Wraethworld
a novella by Kody Boye

Wraethworld
By Kody Boye
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FOREWORD

During the spring and summer months of 2009, I was misdiagnosed with an anxiety disorder and as such was placed on anti-anxiety medication for it. The side effects ranged from all sorts of things—to stomachaches, to headaches, nausea, the works. It also explicitly stated that I may have very real, very *lucid* dreams. I discounted the possible side effects because, at the time, I was desperately searching for a cure, or at least a temporary fix for the problems I was having at that time. It was during one of these spring and summer nights—when, in the depths of a very lucid dream—that I saw within my mind the image of a little girl lying in her bed, along with a creature whom I had considered 'the little girl who looks like a fish,' who, suspended by imaginary water, floated over the little girl's bed. She told the girl whose name became Mary that her world was in danger and that only she could stop it.

The moment I woke up, I burst from my bed and ran to my computer—where, over the course of half an hour, explicit, subconscious details that I must have had but never processed were added to a document to mark the dream.

At the time, I thought the story of the little girl entering a place called Wraethworld was just going to be a dream journal entry.

Two years later, during the height of some of my most severe bipolar problems and a phase where I was constantly being haunted by suicidal thoughts, I began writing the first draft of the short novel you are now holding in your hands.

I'll be honest: *Wraethworld* might not be for everyone. Told in an experimental style and driven by a main character whose age and persona become a major driving force of the story, I wrote the novel over a two-month period and let it be for four months before I returned to revise it for the last and final time. It isn't like my regular writing. It *is* my work (I will say that much,) but the story within forced me to step out of the box of my personal comfort zone. For that, I believe *Wraethworld* has made me a better writer.

Before we begin reading, I wanted to give thanks to my friends Shari and Mitchell for adding their input to a manuscript as a whole. It is because of your suggestions that the novel is better than I thought it would be. So, once again—thank you.

Now, as you turn or flip the page, I allow you to step into the world of Mary Matthews and the Wraethworld that she soon enters.

Kody Boye
March 24, 2012

A.
The First Interlude

There is many a thing that can be said for children with extraordinary powers of perception. Be it a natural instinct that they are gifted with from the very beginning of time—when, for all purposes, they are delivered from the safety of the womb and into real world—or a curse of which is imposed upon them by the body, it can be said that intuition, as powerful and all-encompassing as it seems to be, can be with its faults. A marble can be chipped, a diamond flawed, a mirror broken—and in these marbles, these diamonds and these mirrors, it can be said that there are moments in which time becomes reality: in which clocks start turning, in which an hourglass fills on one side and is empty on another, and when the Sun goes down and the Moon comes up. It is these moments, and many more, that ultimately define who we are as infants, as children, and who we will eventually become as adults, whether we are right or wrong or nowhere in between.

This is the story of a little girl named Mary. Born disabled not in body, but in mind and spirit, she lives a life fractured and disjointed from not only her family and community, but herself. Many of time she feels unsure, insecure, worried or frightened at the world around her, but that is not to say that she is without a remarkable ability. No. To deny her this luxury of ultimate perception would be to strip her of the power she holds over the world that is around her, and to do that would be to destroy the one thing that makes her different from everyone else.

The story of little Mary Matthews begins on one lonely night in her bedroom—when, out of the darkness, she learns that there is another world that exists beside our own… one that is in terrible, terrible danger.

1.
Fish Girl

Wake up Mary. Wake up.

She opens her eyes to find the world lit in blue. Startled, afraid, unsure of her surroundings and of the light blooming within the open space, she seeks out the source of the luminescence with her wandering vision—first to the night light, which has long been dead, then the doorway, where no light shines. It's supposed to be open, because it has always been promised, but tonight there is no light. There are only shadows cast across the room—like water slowly drifting across the sea.

Her first thought is to scream. The voice is here—*here*—somewhere in the room. Where it is she doesn't know, but at that moment, it doesn't particularly matter.

She wants to cry.

The light continues to swim across the room.

Mary is afraid.

Blankets up to her chin, feet as far away from the edge of the bed as possible, she turns her eyes up to look at the ceiling.

It's there.

The light.

She closes her eyes, then opens them.

Slowly, she is revealed.

She is a dandelion in a long green field, a ballerina on a big wide stage, a princess walking down the aisle with a crown on her head; she is a snake in a garden, tempting the eve; she is a figure in the night drawing in the sky figures of light of which all children can stare—she is everything beautiful and wonderful in this world, crisp and pure and full of life. She is, as Mary sees, a little girl.

However—it soon becomes apparent that she is no ordinary girl.

As she comes into view, the light rapidly dimming from the spherical shape it has appeared in and the trace amounts of luminescence flickering across the walls, Mary can see that this little girl suspended within the sphere is not normal. Her skin is blue, her eyes are white, her lower half is a fin like a mermaid and her arms are small—there are gills on her cheeks, her sides, and there is webbing between her fingers. She looks like a fish, this little girl in Mary's room, but she is not. Mary knows this because fish, no matter how beautiful, cannot talk.

Mary, the fish girl says.

Mary cannot speak. She is petrified. She knows it is because of this creature, this thing, this *little girl* who *looks like a fish,* and she knows that should she try to speak, she will forever be lost to the fantasy of this world.

This can't be true. This has to be a dream.

Mary, she says.

The floating apparition of the little girl who looks like a fish seems to be swimming in the air. All around her there is mist—waves, fog, light in which her form is shrouded. It is this light that illuminates the room, that makes Mary think that she's in a swimming pool, and it is this light that makes her feel as though she is suffocating.

She cannot breathe.

She cannot move.

She can't even utter a cry.

In waiting for a response from Mary, the little girl who looks like a fish spreads her arms and reveals to Mary the dorsal fins that line her elbows and back.

I don't have long, the fish girl says, *but I need you to listen to me, Mary. Our worlds lie on the brink of destruction.*

On the brink of destruction, Mary wonders. What could that possibly mean?

Do you hear me, Mary?

Mary nods, finally able to move.

Beware of the train, the fish girl says, *beware of the train, beware of the train with the beluga whale stain.*

The fish girl lowers her white eyes. *Help me, Mary,* she says. *You are the only girl who can save my world.*

In the blink of an eye, the fish girl disappears.

The world goes bright.

The world goes dark.

All Mary can do is scream.

2.
School Trip

She stands in line with a menagerie of school children who are preparing for their day of fun. Some are girls, some are boys, but all are preparing for the trip Miss Kitty has been talking about for weeks.

"Now now," Miss Kitty says, raising her hands up and down as if she is a bird flapping her wings to soar to the greatest of heights. "Settle down everyone. We'll be leaving soon."

No one is being loud. They are all as silent as a bell, so why is Miss Kitty telling them to be quiet?

Rather than ponder on these things, Mary locks her hands behind her back and clicks her heels together, all the happier to hear the sound of the leather singing in the warm afternoon day.

When it seemed as though everyone is prepared and ready to go, Miss Kitty turns, waves her hands, and gestures them along.

It was to be the trip of a lifetime, this place Miss Kitty wants to take them. Mary knows from the way her classmates have reacted. Their cries, their screams, their laughs, their dreams—all spoke of things magical and exciting, of fun in the sun and of hurdles to run. She doesn't know where they are going, as she was never told what exactly the trip will be about, but Miss Kitty had said something about a park.

