food has been provided for me, I eat. If I find that water has been provided for me, I drink. Sometimes I am provided both food and water, sometimes I am provided food but not water, sometimes I am provided water but not food. During my last time

> awake, I found in this room only a bottle of bitter wine, and fifteen small white stones wrapped in brown paper. In this time awake, I find at the foot of my bed a loaf of bread on a white plate, and a wide shallow bowl filled with warm and slightly scented water. The bowl is light blue, with patterns of singing birds. In one corner of the room there is a conical pile of crumbled chalk.
>
> There is water suspended in the air, in tiny drops too small to see. The light passes between and around them. There is food suspended in the air, in tiny pieces too small to see. The light passes between and around them. I have drowned. I am in exile. Why should I need more to eat than is provided to me by breathing the air? Why should I need more to drink than is provided to me by breathing the air?

The tea was hot and sweetly bitter. Karla took in a spoonful between her lips, breathed air over it (the air spilling down into her lungs hot and humid and fragrant), closed her eyes and breathed in through her nose (the steam from the cup touching the inside of her nose, among those tender hairs, touching the secret moist places inside her head, the heat a delicate desirable pain), swallowed and felt the tea flow into her throat and become lost within her body.

This was Klara, on that day, before the day the photographer saw her sitting by the river, before life (two tiny lives) began quickening in her body, standing in her room (the room with the stove and the sink, not the room with the bed) sipping her tea hot, thinking about supper. She was a woman, a mostly unremarkable woman, with two legs (ankles, calves, thighs), two feet (toes, instep, blood vessels under the skin), two arms two eyes two ears two nostrils two hands, one navel, one vulva one anus one nose one mouth one tongue. She is not waiting for anything in particular.

This was a man, on that day, at that time, a man walking down a street looking for a particular door, in a certain building. He was a mostly unremarkable man, with two legs (ankles, calves, thighs), two feet, two arms two eyes two ears two nostrils two hands, one navel, one penis one anus one nose one mouth one tongue. Blood vessels under the skin. Walking down a street looking for a particular door, in a certain building. A few minutes before, a poorly-loaded wagon, full of barrels, clattered past him on the street and veered around a corner.

He began whistling, just then, because he was happy, because he was, certainly, getting near a certain place, a place he wanted to be, a place he had been moving toward for a long time. The tune he whistled was a tune he had whistled often before, the tune to an old drinking song, and also the tune to a child's nursery rhyme, about a money and a river, or a pony and a garden. The sky, that day, was an ordinary mixture of clear and cloud.

What the Tempter Said

> The people who brought you up are not your real parents. Your real parents died when you were very young. Your ancestors were unique people. You are from a lineage that can trace its roots to the dawn of time. People of your family have special powers. People of your family have remarkable rights, as well as remarkable duties. Soon all this will become clear to you. Those who have behaved poorly toward you will be punished.
>
> People who are loyal to your ancestors are searching for you. They have been searching for you for a long time, and are now close to finding you. Servants and allies of your family will soon come into contact with you. You must prepare yourself. You must prepare yourself, and be vigilant. You must prepare yourself, and be vigilant, and keep yourself pure.

To keep yourself pure, you must not be fooled by those who claim to be your parents. To keep yourself pure, you must carefully guard your inner truths. To keep yourself pure, you must not be fooled.

Above all, you must not be fooled.

Klara heard the whistling, among the background of noise from the street (more people were abroad than that man, more people were walking than that man, but only he, in that street, was whistling). She opened her eyes. She took another sip of her tea. He found the door he was looking for, went in (these are the stairs, this is the bannister, yes, this is the way up), and now she heard feet on the stairs, and the whistling stopped.

A man was standing in front of a door, on the second floor of an apartment block on a certain street in a certain town (a large village, a small city, a cluster of houses and apartments, stores and warehouses and mills by a small river, where two roads crossed). He was not an unusual man; it was not an unusual door.

He knocked.

And Klara put down her cup, and went to the door and opened it (because these were simpler and more trusting times, perhaps, or because she was Klara, or perhaps because she had heard the whistling, and the feet on the stairs, and because she had made her tea). And then her eyes were closed again, because of the kiss.

The Shock of the New

Hunter fell backward down the hard metal stairs, without any control over his fall, with his arms splayed out grasping at and missing the railings, the sack dropping from his shoulder to land on one step, his pouch (stuffed and heavy) falling from under his arm and tumbling with him down the stairs, the lantern flying over the railing into the darkness and breaking loudly somewhere below and going out, his head hitting the rail or a stair or the wall then his neck bent into an impossible position for a moment as his body tumbled over (shooting pain through his skull, perhaps an instant unconscious, in the place of sleep and death), a wrenching in his left knee. A final roll, off the bottom step onto the dirt ground, and then peace, silence, stillness.

Lying there now, in whatever position the fall has put his body, not yet back to imposing his will even on the part of the world he identifies with himself, he is aware at first only of sound. Again the sound of water teases the outer edge of his hearing, just too quiet to be sure of. Some noise from the street far above, too muffled by the ground and the air to retain any identity, only a low rumble left, reminds him of the world. Slowly, he sits up. It is very dark.

One hand falls onto his pouch, which has ended its fall just next to his body. He feels around with the other hand (feeling in the dirt, but both hands are already dirty, and one is torn, and there is a gash on his head that oozes dark red

blood), but the sack is not in reach, and the lantern is gone. As he fell his eyes were full of dazzle; now they are full of night, darkness as dark as he can remember. He sits and waits for the light, for his eyes to understand and decipher this blackness. He listens to himself breathing.

After some time, he thinks he can see a glow, a memory of the sun, from far above. He holds up his hand, and believes he can see the fingers. That line, there, must be the railing of the stair. He pulls himself to his feet, then cries out, falls back to the floor, clutching his left leg (his eyes closed tight, so tight they are again full of dazzle, of lightning, of clouds of sparks).

When the pain subsides, he stands again, gingerly, keeping his weight off that foot. He puts out his hand (that was indeed the rail; the metal is cold and familiar on his palm). He bends (a bruise on his back), feels around, picks up the pouch. He turns himself, hobbling, toward the stairs; the muscles of his left leg tense, and pain nips him. He takes a deep breath.

With his hand tight around the rail (the pouch tight under his other arm) he hops, levers, lifts, himself up onto the first step, his right leg bearing his weight. His left knee twinges sharply, and he gasps. But he does not fall.

He pulls himself up onto the second step, the third. He is breathing hard, can hear his pulse in his ears. He stops, weight against the railing, to rest. He is, suddenly, very hungry.

He closes his eyes, and is heartened to find that he can see the difference, that the insides of his eyelids are darker (darker still) than the space in the skin of the earth where he stands; that the space is lighter, to his eyes, than utter darkness. Another deep breath, another two, three, four steps. How many steps are in this stairway? He has never counted. Coming down it has always been, taken, given, a timeless time (his heartbeat and his step the rhythm of the earth). How lucky they are, he thinks, on the surface, to

have working legs, light for their eyes. (For the material body, the length of a cycle is one hundred years.)

Another breath, another step, two steps, another rest. His right ankle already aches (a bruise on his back, a bruise on his cheek, the blood slowly seeping into his hair, a throbbing in his left knee). And again. And again. (How graceful she was, raising her arms with her face upturned.)

Another breath in the darkness, he pulls himself up toward the next step, and his left foot strikes the sack (the book, unbound pages between heavy covers, the bags of loose pages and leaves and dirt, the drawstring, the tube of the hem). Fire shoots up his leg, he crumples, but he does not (does not does not) lose his grip on the railing, or even the pouch.

So now he is half-crouching on the stairway, his right knee on the sack. And slowly he puts the pouch down on the step below. And slowly he gropes for the sack, finds where it is and how it lies, finds the opening of the sack, pushes it wider with the fingers of his free hand. And slowly he shifts his weight, so he is sitting on the edge of a step, stable, and can take his other hand from the rail. He picks up the pouch and pushes it into the sack, sliding the material up around it, forcing it to fit. He draws the drawstring, puts the sack over his shoulder (it bumps the bruise on his back, and he winces, but the pain is a small increment and really barely noticeable). Stands.

Another rest, another deep breath, another step, two steps, four steps, a rest. Is the light brighter? Are those lines the rods he drew on some former day?

Once more, the light certainly closer now, his left knee hits the railing or the wall, and he collapses, but he does not, does not, let go of the railing, and does not fall. So finally, another breath another step another breath another step, he comes to the top, in that narrow space in the wall of a building, and he lies on the flat ground there, the sack under his body, and closes his eyes. Ona steps and turns

lightly, dancing, the sun on her hair, and the scent of her body fills his throat.

He opens his eyes, shivering on the filthy ground. The light from the hole (outside it is afternoon, clouds gathering, muted sun) seems impossibly bright, and he squints. He reaches up for the top end of the metal rail (so hungry), and pulls himself to his feet, to his single foot, and balances there, the drawstring of the sack in his free hand. He touches his left foot to the ground, presses lightly, gasps at the pain, although the pain is smaller now, less all-encompassing, coming not from every fiber of the leg but only (only) from the knee, as though it were on fire, or broken, or broken and on fire at once. He hobbles forward on his right foot, his hand on the wall for support.

So, eventually, a battered dirty young man comes slowly out from under an archway in the city, with a cloth sack on his back, and leans against the wall. He looks about him, the street nearly deserted, its aspect desolate in the fading light, for a long moment, then turns, limping along close to the wall (his hand, dirty and the skin torn, always on the wall, to keep the weight off of his left leg), making slow progress down the block (the sack bumping against his back). Near the corner he stops, bends over, sinks to the ground. There are some sticks there, on the sidewalk, some broken boards, but they are short, and splintered, and weak.

There is no way to get from here to the college without crossing a street, several streets. There is no way to cross a street using only one leg. (When he was young, he and Marc and Ona had raced each other, hopping on one foot, from the bottom of the porch steps to the edge of the meadow. They had, then, infinite energy. For spirit forms, the length of a cycle is different with each revolution.) Will someone, passing by, lend him a cane, find him a walking stick? He turns his eyes down to the pavement.

Eventually (the light dimming, the wind cold, Hunter more hungry than he can remember) someone shouts his

name, and two feet (two feet, two useful legs) come running across the street and stand in front of him. It is Geoff the Monk, in a brown quilted coat and a dark broad-brimmed hat (flapping like a distressed bird), exclaiming over him and helping him to his feet (one foot, one useful leg).

"Good God, I didn't think it could be you. What's happened?"

"I was, in a building. I fell."

"And half killed yourself! Here, give me that."

And they went across the city, the sack over the Monk's shoulder, Hunter's arm across the Monk's back, an awkward halting creature with two heads and three legs (and one vestigial appendage dangling cumberously in the midst of it all), burdened with burdens known and unknown, making for shelter before the rain, reaching the college as darkness closed in, reaching Hunter's rooms (Courant at his desk, looking around and only raising an eyebrow as the Monk helped Hunter through the door, to limp to his bed and fall exhausted atop the tangle of sheets) just before the rain started, a fine chill mist of rain, quickly coating the street, the leaves of the trees, the somber roofs, with fine cold water.

"What is it that the cat has dragged in this fine evening?"

Questions for Chapters Fourteen, Fifteen, and Sixteen

In these chapters, the various worlds of the story (Hunter's past, his present, Karla's past, and the writings from the underground room) follow each other in a complex sequence. Make a diagram illustrating the pattern of this sequence, and indicate the position of the formal chapter breaks. What can you say about the pattern of intermingling?

The chapters also contain passages in different grammatical tenses. Extend your diagram to show where changes in tense occur. How is the tense pattern similar to the story pattern? How is it different?

List two things that Hunter gains in Chapter Fourteen, and two things that he loses.

Why does Klara count to one hundred in Chapter Fifteen? What might this tell us about her?

Read the last few sentences of each chapter again. How is the ending of Chapter Fourteen similar to the ending of Chapter Fifteen? How is it different? Who do you think speaks the last sentence of Chapter Sixteen? Why?

Hunter sees Ona, or has a vision of her, in Chapter Fourteen, and again briefly in Chapter Sixteen. Is she actually present in either case? What is the best explanation for what Hunter sees, or seems to see, in each instance?

List three ways that Chapter Fifteen relates to the rest of the story we have heard so far.

Telegrams

Hunter struggles out of his clothes (not very bloody, not terribly torn, not utterly filthy), hobbles out to the washroom and pours water over himself (cold, stinging the gash on his head and his torn hand and his bruised back), hobbles back and collapses again. Courant or the Monk have called for the doctor, who comes and pokes at Hunter's bruises, and his blue and swollen leg, and shakes his head and wraps the knee in a bandage (not broken, only wrenched, only stay off of it for a week, two weeks, until it heals) and leaves him a specific for the pain and gauze for his hand. Keep it clean, only keep it clean. Of his lightheadedness, his feeling that the world is hollow and spinning, that the wall is impossibly far off, Hunter says nothing.

When the doctor is gone, Hunter takes the cloth sack from the floor where he let it fall coming in, opens the mouth of the sack, takes out the pouch (looking at, touching, nothing else inside), opens the pouch and digs for the apple (looking at, touching, nothing else inside), wipes it on a clean sock (what has happened to the neat rows of clothes in his drawers, the neatly sequestered laundry in the corner?) and eats it, in huge bites.

