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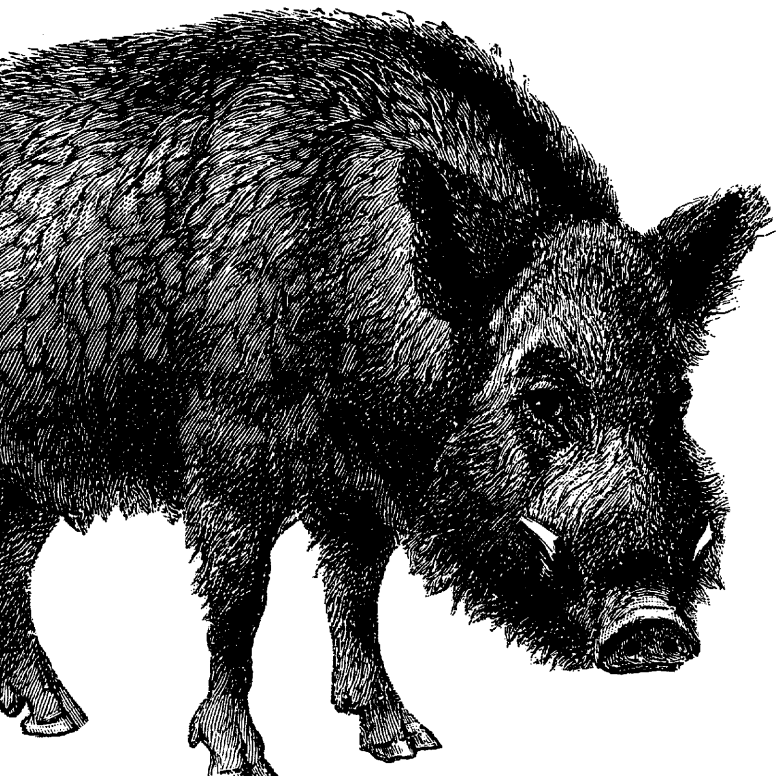
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ANNIH



ILATION

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For Ann

ANNIHILATION

01: INITIATION

The tower, which was not supposed to be there, plunges into the earth in a place just before the black pine forest begins to give way to swamp and then the reeds and wind-gnarled trees of the marsh flats. Beyond the marsh flats and the natural canals lies the ocean and, a little farther down the coast, a derelict lighthouse. All of this part of the country had been abandoned for decades, for reasons that are not easy to relate. Our expedition was the first to enter Area X for more than two years, and much of our predecessors' equipment had rusted, their tents and sheds little more than husks. Looking out over that untroubled landscape, I do not believe any of us could yet see the threat.

There were four of us: a biologist, an anthropologist, a surveyor, and a psychologist. I was the biologist. All of us were women this time, chosen as part of the complex set of variables that governed sending the expeditions. The psychologist, who was older than the rest of us, served as the

expedition's leader. She had put us all under hypnosis to cross the border, to make sure we remained calm. It took four days of hard hiking after crossing the border to reach the coast.

Our mission was simple: to continue the government's investigation into the mysteries of Area X, slowly working our way out from base camp.

The expedition could last days, months, or even years, depending on various stimuli and conditions. We had supplies with us for six months, and another two years' worth of supplies had already been stored at the base camp. We had also been assured that it was safe to live off the land if necessary. All of our foodstuffs were smoked or canned or in packets. Our most outlandish equipment consisted of a measuring device that had been issued to each of us, which hung from a strap on our belts: a small rectangle of black metal with a glass-covered hole in the middle. If the hole glowed red, we had thirty minutes to remove ourselves to "a safe place." We were not told what the device measured or why we should be afraid should it glow red. After the first few hours, I had grown so used to it that I hadn't looked at it again. We had been forbidden watches and compasses.

When we reached the camp, we set about replacing obsolete or damaged equipment with what we had brought and putting up our own tents. We would rebuild the sheds later, once we were sure that Area X had not affected us. The members of the last expedition had eventually drifted off, one by one. Over time, they had returned to their families, so strictly speaking they did not vanish. They simply disappeared from Area X and, by unknown means, reappeared back in the world beyond the border. They could not relate

the specifics of that journey. This *transference* had taken place across a period of eighteen months, and it was not something that had been experienced by prior expeditions. But other phenomena could also result in “premature dissolution of expeditions,” as our superiors put it, so we needed to test our stamina for that place.

We also needed to acclimate ourselves to the environment. In the forest near base camp one might encounter black bears or coyotes. You might hear a sudden croak and watch a night heron startle from a tree branch and, distracted, step on a poisonous snake, of which there were at least six varieties. Bogs and streams hid huge aquatic reptiles, and so we were careful not to wade too deep to collect our water samples. Still, these aspects of the ecosystem did not really concern any of us. Other elements had the ability to unsettle, however. Long ago, towns had existed here, and we encountered eerie signs of human habitation: rotting cabins with sunken, red-tinged roofs, rusted wagon-wheel spokes half-buried in the dirt, and the barely seen outlines of what used to be enclosures for livestock, now mere ornament for layers of pine-needle loam.

Far worse, though, was a low, powerful moaning at dusk. The wind off the sea and the odd interior stillness dulled our ability to gauge direction, so that the sound seemed to infiltrate the black water that soaked the cypress trees. This water was so dark we could see our faces in it, and it never stirred, set like glass, reflecting the beards of gray moss that smothered the cypress trees. If you looked out through these areas, toward the ocean, all you saw was the black water, the gray of the cypress trunks, and the constant, motionless rain of moss flowing down. All you heard was the low moaning.