Don't worry Mary, Miss Kitty had said. *It's going to be great.*

Great it would hopefully be.

As they progress up the street, past the school and toward the place where the big buildings stand, Mary looks up and marvels at their structures, their ingenuity, their grace. They seem like animals, these things in the sky, all so tall and oh so wide, and it is in looking at them, at their shivering forms as if they are cold, that she begins to feel small. She is a fly, she knows, on the world's largest apple, slowly but surely advancing up its slope and toward the top of the world. In thinking of this, she comes to realize that this is her world, her town, her *city* where she has grown up all her life, and for that alone she smiles.

The children around her don't notice the things that she is noticing. Why, she doesn't know, but she imagines it is because they are too focused on Miss Kitty, who is tall and pretty and wears bangles on her arms that clink and chink whenever she walks. The notion isn't untrue, because Miss Kitty is the greatest teacher Mary could possibly imagine, but it makes her wonder just whether or not her classmates are aware of what they are doing and where they are going.

Ahead, looming in the distance, is a street. Lined with red-brick buildings that appear to be nothing like the shiny figures that haunt them from overhead, it extends forever into the distance and seems to go on for eternity before, eventually, the road going forward ends and then swings to the left and right. There are two ways they can go, she knows, but where this place she is going is she doesn't know.

Sighing, Mary stops to consider herself, then clicks her shoes together.

The sound makes her happy.

Mary, a voice says.

Mary raises her eyes.

Where could that have come from?

For but a moment, she stands there waiting for the voice to continue. Then she remembers.

She came to her last night. A dandelion in the field, a ballerina on a stage, a princess with her crown—she appeared from nowhere and spoke of worlds to be saved, of things to be done, of trains to be seen and dangers to beware. It was she that had made the world swim, as though trapped beneath the ocean, and it was she that said that only Mary could save her world. The

memory is stark, fierce, like Missy Kitty slapping a ruler on a table to make everyone in her class be quiet, and it is everything that seems horrible and dreadful within the world.

In her head, Mary knows that something is wrong.

Beware the train, the train, the fish girl had said. *Beware the train with the beluga whale stain.*

A shiver runs through Mary's body.

The wind picks up, blowing her dark hair over her shoulder.

She looks ahead and finds that both her class and Miss Kitty are far, far ahead.

Stepping forward, Mary begins her trek up the road to catch up with her classmates and begins to feel within the air a sense of urgency that terrifies her. It is like the time she stumbled into the neighbor's backyard when the fence broke and she was confronted by the dog. Big, mean, slobbering at the mouth and with eyes like cold ice—there had been a moment when staring into its eyes that Mary considered the reality that something bad was about to happen, that she was about to get hurt and that once that happened, she would go to the hospital, where she would be poked and prodded with pins and needles and have blood drawn from her body to be put into the machine that makes things better and everything right. It feels, in this moment, while she is standing in the road with Misss Kitty and her class far, far ahead, that she feels just like that, though why she can't be sure. Everything should be fine. Miss Kitty and her class are only a few feet away.

In the back of her head, she knows it will take but a moment for her to catch up.

She begins to run, then stops. Her shoes click like nice lizards on the largest of television screens.

Her mother told her never to run. *You'll get hurt,* she had said.

Hurt is not what Mary wants to be.

Slowing her pace, she takes a deep breath, looks at the class in front of her, then continues forward—slowly this time, so as to not fall and skin her shins or elbows.

The breeze kicks up again, drifts around her dress, raises the tails of her skirt, then shifts it across the front of her legs.

Mary stops.

Something is wrong.

You are the only girl who can save my world.

The fish girl's voice is coming from up the road, in a space where the wall is open and where, she knows, there is an alley.

Stepping forward, but careful not to trip off the sidewalk and into the street below, Mary looks forward, toward her class and where Miss Kitty are directly ahead.

It won't take her long to catch up if she tries.

For a few moments, everything seems fine. The birds are chirping, a dog is barking in the distance, and ahead the class is laughing, so loud that even from such a vast distance Mary can hear them clearly.

When she gets to the break in the wall that begins the alleyway, Mary stops. Eyes set ahead, shins cold and hands trembling, she feels around her legs the breath of the wind and realizes that something is wrong.

There should be no wind coming from her side. There is an alley there, nowhere for the wind to come from.

Mary turns.

It opens before her like a portrait into another world. There is no brick, no sand, no mortar, no concrete, no side of a building or a sign that warns her not to enter. There is no yellow tape, emblazoned with the words of the police, and there is no barricade that forbids her to enter. There is nothing to keep her from entering and there is nothing that stops her from looking. No. Instead, there is a bridge—light, mahogany, with red-colored planks and intricate rods that rise up and create overhead the support for the entirety of the structure—and in the distance there are hills that rise up out of a vast field of green. Golden light spills from this place, so beautiful and pure, and wind that smells of flowers and lavender drifts forward and overwhelms her senses. But perhaps the most striking thing of all is the road that starts at the end of the bridge that leads down into this place. Winding through the hills, passing through one great plain, leading toward what could only possibly be what she believes is the rest of this place. It is everything beautiful in this world, this place, her dreams, and it is not until she raises her head and looks forward, into the sky that lies beyond the clearing of what should be a wall, that she realizes something.

There is a sign—curved, like a rainbow, flushing across the front of the bridge. Its letters are many, its message important, its purpose meant.

Mary stares.

The letters begin to form together.

W…R…A…E…T…H…

Mary closes her eyes.

The wind shifts her skirt once more.

When she opens them and looks at the final four letters, she realizes it is a word she already knows: world.

Wraethworld.

It is in but a moment that a notion so terrible and unreal begins to take her body that Mary begins to shiver. Cold, as though in the snow, on a morning when the temperature is low and the trees are dead, she stands before the entrance to the amazing world before her and feels within her head a sense of urgency that she realizes can only come from something or someone telling you something. There's a similar feeling when her mother tells her to clean her room or her father yells for her to come to dinner, saying it will soon be cold if she doesn't come now. In both cases, there is a sense—a *feeling*—of haste, that of which can fuel the mind and deliver heat within the chest, and in standing before this world, dressed only in a short blue-and-white dress and a pair of Mary Jane's, that Mary knows that something is really, truly wrong.

Though she has no concept of this place or just what it could be, she knows this is where the fish girl lives.

She takes a breath, expels it, then steps forward.

Her feet rest upon the border between this world and Wraethworld.

Mary closes her eyes.

She once more smells lavender.

When she opens her eyes, she realizes that there is something she has missed before—a track, it seems, that runs along the bridge and eventually continues on to the world, where she sees its path all but disappear as the dirt road continues on and begins to wind through the hills.

Though it seems like the most heinous thing in the world, Mary steps forward.

Her feet pass onto the bridge.

The planks crunch beneath her feet.

The shot of footsteps sound behind her.

Mary turns.