"I need to send a telegram," he says to Courant, around the apple. Courant snorts.

"I need to memorize Catullus. And you owe me money."

"If you will send what I give you," tearing a scrap of paper from some old drawing (the leg of a chair, the sun on a cup, a piece of bread) and finding a pencil, scrawling words, "and if you will send someone to tell Gleel that I am unwell and cannot work" (urgently gathering all the needful things in his head before he is overwhelmed by the surf), "then, well then I will borrow more money from you, so that when I finally pay you back you will be all the richer."

Courant smiles at this, and takes the paper from Hunter's hand.

"I suppose I can read this scrawl. You lie there dead and I will do your errands."

Hunter lies back on the thin mattress (his back aches, and his knee twinges again from the movement). Eyes closed (the sound of Courant pulling on his jacket, opening the door, closing the door, walking down the creaking hallway and fading away), he thinks of the telegram, of the telegraph office in the old wooden building across the next courtyard, between the offices of the bursar and the steward, the clicking relays and the shuffle of papers.

The old house (with the porch, by the meadows by the river, where his mother and father still live on the second storey, those children scattered to the winds, or off to second storeys of their own, or small houses along the valley) has no telephone. His words, his telegram that Courant will send, will go through the long wires, out of the college and out of the city, across miles of land (towns, fields, hills, what pushes the message along, what keeps it moving through the wires?), eventually to the village (wires hurtling down to the telegraph set in the back room of the post office, a line of unwashed coffee cups on the counter beside it, a stack of mail, dust on the tops of the pigeon holes).

The telegram, his words, will go to old Mr. Trask, or to young Mr. Trask his son, not as young any more (is old Mr. Trask still alive, still working?), be put down on paper, put

in the bag for Bobby Cramm (or is he married now and off to town, is one of the boys from the meadow carrying the bag, working for the government, wearing the shiny button on his belt?). And Bobby Cramm will take it on his bicycle out over the hill, into the valley, down the road that runs in sight of the river. To the house.

Why does he not know who carries the telegrams now? Why does he not know if old Mr. Trask is still at the post office, still smoking his pipe, still alive? Why, in three years and seven months, has he been back (been home) so seldom? Why has he slept so long?

When Bobby Cramm (or whoever carries the telegrams now) comes to the house, rings the bell on his bicycle coming up the lane from the road, gravel under his wheels, people will come onto the porch, find out who the message is for, go and get his mother, or his Uncle, or both (both of them on the porch, squinting at the printed paper in the bright light, wondering, with the messenger waiting by his bicycle for a reply). His Uncle will grumble about the pennies a reply will cost (how white is his hair now?), his mother will smile, and write on the form in her small precise hand. But how long will it take? Will the messenger already have made his rounds today, gone home? Will they send him out again for Hunter's words? (Should he have told Courant to pay extra, for the "urgent" stamp?)

Hunter lies back on the pillow and falls asleep. His knee throbs and his back is stiffening, he is still hungry (what is an apple?), but he falls asleep, and dreams of pain and impossible shapes, a hexagonal box, tubes connecting to the moon. Courant goes, with some dispatch, to the telegraph office (the rain still a fine mist drifting in the air), fills out the form (name and address of recipient, message, special handling), pays the counter girl (plump lips, a soft pink chin), and goes out. It occurs to him to find a late vendor and buy a packet of meat.

The smell of the food wakes Hunter, slowly. When he opens his eyes he sees Courant's back (at the desk again, head down over Catullus), and a steaming meat bun on the chair by the bed. He eats it in large slow bites, his eyes closed (the air flowing hot and pungent into his lungs across the food in his mouth).

"You are an angel."

Courant snorts. Hunter's words travel the wires, clatter into the relays, into the telegraph set beside the coffee cups. Bobby Cramm (it is still Bobby Cramm, still hoping for a position in town, an income, to ask the dark-haired girl with the laughing eyes for her hand, some night under a full moon), has gone home for the night. The words will sit until morning, printed on the form in the proper pigeon hole, waiting to be delivered to the house above the meadow.

"ALL FINE," the words say, "WHERE IS ONA?"

The Quiet Man

The man keeping Abram awake now, hands slapping his cheeks, another pot of water (cold, rusty water) poured over his head, has broad shoulders and a large bulbous nose. He is not cruel, not overtly cruel, affable really. He seems entirely ready to believe that Abram knows nothing more than the nothing he has already told, nothing about strategy, about troop movements, about lines of supply.

"We do this to everyone. Means nothing. You have nothing to tell me, so tell me nothing. Just you will not sleep for awhile."

Abram thinks the man may have said this before, or something like this. It is difficult to think, the twitching in his legs is a constant distraction, the chafing of his wrists tied behind the chair, where he still holds them sometimes, although they untied him hours ago. He swings his arms and almost topples over. Voices sing hymns through the walls, and out of the corner of his eye a vibrant shape rushes toward him and he flinches. The man laughs good-naturedly, as though he had told a joke.

Being a student had kept Abram out of the army, out of the war, until comparatively late, when the battle lines had hardened, the trenches already been dug. When he was finally called up, trained quickly in an empty warehouse by the train station, he was sent off with twenty other raw boys and one officer (an officer with a thick shock of white hair, a row of military decorations on the breast of his uniform

jacket, a scar on his forehead and a heavy limp), to guard a supply caravan crossing what should have been safe ground.

They were set upon at night, against all expectation. Abram's watch had ended an hour before, and he was curled in his sleeping roll (still not used to sleeping in a sack, sleeping in a strange place, sleeping with a rifle by his side, among strangers), and did not even wake up until he was already a prisoner. They took him out, bound, past the broken wheels and the bodies of the dead, and he vomited up the stale camp supper (leaning over a muddy rut, ashamed to be weak with his body untouched, never having raised his rifle in anger). They blindfolded him and tossed him into the back of a cart, and the next night, the next nights, he spent in a dirty shed, sleeping on rags on a dirt floor, other prisoners (more strangers, all quiet, spent) lined up beside him.

The building where the prisoners are questioned is cramped and dark. It sits between the place where they sleep (another abandoned warehouse; this war, Abram thinks, is between abandoned warehouses) and a low square building that was perhaps an office. The unit that captured them seems to be well settled-in here. Abram wonders how far behind the lines they are. Sometimes, far off, he thinks he hears bombs or gunshots, deep coughs in the earth muffled by distance, sharp cracks that could be trees breaking in a storm. Planes go by overhead.

On the first day of his questioning (prisoners taken one by one away, without a word, none returned), he hears singing coming through the walls, a shout of harmony, strong rhythms.

"What is that?"

"What?"

"That singing."

"What singing? You are going mad already."

"You must hear it."

"Neh." This was before the beating began, when he was simply bound to the chair and asked the questions over and over, encouraged to talk, his questioner bored and without expectation of success.

"Listen, I know you can hear it."

"Neh, of course. You are not quite mad yet," and here his questioner, not the large-nosed affable man, but a thin twig of an officer, narrow lips and pale eyes, almost smiled, "in the building next door is our church, eh? Our sanctuary. You hear the hymns."

And now, how many hours or days later, in the questioning room between the church and the warehouse, Abram sits on the chair, forgetting whether or not he is bound, the muscles of his eyelids twitching in spasms (if he closes his eyes, he knows the slap will come, or the water, or a fist to his ribs).

"We do this to everyone. Means nothing."

Abram wonders if his army also does this to everyone. If it is only this unit of the enemy that routinely tortures prisoners, or if it is a general policy, a requirement, a universal rule of war. The big man swipes his hand across the back of Abram's neck, casually, jerking his head up.

"Hello!" he shouts, "Stay awake! If you tell me something, I can write it down on the pad here, and then you can sleep."

Abram knows nothing to tell him, knows not even enough to tell a useful lie. What shape are the truths, the secrets, that they want him to reveal? What does information from a prisoner sound like? Abram has no special loyalty, has no feel for what this war is about, has no resistance whatever, none, to this or any other sort of torture. This much he has learned about himself. His officers knew of it already, his worthlessness, must have seen it in his eyes, and so he has no secrets to give up.

"We have many guns. I saw boxes full of guns." He had tried to betray himself even before they started keeping him

awake, after only a beating or two. But they had just laughed at him.

Abram was married just a month, five weeks, before he was called into the army. Sarah was not yet with child, he was only a student, and that was no longer an excuse. He tries to recall (sitting in the chair, his clothes wet, shivering from the cold and the jerking of his muscles) her face, Sarah's, at the wedding, the shy kiss when they were made man and wife. They had been so happy, even with the war shaking the ground with its feet (Abram's feet quiver, one toe broken). He sees her standing before him, with a cap on her head, and she is singing, singing like an angel, and around her shoulders is a cape of feathers. Then the big man pours more water over his head, and he is awake again, but the singing goes on.

"I was in the army only two weeks. You are wasting your time on me."

The man's voice is thick and rough, with a heavy accent. "Time, we have. You talk, perhaps it will tell us something."

But they have said this before, and Abram has talked, talked in long unconscious bursts, about the supply train (but they have captured that, they know everything about it), the names of his officers (those he could remember, those he made up), the number of his unit (which they have also captured, and know everything about), how to clean and load his rifle, how to march in parade, the meanings of the bugle calls. Still they beat him, still they will not let him sleep.

There is a man here, now, who will not meet his eyes, who asks if he would like water to drink (he would, his lips are cracked, he has learned that having water dumped over your head does not keep your lips from drying), if he would like a warm bun. Tears leak from his eyes at the taste of the water in his throat, and he chokes on the bun, but swallows it down. The man is an angel, and he tells the man

everything again, about the train and the officers and the crates of guns, and about Sarah and the wedding and his classes at school and how he vomited into the mud.

The man is sympathetic, understanding (an ordinary man, slight, brown hair, straight nose), but Abram must understand that he cannot sleep unless he tells everything he knows. Perhaps something he heard the officers say? Abram thanks him, is eternally grateful, recalls hearing the officers speak of a big plan, a major advance, an attack scheduled for midnight, thousands of troops, elephants, tigers, coming up the road from Africa (his arms are twitching now, the large muscles pulsing like gnats). The man stands (his face no longer so warm?) and shakes his head, and leaves the room.

Left alone, Abram slumps to the ground, his eyes close, and he is instantly asleep. He sleeps as they carry him away, and toss him in with the others. He groans in his sleep when they (the other prisoners in this smaller and darker place, the ones that were tortured before him and haven't yet been taken away to some further place in the labyrinth of the war) lift his head and put a pile of rags under it, straighten his body on the ground and cover him with something gritty.

Later he awakens enough to eat a little and drink a little. They tell him their names (some he knows from the floor of the warehouse, some are from his unit, some are strangers), he tells them his. Then a guard comes, picks out a dozen, Abram among them, and pulls them roughly out into the compound. They are loaded into another cart (it is sunset, and beginning to rain), and driven off again. In the jolting cart (his throat is sore, his lip bleeding again, his toe a throbbing pain) sleep overcomes, envelopes, him again.

The cart stops, and they are pulled out, to stand facing a lighted place, fences of barbed wire curling away in all directions, a gate. "Prisoner exchange," says a guard. "Line up, walk through there. Slowly. You run, we shoot you."

They stagger, twelve of them in a ragged line, out between the fences and the wires, through the gate, across a barren field. Bright lights shine from both sides into the center of the field. From the other side a dozen other men are trudging, in the remains of enemy uniforms (are they better fed, less worn out, healthier?). The lines pass each other. Abram's eyes meet for an instant the eyes of a man coming the other way, and in the middle of nothing they smile at each other.

Hunter thinks of Abram, his father, as a quiet man, not courageous. His father tells few stories, and none are about the war. The little toe on his right foot is an odd twisted stump. Sometimes he wakes in the night, and Hunter's mother holds him, and her voice is soft.

Memory as a Vessel

The world changes when I sleep. I notice these changes because my memory tells me what the world was like before. Where there was a table before, now there is a chair. Where there was a well, now there is a mountain. Where there was a nation of weasels, now there is a song of victory.

Memory may be inscribed on tablets. When we are young, we inscribe our memories on our bones. Men whose bones are filled up with memories are called governors. Women whose bones are filled up with memories are called angels. When we are older, we inscribe our memories on the inside surfaces of our eyes.

Night

There is no reply to Hunter's telegram that evening. He dozes and wakes. People come in and out, talking to Courant, asking after Hunter's health (he is a minor celebrity now, returning from the city with his wounds, found lying in an alley, having been beaten and robbed, or hit by a cart, or a dozen other rumors). Someone brings a crutch for him, and he gives thanks sleepily. Courant goes out somewhere, and Hunter, finally, sits up and opens his pouch again.

He takes out the filled bags that are in it and puts them on his lap on the bed. He takes out the few remaining empty bags, considers them for a moment, tosses them onto his desk (one slides off to the floor). Takes out a few drawings of his own and adds them to a sheaf under the bed. Takes out the postcard and the picture of it, takes out the blank papers and the pencils, and then puts them all back in again.

He reaches down and opens the mouth of the sack. Inside, the paper bags have been bent and slightly crumpled. The book, still and heavy, lies undamaged at the bottom. He takes out the paper bags and puts them on his lap with the others, stacks them up into stacks, presses them with his hands.