The effect of this cannot be understood without being there. The beauty of it cannot be understood, either, and when you see beauty in desolation it changes something inside you. Desolation tries to colonize you.

As noted, we found the tower in a place just before the forest became waterlogged and then turned to salt marsh. This occurred on our fourth day after reaching base camp, by which time we had almost gotten our bearings. We did not expect to find anything there, based on both the maps that we brought with us and the water-stained, pine-dust-smearred documents our predecessors had left behind. But there it was, surrounded by a fringe of scrub grass, half-hidden by fallen moss off to the left of the trail: a circular block of some grayish stone seeming to mix cement and ground-up seashells. It measured roughly sixty feet in diameter, this circular block, and was raised from ground level by about eight inches. Nothing had been etched into or written on its surface that could in any way reveal its purpose or the identity of its makers. Starting at due north, a rectangular opening set into the surface of the block revealed stairs spiraling down into darkness. The entrance was obscured by the webs of banana spiders and debris from storms, but a cool draft came from below.

At first, only I saw it as a tower. I don't know why the word *tower* came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground. I could as easily have considered it a bunker or a submerged building. Yet as soon as I saw the staircase, I remembered the lighthouse on the coast and had a sudden vision of the last expedition drifting off, one by one, and sometime thereafter the ground shifting in a uniform and preplanned way to leave the lighthouse standing where it had always been

but depositing this underground part of it inland. I saw this in vast and intricate detail as we all stood there, and, looking back, I mark it as the first irrational thought I had once we had reached our destination.

“This is impossible,” said the surveyor, staring at her maps. The solid shade of late afternoon cast her in cool darkness and lent the words more urgency than they would have had otherwise. The sun was telling us that soon we’d have to use our flashlights to interrogate the impossible, although I’d have been perfectly happy doing it in the dark.

“And yet there it is,” I said. “Unless we are having a mass hallucination.”

“The architectural model is hard to identify,” the anthropologist said. “The materials are ambiguous, indicating local origin but not necessarily local construction. Without going inside, we will not know if it is primitive or modern, or something in between. I’m not sure I would want to guess at how old it is, either.”

We had no way to inform our superiors about this discovery. One rule for an expedition into Area X was that we were to attempt no outside contact, for fear of some irrevocable contamination. We also took little with us that matched our current level of technology. We had no cell or satellite phones, no computers, no camcorders, no complex measuring instruments except for those strange black boxes hanging from our belts. Our cameras required a makeshift darkroom. The absence of cell phones in particular made the real world seem very far away to the others, but I had always preferred to live without them. For weapons, we had knives, a locked container of antique handguns, and one assault rifle, this last a reluctant concession to current security standards.

It was expected simply that we would keep a record, like this one, in a journal, like this one: lightweight but nearly indestructible, with waterproof paper, a flexible black-and-white cover, and the blue horizontal lines for writing and the red line to the left to mark the margin. These journals would either return with us or be recovered by the next expedition. We had been cautioned to provide maximum context, so that anyone ignorant of Area X could understand our accounts. We had also been ordered not to share our journal entries with one another. Too much shared information could skew our observations, our superiors believed. But I knew from experience how hopeless this pursuit, this attempt to weed out bias, was. Nothing that lived and breathed was truly objective—even in a vacuum, even if all that possessed the brain was a self-immolating desire for the truth.

“I’m excited by this discovery,” the psychologist interjected before we had discussed the tower much further. “Are you excited, too?” She had not asked us that particular question before. During training, she had tended to ask questions more like “How calm do you think you might be in an emergency?” Back then, I had felt as if she were a bad actor, playing a role. Now it seemed even more apparent, as if being our leader somehow made her nervous.

“It is definitely exciting . . . and unexpected,” I said, trying not to mock her and failing, a little. I was surprised to feel a sense of growing unease, mostly because in my imagination, my dreams, this discovery would have been among the more banal. In my head, before we had crossed the border, I had seen so many things: vast cities, peculiar animals, and, once, during a period of illness, an enormous monster that rose from the waves to bear down on our camp.

The surveyor, meanwhile, just shrugged and would not answer the psychologist's question. The anthropologist nodded as if she agreed with me. The entrance to the tower leading down exerted a kind of presence, a blank surface that let us write so many things upon it. This presence manifested like a low-grade fever, pressing down on all of us.

I would tell you the names of the other three, if it mattered, but only the surveyor would last more than the next day or two. Besides, we were always strongly discouraged from using names: We were meant to be focused on our purpose, and "anything personal should be left behind." Names belonged to where we had come from, not to who we were while embedded in Area X.



Originally our expedition had numbered five and included a linguist. To reach the border, we each had to enter a separate bright white room with a door at the far end and a single metal chair in the corner. The chair had holes along the sides for straps; the implications of this raised a prickle of alarm, but by then I was set in my determination to reach Area X. The facility that housed these rooms was under the control of the Southern Reach, the clandestine government agency that dealt with all matters connected to Area X.

There we waited while innumerable readings were taken and various blasts of air, some cool, some hot, pressed down on us from vents in the ceiling. At some point, the psychologist visited each of us, although I do not remember what was said. Then we exited through the far door into a central staging area, with double doors at the end of a long hallway.

The psychologist greeted us there, but the linguist never reappeared.

“She had second thoughts,” the psychologist told us, meeting our questions with a firm gaze. “She decided to stay behind.” This came as a small shock, but there was also relief that it had not been someone else. Of all of our skill sets, linguist seemed at the time most expendable.