Miss Kitty is standing there, breathless, her mouth agape and her eyes wide with fear. “Mary,” she says. “You’re not supposed to be—“

It is here, in this moment, that Miss Kitty stops speaking. She appears lost, as though she knows not what is going on. Her eyes twinkle, her mouth quivers, her hands flush at her sides and her skinny frame begins to tremble. She takes her first step forward into the alley just as Mary takes her first step backward, into the place called Wraethworld and away from the place she has known as home.

“What is this?” Miss Kitty asks.

Mary does not know, nor can she answer for she knows nothing of this world, this land, this place called Wraethworld, but it is in response to such a question that she continues to step backward. Reflexively she stumbles back, toward the side of the bridge where the railing prevents her from falling over, and watches her teacher slowly but surely advance upon her.

“Mary,” the teacher says. “You can’t—“

Miss Kitty stops speaking as her foot steps down into Wraethworld. She pauses, looks down at the planks, then back up at Mary. Her face pales and her eyes fall to the tracks that lay directly upon the center of the bridge.

Mary steps back.

Miss Kitty steps forward.

They are both fully in Wraethworld within the next few steps.

“We need to go,” Miss Kitty says, extending her hand toward Mary. “This isn’t right, Mary. It’s—“

The scream of a whistle cuts Miss Kitty off midsentence.

Mary raises her eyes.

The head of a white monstrosity barrels through the invisible wall that separates the worlds.

Beware of the train, the fish girl had said, *beware of the train with the beluga whale stain.*

Miss Kitty looks up.

It is in but one moment that the end of her life occurs.

Miss Kitty has always had a penchant for wearing jewelry. Hoops in her ears, bangles on her arms, rings on her fingers and chokers around her neck—it is no surprise that on the day when Kitty Isabella Wrightwood, age twenty-five, kindergarten school teacher and recently-single steps into the place called Wraethworld that she would be wearing an ensemble that bears upon its breast and torso a series of chains and other miscellaneous lengthy jewelry. It is this fashion statement, this casual attire, that is caught when she tries to throw herself to the other side of the bridge, toward Mary and the place she now safely stands. A chain ensnared, her head thrown back, her body propelled forward and into the air—Miss Kitty is thrown several dozen steps into Wraethworld and is propelled up and over one of the support beams that make up the bridge they now stand upon. It is here, in the crux of this moment, that she falls down, suspended by her chains, and is instantly set directly in the path of the beluga whale train.

Mary has but a moment to think before her teacher is severed at the waist.

As blood rains through the air, staining not only the pristine wood beneath them, but the head of the beluga whale train sailing down the path, the two halves of Miss Kitty’s body sail through the air. Her bottom half, still twitching, lands in the normal world, where it convulses once before stilling all together, while the second half of her body is lost in the air to Mary’s eyes for a series of undeterminable moments. It is in these moments that she begins to cry, lost to the world and unable to know what to do, and while they pass she feels as though she has done something wrong. It is her fault that Miss Kitty was hit by a train, that she was most-obviously

killed, and had she never stepped foot into this place called Wraethworld nothing would have ever happened.

Tears snake down her face.

She is almost unable to breathe.

Behind her, something falls to the bridge.

Slowly, and with more fear in her heart than she can imagine, Mary turns.

What should have been the upper half of Miss Kitty's body appears to be nothing of the sort. It is long—stretched, morphed, transformed into something completely inhuman and bearing upon its body scales and skin grey and the color of ash. It is this Mary notices as she steps forward, around what has just fallen from the sky and to her feet, but it isn't until she rounds the creature's oozing upper half that she sees what it truly is that Miss Kitty has become.

Where Miss Kitty's head would have been is now ensconced in the shape of a fish—ugly, with huge black eyes and with a faintly-pulsing mouth that resembles something of a bottom-feeding plecostomus.

Mary stares.

The train continues to barrel on.

In the distance, hundreds upon hundreds of blackbirds disband from the trees and go sailing into the air.

The fish has but one moment to blink its eyes before it ceases to move.

Alone, frightened, unable to believe what she has just seen before her eyes and trembling as though she has never trembled before, Mary turns, her eyes searching for the train that killed Miss Kitty.

Ahead, near the very end of the bridge, lies a body, its head all but gone and what appears to be a slick mass of red and grey matter covering the wood panels. In its hand it holds a gun—short, sharp and silver.

Mary breathes.

Something begins to materialize into being above the corpse.

Stepping forward, around the dead fish that used to be Miss Kitty, Mary trails her eyes along the bridge and notices, upon the ground, the remnants of Miss Kitty's jewelry. Rings, glass, severed hoop earrings, the balls and chains that used to make up her shirt and dress—all glitter faintly in golden light streaming down from the sun above. These are not what trouble her, as she is easily able to navigate around the shards of broken metal and jewelry. It is the beads that are trailing from the top of the bridge. White in color and resembling something of pearls, they trail from the topmost support beam and cascade to the ground in a perfectly-strung line until they are wrapped around one of the railing beams at the side. These reflect rainbows, and as she steps forward, toward the body of the man whose head is now gone, she watches as a scroll of parchment comes into view directly above the corpse—golden, glowing, and beckoning her forward with but its presence alone.

Careful to step over the arm and hand that holds the gun, Mary stares at the golden scroll, then raises her hand.

Something beckons her to touch it.

When her palm is pressed against the parchment, it begins to unfurl before her eyes.

There is but a name upon its surface, emblazoned in black.

This is the story of Adil Amna, a disembodied voice says, *and this is how he came to Wraethworld.*

3.
Adil Amna

Adil Amna was not an ordinary man. Born Muslim-American and brought up with a harsh religious upbringing, he considered much of his later childhood and teenage years to be wrapped in a horrid display of God and judgment that tormented him during his waking hours and gave him nightmares when he tried to sleep. His mother wore a veil until the day she died, all black as if she were attending a funeral of a family friend, while every day his father would roll out the mat and pray to the great and grand Mecca, five times a day—standing, bowing, hands raised beside his head or prone and to the ground. It was for this reason—that torment, those nightmares, those thoughts of doubt and those notions of regret—and because of the fallacies of his religion that failed to secure within him a belief in a higher power that Adil existed in a state of perpetual hell. His father would often chastise him for such behavior, and as he grew older and more resilient to his personal tormenter's oppression, Adil found himself locked in a state of agony, of depression and of the saddest things in life.

Come time for his eighteenth birthday, Adil—intelligent beyond all means and steadfast in his pursuit for a higher education—left home to attend university, but it is not without the past that we shape the future. As such, he became haunted—first and foremost by his mother, who'd often sat by and watched with sad eyes from the only exposed portion of her veil, then by his father, who lingered within his mind at all times, imposing upon him the penance only deserved for those believed to be Infidels.

Disparaged by his past and unable to move on to accept his future, his once-astounding grades began to plummet and his superiors began to bear down upon him. Such pressures, both external and internal, eventually led him to drop out and take a lowly position as a gas station attendant.

It would have seemed, to anyone looking upon the situation, that Adil was a sad man—a tormented soul who could not recover and face the world almighty.

It was not until his nineteenth birthday, when he began to delve into the reality and the physics behind the possibilities of alternate realities, that things began to peak. With a predisposition to depression and the sadder things in life, it made perfect sense for Adil to venture toward such things—blindly, he imagined, hand extended and with a lantern in the other. He would walk these tortured halls, he swore, and he would avenge upon himself the idea of a life where he did not suffer and where his aspirations to be one of the leading medical surgeons in the world had succeeded.