He selects one bag (at random, at whim), sets it aside, and puts the others one by one, efficiently, into the cloth sack, on top of the book. They just fit, the ones that he

brought out of the underground in the sack, and the ones that he brought out in the pouch. He tightens the drawstring, and pushes the sack under the bed.

He picks up the one paper bag in his lap and looks at it (looks at it as though it were a single thing, not a container full of other things, of paper scraps and ink, words and drawings, dirt and cobwebs and the ends of leaves). He yawns. He feels perfectly at home in the bed, secure, warm. Still hungry, but with a hunger that pleasantly anticipates the next meal. His knee aches, but aches comfortably in the doctor's dressing.

He puts the bag down again on his lap, reaches into it with two fingers, draws out a sheet of paper, and reads "Memory as a Vessel". At the bottom of the page, under the words, is a picture that matches the words (Hunter smiles at it): three graceful pots (or vessels), with liquid pouring between them (in defiance of gravity), like the top of a fountain, or a factory in a dream, and a pair of hands reaching, and a bone. He puts the page down on his lap, closes his eyes, and falls back into a doze.

He wakes up with Geoff the Monk sitting in a chair beside the bed, frowning at the paper in his lap. (The world changes while I sleep.)

"Sorry if I woke you."

"I'm sleeping too much anyway." His hands go to the paper in his lap; he finds he wants to hide it, to slip it (innocently, accidentally, unnoticeably) away from Geoff's eyes (Geoff in a dark shirt, dark pants, a dark hooded cloak with the hood thrown artfully back).

"Thought I'd just look in on the invalid. But what do you have there? New masterpiece?"

"Not mine, not my work. Just something I, I found."

"Heh." Is he looking at the bag, folded among the sheets in Hunter's lap? "Found where?"

"Ah, just, in the street."

"In the street?" Geoff takes it in his hand and holds it in the light. Hunter is too flustered (why does he care if Geoff touches it? why doesn't he tell the story?) to prevent him.

"Well, no, in a building. Just in a pile of trash. Blowing around."

"Fascinating stuff. Is there more?"

"Uh, more..."

"Could I borrow this?"

"I'd like to keep it," regaining himself, Hunter's fingers take it back, turn it toward his face (when we are young, we inscribe our memories on our bones).

"Well, sure. Maybe I could, well." And suddenly the Monk is standing, waving his hands vaguely about, bidding him a cordial (if somewhat confused, oddly diffident) good night, and is gone. Hunter shakes his head.

He puts Memory as a Vessel to one side (if his friend returns, why should he not offer it to him, apologize, at least lend it to him, at least still have it here, out, and not draw attention to the bag, the bags, the sack, the book). The next paper in the bag is covered with a city of tiny buildings, interspersed with globular shapes like maggots, or sausages. The next is covered with words, smaller than ever, covering the scrap of paper (torn in a rough trapezoid from some larger piece) except for a clear triangular space in the center, in which there is a single dot. This one has no title.

> I am a prisoner in a castle. The castle sits atop a high mountain. Because of its height, the castle is often surrounded by clouds, and the ground around the castle is always snow-covered. There are three mirrors in the castle, in which I may look at myself. I may also look at my face in pools of water. Aside from myself, there are three people of whose presence in the castle I am certain. One is a man, one is a woman, and one is a small child. Birds the color of rubies build nests in the

towers of the castle. In the night, the floors of the castle shake as though from enormous footsteps.

The man, the woman, and the child with whom I share the castle do not speak my language, and I do not speak theirs. My attempts to communicate with them with gestures seem to frighten them. My attempts to speak to them directly, as by pointing at myself and saying my name, seem to upset them. They are most content when I keep myself at a distance. Twice a day, the man or the woman leaves a basket of food in my room. They do not look at me when they do this, if I am present.

The castle is made of stone, and seems very ancient. When the air is clear, the sky above the castle is bright with stars. When the ground is not hidden by clouds or mists, and it is daytime, it is possible to see for a great distance from the towers of the castle. To the north of the castle lies a range of mountains. These mountains are rocky and snow-capped, like the mountain on which the castle sits. To the south of the castle is a broad plain, covered with trees. On some nights when the air is clean, a dim light can be seen some distance out on the plain.

In the center of the castle is a courtyard. In this court-yard there is a well. The well is wide and shallow. There is water at the bottom of the well. The water is not far below the ground, but it is not near enough that I can see my face in it. In the well live innumerable small snails. When the weather is damp, these snails come out of the well. On mornings that are both damp and warm, the walls of the courtyard are full of snails. The snails move slowly along the walls, leaving moist trails behind them. Sometimes the trails are in the form of words. Sometimes the trails are in the form of pictures. Sometimes the pictures are pictures of hands,

or mountains, or rows of women standing by a river. I do not eat the snails.

Hunter puts this scrap back into the bag, with the city of buildings and sausages, with the other scraps and pages that he has not yet seen. He is very tired, although he has slept. He opens the sack and puts the bag into it, then he pulls the drawstring tight, and knots it. He puts the sack on the floor and lies back, Memory as a Vessel still in his lap. Then he frowns, and sits up, and reaching down he pushes the sack out of sight under the bed, and piles some of his own drawings (the back of his own hand, a lamp, two sticks floating in a pool of water) in front of the sack, so it cannot be seen by anyone standing in the room. Then he lies back again. Outside it is quiet.

Hunter dreams of snails, and dreams that he is a prisoner. He dreams that he is very sleepy, dreams that he lies down on the roof of a building atop a high mountain, and dreams that he falls asleep. Asleep, dreaming that he is asleep, Hunter's breath is deep and quiet. Later, Courant comes in and turns off the lamps, and gets into his own bed. Outside the sky clears and the moon comes out. Moonlight flows in through the window and across the sleepers. A bird calls.

In the house by the meadow, the house with the porch, Hunter's mother and father, Sarah and Abram, are asleep. Hunter's Uncle Shaytl is also asleep, dreaming of Leona and the sound of airplanes. Nocturnal animals are about their business among the grasses of the meadow, feeding and hunting and fleeing. In another city, Ona lies in her bed, suddenly awake, looking up at the moon.

A fever swept through the town just before Klara's babies began to walk, just after they had weaned themselves from her milk (the sweet tug of those mouths on her breasts filling her body with warmth). She feared for

them, but this was a fever that fed on adults, and it was Klara herself that it struck.

"Am I going to die?"

"The fever has abated. Stay in bed, drink all the water you can stand."

"Why is my breath so short?"

"The fever lodges in the lungs."

"Will they heal?"

"Rest."

Two nights later, her babies plump and graceful, fussing in their slatted bed, the fever returned, and Klara died. The doctor, come to sign the death form, stood over her bed. Her eyes were closed, her face was pale, the skin translucent, untenanted. On the low table beside the bed sat a stack of postcards, a gift from the photographer, come in the mail a month ago. She was a lovely woman, thinks the doctor.

That year, with the deaths of so many parents, the town was awash in severed babies. Klara's were well, if casually, cared for, two babies in a flood of babies, of children, of tears and trouble. Later there was a fire, and rain, and haste, and somewhere they were separated, and somewhere the last person who knew forgot that they were brother and sister.

Replies

In the morning Hunter wakes very early, swings his legs over the side of the bed (his knee stiff and sore), sits up, rolls his shoulders up to his ears and back (those muscles working, the bruise on his back a warm ache). He tries the crutch, gingerly tries his left foot on the floor; the leg is weak and the knee very tender. But touching his foot to the floor is no longer a tearing agony.

With the crutch, he hobbles into the corridor, to the bathroom, out to the courtyard to break his fast with another hot bun. The day is clear and cold, the sun just rising over the roofs. No reply yet to his telegram.

In the post office at the end of the wires, where the telegraph set lies beside the coffee cups, Bobby Cramm yawns and stretches, and takes the paper with Hunter's words from the pigeon hole.

Back in his room, Hunter sits at his desk (tensing the muscles of his knee to feel and gauge the tug of pain, putting his fingers in his hair to feel the lump on his head, tender but no longer bleeding). He turns his hands palm up on the desk and looks at them, at the scratches and marks that cross his life lines at unwonted angles, at the torn place, still red and raw, on the broad pad below his right thumb. He takes paper and pencil, and begins to draw.

In the house by the meadow, on the second storey, Shaytl sits by the window, his pipe unlit in his hand. He has been awake for an hour. He feels, as he sometimes feels, a

sense of oppression, of sourceless discontent, as though the world were a reproach to him. He sighs, alone in his room, looking out at the relentless blue of the sky and the green of the trees. He scratches his stomach and shakes his head.

In half an hour, he will hear the bell of Bobby Cramm's bicycle (his hearing has stayed sharp into his old age, every creak of the old house sharp in his ears). Going down to the porch, reading Hunter's telegram along with Sarah, this inexplicable heaviness will lift from him, for no more reason than it came. When they have sent the cyclist off with a reply (greetings, love, Ona's last known address), he will take bread and cheese and his black and red coat, and stride off (a thumping rolling stride) down the path along the river, his old arms swinging, no destination in mind, no thought in his head, only the color of the light and the taste of the air.

"She is in Pullen."

"You should write her."

The reply has come, Hunter's mother to Bobby Cramm to young Mr. Trask at the post office, through the sending set (hot coffee fresh in the morning, the cups still unwashed) through the wires, back over the hills and fields, to the college, to a telegraph boy, and up to Hunter's room. Greetings, love, an address. Hunter (on the bed, his leg up) and Courant (and his desk) and Geoff the Monk and Gretl Tayne (in the doorway, claiming that they have somewhere else to be, that they are about to leave) pass the reply from hand to hand.

"I will take the train," Hunter says, suddenly knowing that he will in fact take the train, that Pullen is not all that far away (although in fact it is, in the other corner of the country, more than a day away).

"Or you could simply walk," says the Monk, eyeing Hunter's leg, the knee still bandaged, the crutch in the corner by his bed.

Gretl shakes her head (her hair long and black as jet, worn free, cascading down the column of her figure in a calculated torrent). "You are all entirely mad."

Three hours later, Hunter is in the common compartment of the train, and it is moving out of the station. He has his leg up on the seat beside him, the cloth sack (the book, the bags, the words and drawings, the flaming horses) and a bulging carpetbag (clothes, paper, pencils, bread, two apples) underneath. The paper with Ona's address, a boarding house in Pullen, is in his pocket. The line is a modern one, the engines large and smooth diesel-electric, pulling away from the platform with a humming roar. Behind him in the station, Gretl and Geoff turn away back toward the college. Folded carefully in Geoff's pocket is the page called "Memory as a Vessel". Hunter is pleased with himself for having left it.

Packing, sending to the station to find the next train, the trip across the city with his crutch and his friends, all this has gone by in a moment, and now he is settled, motionless in motion, looking out the car's sparkling window at the engine yards and warehouses sliding by, faster every moment, and he is quite content.

There is a table before him, between his seat and the empty seat opposite. Once the train is moving, he says to himself, tightening and relaxing his leg to relieve the ache and stiffness, he will open the sack, get out the book, and by the light through the windows he will read it. But for now, for the time being, he will sit looking out the window and let his mind wander.

The world, he remembers Ona saying, is a library. They had been, the three of them, lounging by the river some rainy holiday afternoon, watching the sun trying to break through the clouds, and talking nonsense. Every tree a book, Marc had agreed, every person a bookcase tall as a house. And Hunter had told them a story, a story that his

mother had told him just a few days earlier. This was not long before Hunter had left for the city, and gone to sleep.

There were once, the story said, three princes, the sons of a great king. Although they were triplets, born on the same day, they were each very different. One was tall and strong, with flowing hair and the eyes of every woman young and old upon him as he walked (a flashing smile, arms like the limbs of a great tree). One was quick and limber, with a proud high forehead and a mind as bright as the sun; he sat with the greatest scholars when he could barely walk, and astounded them with his knowledge. The third was small and quiet, hardly noticeable in the shadow of his brothers, but the one that children loved the most, and the one you would go to with troubles.

It came to pass that in the year these three remarkable princes came of age, the press of events in the world rushed against the king their father like storm clouds, and he was overthrown, and his family and followers scattered to the four winds. On the edge of a barren field one night, camped under ragged tents that had once been grand, the king called his boys to him, and told them their fates.

The king revealed to the boys that their mother (whom they had never known, growing up mothered by a family of queens and a castle full of doting noblewomen and servants) had been a Goddess, an avatar of Athena the Wise, who had come to the king in the great temple in the capital city, and loved him, and borne him sons. And after the sons were weaned from her breasts she had left them, gone back to the hills of the Gods, and behind her she had left three books, and told the king their purpose.

Now the king brought out the three books, from a chest he had taken with him fleeing from his palace, and he gave one to each of his sons, in the ragged tent by the barren field. The books were all three the same: richly bound in soft leather, filled with the finest paper, and every page blank.

"You are each to go out into the world," the king said to his sons, "and in your book you are to write everything that you find of immortal wisdom. When you come to the golden city of the Gods, you will each present the book to your mother the Goddess, and it will determine your legacy." And the three boys, now men, took their books and left their father that very night, going off into the world through the darkness.