After a moment, the psychologist said, “Now, clear your minds.” This meant she would begin the process of hypnotizing us so we could cross the border. She would then put herself under a kind of self-hypnosis. It had been explained that we would need to cross the border with precautions to protect against our minds tricking us. Apparently hallucinations were common. At least, this was what they told us. I no longer can be sure it was the truth. The actual nature of the border had been withheld from us for security reasons; we knew only that it was invisible to the naked eye.

So when I “woke up” with the others, it was in full gear, including heavy hiking boots, with the weight of forty-pound backpacks and a multitude of additional supplies hanging from our belts. All three of us lurched, and the anthropologist fell to one knee, while the psychologist patiently waited for us to recover. “I’m sorry,” she said. “That was the least startling reentry I could manage.”

The surveyor cursed, and glared at her. She had a temper that must have been deemed an asset. The anthropologist, as was her way, got to her feet, uncomplaining. And I, as was my way, was too busy observing to take this rude awakening personally. For example, I noticed the cruelty of the almost imperceptible smile on the psychologist’s lips as she watched us struggle to adjust, the anthropologist still floundering and

apologizing for floundering. Later I realized I might have misread her expression; it might have been pained or self-pitying.

We were on a dirt trail strewn with pebbles, dead leaves, and pine needles damp to the touch. Velvet ants and tiny emerald beetles crawled over them. The tall pines, with their scaly ridges of bark, rose on both sides, and the shadows of flying birds conjured lines between them. The air was so fresh it buffeted the lungs and we strained to breathe for a few seconds, mostly from surprise. Then, after marking our location with a piece of red cloth tied to a tree, we began to walk forward, into the unknown. If the psychologist somehow became incapacitated and could not lead us across at the end of our mission, we had been told to return to await “extraction.” No one ever explained what form “extraction” might take, but the implication was that our superiors could observe the extraction point from afar, even though it was inside the border.

We had been told not to look back upon arrival, but I snuck a glance anyway, while the psychologist’s attention was elsewhere. I don’t know quite what I saw. It was hazy, indistinct, and already far behind us—perhaps a gate, perhaps a trick of the eye. Just a sudden impression of a fizzing block of light, fast fading.



The reasons I had volunteered were very separate from my qualifications for the expedition. I believe I qualified because I specialized in transitional environments, and this particular location transitioned several times, meaning that it was

home to a complexity of ecosystems. In few other places could you still find habitat where, within the space of walking only six or seven miles, you went from forest to swamp to salt marsh to beach. In Area X, I had been told, I would find marine life that had adjusted to the brackish freshwater and which at low tide swam far up the natural canals formed by the reeds, sharing the same environment with otters and deer. If you walked along the beach, riddled through with the holes of fiddler crabs, you would sometimes look out to see one of the giant reptiles, for they, too, had adapted to their habitat.

I understood why no one lived in Area X now, that it was pristine because of that reason, but I kept un-remembering it. I had decided instead to make believe that it was simply a protected wildlife refuge, and we were hikers who happened to be scientists. This made sense on another level: We did not know what had happened here, what was still happening here, and any preformed theories would affect my analysis of the evidence as we encountered it. Besides, for my part it hardly mattered what lies I told myself because my existence back in the world had become at least as empty as Area X. With nothing left to anchor me, I *needed* to be here. As for the others, I don't know what they told themselves, and I didn't want to know, but I believe they all at least pretended to some level of curiosity. Curiosity could be a powerful distraction.

That night we talked about the tower, although the other three insisted on calling it a tunnel. The responsibility for the thrust of our investigations resided with each individual, the psychologist's authority describing a wider circle around these decisions. Part of the current rationale for sending the

expeditions lay in giving each member some autonomy to decide, which helped to increase “the possibility of significant variation.”

This vague protocol existed in the context of our separate skill sets. For example, although we had all received basic weapons and survival training, the surveyor had far more medical and firearms experience than the rest of us. The anthropologist had once been an architect; indeed, she had years ago survived a fire in a building she had designed, the only really personal thing I had found out about her. As for the psychologist, we knew the least about her, but I think we all believed she came from some kind of management background.

The discussion of the tower was, in a way, our first opportunity to test the limits of disagreement and of compromise.

“I don’t think we should focus on the tunnel,” the anthropologist said. “We should explore farther first, and we should come back to it with whatever data we gather from our other investigations—including of the lighthouse.”

How predictable, and yet perhaps prescient, for the anthropologist to try to substitute a safer, more comfortable option. Although the idea of mapping seemed perfunctory or repetitive to me, I could not deny the existence of the tower, of which there was no suggestion on any map.

Then the surveyor spoke. “In this case I feel that we should rule out the tunnel as something invasive or threatening. Before we explore farther. It’s like an enemy at our backs otherwise, if we press forward.” She had come to us from the military, and I could see already the value of that experience. I had thought a surveyor would always side with the idea of further exploration, so this opinion carried weight.

“I’m impatient to explore the habitats here,” I said. “But in a sense, given that it is not noted on any map, the ‘tunnel’ . . . or tower . . . seems important. It is either a deliberate exclusion from our maps and thus known . . . and that is a message of sorts . . . or it is something new that wasn’t here when the last expedition arrived.”

The surveyor gave me a look of thanks for the support, but my position had nothing to do with helping her. Something about the idea of a tower that headed straight down played with a twinned sensation of vertigo and a fascination with structure. I could not tell which part I craved and which I feared, and I kept seeing the inside of nautilus shells and other naturally occurring patterns balanced against a sudden leap off a cliff into the unknown.