For many years Adil studied the likelihood and the equations related to the multiverse, of the Big Bang and the fates of the Universe, and in his studies he found himself to be happy—ecstatic, even, for the fact that every day it seemed he was getting closer and closer to the reality he so happily dreamed of. In his dreams, he imagined himself born not of Muslim decent, but of American, if only because of his overbearing father's religion, and in these dreams he imagined his mother a woman free of her veil, with a life of her own not meant to serve her husband. He saw her face, her beautiful dimples, and he saw the wrinkles upon her forehead and a smile upon her face when he returned home from university every semester with high grades and at the top of his class.

Things seemed to be going perfectly well.

Things were not, however, without their doubts.

It was within his studies that in the capital Adil began to research the idea that an alternate reality could exist—that within his city, there very well could be an opening to a world divine and pure. He knew not whether this world was to be a parallel of his own or if it was a universe unto his own, without his family and possibly within a different timeframe, but it was with that notion that he began to scour the city for any possible openings. Deep wells, the insides of caves, within the confines of clocks old and dead and pressed places that seemed small but vast—everything he could possibly find that could relate to alternate theories came under scrutiny, as if he were an archaeologist searching the deserts for the missing link.

Eventually, however, his pursuits became null, devoid. Clinical depression set in and a psychiatrist diagnosed him with obsessive-compulsive disorder. It was without dignity or clarity that she said that Adil was desperate for a way out of this world, and for that alone he should be put on medication.

When given a prescription for a series of anti-psychotic and depressant tablets, Adil blindly threw the receipt away and went wandering one day with a gun in his jacket and an idea set within his head. If the world would not accept him for who he was, and if another world would not take him from the place that haunted him so, he would end it all and jump to the one universe he so firmly believed in—Hell.

It was during that walk, of which could be called the suicidal guideline, that Adil discovered upon happenstance a world completely unlike his own. The plane broad, the scope wide, he first craned his head into the alleyway that he stumbled across to view the sign that so very clearly read *Wraethworld,* then turned his attention to the single wooden bridge that led into what appeared to be a valley vast and wide and full of what appeared to be poppies or something similar.

Upon stepping into this world, free and at last devoid of the past and the reality that haunted him so, Adil realized that he could very well go on in this magical and wonderful place. For that alone, he began to search, climbing high and low, in nooks and crannies, but when he found nothing similar like the world he had so grown to hate that would make his living convenient and therefore safe, he came to a conclusion that would ultimately cut off his existence and therefore drive him back to the entrance of the world called Wraethworld. He walked the long path, trekked through the forest, passed the field of poppies and wound his way through the hills, all with the intent of returning to the world he had been so eager to leave behind. He would return home, he said, to his mother and father, and he would adopt into his heart the God Allah and pray for his salvation. He would not burn in Hell, he knew, if he repented, and he would find within himself a sense of peace that he would not have had before this whole endeavor. He would take his prescription and swallow his pills, if only in private and away from his parents, make himself a better man and return to school. He would become the very doctor he so desperately wanted to be and save children from the tragedies of war.

They say that once a choice is made, it can never be undone.

Adil came to realize that upon finding the bridge he'd entered the world on.

In this place where, it seemed, the worlds bridged, and upon which he had discovered the Wraethworld that seemed to be completely devoid of people, animals or foods nourishing, he came to find that the bridge simply ceased to exist after a moment—that, beyond the curved flourish of wood that declared its name, there was nothing, save for hills and a vast, endless blue sky.

It was, without conscience after that moment, that Adil pulled the gun from his pocket and placed the mouth of the pistol to the bottom of his head.

The beads glowing around him, reflecting miniature rainbows that cast their reflection off the metal of his gun, he pulled his trigger and ended his life in but a moment.

Adil Amna entered the world of Wraethworld to escape his conscience.

He died by his own inhibitions.

U.
The Second Interlude

Those of whom are able to discern within the world the power of sound are without consequence the most righteous of champions, for upon the wind, from the lips of many or the mouth of one an individual can spool into their mind the concepts of the world without thinking once or twice. As infants we learn to quickly identify what it is we are supposed to know. Loud sounds are identified as threats, the soft the hum of plenty, the words which begin with one letter and end with another to make a complete word that is a name—these are the things that all individuals granted with the gift of sound are able to discern even from an age in which they are no more than a few moments old. Sometimes this is the only gift we have, while at others this is the gift we are so viciously denied of. It is for this reason, and more, that the ones afflicted with such beautiful recognition are able to realize what it is for a bell to chime, for a dog to bark or a cat to meow for its milk. For that, it seems, this is the greatest gift of all.

However—it is not the gift of sound that make us able to champion our cause. It is the ability to create *sound that is so revered throughout the land that we are brought to our knees at the sound of one man's call.*

It is at this point in our story that our heroine, little Mary Matthews, is tasked with her first challenge—that within the virgin depths of Wraethworld, while scared, alone, and completely unsure of herself, she begins to advance toward a time and place which she cannot decipher. Some may call this the first leg of the journey, the first embarking, the beginning of the quest or the time in which Arthur pulled the sword from the stone. But it need not matter what it is the beginning of this happens to be. As Mary advances, toward the place in which the road curves and lies between two hills, she will come to realize that there are powers within her that even she isn't aware of—and that, though once taught, were not given physical consequence.

4.
The Hills

When Mary's mind comes free of the glowing scroll of parchment and the message of Jesus Picarazio disappears into the air, she isn't necessarily sure where to go. A growing sense of dread that reminds her of being punished for a crime of which she committed leads her to believe that she should turn around and return to the classmates that were likely waiting up the road. Another sense of ease, however, tells her that, were she to venture within this world, she would be perfectly fine—that this place, as cruel as it seems to be, is not really as terrifying as she is making it out to be. Sure—her teacher may be dead behind her, and the body of a man whom most likely had died by his gun rests just a few feet near the end of the bridge, but that does not necessarily mean she herself would have harm befall her.

It is with that notion in mind that Mary takes her first step off the bridge, onto the path that is lined with grass and that kicks up dirt as she slowly makes her way into the place called Wraethworld. There are no birds, she notices, beyond the ones she has previously seen, and there

seem to be no animals which inhabit this place. There are not even any bugs that swarm around her to try and bite at her flesh. There is nothing, it seems, save for the path that leads toward the hills.

Unsure of herself and just what it is she is supposed to be doing, Mary stops, turns, then looks toward the entryway to Wraethworld.

It is with horror that she finds that the entrance to the alleyway has disappeared.

What will she do, she wonders? She cannot leave now that the way has been closed, and she cannot simply remain, as she knows soon she will grow hungry, but she isn't necessarily sure if the road is safe, or even if it will grow dark sometime soon. It seems that there will be plenty of daylight left, as the sun above is only halfway across the sky, and while the road seems the best course of action, she isn't sure if following the path that the train took will be the best course of action.

After several moments of indecision, in which she tries to contemplate whether staying near the bridge is a good idea or not, she decides, with sadness and a bit of worry, that going forward is the only thing that will help deliver her into a place where she may, in fact, be safe.