The first son, the strong one, rode to a far country, and joined the army there as the lowest recruit. He patrolled haunted swamps, guarded high passes choked with snow, drove monsters away from the fields of the farmers. His strength and his skill won him acclaim, and honor, and at the height of his manhood he was made a general of the army, with thousands of men under his command. In his book, he recorded all that he heard of martial history, of the daring of kings, of the laws of war and strategy. Many women admired him, and he fathered a score of children.

One day, years later, when his hair was streaked with white but his limbs still strong, he heard a traveler's tale of a golden city, hidden in the snows of a mountain far to the west. He gathered his most loyal retainers around him, begged the king he served for leave to go in search of his fate, and set off. After many adventures and trials, he reached the base of the mountain, and saw glittering above him the golden light of the city of the Gods. He bid his followers farewell, and making his way up the mountain (the snows parting before him in welcome, if the tales of his retinue may be believed) he came to the gates. They opened of themselves to let him in (gates golden and graceful, as high as the sky), and he saw his mother within, all in white, and more beautiful than any mortal.

The first son handed his mother the book, and looking through its closely-lettered pages she smiled, and embraced him, and made him the general of all the hosts of the Gods.

The second son, whose mind was as bright and quick as a flame, went off into the world alone, and traveled alone, going from city to city, from collegium to tower to hermit's cave, sitting with the wisest of scholars and learning their wisdom. In his book, between the soft bindings, he recorded the deepest and most arcane lore: the true names of the stars, the secret of the transmutation of the elements, the powers and weaknesses of every spirit of the woods, the deserts, and the hearts of men.

Where the second son went, scholarship bloomed; in his wake sprang up renaissances, scientific revolutions, the breaking and forming of schools of thought, philosophies, systems of knowledge. In one city, in an ancient book long lost in a dusty corner of a royal library, he found a rumor of the golden city of the Gods. In a slender tower on a sun-drenched mountain peak, sitting cross-legged between twin sorceresses with the faces of birds, he heard disembodied voices tell a story of the founding of that city, and a cryptic hint of where it might be found. The answer to that riddle he discovered in a laboratorium at the edge of a foetid marsh, laboring into the night with a bent old man with stained hands, boiling obscure liquids and collecting the steam on sheets of glass. Five years later, riding a camel whose saddle-bags were stuffed with parchments and herbs, he topped a dune in the middle of a desert, and before him lay the city of the Gods.

The second son was welcomed by his mother (her eyes wiser and her face more learned than any he had seen in the realms of men), and on looking through his book she embraced him, and made him the chief of the scholars of the collegium of the Gods (for not even the Gods know all that there is to know of the cosmos; to create is not always to comprehend).

The third son walked from the tents of his father, along the road into the darkness. He looked at the sky, and thought of his mother, and wondered. He arrived the next

day, somewhat footsore, at the edge of a town, and found a room to let. The forces of the world that had pushed his father from his throne swept over and through the town, and the third son helped tend the wounded, and worked for a baker baking bread. The war passed, and in peace the town prospered, and the third son kneaded bread in the morning, and sat by his window in the afternoon, looking at the sky and feeling the wind, and talking to the folk that passed by in the street. He often took out his mother's book and held it in his hands, feeling the fine softness of the covers, and resting his eyes on the empty pages. Only once did he write in it.

As his youth began to fade, the third son met a woman of the town, and married her, and they had three children together. In time the children grew, and went into the world, and in time the woman died. The third son wept. And one morning, when the clouds sped along the sky swept by a wind in the heights, the third son took his mother's book and went out into the town, stood for awhile with his head down before the grave of his wife, and then walked out across the fields, to the gates of the golden city of the Gods, and knocked at the doors, and they were opened.

The third son was welcomed by his mother, who tousled his hair and kissed his cheeks. He gave her his book, and she opened it and saw the one thing that he had written within. And she smiled gravely, and embraced him, and led him to the top of the city of the Gods, and sat him in the golden throne at the top of the city, from which he could see all of creation and all the doings of men and Gods. And standing next to the throne, she put her arm around his shoulders and kissed him.

"Welcome home," she said.

Questions for Chapters Eighteen, Nineteen, and Twenty

What does the story about Abram (Hunter's father) tell you about him? What does it tell you about Hunter?

What elements do the three stories, of Abram, of the prisoner in the castle, and of the three princes, have in common? Pick another story we have heard, and say how it might be related to them.

How does Geoff the Monk react to the paper in Hunter's lap? How does Hunter respond? What ultimately becomes of that paper? How do you explain this?

How does Klara's death fit into the narrative as a whole? What might be her role in the story? What ambiguities surround her?

In what sense is the world a library? What might her observation tell us about Ona?

Does the story of the three princes have a moral? What might the moral be?

The Quest Continues

The train put behind it the last of the local station stops around the city, and entered the countryside, the plain between cities, the express leg of its route. In the tug of the open space, it moved smoothly, gliding along the tracks like a skater, eager for speed, stopping for nothing. Hunter watched the outlying houses, the farms wealthy and poor, long streaks of electric lines sweeping in to follow the tracks, joining and dividing and reaching suddenly off for the horizon. Here a village, the tracks flying by the backs of the poorer houses, broken carts and neat stacks of wood against the fences, here a market town, a level crossing with children waving up at the cars, here a graveyard, here a field of wheat. Hunter roused himself with effort.

The cloth sack was heavy, but lighter than he remembered. He lifted it to the seat beside him (the car not crowded today for this part of the route, no one looking at him or using the table, no one concerned), and opened the drawstring. He took out the bags, one by one, and piled them on the table. He took out the book and placed it beside them. He sat back, imagining himself a glutton before a feast, a libertine before an orgy. He almost drew back before the density of the unknown before him, put them all away again to turn back to the window, but in the light of the sun he was able to resist.

He opened the book to the first page, reads again "Ten Days After Drowning", familiar now like an odd old friend.

He turned the page (turns over the first scrap in the crumbling heap) and read "Eleven Days After Drowning". Another train passed, going the other way, on the other half of his train's track; the cars rattled and clanged at each other, and the engines sounded their horns in greeting.

He turned over the next sheet. The third page of the book, the third sheet in the heap, was burned at the edges. In the center of the page was the face of a woman, staring with ambiguous intensity out at him. Around the edge was a sinuous curl of writing, just a few sentences, in that same hand. The words grew larger and smaller in waves along their way.

The hand of a woman. Two fingers bent around the stem of a glass. The hand of a woman. A grey eye and a blue eye. The hand of a man. A broken board. A nail. Five toes, in the shadow of a cross. A cup, a knife, and two spoons.

Hunter smiled at this homely row of narrated objects, smiled at the intent woman (what is Ona doing now? what will she say when she sees me?). And he turned the page.

The next sheet, the fourth in the book, was nearly blank. Or, he saw, leaning forward so his nose nearly touched the page, the writing was very light, nearly invisible, truly invisible in places, fading in and out without obvious order. What he could see of the image was a city, seen from far above, or in one place the back of a foot, and elsewhere a jumble of letters or words, all too light to make out.

Frowning, Hunter closed the book again and pushed it aside. He opened a bag and took out a sheet. It was stuck with tangled cobwebs to another, and the two of them slid out together, scattering dirt across the tabletop. Hunter sighed and separated them, and brushed the dirt onto the floor of the car.

On the first page was a burning bridge. People walked across the bridge, and flames clung to their heads, their hands, their shoulders. The trees along the bank were also

in flame. Burning branches hung down, fell onto the road. None of the people, flaming as they were, seemed to be in any pain, or to be frightened, or aware of anything out of the ordinary, except for one young woman, on the edge of the page. She was untouched by the fire, except for one spark that had landed on the edge of her dress, and was smoldering. On her face was stark fear.

Hunter put that page back into the bag. On the next page, the other page (outside, a forest has sprung up on both sides of the train, and trees rush by, not burning), Hunter found words, and a pair of hands. In the center of one hand, taking up half the palm, was a placid lake, on which swam a flock of perfect geese. In the center of the other hand, two men, one with the head of a dog and one with the head of a flower, both nude and corpulent, stood facing each other, their legs braced, their arms pressed against each other, snarling. Between the hands, these words.

The Journey

If I close my eyes, I inhabit a different world. With my eyes open, I stand in a field, but if I close my eyes my ears hear walls, close to either side. With my eyes open, I stand in a room, but if I close my eyes my ears hear a vast open space behind me, and a yawning abyss before. Walking with my eyes closed, I hear openings in the wall to my left. I pass one opening with every four strides. With my eyes open, I am walking in place, in my cell.

The sequence of events is determined only by the story that the narrator chooses to tell. I am drowning in cold water. I am riding in a coach, wearing a red silk coat. I am waking in my room, to find that the ceiling has been covered in layers of dangling fur, and sweetmeats are scattered across the floor. With my eyes open, I am myself, writing on a piece of flint with a burned stick.

With my eyes closed, my story merges into a thousand other stories, and I am a woman with a tiger. I am a clown. I am the palms of two hands, covered with oil.

Hunter touched the page with his fingers, as the forest around the train dwindled to a thin wood, to fields of brambles, to an open plain beside a river. The rhythmic chuck of the rails seemed louder now, the eager gliding of the train more a pulsation, a quick beat. He heard footsteps coming from behind him.

A woman was standing beside him, slightly behind him, looking down over his right shoulder (he twisted in his seat to see her and his knee protested, pain bringing him back still more sharply to the world). She was looking not at him, but at the page before him on the table. Her face was placid, appraising. Not an especially pretty face or an especially plain one, it was framed by short hair (very short, Hunter saw, much shorter than his own, capped by a black beret). Her hand was on the back of his seat, supporting her body against the slight swaying of the car on the tracks. A leather bag hung from her other shoulder, molding itself against her hip.

"That isn't one that I know," she said. She looked for a moment at his face (her eyes black and forthright, unhesitating), then at the bags and the sack beside him. "You have a great many. You're lucky." She looked down again at the paper before him, the two palms, the lake and the contending figures, the flock of birds, the text, and Hunter looked down also, flattening his hands against the top of the table.

He heard her open the bag, heard a small rustle of paper. Saw her hand (blunt fingernails, a small scar at the joining of the first and second fingers) as she placed another sheet in front of him. He felt as though a great hollow had opened inside him, in the core of his belly, as though the train had suddenly plunged into an abyss.

So here is this new sheet of paper (new to Hunter, not new in itself; in itself at least as old as any of his, not dirty but frayed, somehow carrying an air of age older than his, but more elegantly preserved). It sits on the train table before him, above and slightly to the right of the sheet that rests between his hands, under his fingers.

It bears words, in a different hand than his own, an open and looping hand, each letter a crafted thing, a claim upon the world. It bears no drawing, no representation, but along each vertical edge is a series of lines, patterned but imperfectly, straight and slanting, bringing to mind by its single example a million, an infinity of, other lines and patterns that might have been there, a million, an infinity of, other sheets of paper that might have been there on the table, above and slightly to the right of his own. Each of those other sheets would bear other words, or none.

> *Ygraine and Memnon celebrate these rites with an ecstatic dance, in company with a thousand weeping angels. Wrath, the enormous strider whose sisters Calm and Quiet rule the void as his regent, is held at bay by torches and lamps and the light of burning books. An army of crofters surrounds the dancers, uncertain supplicants. Or hunters finally taking their quarry to ground.*

Despite himself Hunter touches the page. Its words are nonsense, he tells himself, then laughs inwardly (does he laugh also with his breath? does the woman hear? does her breath laugh with him?) at himself for the thought. He looks up at her. He finds no words of his own.

"You are young," she says, softly judging him, and she puts out a hand and touches his forehead. He feels very young, although from her face and her form she is no older, or not much older, than he is. She smiles, her unpainted lips curling higher on one cheek than the other.

"How it works," she says, "is that you take this one, and I take that one of yours." And she moves her hand down (her fingernail brushes his cheek, and he thinks of Marc's fingernail brushing his cheek, of the shape of Ona's toes) and rests it on the table, beside his hands and the two papers.

He thinks of the scraps still buried under the skin of the world, in the room in the hallway below the stairs and the crossing rods. He thinks of the drawings on those walls, fading and crumbling and washing out with age and water, and of the page that is a single dot, or the page with the smudged staircase and the bird's head. They all seem in this moment to be equally vital, integral, indispensable parts of whatever it is that he has separated from the world.

To exchange with this woman, this bold woman standing in the aisle of the speeding train (outside a village flashes by, the gates of another level crossing, the railings of a bridge, a narrow glittering river), would be to sever something, or to entangle something irrevocably. The thought twists his heart. He looks away from her, down at the table, and she lifts her hand, moves it over his, touches two of his knuckles with the pads of her fingers.

And he lifts his paper, this scrap of writing between the two drawn hands, and his hands put it into her hand (her fingers closing leisurely on it, not snatching, giving him time to rescind, to recover, to maintain the whole), and his hands move her paper, the other paper, with its looping letters and enclosing lines, between them, on the table in front of him. There is silence for a moment (a noisy silence, the clatter of iron wheels on iron track and wooden ties, the creak of the car, the humming roar of the engine always somewhere ahead), and then he hears (uncertain supplicants) her open her bag, and the rustle of paper.