The psychologist nodded, appeared to consider these opinions, and asked, “Does anyone yet have even an inkling of a sensation of wanting to leave?” It was a legitimate question, but jarring nonetheless.

All three of us shook our heads.

“What about you?” the surveyor asked the psychologist. “What is your opinion?”

The psychologist grinned, which seemed odd. But she must have known any one of us might have been tasked with observing her own reactions to stimuli. Perhaps the idea that a surveyor, an expert in the surface of things, might have been chosen, rather than a biologist or anthropologist, amused her. “I must admit to feeling a great deal of unease at the moment. But I am unsure whether it is because of the effect of the overall environment or the presence of the tunnel. Personally, I would like to rule out the tunnel.”

Tower.

“Three to one, then,” the anthropologist said, clearly relieved that the decision had been made for her.

The surveyor just shrugged.

Perhaps I’d been wrong about curiosity. The surveyor didn’t seem curious about anything.

“Bored?” I asked.

“Eager to get on with it,” she said, to the group, as if I’d asked the question for all of us.

We were in the communal tent for our talk. It had become dark by then and there came soon after the strange mournful call in the night that we knew must have natural causes but created a little shiver regardless. As if that was the signal to disband, we went back to our own quarters to be alone with our thoughts. I lay awake in my tent for a while trying to turn the tower into a tunnel, or even a shaft, but with no success. Instead, my mind kept returning to a question: *What lies hidden at its base?*



During our hike from the border to the base camp near the coast, we had experienced almost nothing out of the ordinary. The birds sang as they should; the deer took flight, their white tails exclamation points against the green and brown of the underbrush; the raccoons, bowlegged, swayed about their business, ignoring us. As a group, we felt almost giddy, I think, to be free after so many confining months of training and preparation. While we were in that corridor, in that transitional space, nothing could touch us. We were neither what we had been nor what we would become once we reached our destination.

The day before we arrived at the camp, this mood was briefly shattered by the appearance of an enormous wild boar some distance ahead of us on the trail. It was so far from us that even with our binoculars we could barely identify it at first. But despite poor eyesight, wild pigs have prodigious powers of smell, and it began charging us from one hundred yards away. Thundering down the trail toward us . . . yet we still had time to think about what we might do, had drawn our long knives, and in the surveyor's case her assault rifle. Bullets would probably stop a seven-hundred-pound pig, or perhaps not. We did not feel confident taking our attention from the boar to untie the container of handguns from our gear and open its triple locks.

There was no time for the psychologist to prepare any hypnotic suggestion designed to keep us focused and in control; in fact, all she could offer was "Don't get close to it! Don't let it touch you!" while the boar continued to charge. The anthropologist was giggling a bit out of nervousness and the absurdity of experiencing an emergency situation that was taking so long to develop. Only the surveyor had taken direct action: She had dropped to one knee to get a better shot; our orders included the helpful directive to "kill only if you are under threat of being killed."

I was continuing to watch through the binoculars, and as the boar came closer, its face became stranger and stranger. Its features were somehow contorted, as if the beast was dealing with an extreme of inner torment. Nothing about its muzzle or broad, long face looked at all extraordinary, and yet I had the startling impression of some *presence* in the way its gaze seemed turned inward and its head willfully pulled to the left as if there were an invisible bridle. A kind of elec-

tricity sparked in its eyes that I could not credit as real. I thought instead it must be a by-product of my now slightly shaky hand on the binoculars.

Whatever was consuming the boar also soon consumed its desire to charge. It veered abruptly leftward, with what I can only describe as a great cry of anguish, into the underbrush. By the time we reached that spot, the boar was gone, leaving behind a thoroughly thrashed trail.

For several hours, my thoughts turned inward toward explanations for what I had seen: parasites and other hitchhikers of a neurological nature. I was searching for entirely rational biological theories. Then, after a time, the boar faded into the backdrop like all else that we had passed on our way from the border, and I was staring into the future again.



The morning after we discovered the tower we rose early, ate our breakfast, and doused our fire. There was a crisp chill to the air common for the season. The surveyor broke open the weapons stash and gave us each a handgun. She herself continued to hold on to the assault rifle; it had the added benefit of a flashlight under the barrel. We had not expected to have to open that particular container so soon, and although none of us protested, I felt a new tension between us. We knew that members of the second expedition to Area X had committed suicide by gunshot and members of the third had shot each other. Not until several subsequent expeditions had suffered zero casualties had our superiors issued firearms again. We were the twelfth expedition.

So we returned to the tower, all four of us. Sunlight came

down dappled through the moss and leaves, created archipelagos of light on the flat surface of the entrance. It remained unremarkable, inert, in no way ominous . . . and yet it took an act of will to stand there, staring at the entry point. I noticed the anthropologist checking her black box, was relieved to see it did not display a glowing red light. If it had, we would have had to abort our exploration, move on to other things. I did not want that, despite the touch of fear.

“How deep do you think it goes down?” the anthropologist asked.

“Remember that we are to put our faith in your measurements,” the psychologist answered, with a slight frown. “The measurements do not lie. This structure is 61.4 feet in diameter. It is raised 7.9 inches from the ground. The stairwell appears to have been positioned at or close to due north, which may tell us something about its creation, eventually. It is made of stone and coquina, not of metal or of bricks. These are facts. That it wasn’t on the maps means only that a storm may have uncovered the entrance.”