Stepping forward, but taking extra care not to loiter near the center of the road for fear of the train magically returning from its place of nowhere and everywhere, Mary begins her trek into the place called Wraethworld.

It seems, in but a moment, that the path will be clear—that the place, though frightening and beginning with death, may very well allow her safe passage free of harm.

As the afternoon wears on, Mary sets her eyes on the hills, toward the globes that border the road in the far distance.

It is there, she knows, that the path will dip and something new will begin

With her head held high but her heart resting all the lower, she continues onward.

Beneath her, as the day progresses and her ever-expanding path seems to lengthen, her Mary Jane's begin to gather dirt. Slowly, it seems, they are building familiarity with this world, this place, this wonderful and terrifying world called Wraethworld, and as Mary looks down at her shoes, she feels a certain amount of remorse for the fact that her clothes, freshly-bought especially for this trip, will likely not survive the adventure she imagines will unravel in front of her. Her mother, she knows, will cry when she sees her shoes are a wreck, while her father will simply shake his head, as he always does when it seems as though she has done something wrong. Mary is only aware of this reality because it has happened before—when, the day they had the neighbor's dog over, her brand new dress was torn and covered in mud. *Oh Mary,* her mother had cried, *how could you?* Her father, meanwhile, had done what he'd always done—shaken his head. It is such things that are ingrained within her memory and is likely ingrained in everyone's. She imagines this to be true, as she believes that her fellow school children may very well have endured this form of punishment. It is, however, without remorse that she casts these thoughts away, as it seems that they are useless in a world where not only do her classmates not exist, but where her parents are nowhere to be found.

The sun falls across the sky ever so quickly as she continues to advance up the path. Like a star across a great black horizon, its tail trailing so cosmically and its presence becoming all the less present as it continues on, it seems to be forewarning her of something to come. Its rays, radiating across the cloudless sky, mark her skin in trails of sweat. Her collar feels stifling, her knees begin to ache, and her feet begin to feel as though she has walked thousands upon thousands of miles. She compares it to walking to her grandmother's house with her parents on a

long hot day. Mama Grandma has always lived very, very far away, and on choice days when the car is broken, they usually walk. Always when she arrives her feet hurt.

In remembering such a thing, Mary begins to cry.

Mama Grandma may never see her again if she doesn't keep walking.

With tears snaking down her face and her heart hurting in her chest, Mary stops, reaches up to wipe the tears from her face, then takes one long, hard look up the road.

In the distance, there are two knolls. Both are barren, like ice cream fresh from the container. Between them lies the road. It seems ever so far away, the entrance to what she knows will be the new frontier, and in looking behind her shoulder to seek out the bridge she entered the world in on, she finds that she is very, very far away.

It is, in that moment, that she imagines she has already walked the distance to Mama Grandma's house.

Her ankles ache.

Her eyes burn.

Her lip quivers.

However—despite the pain and fear that so openly weighs down upon her body, she knows that should she not keep going, and should she remain here, on the road, in what is unarguably in the open, something bad might happen.

The sun is getting closer to the opposite side of the world. Soon, she knows, it will be dark.

She does not want to know what lies in the darkness.

Her mother once told her that monsters don't exist.

For some reason, Mary believes otherwise.

She continues on until the sun grows weary in the sky. When its rays finally begin to bleed away—when the world turns pink and orange and red and even white in places—Mary begins to grow afraid.

She has been walking for a very, very long time. Though she can't tell time, she can imagine, based on what her father once said about hours, that she has been walking for far too many hours. Her feet feel like they are ready to fall off and she can't feel her toes within her shoes. A part of her wants to take the Mary Jane's from her feet and simply cast them aside, as they are seemingly becoming too much a burden for them to be convenient, but another part tells her that doing so would be wrong. She knows it is not her mother inside her head telling her that doing so would be such a bad thing—it is something else, something more internal, she knows, that is telling her to keep the shoes, as soon she will need them.

At this moment, Mary can't imagine why she would need her shoes. She is on no more than a dirt road.

After a moment, she realizes something.

Things can change in but a moment.

That seems to become all the more true when the world begins to lose its light.

It begins in the far distance, to the place she knows as left. A darkness, like a series of lights being turned on, first by dimming, then by extinguishing altogether. In this darkness there is a fog—a smoke, she could say, that is slowly making its way to her left. It is a monster devouring the horizon, a creature born to make her journey hard. It is not slowly that the sky fades from blue and begins to turn to black. It is with haste that she can never imagine, and in staring at it, Mary feels as though she is small, an ant that is standing at the bottom of a hill and hoping to travel its surface by nightfall.

In stopping to look at the darkness, at the horror that is slowly unveiling itself, Mary begins to cry.

This is it.

In but a few moments, it will be dark and she will have no light to guide her.

With the knowledge that she may very well not be able to see the path before her, Mary begins to run—slowly at first, as if she is simply chasing after a friend, then much quicker. Running, swiftly, like a horse, a stallion, a champion mount she has seen on TV that seems as fast as the wind and even faster than the things around her, she pumps her legs as hard as she can as above the light begins to fade and the darkness devours everything whole. Her feet are numb, her knees weak, her chest is heaving up and down and her mouth and throat are desperate to draw in breath. She is a body of pain, a little girl with ruby red slippers, and it is without mercy that behind her the monsters are coming, ready to bite her ankles and tear her to the ground.

In one final moment of mercy, Mary screams, hoping that birds will fly from the trees and assure her that all is well.

There are no birds.

Nothing flies, nothing runs—no living thing even stirs in the world around her as the sun goes down and the world goes dark.

Defeated, Mary falls to her knees—crying, mercilessly, for the light she has lost.

There seems to be nothing in the world except her, her tears and her fears.

It takes no more than a brief second for her to feel as though there is something in the darkness watching her.

Mary raises her eyes.

There are things with red eyes looking at her from upon the hills.

At first, she isn't sure if they are real—that they are only things she is seeing because she is scared and alone and unsure. Then she sees that they are moving. Their heads are shifting side to side, left and right, and at some points it seems their necks turn all the way around so that their heads are upside-down without actually being upside-down. They do not make any noises, do not seem to make their way down the hills, and do not seem to care for the fact that she is simply a little girl alone in the dark and that she holds no bearing or ill will toward them. They simply seem to be watching, as if there is nothing more in the world to do on a long warm night when there are no clouds and is no moon or light.

Sniffling, Mary raises her hand to wipe snot from her nose.

One of the things on the hill laughs.

Her heart begins to beat faster in her chest.

Though something tells her that she has no need to worry about the things on the top of the hills, she knows that staying where she sits would probably not be the best idea.

Standing, but taking a moment to compose herself on her own two feet, she pushes her hands out to her sides, pinwheels, then takes a few steps forward.

Both of the things on the hills begin to laugh.

They sound like a clown who has lost control of his breath. His nose is too big. He can't breathe. His shoes are too wide and his gut is too large.

Mary begins to shake.

Though it is not cold, and though there is no breeze, there seems to be snow falling all around her.