He takes this new sheet (has he brought any empty bags? should he press it between the covers of the book? fold it in his pouch? burn it, toss it from the window?) in

his fingers, and leans back in his seat (knee creaking, asking to be bent to exercise its pain). She looks down at him and smiles, a smile of triumph or victorious conspiracy, and then she flicks two fingers, and a small card flies from them to land in his lap. He picks it up. An address in Pullen (near Ona? across the city? he does not know Pullen), no name, blank on the back, no burning bridges or men with the heads of birds.

When he looks up she is walking away from him down the aisle of the car (where was she going when his paper caught her eye and she stopped?). At the connecting door she stops and looks back at him, gravely, and raises her hand. Then she is through and gone (the clatter and rush of the train louder for an instant, then quiet).

He holds the paper (this new paper) in his hands (the hand with a lake, the hand with two men), and looks out the window of the train, at things (shapes, colors) rushing by, all in the same direction. He could, it occurs to him, go through that door and find her, search for her, and if he found her ask her questions (about this paper, about other papers like it, about what she will do with his paper, about this card with the address in Pullen). But the thought seems absurd even before it is fully formed.

He reaches into the bag and pulls out a handful of papers, seven papers, and fans them (brushing away the dirt, the small stones, because dirt and small stones are not part of the thing that he has separated from everything else in the world, and put in his sack) out on the table in front of him, and slips the new page in among them. No danger that this one will be confused with those (the world holds itself apart). The paper is different (although not all of his papers, the papers from the room under the skin of the world, are the same), the ink is a different shade, the writing, the speed of the strokes, entirely different.

He takes the card and puts it in his pocket. The train rushes on, just as headlong, just as determined, across the

plain, toward the other end of its route. The steeple of a church flashes past the window, and then another one, at a distance over the top of a hill, floats by at a more stately pace. There was an ancient ruined church at the head of the valley (a more modern, smaller, less ambitious one in the center among the scattered houses). The three of them, Ona and Marc and Hunter, had walked to it more than once, along the path and road by the river, in the sun or through the fog, and lay on their backs on the cracked flagstones of its courtyard, and watched the sky.

Eight Cards on a Table

Water up to the Shins

There is a regularity in the world. That regularity is, as I began to suspect when last I was awake, the steady rising of the water. I will name my days now by the rising of the water.

On the first day, the water was a film on the low parts of the ground. The water was a film on the ground before the idol in the shape of a lion. The water was a film on the ground before the idol in the shape of a woman with eight arms and four breasts. The ground before the idol of swords was slightly higher, and that ground was dry.

On the second day, the water was high enough to cover my feet. That second day is therefore named Water up to the Ankles. On that day there were no longer any idols in the room, but the water covered all the ground. The water was up to my ankles next to the shattered machine, and the water was also up to my ankles on the other side of the room, by the gouges in the wall and the broken axes.

The water enters the room through cracks in the walls. It enters the room by dripping from the ceiling. It enters the room by seepage from the floor. The water enters the room in slow but unvarying drops from the gilded

pipe that protrudes from the mouth of the stone dragon twenty feet above my head. There is no regularity to the source of the water, but its rising continues.

Today the water is up to my shins. The ground is uneven, and although the water is clear it distorts my vision. The ground is also slick, and I fall often. Stone columns rise above the water at intervals throughout the room. On these columns are piles of stinking offal. Some of these piles are my food for the day. I must examine them carefully before eating.

Hunter recalls the water that swirled in and around the banks of the river in flood, the mud that formed under their feet when they stirred up the ground on summer days, the shimmering blur between the air and the water when they went, hiding from their parents, out to the river in the driving rain, and got soaked, all three, to the skin.

The second sheet of paper has the word "substance" written in one corner, the word "hope" in the other, and an image in between. Hunter feels how the image draws his eye around, from one word to the other, in arcs. The image is of an arm, bent gracefully but somehow unnaturally across the page, and of threads or small ropes arcing through space around the arm, as though fastened to arrows. In the background, light and barely visible but reinforcing the guiding of the eye, a city on the side of a hill, with a bell-tower rising above it, and above that a platform of cloud curving over the city and recapitulating the shape of the hill, of the arm, of the threads. Substance and hope, Hunter thinks, and wonders if there is some meaning he should see.

The third piece of paper is a small scrap, burned on two edges, with a face in profile, and before it a column of writing. Only the first few lines are legible. He thinks about

the missing letters, words, the dark room underneath the city, the door ajar.

> My records have been lost. My records have been destroyed. There is no one who can recount my history. There are no stories about me remaining in the world. The books that contained my name have been burned in the public square. My name

and that is all that he can read.

The fourth paper in the pile fanned out in front of Hunter on the table (the train going up a slope now, slower but still unfettered, running without strain against the pull of the earth) bears a woman in a wide hat, her eyes peering up out of the paper, her hair in tangles spilling out from under the hat around her face.

> Diana, the Huntress, holds up the lintel of the window. Mary, the Mother of God, supports the left side of the window. Astarte the Abundant supports the right side of the window. Above the window there is a cloud in the shape of a woman. The cloud has no face. Through the window, I can see the whole of the universe. Through the window, there is only mist.

Hunter remembers, and can find no reason for remembering, the day that dark Maria told the children, gathered around her on the porch of the house, about the inward organs of the body, and how they communicate one with the other within the darkness of the body by substances they introduce into the blood. Hunter imagined these substances as thick and syrupy, as flowing or oozing through the blood vessels slowly, pushed on by the rushing of the quick light red blood. Later he learned that hormones are like scents, like dust in the wind, tiny puffs of chemical dispersed into the blood and flowing within it. But he still thinks of the

organs in the body as great slugs, conversing by way of globules oozing slowly and reluctantly through the veins.

The fifth paper in the pile is the paper that the woman gave him (he could still go forward in the train, go through the door between the cars, and find her, or look for her), the paper with the looping words that sit on the page like statuary.

> *Ygraine and Memnon celebrate these rites with an ecstatic dance, in company with a thousand weeping angels. Wrath, the enormous strider whose sisters Calm and Quiet rule the void as his regent, is held at bay by torches and lamps and the light of burning books. An army of crofters surrounds the dancers, uncertain supplicants. Or hunters finally taking their quarry to ground.*

Do other papers describe the rites of Ygraine and Memnon, of Wrath and Calm and Quiet? The woman said that he was lucky, that he had a great many. Does she have only a few? Has she given him a tenth of what she has? A quarter? What are the books that are burned in the rite, to hold Wrath at bay?

The sixth paper in the pile, the fifth that he pulled from the bag (so many bags in the pile of bags, and the book lying heavy on the table, all but untouched) is blank. He turns it over; the other side is blank as well. Holding it to his face (it smells of both fire and damp, of rot and of heat) he cannot make out even the lightest and most faded of drawn lines. There is a smudge of dirt on the back of the paper (the side that was facing down when he drew it from the bag, but it is no more the back than it is the front), a smudge in what might be the shape of a fingermark. He puts his own finger against it. The train rushes under a bridge, and the sound of it sweeps through the car and out.

The seventh and eighth sheets, the sixth and seventh of the seven he pulled from the bag, are stuck together. Not looking at the face of either, he pulls their edges carefully apart, slides his fingers between them, prying gently at the join. They pop apart with a little puff of dirt; Hunter's fingers touch the drop of resin (or glue, or sap, or clay made from dirt and cobwebs, or ichor, or something dried), and a bit sticks to his skin. He pinches his fingers together and pulls them apart, and the pads of skin are pulled out for an instant, stuck to the adhesive fleck, and then spring back when the contact breaks.

He rubs his fingers on his pants.

The seventh sheet has two long lines, sinuous lines running up and down the page, crossing each other three times, floating side to side in the space of the page. Between the long vertical lines are short horizontal ones, forming what might be a twisting flexible ladder, and grasping the rungs of the ladder are figures, vaguely human figures but flexible themselves, long and boneless, also twisting sideways in the space of the page as they climb up, or climb down, the twining ladder. Behind the ladder and the figures, low on the page so only the top limb shows, sits the sun, vast and brilliant (drawn vast and brilliant despite being a few marks with a pen on a few inches of paper, and Hunter nods to himself, admiring the technique) casting the figures into shadow, into the shadows of themselves, and filling the space with light. The words sit on the page in a thin column on the left, not lit by the sun, not taking part in the image.

Rescued from Drowning

Had events occurred differently, I would be in a
constant world, and the moon would not fill this room
with the grey and white bulk of its body. Had events
occurred differently, I would be in my carriage, driven
by the man who drove my carriage, and I would be

eating from a box. The order of events is arbitrary. The set of events that occurs is arbitrary. The set of events that occurs is in control of the narrator. By narrating my story in a different order, I may rescue myself from drowning. By narrating my story with a different set of events, I may be rescued from drowning.

Hunter frowns and turns his head away, abstracted. Someone passes along the aisle of the train car, looks down incuriously at the table, goes through the door (the sound loud again and then soft; people have perhaps passed along the aisle before, many times, as he sat here reading, looking, moving his eyes over the papers).

In sudden disquiet, he lifts the book and puts it back into the bottom of the cloth sack, lifts the bags (one at a time, two at once, a small pile at once) and puts them in on top of it, and draws the drawstring, leaving out only the single bag from which these papers came, and the papers themselves (seven from his bag, from the room under the skin of the earth, and one from the woman with the cap). He lifts his leg off of the seat beside him and eases his foot to the ground; the flow of blood to his knee is a throbbing ache. He tenses and relaxes the muscles, weighs the pain.

The eighth sheet, the last sheet in the pile before him, the seventh of the seven sheets he pulled from the bag, is covered with jagged lines, running diagonally over the paper, never quite intersecting. In one corner is a small clear area, and in the clear area is drawn a clear cylinder (of glass, of ice, of crystal), and lying in the center of the crystal, eyes closed, is a young woman. Hunter leans close to the page (the process for transforming the human body into ice is recorded on the forehead of the frozen maiden), but her face remains obscure, distorted by a wave of density, a refracting of light through the tube of her prison (the volume of air connecting my body to the moon has the

same function as the ice surrounding the body of the maiden).

Questions for Chapters Twenty-One and Twenty-Two

How many pages from the underground room have been fully described so far? How has Hunter reacted to them? Name two things that they all have in common. Do you think they all have the same author? How is the page that the woman gave Hunter on the train different from them? How is it similar to them?

What is Hunter's attitude toward the woman? Toward exchanging papers with her? Why did he not attempt to follow her as she left the car, and why does he not look for her later? What might she be doing now? Expand on Hunter's feelings about entanglement.

Some of the passages that Hunter reads on the papers remind him of scenes from his childhood, although the connection between the words on the paper and the scene that he remembers is not always clear. Describe a time when something that you saw or read reminded you of something that bore no obvious relation to it.

The Steam Train

After midnight, the train finally slows, coming into a denser place in the web of tracks, the bulge at the far end of its route. A conductor in a pillbox cap comes through the car announcing a stop, and the humming of the engines quiets, and the rhythmic rush of the light poles beside the track unwinds downward, languorously, and the train stops at a station. The doors are opened by booted trainmen, and a few passengers, with a rustling of luggage, get off, or come on. Hunter raises his head from the back of the seat. He has been sleeping for some minutes (or hours, or days), his head and his dreams full of rising water, women with cloud faces, burning bridges, and an insistent demand for attention from something always just beyond his vision. His neck is stiff.

After the first station, there are two more stops before the railway yard and the grand exchange, the end of the line. Outside the windows, lights and darkness advance and pass and vanish, inky water sparkles with blue light, and the wind whistles through the walls, whistles more loudly than in the day, when the train was gliding faster, in the open, in daylight.

Hunter has put the eight papers back into the bag (the seven papers back into the bag, and the eighth paper, the one from the black-eyed woman, into the bag for the first time, among the other papers, there being no chance of confusing them), and put that bag into the cloth sack (with

the other bags, and the book), and pulled the drawstring to close the mouth of the sack, and then looped the end of the drawstring around his wrist. He did this when he felt sleep coming over him, while the sun was still sinking red over the fields outside the windows.

The third stop, a few more people on and off, things rolling in the aisles, doors closed, into the center of the city, under a bridge and into a deeper darkness, into the maw of the great station, the grand exchange, and then up to a lighted platform, trainmen in elegant black gloves opening the doors and bowing to the passengers, everyone on their feet, holding their bags. Long after midnight, but the station is alive, and lit, and noisy with the noises of distance and of speed and of business.

There is a hotel here, enclosed within the station, two hotels really, one rich and one common (in the same column of the building, back to back, but with their doors on different long corridors, a long walk apart), and Hunter could have taken a room for the night (the last of his money in his pocket, and Courant still owed, and no plan in his mind beyond seeing Ona, and hearing her voice), but he has a ticket for the next train out to Pullen, and it leaves in half an hour.

A conductor helps him with his luggage out onto the platform, and then he is standing (the line of the train hissing and crackling softly on the tracks, its parts readjusting to stillness, to no wind), with the crutch under his left arm, his suitcase in his right hand, the cloth sack over his right shoulder. He feels entirely askew, tired, dazed by the size and the sound of the place.

"Are you going to the concourse?"

A young couple, perhaps his own age, have come up beside him, the man (a thin beard and moustache, a long grey coat) next to him, the woman (a sharp nose, long limbs, a pale yellow dress) beyond, looking politely at him,

smiling as one smiles to a stranger on a railway platform at night.

"Gate eleven," Hunter answers, feeling in his pocket for his ticket.

"Like a hand?"