I found the psychologist’s faith in measurements and her rationalization for the tower’s absence from maps oddly . . . endearing? Perhaps she meant merely to reassure us, but I would like to believe she was trying to reassure herself. Her position, to lead and possibly to know more than us, must have been difficult and lonely.

“I hope it’s only about six feet deep so we can continue mapping,” the surveyor said, trying to be lighthearted, but then she, and we, all recognized the term “six feet under” ghosting through her syntax and a silence settled over us.

“I want you to know that I cannot stop thinking of it as

a *tower*,” I confessed. “I can’t see it as a tunnel.” It seemed important to make the distinction before our descent, even if it influenced their evaluation of my mental state. I saw a tower, plunging into the ground. The thought that we stood at its summit made me a little dizzy.

All three stared at me then, as if I were the strange cry at dusk, and after a moment the psychologist said, grudgingly, “If that helps make you more comfortable, then I don’t see the harm.”

A silence came over us again, there under the canopy of trees. A beetle spiraled up toward the branches, trailing dust motes. I think we all realized that only now had we truly entered Area X.

“I’ll go first and see what’s down there,” the surveyor said, finally, and we were happy to defer to her.

The initial stairwell curved steeply downward and the steps were narrow, so the surveyor would have to back her way into the tower. We used sticks to clear the spiderwebs as she lowered herself into position on the stairwell. She teetered there, weapon slung across her back, looking up at us. She had tied her hair back and it made the lines of her face seem tight and drawn. Was this the moment when we were supposed to stop her? To come up with some other plan? If so, none of us had the nerve.

With a strange smirk, almost as if judging us, the surveyor descended until we could only see her face framed in the gloom below, and then not even that. She left an empty space that was shocking to me, as if the reverse had actually happened: as if a face had suddenly floated into view out of the darkness. I gasped, which drew a stare from the

psychologist. The anthropologist was too busy staring down into the stairwell to notice any of it.

“Is everything okay?” the psychologist called out to the surveyor. Everything had been fine just a second before. Why would anything be different now?

The surveyor made a sharp grunt in answer, as if agreeing with me. For a few moments more, we could still hear the surveyor struggling on those short steps. Then came silence, and then another movement, at a different rhythm, which for a terrifying moment seemed like it might come from a second source.

But then the surveyor called up to us. “Clear to this level!” *This level*. Something within me thrilled to the fact that my vision of a *tower* was not yet disproven.

That was the signal for me to descend with the anthropologist, while the psychologist stood watch. “Time to go,” the psychologist said, as perfunctorily as if we were in school and a class was letting out.

An emotion that I could not quite identify surged through me, and for a moment I saw dark spots in my field of vision. I followed the anthropologist so eagerly down through the remains of webs and the embalmed husks of insects into the cool brackishness of that place that I almost tripped her. My last view of the world above: the psychologist peering down at me with a slight frown, and behind her the trees, the blue of the sky almost blinding against the darkness of the sides of the stairwell.

Below, shadows spread across the walls. The temperature dropped and sound became muffled, the soft steps absorbing our tread. Approximately twenty feet beneath the surface, the structure opened out into a lower level. The ceiling was

about eight feet high, which meant a good twelve feet of stone lay above us. The flashlight of the surveyor's assault rifle illuminated the space, but she was faced away from us, surveying the walls, which were an off-white and devoid of any adornment. A few cracks indicated either the passage of time or some sudden stressor. The level appeared to be the same circumference as the exposed top, which again supported the idea of a single solid structure buried in the earth.

"It goes farther," the surveyor said, and pointed with her rifle to the far corner, directly opposite the opening where we had come out onto that level. A rounded archway stood there, and a darkness that suggested downward steps. A tower, which made this level not so much a floor as a landing or part of the turret. She started to walk toward the archway while I was still engrossed in examining the walls with my flashlight. Their very blankness mesmerized me. I tried to imagine the builder of this place but could not.

I thought again of the silhouette of the lighthouse, as I had seen it during the late afternoon of our first day at base camp. We assumed that the structure in question was a lighthouse because the map showed a lighthouse at that location and because everyone immediately recognized what a lighthouse *should* look like. In fact, the surveyor and anthropologist had both expressed a kind of *relief* when they had seen the lighthouse. Its appearance on both the map and in reality reassured them, anchored them. Being familiar with its function further reassured them.

With the tower, we knew none of these things. We could not intuit its full outline. We had no sense of its purpose. And now that we had begun to descend into it, the tower

still failed to reveal any hint of these things. The psychologist might recite the measurements of the “top” of the tower, but those numbers meant nothing, had no wider context. Without context, clinging to those numbers was a form of madness.

“There is a regularity to the circle, seen from the inside walls, that suggests precision in the creation of the building,” the anthropologist said. *The building*. Already she had begun to abandon the idea of it being a tunnel.

All of my thoughts came spilling out of my mouth, some final discharge from the state that had overtaken me above. “But what is its *purpose*? And is it believable that it would not be on the maps? Could one of the prior expeditions have built it and hidden it?” I asked all of this and more, not expecting an answer. Even though no threat had revealed itself, it seemed important to eliminate any possible moment of silence. As if somehow the blankness of the walls fed off of silence, and that something might appear in the spaces between our words if we were not careful. Had I expressed this anxiety to the psychologist, she would have been worried, I know. But I was more attuned to solitude than any of us, and I would have characterized that place in that moment of our exploration as watchful.

A gasp from the surveyor cut me off in mid-question, no doubt much to the anthropologist’s relief.