While taking her first few steps forward, toward the place haunted by the things on the hill, the snow that seems to be falling around Mary thickens—warps, distorts, makes everything in

the world appear as though light and covered in a dull sheen of grey. It's like her room at night back in the real world when the night light used to work. The rocking horse would stretch, its eyes would bulge, its neck would split in two and its torso would lunge forward—such an innocent thing would turn into something malevolent and she would have to hide beneath the covers, as the thing that used to be her rocking horse but was now nothing more than a monster seemed much too frightening to look at. In thinking this, and in examining the world around her, she begins to make out shapes lingering in the distance—trees, it seems, on both sides, that have appeared out of the ground come nightfall, and the knolls in the distance with the things with the red eyes atop them. These are now clearly visible in shades of grey and white, and though it seems as though there is static or some sort of ash like from a fire clouding her vision, she takes solace in the fact that she can finally see.

Above, on the hills, the things with the red eyes turn their heads upside down, then laugh.

They must be playing some kind of game, Mary thinks, because there really is no reason to be laughing so late at night—unless, of course, they were laughing at her because they thought she was funny, walking all alone in the dark.

At the thought, she once more begins to cry.

A moment later, Mary stops, then looks at the things in the distance.

How desperately she wants to scream for them to stop, to tell them there is nothing funny and that just because she is a little girl and she is walking on the road alone in the dark there is no reason for them to be laughing. When she realizes that screaming would do nothing more than make her sad, however, Mary takes a few steps forward.

Her Mary Jane's click together.

The creatures on the top of the hills stop laughing.

Mary frowns.

She clicks her heels together again.

They instantly turn their heads rightside-up and stare at her.

What could they be thinking, she wonders, as she once more clicks her heels together and watches as both of their heads rise, then fall. Do they like the sound that she is making and have stopped laughing because of it, or are they afraid of it and therefore have changed their opinion about looking on at her as though she is something to be admired? It seems to be one of the two reasons, as they have since stopped making any sort of noise whatsoever, but in that respect she cannot, nor does she feel that she wants to know.

Mary stops.

The creatures raise their heads.

She clicks her heels together.

One of them screams. The sound is like a hawk diving in for the kill.

The creatures' heads fall so low that Mary believes they are descending down the hill—that, with haste that she cannot imagine, with speed that she imagined herself to have no more than a few moments ago, they are descending upon her as though they are dogs ready to attack the rabbit that she is at the bottom of the hill. She cries out, stumbles back, falls to the ground. Dirt flies around her and into her mouth. She cannot breathe, cannot think, and in her current position cannot see, so she reaches up to claw at her throat as if she can pull the dirt out and finds that even though she is trying nothing she is doing will work. It seems that she will not be able to get up and run away as the red eyes begin to come closer and closer and as the figures begin to appear faintly upon both sides of the road, and while crawling back, stumbling over both her feet and her hands, she believes that she will be gone in but a moment's time.

Her mother, her father, Mama Grandma—what will they think?

With one last, final push for breath, Mary reaches up, smacks her throat as hard as she could, then gasps as dirt flies out of her mouth.

The creatures with the red eyes stop moving.

Mary freezes.

Alone, in her spot in the middle of the road, she waits for something to happen.

The creatures tilt their heads—the one on her left to the right, the one on her right to the left.

They both make a noise.

Every inch of Mary's body begins to shiver.

Reaching up, she runs her hands along her arms as if her touch will warm them and begins to cry as both of the creatures with the red eyes begin to take their steps forward.

If only she hadn't come into the world, if only she hadn't listened to the voice, if only she hadn't felt the wind—maybe then she would not be here: cold, alone and trapped in Wraethworld.

As she waits for the creatures to descend upon her, she thinks of her family and what they will think when she is gone.

The creatures draw ever closer.

Tears snake down Mary's face. She tastes salt on her lips and knows that she will never again taste a hamburger and fries.

When the things with the red eyes come into the center of the road, they stop, jut their lengthy necks forward, then raise their elongated hands, limp at the wrists and bowing to the earth as if they are tired and afraid.

Mary waits.

The things in front of her tilt their heads to the side.

Unsure what to do, Mary crawls a few steps back.

Her heels scrape together.

No. She can't make a noise. They might get angry.

She closes her mouth, takes a breath, prays just like her mother taught her that nothing bad will happen within the next few moments.

The creatures laugh like the clowns they seem to be.

Their mouths black, scowling and pursed, they take a few steps forward.

Mary crawls back.

They take another few steps forward.

A breath of air comes out of Mary's chest and the creatures chuckle again.

Why her?

The tears slick on her face, Mary looks from her shoes, to the creatures, then back again.

With more fear in her heart than she could ever possibly imagine, she stretches her legs forward, almost to where she can see the creatures' feet standing, then braces herself for what is about to come.

She closes her eyes. She holds her breath. She clicks her heels together.

The creatures do not make any noise.

Mary clicks them together again.

No sound comes.

When she clicks them for a third and final time, she believes that this will be the moment before the creatures do whatever it is they want to do to her.

After expelling the breath she has held in for so horribly long, Mary opens her eyes.

The creatures are nowhere to be seen.

She begins to cry.

They are gone. They are finally gone.

She walks until she feels she can walk no more. It is at this time—when the black, moonless sky seems to begin to lose its white haze of clarity—that Mary stands before the two hills that she has seen since she first entered Wraethworld. Tall, round, awesome in scope and terrifying in prospect—they seem to hold a secret that she knows she will never be able to understand and for that she feels as though sleeping, at this time, may be the wrong thing to do. But since her body is almost ready to fall over and her head seems to swim, she pauses in midstride, then turns her head to look at both sides of the road.

The hills seem to beckon her.

She begins to step forward, then stops.

Her mother once told her never to step off the path. *You may get lost,* she once said, *and something may get you.*

It is not without cause that her mother had said this, and though young and ignorant in most respects Mary was well aware of the reality of what can happen if you step off the path—when, in the woods around her city, little boys and girls went missing and were never found again. In standing before the hills, on the road that seems never to end, Mary feels as though what her mother said is sound advice, something that may very well keep her safe from anything that may be wandering off the beaten path.

After settling down on the road and spreading out directly in the middle, where the train tracks no longer run, Mary closes her eyes and takes a deep breath of fresh air.

For the first time since entering Wraethworld, she does not feel afraid.

Morning comes in but a blink of a moment.

When Mary opens her eyes, the sun shines on the far side of the world—distant, to the left and lighting the hills in splendid, golden glory.

After rising to her feet and brushing the dirt off her dress, she turns her attention to the road in the near distance and lets out a breath of air she seems to have been holding for the entirety of the night.

Nothing happened while she was sleeping.

Things seem to be perfectly normal.

Unable to resist the urge to smile, Mary steps forward and looks up at the world before her.

It will be no more than a few short moments before she sees what it is that lies beyond the great knolls that she was able to see upon entering Wraethworld.

With a few short breaths, Mary closes her eyes, tries to inspire within herself the confidence to continue onward, then takes a few steps forward.

Dirt crunches beneath her feet.

The monsters' footprints are nowhere to be seen.

The sun is marvelous in the sky.

It seems, when stepping forward and between the two hills, that birds will fly forth and summon upon their wings the happiness that all things upon wings carry.

When she steps forward, however, she sees something she does not expect.