Hunter nods gratefully, and the man reaches out, and Hunter gives him the suitcase. They make their way, the three of them, up off of the platform into the mazy interior of the station (old wooden corridors, vendors selling meat and sweets and fried dough, conductors and engineers and station officials striding past in their own parallel version of the place), past the wide arch that leads to the concourse (Hunter offers to take back his bag, but the young man waves him off), and along another hallway to the dark rectangle of gate eleven.

"You're very kind." Hunter would like to draw them, the graceful shapes of their clothing, their long legs, generous faces.

"It was nothing."

"Have a good journey!" the woman calls over her shoulder as they walk off. Hunter stands on the platform. His train has just arrived (from the yard, or from Pullen, or from elsewhere), and the doors of the cars are not yet open. The engine, hissing and cooling here at the head of the platform (the cars arrayed behind it like logs) is an old coal-fired steam engine; this is an old line, from the grand exchange to Pullen, its engines and cars distinguished but slightly shoddy.

A cluster of conductors appear from a door hidden in the shadow of the wall and open the doors of the cars. One comes to Hunter and looks at his ticket, nods, takes his suitcase, and escorts him onto the train (his knee a dull ache from even crossing the station, the neck of the bag rubbing his shoulder). In the car where the conductor has settled him, there are no tables, but the seat cushions are soft (red cloth rubbed threadbare in places, and patched). He sits

down and puts his sack and his suitcase on the floor between his feet.

The cars of the train slowly fill up; although it is deep night, hours before dawn, there are people going from here to Pullen, or to places on the way to Pullen, or places beyond. Hunter puts his fingers into his pocket and touches the paper with Ona's address, and the card that the woman gave him. A white-haired couple sit in the seats opposite Hunter. A ruddy young man sits two seats away on his left. Just before the trainmen close the doors, someone heavily wrapped in layers of dark clothing (a woman? probably a woman) sits in the seat to his right. On this part of the journey, there will be no long hours at a solitary table, touching paper and hearing only the rush of the wheels on the tracks.

With a great chugging and hissing of steam (this car is only two back from the engine, the huge noisy beast that makes coal into miles), the train backs out from the platform, backs out of the lit darkness of the station into the streaked fiery darkness of the switching yard. A conductor goes through the cars collecting tickets. The train backs up against a great black shape (a roundhouse, a train shed, a mountain) and then starts forward along another track, off with a jerk into night black and shiny as coal.

The heads of the couple across the car nod in the rhythm of the engine, of the ties, of the steady chug of the pistons. The train goes through the inner city slowly, making no stops, and when the darkness is emptier (lighted streets left behind, the lights of boats at the port left behind) it picks up speed, the rhythm quickening, blackness rushing past the windows with now and then a spark from the boiler, a tail of smoke, steam, rampant exuberance.

Hunter straightens out his knee in front of him, props his crutch on the vacant seat to his left. The bundled figure to his right has her (her?) head down, arms crossed, not moving. Hunter leans back in his seat. He thinks about the

room, the room under the earth with the pipes in the ceiling and the book on the table (no longer on the table). He sees himself gathering up all those pages (all the ones he did gather, the ones not left behind in the silence, the drip of water somewhere in the distance), stuffing them into bags. He frowns, recalling a bundle of papers, all the same size and shape, that his hand found in the dirt, and that he put into a bag without looking at them.

He opens the mouth of the sack (the rhythm of the train now loud and steady, the turning of the pistons, of the wheel rods, the roar of the steam, grander but less certain than the hum of the diesel), and feels the paper bags, one by one (the grittiness of dirt, of crumbling paper, of scraps pressed together and tumbled in travel). When his fingers find the bundle, he is certain. No other place in the bags has this solid feeling, this regularity, as though he had stuffed a bound book into his sack. He opens that paper bag and brings the bundle out, out of the paper bag and out the mouth of the cloth sack, into the air. The nodding pair across the car are looking at him, or only looking out the window behind him (at the darkness), or only resting their eyes on the wall over his head.

He holds the bundle of papers in his lap. They are square and thick, each sheet thicker than any of the sheets he has read so far. They are held to each other by nothing, by cobwebs, perhaps only by habit. He turns the bundle over in his hands. There is writing on the face of this page, writing in the same hand that he has become accustomed to, but in a different ink, a smoky dark blue ink, not the jet black and grey charcoal of the other scraps (the days after drowning, the days of the frozen maiden). He looks quickly through the bundle, at some of the other papers (are there ten, twenty, a hundred sheets?). He finds no drawings, no titles, just lines of even text.

There are still things that we need to know about you, beyond what you've written on the forms, beyond what is in the public record. Understanding will come from intimate acquaintance, from knowledge of detail, from the shape of the mirror in the morning, the number of hairs on the back of your thumb.

Not that we need to know you at quite that level.

There are concerns we have about your life. You are a mass of contradictions. We have not yet formed a coherent image of you in our minds. A coherent image is what we need, if we are to be successful. If you, as well as we, are to be successful.

Look up at the light and relax.

Hunter rubs his eyes with thumb and forefinger. He is sleepy; he is not used to trains. Travel tires him. The wrapped body in the seat next to his moves uncomfortably in its seat. He seems to feel warmth coming from there (from her?), warmth and a certain enclosed animal scent.

How far have you come, to reach this point? We regret that we cannot take the time to fully appreciate the complexity of the path you have taken. But we are concerned at this moment with your present state, not your history.

Whatever you have left behind along the way, let it be forgotten in this place. If you have lost

your innocence, tell us the story of your new maturity. If you have lost illusions, tell us your truths.

Hope for redemption, hope for the future, hope for a justification of the present. In the background of the sound-field of this instant, listen for a unifying theme.

You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door.

There is a small mailbox here.

He feels exposed, bare, addressed directly by the words, unable to reply. What tyranny, he thinks, does a writer exercise over a reader. What insupportable power an artist (he thinks of his own drawings, and it occurs to him to wonder when he last held a pencil) has over the viewer, over the audience. He feels the night pressing against the back of his neck, and from within the cloth piled in the seat beside him he hears breathing, air being pulled in and pushed out, through a nose of some shape, into a body of some design. He shakes his head.

You have thought the world relentless. If you have indeed come here to rest, you may not find conditions entirely to your satisfaction. But others are depending on you, others have always depended on you. We are none of us entirely alone.

We place no more demands upon you than you place upon yourself. You have been told that you are your own worst enemy, but we do not

believe that. Our evidence does not support that. If there is other evidence that you can provide to us, we urge you to do so without hesitation and without restraint.

It is in all of our interests. Our interests and yours coincide in many areas. You have sacrificed much to be here. We all wish for success.

The white-haired woman across the car has laid her head on the shoulder of the white-haired man. They are old, Hunter thinks, as his Uncle is old. His parents, too, aren't they old by now? Hunter thinks of his own hair turning white, of a white head lain on his shoulder, before dawn, crossing the countryside in a chuffing steam train, sitting under glass with strangers.

The train rushes clattering across a river bridge; the lights of boats, or ships, make a line through the dark.

We do not believe every story that you tell. That is to be expected. You should develop the habit of telling the truth when you speak to us. It will be better for all of us in the long run.

We are your friends. You must remember that, whatever else happens and whatever other impressions come upon you in the course of our interaction, we are above all your friends. We have obligations toward you, just as you have obligations toward us.

We will come to know each other well. Put your fingers to the back of your neck, and feel the softness of those hairs. We will be to each

other like the hairs at the back of the neck. Only relax.

Hunter groans in frustration, or exhaustion (his knee aches if he does not think about it, feels perfectly normal if he does), and moves as though to put the bundle (or stuff it, or fling it) back into the sack. But he doesn't. He shakes it slightly in his hand (the four pages he has read taken off and put behind the back of the bundle, raised up slightly above the others so he can find the beginning again, not lose the order that he found them in, because that order is part of what he is separating, has separated, from the rest of the world), and blows with his mouth, and a little more of the dirt and the remains of cobwebs are shaken off and float or fall to the floor of the car.

Questions for Chapter Twenty-Three

Hunter travels on two different trains in this chapter. How are they similar? How are they different?

How are the writings that he reads in this chapter different from the other writings from the underground room? How are they similar?

What might the two people sitting across the car from Hunter in the steam train think about him? What does the person in the heavy clothing, to his right, think about him? What do the two people who helped him from the one train to the other think about him? What might they be doing now?

Pullen

Here is Hunter in Pullen, in bed, early in the morning. Ona has just left the room, to go to the shop, with a backward glance and an odd smile at him over her shoulder as she went through the door. Here is Hunter in a thin nightshirt, under clean but threadbare blankets, a fresh wrapping around his knee (Ona putting it carefully but firmly on last night, by the light of the candles, her hands certain and strong). Hunter suspended in a moment of time that demands nothing of him.

Things have happened. The steam train came into a lighter place, into the city, with the first hint of dawn in the air, and slowed. Hunter put the bundle of papers (only a dozen of them read, and many many miles flowed past beyond the windows in the dark) back into the cloth sack, back into the bag, and the wrapped figure beside him suddenly stood and walked away from him, through the door and into the next car (two legs, two arms, one head), and the white haired couple shifted in their seats, and there was the station.

Someone helped him out of the train, someone helped him from the platform, someone perhaps tried to pick his pocket, or to knock him down in the jostling corridor. For a few pennies (a few of the last few of his pennies) a boy told him where the street on his telegram was, and carried his suitcase for him. And he stood in the street, looking at the door (not having asked the boy about the other address, not

wanting anything to do in this bleary morning breeze with the woman in the cap and the looped letters like carved chains), and it was opened before he knocked.

"So you came here, all the way here, hundreds of miles, on a crutch, not writing first, with no purpose in mind at all?"

"Roughly, yes."

To sit with Ona in the little kitchen (the lady of the house, the taker-in of boarders, letting him in on Ona's word, with doubtful eye, with a shake of her head more perhaps out of habit than real conviction, for he looked honest, or at least unthreatening), to sit and sip hot tea with her eyes laughing at him and her face (Ona's face just there, two eyes one nose one mouth, close enough to touch) was all Hunter could imagine then, in that morning. Nothing else was possible; what further purpose could there be?

"Come back with me to the college," he had said, somewhere in the scent of the tea and the rattling of someone in the room above.

"Stay here in Pullen with me," she had said. And he had frowned, and thought, and smiled.

Now he is in bed. He has taken a room in the house. Two days before two former tenants had left, vanished, after a vast screaming debate, fight, quarrel (utterly incoherent, Ona said, mindless but quite ferocious, like cats) in which they had each pitched the other's things out the window, and each strode out, tossing bills behind them for rent that was owing, and turned in opposite directions in the street, cursing each other foully over their shoulders (like someone screaming at a mirror). So now he has a room, three doors from Ona's, and one room in the house is vacant, and she has just left, for the shop.

Ona has a place in a dress shop, where she sews, and measures, and puts things together (separating things from the world by joining them in well-ordered groups). "You were always the one that saw, and Marc would plan, and I

would make; you know." But Hunter did not know, did not know until the moment she said it (did not see), and saw that it was (of course, undeniably) true. She makes some money, she saves some money, and she has lent him his first week's rent.

"Come up to the shop in the afternoon, we'll talk to Duncan. In the morning I'll sweeten him up for you."

So here is Hunter in bed. He stretches his ankles, points his toes (his knee protests the pulling), bends his ankles (the back of his leg twinges), puts his arms up above his head (his hands hit the wall, the wall covered in beige and white striped paper, waterstained here and there, a stain like a hand beside the bed, a stain like a mountain near the ceiling), yawns.

The cloth sack is in the corner, under a table. On the table is a candle in a black iron holder. In the sack, still, are the bags and the book (and the dirt, and the cobwebs, and the fragments of leaf, the smell of the earth and the sound of water dripping); his suitcase is in the closet, his clothes on hooks and folded in the drawers (he wonders what Courant is doing, what is happening in his classes, what byway the Professor's mind has wandered into and what patterns the dust is making in the sun). This morning, he will send a telegram to his parents, a telegram to the school (what do they pay draftsmen in Pullen?), saying that he has hurt his leg, he is staying at this address for now, he is well. This morning, he will have a late breakfast downstairs in the common room (the lady of the house watching him eat, putting pins in her hair, straightening the table). This morning, he will step out the door, onto the street. This morning he will see Pullen by day.

Ona is walking, walks, from the rooming house to the shop. She has walked, many times, from the rooming house to the shop, and looking at herself she decides that the walk, this day, is the same as the walk any other day. Hunter, that boy, that piece of her childhood (before those

other two, her husband that was, that other, that story that later she will tell Hunter, in the dark under a frowning moon), is behind her, lying in a bed (the shape of him under the covers, the odd smile on his face as she looked back at him from the doorway). But this is still the walk, from the rooming house to the shop, past these buildings, around this corner, up this hill.

This building, the one that Ona is passing now, this old red brick and lath building, three stories above the street and one below (and then, below the basement, one rough room, or cell, dug down under the floor and into raw earth, and then covered with a wooden trap, and that covered with flooring, and forgotten now, for sixteen years, nothing down there but a broken chair, ashes, the skeleton of a dead rat, silence, time, perhaps an old bit of paper with an inch of writing, perhaps not, the air stale beyond staleness, nothing moving) has a bookseller's shop on the street level, apartments above and below (an earnest young couple in the two basement rooms, suffering bravely with the damp, walking over the wooden trap a dozen times a day, perhaps thinking idly that the floor sounds hollow there, perhaps not). Sometimes the keeper of the shop, the bookseller, is standing at the door, in the air, and then Ona nods at him, and he nods at her. But today he is somewhere inside, with the books.