“Look!” the surveyor said, training her flashlight down into the archway. We hurried over and stared past her, adding our own illumination.

A stairway did indeed lead down, this time at a gentle curve with much broader steps, but still made of the same

materials. At about shoulder height, perhaps five feet high, clinging to the inner wall of the tower, I saw what I first took to be dimly sparkling green vines progressing down into the darkness. I had a sudden absurd memory of the floral wallpaper treatment that had lined the bathroom of my house when I had shared it with my husband. Then, as I stared, the “vines” resolved further, and I saw that they were words, in cursive, the letters raised about six inches off the wall.

“Hold the light,” I said, and pushed past them down the first few steps. Blood was rushing through my head again, a roaring confusion in my ears. It was an act of supreme control to walk those few paces. I couldn’t tell you what impulse drove me, except that I was the biologist and this looked oddly organic. If the linguist had been there, perhaps I would have deferred to her.

“Don’t touch it, whatever it is,” the anthropologist warned.

I nodded, but I was too enthralled with the discovery. If I’d had the impulse to touch the words on the wall, I would not have been able to stop myself.

As I came close, did it surprise me that I could understand the language the words were written in? Yes. Did it fill me with a kind of elation and dread intertwined? Yes. I tried to suppress the thousand new questions rising up inside of me. In as calm a voice as I could manage, aware of the importance of that moment, I read from the beginning, aloud: *“Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that . . .”*

Then the darkness took it.

“Words? Words?” the anthropologist said.

Yes, words.

“What are they made of?” the surveyor asked. Did they need to be made of anything?

The illumination cast on the continuing sentence quavered and shook. *Where lies the strangling fruit* became bathed in shadow and in light, as if a battle raged for its meaning.

“Give me a moment. I need to get closer.” Did I? Yes, I needed to get closer.

What are they made of?

I hadn't even thought of this, though I should have; I was still trying to parse the lingual meaning, had not transitioned to the idea of taking a physical sample. But what relief at the question! Because it helped me fight the compulsion to keep reading, to descend into the greater darkness and keep descending until I had read all there was to read. Already those initial phrases were infiltrating my mind in unexpected ways, finding fertile ground.

So I stepped closer, peered at *Where lies the strangling fruit*. I saw that the letters, connected by their cursive script, were made from what would have looked to the layperson like rich green fernlike moss but in fact was probably a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism. The curling filaments were all packed very close together and rising out from the wall. A loamy smell came from the words along with an underlying hint of rotting honey. This miniature forest *swayed*, almost imperceptibly, like sea grass in a gentle ocean current.

Other things existed in this miniature ecosystem. Half-hidden by the green filaments, most of these creatures were translucent and shaped like tiny hands embedded by the

base of the palm. Golden nodules capped the fingers on these “hands.” I leaned in closer, like a fool, like someone who had not had months of survival training or ever studied biology. Someone tricked into thinking that words should be read.

I was unlucky—or was I lucky? Triggered by a disturbance in the flow of air, a nodule in the W chose that moment to burst open and a tiny spray of golden spores spewed out. I pulled back, but I thought I had felt something enter my nose, experienced a pinprick of escalation in the smell of rotting honey.

Unnerved, I stepped back even farther, borrowing some of the surveyor’s best curses, but only in my head. My natural instinct was always for concealment. Already I was imagining the psychologist’s reaction to my contamination, if revealed to the group.

“Some sort of fungi,” I said finally, taking a deep breath so I could control my voice. “The letters are made from fruiting bodies.” Who knew if it were actually true? It was just the closest thing to an answer.

My voice must have seemed calmer than my actual thoughts because there was no hesitation in their response. No hint in their tone of having seen the spores erupt into my face. I had been so close. The spores had been so tiny, so insignificant. *I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead.*

“Words? Made of fungi?” the surveyor said, stupidly echoing me.

“There is no recorded human language that uses this method of writing,” the anthropologist said. “Is there any animal that communicates in this way?”

I had to laugh. “No, there is no animal that communicates

in this way.” Or, if there were, I could not recall its name, and never did later, either.

“Are you joking? This is a joke, right?” the surveyor said. She looked poised to come down and prove me wrong, but didn’t move from her position.

“Fruiting bodies,” I replied, almost as if in a trance. “Forming words.”

A calm had settled over me. A competing sensation, as if I couldn’t breathe, or didn’t want to, was clearly psychological not physiological. I had noticed no physical changes, and on some level it didn’t matter. I knew it was unlikely we had an antidote to something so unknown waiting back at the camp.

More than anything, the information I was trying to process immobilized me. The words were composed of symbiotic fruiting bodies from a species unknown to me. Second, the dusting of spores on the words meant that the farther down into the tower we explored, the more the air would be full of potential contaminants. Was there any reason to relay this information to the others when it would only alarm them? No, I decided, perhaps selfishly. It was more important to make sure they were not directly exposed until we could come back with the proper equipment. Any other evaluation depended on environmental and biological factors about which I was increasingly convinced I had inadequate data.

I came back up the stairs to the landing. The surveyor and the anthropologist looked expectant, as if I could tell them more. The anthropologist in particular was on edge; her gaze couldn’t alight on any one thing but kept moving and moving. Perhaps I could have fabricated information that would have stopped that incessant search. But what could

I tell them about the words on the wall except that they were either impossible or insane, or both? I would have preferred the words be written in an *unknown* language; this would have presented less of a mystery for us to solve, in a way.