She seems to be on top of the world. Between the knolls, beneath their shadow, within a place where sun does not shine and where her presence seems all the smaller, the world extends

into a sweeping plain of flowers in hues of red and purple—where, briefly, patches of clear grass can be seen just before the world dissolves into a forest where black trees seem to extend far into the sky, their branches broad and their fingers extending into the air. In standing there, and in viewing the sight before her, it seems that the path before her is too harsh—that, within its drop, and within the curves of which seem to not be travelled by feet, but by sleds in the slow, there is a sense of danger that cannot be rivaled by anything she has yet encountered. The beluga whale train, the man with the gun, the never-ending roads or the creatures on the hills—none of these things rival what it is she is currently seeing, this grand, sweeping plain. Not even the flowers that seem so pleasant are enough to make her smile, nor are the smells enough to make her feel as though things will be fine.

It is in standing there, between the hills and on top of the world, that true fear begins to reside within her heart.

Something tells her she can't do this. That something tells her to turn around—that even if the entrance to Wraethworld and the beginning of the real world is no longer there, that maybe it will open sometime soon.

In thinking these thoughts, Mary begins to cry.

She begins to turn, ready to take her place on the side of the road and away from the hills, when she sees something on the ground.

She steps forward and narrows her eyes.

A pair of lonely wings rests on the side of the road—torn, it seems, from their original owner.

A glowing scroll of parchment begins to materialize in the air as Mary steps forward, then slowly unravels.

There is but one name on it, emblazoned in black.

This is the story of Baby Jason, a disembodied voice says, *and this is how he came to Wraethworld.*

5.
The Boy Who Thought He Could Fly

Baby Jason always wanted to fly. From the time he was born and saw his first eagle he wanted to be in the sky. Arms spread high, lips pulled aplenty, his teeth would shine and his eyes would glimmer as within the clouds, within the atmosphere and within the place that existed above the resting world, birds flew and creatures of metal origins coasted the sky as they made their way from one place to another. He was barely one month old when, within his mother's arms, he looked into the air and saw his country's pride and glory soaring overhead. He was but two when he began to take his first steps and, when clumsy and falling, he fell and began to cry, longing for wings and the things they could so assuredly do for him. Then, when he was three, he boarded a plane with his family and went to a place in the world he did not know, and in looking outside, at the clouds and the world below, he knew he wanted to be a bird. However—since the world would not allow such a thing, as he was not a bird, but a boy, he would dream of a day when, one day, he could fly.

Baby Jason lived with his family in Adrian, Michigan. Surrounded by so much water, it was wondered by family why, of all the things a little boy could possibly be, he wanted to be a bird. There seemed to be so much magic in fish, in a world where water was boundless and where most anything could live, but it was not Jason who was unsure, but the people who was telling

him he should be a fish. He wanted to be a bird, he said, because the world was much larger in the sky—because, with wings, you could go anywhere. Even at such a young age he said that fish could not go anywhere, that the world eventually stopped and that there were sometimes rocks in the way.

His mother once said that, in the ocean, the water never stopped—that even though there was land, you could eventually go around it.

Baby Jason said otherwise. Birds could go on forever, he argued, because there was no land to stop them.

Afterward, there was no arguing that baby Jason wanted to be a bird.

It was on his fifth birthday—when, at an age, he was on the crux of childhood and bordering the time where soon his world would change for the good or the worse—that his father, an aviation expert and a man whom worked with planes and cranes, came home from work one day with a costume that had wings on its back. *You can be a bird,* his father said, *for Halloween.*

It could have been the happiest moment of his life. Here he was, five years old and wanting to fly, and so very close to the thing he so desperately wanted to be. He could not, his father said, really fly, as there was no way for the wings to substantially hold his body afloat, but he could be the closest that he could possibly be.

There was no argument on Halloween day baby when Jason put his winged costume on and went trick-or-treating with his father.

The world is boundless. Baby Jason knew this even from a young age when looking at birds and how they seemed anywhere to go. But it was without purpose or intent that most people are aware that on certain days, the worlds can bridge—that portals to other places can open, that other planes can be revealed, that alternate dimensions can surface in the simplest objects and different realities can cross over and merge with the one most people currently live in. Halloween exists on one of those days when, it is said, the spirit world comes to the physical as one, and it is on those days that miraculous things can happen. People can be born, people can die, and people can cross over into places that only the wildest imaginations can dream of.

It was while walking with his father down a long road in Adrian, Michigan that baby Jason discovered Wraethworld.

It was in the most simplest of objects, a thing that had fallen from a woman's purse and that had landed on the side of the road. Had baby Jason been a moment later, and had his father not wandered away to chat with a friend who stood just a few feet away from the sidewalk, there would have never been a bridging of the worlds. Baby Jason would have remained in the real world, his father would have continued to take him trick-or-treating, and his mother wouldn't have received an urgent and frantic phone call that her son had just been kidnapped.

It takes but a moment for the world to change.

Baby Jason's world changed in one of those moments.

Within a mirror that had fallen out of a nice woman's purse, and within its oval contours that looked so fine and fancy, baby Jason saw upon its surface a place that looked magical. He did not, as he had expected, see his reflection, nor did he see the sky or the stars that twinkled above him. Instead, he saw a world that looked magical—a place with two hills and a wide, open space where it seemed he could fly.

When baby Jason saw this place, his heart began to beat frantically in his chest.

He would have cried out in joy before he stumbled. He did not, however, fall to the street, as would have been expected for a boy who took a tumble. Rather, he fell into the mirror, into a place whose name he did not know but whose name was really Wraethworld.

It seemed to take a long time for him to fall. He did not fall directly from the sky, as that would have possibly hurt him far worse than he could have ever imagined, but he did fall a fair distance from the ground, since when he impacted he cried out in both surprise and utter terror. How, he wondered, could he have gotten here, in this place, just by falling?

When baby Jason opened his eyes, he saw before him a road filled with dirt.

As he rose to his feet, he discovered, to his utter enjoyment, fascination and fear, that he was standing within the very place he had seen within the mirror.

It took him several moments to realize that he was in a completely different place, within a completely different area and within possibly a completely different time. It did not cross his young mind that he could possibly be within another world. Such things are impossible, it seems, except in books, in games, in movies, on the TV, and for that he didn't even stop to consider such a thing. For that reason, he merely stared on ahead and at the world below—at the road, the poppy fields, and the dark forest directly in front of him.

In but a few moments, baby Jason began to worry.

Where was his father and how, he wondered, would he get out?

After looking up into the sky and seeing that there no longer was a way to get out, baby Jason began to cry.

Something behind him shifted.

He turned to look at the most beautiful thing ever.

She was a woman who looked as though she was carved from marble. Red in color, with white lines running across her skin, with a mouth painted black and a pair of blue eyes so bright they seemed to reflect the sea stretching on forever, she was dressed in a fine black robe and appeared to be something like a lady from church—except for the red and white skin. He couldn't remember what exactly they were called, as the name sounded much too confusing, but it took very little for him to smile at her.