This building (Ona has walked along a few long morning steps, half a block, to the corner), the one she is passing now, the one on the corner, is a proud stone building, with the name of the firm carved into the stone (the stonecutter dead now for two years, a quiet death from the lungs, in the night in a narrow bed, an owl in the field outside the window), and a thick oak door with a brass boot-scraper bolted on the top step. Ona puts her hand on the stone (waiting for a cart to pass, a cab, a truck with clattering wheels) and feels the coolness of the night still in it. The sun will be bright today, but the air brisk, damp.

This building (Ona has walked another block, another block, two feet two legs two arms one head) is the building that Ona works in (that Ona lives in, when she isn't in her room, or walking in the street, or sitting in the park eating her lunch, or somewhere else), the one with the dress shop. Duncan, who owns the shop, lives upstairs, in the room that looks out over the street (birds light on the windowsill in the morning and sing, and wake him up). Above the door is a post, and on the post is a sign (the signmaker still a signmaker, on the other side of the city, and his son working in the sign shop with him now, and the months passing by), and on the sign is a dress, and bonnet, and a pair of shoes (although the shop does not sell shoes), all arrayed as though dressing a woman, but there is no woman on the sign (or she is invisible). Ona goes up the steps, and on the top step she turns and looks down at the street.

Ona was a child in those same meadows, beside that same river, where Hunter was a child, or as much the same meadows and the same river (the same woods, the same stones, the same sticks) as the meadows and river (woods, stones, and sticks) of two different people can be. Ona lived along the river path a few minute's walk (for a quick child, a leisurely adult, Shaytl with a little girl on his shoulders, her hands tugging his hair) from the house and the meadow, in a smaller house that sat in the shade with two other houses, tiny houses, large sheds perhaps, in a place by the river a little too dark, a little too damp, but with a familiar smell. Marc lived in the house to the left, close enough that they could signal to each other out their windows at night, with carefully hooded candles. Standing on the top step of the shop in Pullen where she works (where the adult Ona works, the Ona who is somehow here and not there), she thinks of those candles.

Dark Maria was Ona's favorite among the devoted shabby adults that followed and herded the children in the meadows and along the river. She was small and quiet to

Mother Canna's firm-voiced elegance. Something had hurt Maria once. Ona realized one day, on the edge of growing up, with the kind of shock that comes on the edge of growing up, that Maria was terribly ugly, her face scarred by something unspoken, untold of. Ona knew of course that Maria was beautiful (the shape of her mouth and her eyes when she spoke to the children, not patiently but as though patience were the last thing required, of the relations of numbers, the names of the birds, the habits of the bodies of foxes and people), but still, there it was.

One evening, when everyone had eaten a buoyant supper on the porch of the big house (and on the stairs, and at the edge of the meadow, fireflies in the grass, crickets in the air), Maria had walked with Ona (that same Ona, on that same edge of that same growing up), and talked to her about Marc, and about Hunter, and about boys and girls and men and women, all things that Ona already knew (as much as she would ever know), but that came out differently in Maria's voice, or in her voice speaking to Maria.

"Do you think you will marry him?"

"Marry? Which one?"

"Which one?"

And Ona had laughed at the question, and Maria had stopped on the path and put her hands on Ona's shoulders (small strong hands, one finger bent at an odd angle, and Ona had shivered and thought why she could not marry dark Maria, standing there on the path in the twilight), and Maria had told her a story.

"A woman once died and, finding herself in the mists in the field of the dead with a candle in her hand, she walked forward, and after a time she saw ahead of her a golden light. She walked onward, and came to a high gate, with pillars of ivory and handles and fittings of gold, that glowed in the mist like the sun. Beyond the gate the air was clear, and the fields green, and she saw just at the horizon water of the clearest blue. But the woman paused, for the gate

was standing open, and unguarded. She stood for a long time, holding the unflickering candle and looking at the gate, but then she turned away, and walked out again into the mists.

"After a long time of wandering, she saw ahead of her a red and smoky light, and heard the sound of wailing. She walked onward, and came again to a high gate, this one of ebony and ruby, shining with the light of madness, and this gate was locked and barred, and guarded by great iron beasts whose eyes steamed and whose jaws slathered. And she stood at that gate for a long time, in the mists. Turning away, she faced out into the fields of the dead again, and here and there in the mists she saw tiny lights, like the light of her own candle, moving slowly this way and that."

Ona had frowned. "I don't think I know what that story means."

"It's just a story," Maria had said, "but I wish someone had told it to me, when I was your age, and beautiful."

And Maria had pulled Ona to her, Ona's face against Maria's shoulder, their arms around each other in the dark, and Ona had felt joy and fear filling her up together, and she closed her eyes.

Then they stepped apart (Maria's hand squeezing Ona's hand, and letting go), and they walked the rest of the way in a close comfortable silence. At the door of her house, Ona had turned to Maria again.

"Did she get into heaven?"

"The story doesn't say, I don't think. It was her choice to make."

And Ona had kissed Maria's cheek, and gone in to bed.

And now Ona turns back to the door, and opens it, and goes in.

Questions for Chapter Twenty-Four

We have now seen Ona directly, rather than through Hunter's memories. Is she as you had pictured her? How are her memories of their shared childhood similar to his? How are they different?

On Ona's walk to work, we have seen another underground chamber. How does it relate to the room where Hunter got the papers he carries? What function might this relationship have in the structure of the story?

Seven Days After Drowning

It is entirely to be expected that I am imprisoned. Imprisonment is entirely normal. There is nothing out of the ordinary about the vines that cover my cheeks. The covering of my cheeks by vines is entirely normal. The change in the number of windows every time I awaken is entirely normal. All of this is completely to be expected.

When mankind was young, we learned the ways of the world. Our superiority to the animals stemmed from our knowing that the world was entirely normal. Our superiority to the animals stemmed from our ability to mirror the world within ourselves, as the moon mirrors the sun. Our superiority to the animals stemmed from our ability to mirror ourselves within the world, as the sun mirrors a stone.

The eyes that watch me from inside the walls are attached to small heads. The small heads that watch me from inside the walls are the small heads of children, or of animals, or of sculpted figures of the Gods. By watching me from inside the walls, they hope and expect to learn the secrets of mankind's normality.

Duncan, Marc

Here is Hunter in the room behind the dress shop, in the room with Ona, and with Duncan who owns the shop, and with a crowd of headless dummies, a mound of cloth in oblong bolts, piles of gowns and dresses and thin leaves of pale paper. Duncan has slapped Hunter on the back, and gripped Hunter by the shoulder, and smiled into Hunter's eyes with his own large grey eyes, eyes with small rivulets of red crossing the whites here and there in a disciplined pattern, eyes that invite the looked-at to laugh along with some joke, if he (if she, if the looked-at) is only clever enough to discover what the joke is.

"Pullen is the right place for you, for anyone like us," Duncan says. He has also said that he can give Hunter work, some work, not all that much work, but that there are others in the city, in this very quarter, who can give him all the work that he needs, who can give any draftsman, any artist, any creative person, as much work as any person could need.

"This is the cutting edge of the blade," Duncan says, "the home of the present. This is where any young person should be." And Hunter sees with some surprise that Duncan is young, no older than he is, no older than Ona is, for all that he seems to have already taken possession of the world (Hunter is still waiting for possession of the world, still waiting for some event or ceremony at which the world

will be passed into his keeping), for all that he seems full-fleshed and occupied, like a ruler or a parent.

"Find the home of the present, my father told me. He worked the steel mills, pouring the hot iron for the railways, for the trains, for the electric turbines. That was the home of the present then, the hard industry and the roar of the furnace. And the present is still there, but it is also here, in this city and in this block and in this room.

"That college you come from? In a year, it will have a campus here in Pullen. In five years, the campus in Pullen will be the most important part of the college. I know, this is an old city, a city on the edge of nothing, but now, with the war over and the whole country wired for power and for telegraphy and telephony, the city is becoming new again. We make dresses, here in this shop, for people of taste in Paris, in Rome, in New York. The present is here."

When Duncan has gone out, out to the front room to speak to a customer, Hunter sits (he wants to take his head in his hands to be certain it is still there) and tries to run his memory back, to see if Duncan has in fact given him any work.

"He has ideas," Hunter says to Ona.

"He is an idiot," she says, "but it may be that he is right. If he is right, we will all be rich, and we will buy a good house on a wide street, and we will sit at the window and call down to our friends."

We will buy a house, Hunter thinks, we will buy a house.

"Or," she says, turning to her work, for Duncan has given her work, and it is her work that Duncan sells, "he may be wrong, and we will live in tiny rooms in a rooming house, and we will still sit at the window, and our friends will call up to us."

Hunter's cloth bag, the book and the paper bags inside it, the papers inside the bags, are still under the table in a corner of his room in the rooming house. He has taken out a

few, brushed off the dirt and tossed the bits of leaf out the window (bits of leaf from that room under the skin of the earth now blown about by the winds in the streets of Pullen, muddying the shoes of the citizens of Pullen), spread them on the table and looked at them. But not for long, and not often. He has not told Ona that story yet, and she has not pressed for it, although she has looked at them over his shoulder (her fingers touching his shoulder, rubbing the back of his neck), and said things.

And here is Hunter a week later, or a month later, or three months, sitting in his room in the rooming house, his knee hardly stiff, his back not bruised, drawing a standing woman in a dress (a dress that Duncan sells, a dress that Duncan or Ona or a friend of Duncan's designed, or someone Duncan met in a cafe some evening), and the dress is the subject of the drawing, the woman only a set of lines, of curves, but lines and curves that someone looking at the picture will recognize, will admire and overlook, will see only because they are wearing the dress. This morning, he has wired money to Courant, discharging his debt and equally overstating his good fortune.

The postcard, of the woman on the block in the square (Klara, who made soup and bread, who had two children, who died in the night years ago), and his drawing of it (of her, the arc of her body and the triangle of her dress pointing down) are propped up at the back of his table. On the wall above them is a new drawing, a drawing of Ona, Ona as she is now, and behind her in the drawing is the corner of a stone building, the stone building that Ona passes on the way to the shop (Ona laughs at the picture, and says that he has drawn the stone more clearly than her face).

And here is Hunter that evening, when Ona has come back from the shop, and gone to her own room and put away her things, and taken the tie from her hair, and taken off her shoes (pushing them, one next to the other, under the edge of her bed, so that just the backs of the backs of

the shoes show in the light from the lamp), and then come out again, to come and sit with him on the edge of his bed, and talk about the city, and the shop, and the light, and time.

So they are sitting there, on the edge of the bed (Hunter's bed, more or less identical to Ona's bed, and not really Hunter's, as Ona's is not really Ona's, just rented beds in rented rooms, but the sheets are clean), and Ona's arm is around Hunter's back, comfortable there, and Ona's head is close to Hunter's face, and Hunter's hand is spread out on Ona's back. And there is Marc in the doorway, with two suitcases and an orange jacket.

They are surprised, so surprised that it doesn't matter, and they turn toward him, and he puts the suitcases down. And he sits between them, and Ona's mouth touches his lips, and Hunter's mouth touches his cheek, and he closes his eyes.

And when they are all laughing and talking and staring at each other (Hunter staring at Ona, too, and Ona staring at Hunter, for everything is surprising now), someone (Ona) remembers to close the door.

The Purpose of Virtue

> The corridor is filled with quarreling men. The men who fill the corridor are small. The eyes of the men are the eyes of waterfowl. Like the eyes of waterfowl, the eyes of the men are clear and sharp. Like the eyes of waterfowl, the eyes of the men are transparent to any light but ours.
>
> Men have always quarreled in corridors. When last I awoke, there was one chair in the room. On this chair was a book, written in the language of the Gods. The book, of which I could read only a few words, was a justification of those men who quarrel in the corridors, and an explanation of the nature of virtue.

> The circle is the shape of virtue. The color green is the color of virtue. The month of November is the month of virtue. In virtue all things begin, and in virtue all things have their end. There is virtue in coming together, and there is virtue in moving apart. The number seven is the number of virtue, as are the numbers three and eighteen. The men in the corridor quarrel, because they are not acquainted with the nature of virtue. This is the rule of my imprisonment.

"So I called Bobby Cramm at the post office, on the telephone, and I asked him to run up the hill and find out where you, Hunter, where you were, but he said that he didn't have to run up the hill, because you'd just telegraphed to tell them up the hill that you were here. So I came."

Marc is just the same, except for the suitcases and the orange jacket (bought for working at his uncle's horse farm, but he tells them that he didn't stay there long, that he promised to come back in the spring to help with the young ones, but that horse farms are not where he was born to be, and he says it with a laugh that says he is serious, and Hunter knows the laugh and exactly what it means). And Marc has in his left suitcase a book with a thick yellow cover, and a bundle of loose papers, and he says that a box with more books just like this one, and three more bundles just like this one (bundles tied with string, string from the dark room at the back of the library, but he stops because he is running ahead of his story, and puts the book and the bundle down on the table) are coming by post in a day or two (too much to carry on a train, he says, and Hunter thinks of the man and the woman on the platform, and the man and the woman and their white heads bobbing across the car from him).