“We should go back up,” I said. It was not that I recommended this as the best course of action but because I wanted to limit their exposure to the spores until I could see what long-term effects they might have on me. I also knew if I stayed there much longer I might experience a compulsion to go back down the stairs to continue reading the words, and they would have to physically restrain me, and I did not know what I would do then.

There was no argument from the other two. But as we climbed back up, I had a moment of vertigo despite being in such an enclosed space, a kind of panic for a moment, in which the walls suddenly had a fleshy aspect to them, as if we traveled inside of the gullet of a beast.

When we told the psychologist what we had seen, when I recited some of the words, she seemed at first frozen in an oddly attentive way. Then she decided to descend to view the words. I struggled with whether I should warn her against this action. Finally I said, “Only observe from the top of the stairs. We don’t know whether there are toxins. When we come back, we should wear breathing masks.” These, at least, we had inherited from the last expedition, in a sealed container.

“*Paralysis is not a cogent analysis?*” she said to me with a pointed stare. I felt a kind of itchiness come over me, but I said nothing, did nothing. The others did not even seem to

realize she had spoken. It was only later that I realized the psychologist had tried to bind me with a hypnotic suggestion meant for me and me alone.

My reaction apparently fell within the range of acceptable responses, for she descended while we waited anxiously above. What would we do if she did not return? A sense of ownership swept over me. I was agitated by the idea that she might experience the same need to read further and would act upon it. Even though I didn't know what the words meant, I wanted them to mean something so that I might more swiftly remove doubt, bring reason back into all of my equations. Such thoughts distracted me from thinking about the effects of the spores on my system.

Thankfully the other two had no desire to talk as we waited, and after just fifteen minutes the psychologist awkwardly pushed her way up out of the stairwell and into the light, blinking as her vision adjusted.

"Interesting," she said in a flat tone as she loomed over us, wiping the cobwebs from her clothing. "I have never seen anything like that before." She seemed as if she might continue, but then decided against it.

What she had already said verged on the moronic; apparently I was not alone in that assessment.

"Interesting?" the anthropologist said. "No one has ever seen anything like that in the entire history of the world. No one. *Ever*. And you call it *interesting*?" She seemed close to working herself into a bout of hysteria. While the surveyor just stared at both of them as if *they* were the alien organisms.

"Do you need me to calm you?" the psychologist asked. There was a steely tone to her words that made the anthro-

pologist mumble something noncommittal and stare at the ground.

I stepped into the silence with my own suggestion: “We need time to think about this. We need time to decide what to do next.” I meant, of course, that I needed time to see if the spores I had inhaled would affect me in a way significant enough to confess to what had happened.

“There may not be enough time in the world for that,” the surveyor said. Of all of us, I think she had best grasped the implications of what we had seen: that we might now be living in a kind of nightmare. But the psychologist ignored her and sided with me. “We do need time. We should spend the rest of our day doing what we were sent here to do.”

So we returned to camp for lunch and then focused on “ordinary things” while I kept monitoring my body for any changes. Did I feel too cold now, or too hot? Was that ache in my knee from an old injury suffered in the field, or something new? I even checked the black box monitor, but it remained inert. Nothing radical had yet changed in me, and as we took our samples and readings in the general vicinity of the camp—as if to stray too far would be to come under the tower’s control—I gradually relaxed and told myself that the spores had had no effect . . . even though I knew that the incubation period for some species could be months or years. I suppose I thought merely that for the next few days at least I might be safe.

The surveyor concentrated on adding detail and nuance to the maps our superiors had given us. The anthropologist went off to examine the remains of some cabins a quarter mile away. The psychologist stayed in her tent, writing in her journal. Perhaps she was reporting on how she was surrounded

by idiots, or just setting out every moment of our morning discoveries.

For my part, I spent an hour observing a tiny red-and-green tree frog on the back of a broad, thick leaf and another hour following the path of an iridescent black damselfly that should not have been found at sea level. The rest of the time, I spent up a pine tree, binoculars focused on the coast and the lighthouse. I liked climbing. I also liked the ocean, and I found staring at it had a calming effect. The air was so clean, so fresh, while the world back beyond the border was what it had always been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself. Back there, I had always felt as if my work amounted to a futile attempt to save us from who we are.

The richness of Area X's biosphere was reflected in the wealth of birdlife, from warblers and flickers to cormorants and black ibis. I could also see a bit into the salt marshes, and my attention there was rewarded by a minute-long glimpse of a pair of otters. At one point, they glanced up and I had a strange sensation that they could see me watching them. It was a feeling I often had when out in the wilderness: that things were not quite what they seemed, and I had to fight against the sensation because it could overwhelm my scientific objectivity. There was also something else, moving ponderously through the reeds, but it was closer to the lighthouse and in deep cover. I could not tell what it was, and after a while its disturbance of the vegetation ceased and I lost track of it entirely. I imagined it might be another wild pig, as they could be good swimmers and were just as omnivorous in their choice of habitats as in their diets.

On the whole, by dusk this strategy of busying ourselves

in our tasks had worked to calm our nerves. The tension lifted somewhat, and we even joked a little bit at dinner. “I wish I knew what you were thinking,” the anthropologist confessed to me, and I replied, “No, you don’t,” which was met with a laughter that surprised me. I didn’t want their voices in my head, their ideas of me, nor their own stories or problems. Why would they want mine?