So Marc opens the book to a page, and on the page is a horse, drawn on the page with something thick and black, and the horse is the most powerfully drawn horse Hunter

has ever seen, and it rears up out of the page, and under its feet (drawn roughly, as though in a storm or a fit) it seems to be trampling a city, or some great hive. Marc turns the pages, showing them (giving them just a taste, just a hint to go with his story) some of the other pages, and on all of them there are horses, drawn elemental and majestic (as Hunter cannot bring himself to draw dramatic things, things that force themselves on the eyes), and at the bottom of every page are symbols, or letters, or numerals in some unfamiliar script, and Ona looks at Marc and raises her eyebrows (and Marc knows her eyebrows, and Hunter knows her eyebrows, and what they mean). Marc stretches out on the bed, with his hands behind his head.

(Deep in the night a day, or a week, or a month, ago, Hunter woke with the moon in his eyes to find Ona lying beside him, her eyes open and shining with the pale light, propped up on her elbow. She had finally told him, it being the right night and the right moon, of the man her husband, and the other man, how they had met in the valley and come to the city, how her husband had wanted a child, been eager or desperate for a child from the day they were married, or seemed to be, and how he had let the other man live with them, and when Ona had not been with child after a few months, a year, had become angry and unpleasant.

"But I was blessed, by some angel that I thank every night. Because there was another woman that that man my husband had wanted, and somehow he got word that he could have her after all. So he left me one day," her finger on Hunter's lips when he started to speak, "and the other man bribed the church to annul our marriage, so that I never had a husband at all, and then he let me go, and I came here, and found Duncan. And so I was saved."

"You could have gone home," Hunter said, in a whisper as she had been speaking in a whisper, touching her face.

"I could have gone home, and I could have spread my mother's legs apart and crawled back into her womb, I suppose." So Hunter said no more about going home.

"I can't imagine what this man was like, good enough that you would marry him, bad enough that he would leave you."

"I think," she said, "that there are in the world damaged and undamaged people." Hunter said nothing, waiting.

"One night, we had a basket of fruit, and I was peeling the grapes with my teeth and offering them to him, and the juice was running down his chin, and we were happy, or I thought we were happy. And then I said to him 'now you peel these grapes with your teeth, and feed them to me', but he could not."

"Could not?"

"Not that his teeth were dull, or his hands unsteady. He just could not make himself, could not bring himself, to peel a grape and offer it to me. So damaged and undamaged people."

"Are we undamaged?"

"We are undamaged because we can do whatever we can do; what our bodies can do, our minds can ask for. He was damaged. Somewhere in him there was something that could not ask his body to do that small thing. And I wish that woman the pleasure of him."

And Hunter told Ona, because it was the right night and the right moon, the story of the room under the skin of the earth, the stairs, the gaps in the base of the wall, the sound of water in the distance, the book and the piles of paper. And when he told her how he saw her at the base of the stairs, moving forward and back, she held him and put his head on her chest, and when he told her how he slipped on the step, and fell, and hit his back and his head and felt the red agony in his knee, she kissed the top of his head and wept, and he wept for the cruelty of the damaged man her husband, and with their tears between them they had gone

back to sleep, and they woke the next morning still together and very merry.)

So now Marc is telling his story, lying on Hunter's bed (the bed in Hunter's room in the rooming house with the sounds of the street coming in through the window) with his hands behind his head and his elbows poking up, and the yellow-covered book with its horses open on the table, and Hunter and Ona looking at him.

A Certain House

After he left the horse farm, Marc tells them, with the smell of the horses on his boots and his new orange jacket and what was left of one season's pay, he went to a small city, an old market town, near the horse fields, and there he took a job, fell into a job, helping with the renovation, for the governor, of a large decaying library in a corner of the town square. The library was to be made new and modern, wired with lights and telephones and electric bells, and also made clean and light, and the books chosen to look well on the shelves, and be full of useful wisdom for the town. This was being done because the town had come into money with a particularly excellent season, and because the governor had taken an interest in libraries, and also in modern things.

So Marc was engaged to help in the planning, and the sorting, and the moving of boxes and the running of wires. He told the story slowly, and at length, his voice content and peaceful lying on his back on Hunter's bed, and the two others, Hunter and Ona, settled in beside him (not that there was room on the bed for three, but they turned themselves on their sides and lay precariously, listening to his voice and feeling each other's warmth, and the cool of the air from the window), while he talked.

In a far back room of the library, in a place that had been used to store books that were unwanted even before the library was to be made modern, where boxes were kept,

and string, and stacks of paper of forgotten purposes, there was a stairway. This stairway, Marc found (after moving away three boxes, and a stack of rotting lumber) led down to an even less reputable storeroom, a dark place with a desk and a chair and bookcases at awkward angles. No one knew, and no one cared, what the room had been used for (a bindery, perhaps, a storage room for books in dispute, a bolt-hole for some shy scholar), and Marc was to clean it out and find some purpose for it, or have it boarded over.

The room smelled of time, Marc said, but of a more fragrant sort of time than its darkness and dampness suggested, a healthier smelling kind of time, and Marc came to enjoy minutes spent there, shuffling through stacks of unwanted (unwantable, unreadable, fragile and fragmented) periodicals from other decades (not modern nor clean), account books (of the library? of the town? of some forgotten concern?) discarded in the corners, broken boxes and oddly shaped pieces of wood ("I should have brought some for Hunter to draw; but out of their native habitat they might not be as interesting").

Behind a bookcase, Marc had come across a set of books, bound in yellow and less decayed, but no less old and abandoned, than the rest of the shapes in the room. The books were (he gestured at the table) just as you see; horses rearing, horses straining at the bit, horses trampling cities or running in herds contained in the bowl of a cup, horses at war with bears, or dragons, or oval machines, and at the bottom of each page those words, or numbers, or glyphs, which breathed meaning without speaking it, and which (with the pictures) demanded explanation, or experience.

Beside the books were four bundles of paper, with the same drawings, words (or numbers or runes or hymns or formulae) in the same angular script, perhaps pages that had fallen from the yellow bindings or the remains of other books whose covers had rotted off, or perhaps pages not yet bound when whatever it was that had created the books had

come to an end. Marc had spent many hours at the desk, in the chair, by the light of a lamp he carried down (an electric lamp, the cord a dirty white stretched across the room above and down the stairs and threaded through the objects in the room below). He had filled pages of his own with copies of the script from the pages, with notes on which characters came together, which did not, which appeared on the page with which sort of horse.

Then (and here his eyes came away from the ceiling, his gaze met Hunter's gaze) then one night, very late, when he had been dozing (dreaming? he did not think dreaming) at that desk, he had seen Hunter in the room beside him, kneeling on the floor, with his head down and his hair over his face (but still Hunter definitely and beyond any doubt). And when he had (without thinking, in the chair at the desk) called Hunter's name, the kneeling figure (Hunter, kneeling) had looked up, and just as he looked up had vanished.

So Marc had gone to the telephone (new, modern, clean) and called the post office in the town near the house by the meadows, and there had been no answer, no answer until sleepless hours later, when Bobby Cramm had been in (still yawning from bed, still thinking of the dark-haired girl with the laughing eyes) and had told Marc (on the other end of the telephone, the miles of wires, standing in an alcove of the library) that he did not need to run to the house, because Hunter had just telegraphed, and Hunter was in Pullen, and (although Bobby Cramm is not supposed to read the mail, or the telegrams, but they wouldn't mind, up at the house) here is his address.

"And so here I am."

And so here he is.

"One other thing. One last oddity."

On the train he had taken out the one bundle of papers that he brought with him (the others shipped, the mail so bright and reliable here, after the war, in the clear air and

the yellow sun), and spread a few on his lap, with his notes on the glyphs (the letters, the words, the numbers, the elemental incantations). After awhile (lulled by the running of the train over the tracks) he looked up, to find standing over him a woman.

"A woman I had never seen before, and for that matter who I've never seen since. And she took one of my horses!"

Took it and gave him in return a different paper, with writing (readable writing, familiar words) in an odd looping hand, and gave him also (tossed into his lap, onto his notes) a card, with an address in Pullen.

"And then she tried to walk away, but I got up and followed her. I tried to ask her what she was about, why I should give her my horse for her strange words, who she was, what was at this address. But she just shook her head! She said I could have my horse back if I wanted it. But she would say nothing more."

It is astounding to think, Marc says, how it is possible to avoid answering questions simply by not opening one's mouth. And Marc looks at Hunter and Ona, on either side of him on the bed, suspiciously, seeing something in their faces. He opens his suitcase again and, after a bit of searching, takes out a card and lays it on the table. He takes out a half sheet of paper and lays that beside it. On it, of course, is writing in an artful looping hand, and along each vertical edge is a pattern of lines, different from the pattern of Hunter's lines, the lines on Hunter's sheet, the lines on the sheet that the woman (the same woman?) gave to Hunter on the train (on his train), but also the same, siblings in the same vast unpresent family.

The scholars reach the moon after a week's travel, drawn by the simple intensity of their thought. Those they have left behind search through the rubble, and find five of the seven metal bands that encircled the arms of Wrath. The other two have fallen into a rift in the earth, and will not be seen again for a century.

Hunter goes to the corner, where the cloth sack is. He opens its mouth, ruffles through the paper bags, takes out his own paper with its loops and lines (Ygraine and Memnon celebrate these rites with an ecstatic dance, in company with a thousand weeping angels), and puts it gently on the table next to Marc's (Marc's eyes wide and eyebrows arching). He reaches his fingers into his pocket (he keeps it in his pocket, with coins and with pencils and with an old nail) and takes the card and puts it on the table. The addresses are of course the same.

And then Ona smiles and goes out. Hunter reads Marc's paper, and Marc reads Hunter's (both waiting, not talking, knowing Ona's smile and her walk and what they mean) and when Ona comes back she (there is nothing out of the ordinary) has a card in her hand, and she puts it onto the table, and the addresses are of course the same.

So here are the three young people, standing (now all standing) around the small table, each with a hand on the table, each hand near a small card, each card with the same address, and all seems completely obvious. Their hands touch their hands, a warm three-handed grip, and they all look into each other's eyes for a moment (for a long pleasant moment, the balance of the world shifting for the better Hunter thinks, Marc thinks, Ona thinks) and they turn, and go out the door, and Hunter closes and locks it behind them.

Marc is a stranger to the city, and Hunter is still a stranger to the city (how long does it take to learn a city, to know its smells and where its streets are, to know its walk and what it means?) but Ona knows where they are going. Even with all their talking and surprise, all Marc's slow story with his elbows in the air, it is still early evening (or middle evening, the sun down and the dark settled, but the streets alive, not all the children in bed) and the city is abroad, walking here and there, admiring itself in procession.

The three of them (hand in hand in hand now and again, now three walking a step apart, now two and one, now one and two) cross the blocks, out of their own quarter, into an older (perhaps a calmer, perhaps a richer, a quieter) part of the city, where there are trees between the houses, and courtyards behind some of the facades. And crossing the city they come to a certain street, and on that street they come to a certain block, and in that block Ona brings them to a certain house. And they knock (Hunter, or Ona, or Marc, or all three) on the door.

The woman who opens the door has black eyes and cropped hair. She smiles at them, but does not speak. Ona, who has brought her card with her, offers it to the woman, who shakes her head, and leads them in, through a dim hallway (a portrait of a woman, a mountain and a flock of wild horses, an urn with pastoral scenes crudely rendered, a row of books on a shelf). In the room at the back of the hallway is another door, and beyond that door is another room.

Hunter and Marc and Ona sit on cushions on chairs set in a half circle in the room. The woman has gone. The ceiling of the room is painted with the constellations, and the points of the compass. At the center of the half circle (what would be the center of the full circle) is a table, and two chairs. Somewhere at a distance, a bell rings (or bells ring, a brief melody or an order of chimes).

The door on the other side of the room opens, and a man and a woman come in. They are not young, not sad, not thin. They sit in the chairs, nod at the young people, put their hands (two arms two hands ten fingers two eyes) on the table, and they smile. Ona takes a breath.

"So," she says, "here we are. Will you tell us a story?"

The Water Gate

When last I awoke there was a chair beside my bed. Beside the chair was a table. On the table was a loaf of savory bread in the shape of a man.

When last I awoke I found that my room had become elongated. The wall behind my bed is the same size it was when last I fell asleep. I believe that the far wall is also the same size it was when last I fell asleep. However, the other two walls of my room are now miles long.

One of the walls of my room which is now miles long is blank. On the other wall of my room which is now miles long are a large number of doors. Between every pair of doors there is a window. Out each window is a narrow rocky beach, and beyond that, the sea.

Questions on the Book

Where did Ona get her card? What did the third prince write in his book? Support your answers with reference to the text.

If you were to compose a question about this book, what would it be? Why?

Get paper and pen, and write something, or draw something, from the depths of your mind. Draw a frozen hand, or a city in the shape of an eye, or write about the shapes of tears, or write glyphs in an unknown language. Take the paper and go into a room somewhere under the ground. Hide the paper in a pile of dirty leaves.

What do you feel?