But I did not mind that a sense of camaraderie had begun to take hold, even if it would prove short-lived. The psychologist allowed us each a couple of beers from the store of alcohol, which loosened us up to the point that I even clumsily expressed the idea that we might maintain some sort of contact once we had completed our mission. I had stopped checking myself for physiological or psychological reactions to the spores by then, and found that the surveyor and I got along better than I had expected. I still didn’t like the anthropologist very much, but mostly in the context of the mission, not anything she had said to me. I felt that, once in the field, much as some athletes were good in practice and not during the game, she had exhibited a lack of mental toughness thus far. Although just volunteering for such a mission meant something.

When the nightly cry from the marshes came a little after nightfall, while we sat around our fire, we at first called back to it in a drunken show of bravado. The beast in the marshes now seemed like an old friend compared to the tower. We were confident that eventually we would photograph it, document its behavior, tag it, and assign it a place in the taxonomy of living things. It would become known in a way we feared the tower would not. But we stopped calling back when the intensity of its moans heightened in a way that suggested

anger, as if it knew we were mocking it. Nervous laughter all around, then, and the psychologist took that as her cue to ready us for the next day.

“Tomorrow we will go back to the tunnel. We will go deeper, taking certain precautions—wearing breathing masks, as suggested. We will record the writing on the walls and get a sense of how old it is, I hope. Also, perhaps a sense of how deep the tunnel descends. In the afternoon, we’ll return to our general investigations of the area. We’ll repeat this schedule every day until we think we know enough about the tunnel and how it fits into Area X.”

Tower, not tunnel. She could have been talking about investigating an abandoned shopping center, for all of the emphasis she put on it . . . and yet something about her tone seemed rehearsed.

Then she abruptly stood and said three words: “*Consolidation of authority.*”

Immediately the surveyor and the anthropologist beside me went slack, their eyes unfocused. I was shocked, but I mimicked them, hoping that the psychologist had not noticed the lag. I felt no compulsion whatsoever, but clearly we had been preprogrammed to enter a hypnotic state in response to those words, uttered by the psychologist.

Her demeanor more assertive than just a moment before, the psychologist said, “You will retain a memory of having discussed several options with regard to the tunnel. You will find that you ultimately agreed with me about the best course of action, and that you felt quite confident about this course of action. You will experience a sensation of calm whenever you think about this decision, and you will remain calm once back inside the tunnel, although you

will react to any stimuli as per your training. You will not take undue risks.

“You will continue to see a structure that is made of coquina and stone. You will trust your colleagues completely and feel a continued sense of fellowship with them. When you emerge from the structure, any time you see a bird in flight it will trigger a strong feeling that you are doing the *right thing*, that you are in the *right place*. When I snap my fingers, you will have no memory of this conversation, but will follow my directives. You will feel very tired and you will want to retire to your tents to get a good night’s sleep before tomorrow’s activities. You will not dream. You will not have nightmares.”

I stared straight ahead as she said these words, and when she snapped her fingers I took my cue from the actions of the other two. I don’t believe the psychologist suspected anything, and I retired to my tent just as the others retired to their tents.

Now I had new data to process, along with the tower. We knew that the psychologist’s role was to provide balance and calm in a situation that might become stressful, and that part of this role included hypnotic suggestion. I could not blame her for performing that role. But to see it laid out so nakedly troubled me. It is one thing to think you might be receiving hypnotic suggestion and quite another to experience it as an observer. What level of control could she exert over us? What did she mean by saying that we would continue to think of the tower as made of coquina and stone?

Most important, however, I now could guess at one way in which the spores had affected me: They had made me immune to the psychologist’s hypnotic suggestions. They

had made me into a kind of conspirator against her. Even if her purposes were benign, I felt a wave of anxiety whenever I thought of confessing that I was resistant to hypnosis—especially since it meant any underlying *conditioning* hidden in our training also was affecting me less and less.

I now hid not one but two secrets, and that meant I was steadily, irrevocably, becoming estranged from the expedition and its purpose.



Estrangement, in all of its many forms, was nothing new for these missions. I understood this from having been given an opportunity along with the others to view videotape of the reentry interviews with the members of the eleventh expedition. Once those individuals had been identified as having returned to their former lives, they were quarantined and questioned about their experiences. Reasonably enough, in most cases family members had called the authorities, finding their loved one's return uncanny or frightening. Any papers found on these returnees had been confiscated by our superiors for examination and study. This information, too, we were allowed to see.

The interviews were fairly short, and in them all eight expedition members told the same story. They had experienced no unusual phenomenon while in Area X, taken no unusual readings, and reported no unusual internal conflicts. But after a period of time, each one of them had had the intense desire to return home and had set out to do so. None of them could explain how they had managed to come back across the border, or why they had gone straight home instead

of first reporting to their superiors. One by one they had simply abandoned the expedition, left their journals behind, and drifted home. Somehow.

Throughout these interviews, their expressions were friendly and their gazes direct. If their words seemed a little flat, then this went with the kind of general calm, the almost dreamlike demeanor each had returned with—even the compact, wiry man who had served as that expedition's military expert, a person who'd had a mercurial and energetic personality. In terms of their affect, I could not tell any of the eight apart. I had the sense that they now saw the world through a kind of veil, that they spoke to their interviewers from across a vast distance in time and space.

As for the papers, they proved to be sketches of landscapes within Area X or brief descriptions. Some were cartoons of animals or caricatures of fellow expedition members. All of them had, at some point, drawn the lighthouse or written about it. Looking for hidden meaning in these papers was the same as looking for hidden meaning in the natural world around us. If it existed, it could be activated only by the eye of the beholder.

At the time, I was seeking oblivion, and I sought in those blank, anonymous faces, even the most painfully familiar, a kind of benign escape. A death that would not mean being dead.