Hello little boy, the lady in black said, her mouth moving but no audible sound coming out her lips and entering through his ears. It, instead, felt as though she were speaking in his head. *What is your biggest wish?*

Baby Jason thought long and hard. His first wish was that he wanted to go home, as he knew his mommy and daddy would soon begin to worry about him now that he was no longer at the end of his sidewalk, but for reasons he couldn't necessarily understand that seemed wrong. It was not, of course, his biggest wish, as something told him he would eventually get home anyway and that he wouldn't have to worry about it. He would appear at the end of the sidewalk, be hugged by his daddy, continue trick-or-treating and then go back home to his mother, who would cry and ask just where he had been when he had disappeared off the road. He would then tell his mommy that he had went to a world where there were two big hills and two fields of flowers, then say that a woman who had red skin with white lines and blue eyes had helped him get back to his world. With that firmly implanted within his conscience, and with his mind still running amok, he began to think of the one thing he really, truly wanted in life, the one thing that would make him the happiest little boy in the world and would eventually make him feel as though the world was his and that he had nothing in the world.

Slowly, it dawned on him, like the sun rising over the mountains and lighting his world whole.

"I want to fly," baby Jason said.

All you have to do, the lady with the red skin said, *is believe.*

"But how?" he asked.

The lady with the red skin said nothing. There were stars in her eyes, so beautiful they shined, and they twinkled and sprinkled as though they would soon erupt tears onto the pleasant and vulnerable world. In that regard, she was beautiful—very, very beautiful—and when she turned to sand when a breeze came up and began to disperse across the horizon, baby Jason turned to look at the expanse of land that lay within the far distance.

All he would have to do, she had said, was believe.

Baby Jason spread his arms.

Like the birds he'd seen so many times before, he jumped and pumped his hands.

He began to fly.

He was doing it, he thought, as he began to coast the air and his wings spread out from ahead of him. He was doing it, he was actually doing it!

Little boys can't fly, his mother had once said.

If little boys couldn't fly, then just how was he flying?

Laughing, baby Jason pumped his arms, then bowed his body to direct himself toward the woods that lay beneath.

The sound of tearing fabric filled his ears.

In but a moment, he realized something.

His father once said that people couldn't fly because they were too heavy.

Above, the fabric of his costume continued to rip.

Baby Jason screamed.

His wings came free.

He began to fall.

He hit the ground and continued to roll. Bouncing, he imagined, in the brief moments he could think, like a ball being thrown across the room, his body came down again and again as he rolled down the hill that seemed to go on forever and ever. At one point, it seemed, he would stop, as within his hands he held the earth and the things that made it up, but when he continued down the hill in pain so great and fierce it felt as though nothing in the world could rival it, he tried to cry, but found himself almost unable to do that. The pace of his pain continued to escalate until, finally, it stopped, dead at the end of the hill and at the one place where it seemed everything would cease to exist.

Above, floating through the air like a bird, were his wings.

At the top of the hill, baby Jason saw the lady with the red and white skin and blue eyes standing on the road.

She raised her hand and waved, then disappeared once more as sand.

Baby Jason reached to the sky as he watched his wings begin to fall.

Baby Jason entered the world of Wraethworld to try and reach his dreams.

He died by his own limitations.

T.
The Third Interlude

There are powers within each and every individual that are often left untapped solely because they are not aware that they exist. For those who are knowledgeable of these gifts, and who are able to use them to their own advantage, they often find that within troublesome situations they have a heightened advantage over the dangers that are often present. In these

cases, they are able to rise above the smoldering ashes of defeat and stand proud and tall when around them others have succumbed to the lesser inhibitions of their world.

In the current point of our story, when little Mary Matthews has surpassed the beginning of the world known as Wraethworld and has faced her first gruesome challenge, it has become increasingly apparent that she possesses an advantage over the creatures that inhabit this world. Be it because of a stroke of luck or a natural intuition that she was born with, her quick thinking and fast rationale have saved her thus far. However—it is not without consequence that one who shares advantages over another is offered free reign over their place in the world, be it the real or the metaphysical. For that, it would seem that Mary has only briefly touched upon the dangers that exist within this alternate universe and has therefore left herself open.

As she descends the hills, slowly making her way toward the place where the field of poppies begins and the rest of the world opens up, there rests a danger amidst the flowers that is unseen and troubling in all respects.

With nowhere else to go, it is up to Mary to rely on her own intuition in order to make it past the next broad scope of Wraethworld.

6.
The Poppy Fields

She descends the hill with more speed and grace than she could have ever imagined. One foot forward, another the other, she makes her way forward as though she is a man climbing the biggest mountain in the world and takes extra care to avoid taking too many long steps. Here, it appears, it is very steep, as with one step down she slides a few feet, then with another she almost goes stumbling, and it doesn't take much to see that should she not be careful she will very likely end up propelling herself forward and down the hills. The idea alone summons the thought of baby Jason and how, when his wings failed and his mortality came aplenty, he fell from the sky onto this very hill and rolled all the way down. *Jack and Jill went up the hill,* her classmates once sang, *and along came a spider who once tried to bite her and he went swimming down the telephone drain.*

Mary isn't exactly sure if there is such a thing as a telephone drain. It seems possible, considering that when placed to the ear there are sometimes things that go in the phone—voices, sweat, tears, sometimes the red stuff that she hates but knows is blood—but to think that a spider would go swimming down a telephone seemed almost impossible. Most spiders were much too big to fit inside the tiny holes that telephones had. Ants, maybe, could fit inside a phone, but not a spider.

In thinking this, she takes a moment to consider her place on the slope she is currently on and looks out at the field of flowers before her. They're beautiful, and smell like spring after warm winter's rain, and remind her of home—of the grand, sweeping fields that she often sees out in the wild, untamed country of the place that she has lived in throughout her entire life. Most importantly, they remind her of her mother and how, whenever she would find a flower, Mary would pick it for her and offer it without so much as a second thought.

It's beautiful, her mother had said, each and every time Mary picked a flower and offered it into her small but big hands.

If only her mother were here, Mary thinks. Maybe then things would be just a little safer.

Sighing, her breath a plume of air from lips and teeth that have not been brushed since the day before, Mary continues down the hill.

The sun is high in the sky.
Her shins are dirty.
Her feet hurt.

The trek down the hills is almost as painful as the walk toward them. Ankles hurting, legs clumsy and upper body shivering despite the fact that it is not cold, Mary tries to console herself with the fact that soon, she will be off the hill and in a position where she can rest without having to worry about much of anything, where there are flowers and the smell of spring will lull her to sleep. Regardless, though, these thoughts seem to do little, as it seems in that moment that all that exists is pain—deep, scarlet pain, that stabs her shins with needles at the doctor's office without the nurse ever offering her a cartoon-character band-aid in return. It's almost enough to make her cry. The world is against her, she knows, this place called Wraethworld, and there seems no respite, no moment in which she can stop and recover and just be the ordinary girl that she really, truly is. Something tells her that this is the way this world operates—how, in theory, its sole goal is to make her feel as though she is small—but in thinking such things, she knows that the thoughts are too horrible to bear. As such, she stops thinking altogether and continues down the hill.

Above, the sun passes overhead, winking its one cyclopean eye every so often behind clouds that she has only seen today.

The day progresses forward, unbeknownst to the fact that a little girl is suffering just beneath it.

Near the bottom of the hill, and near the point where Mary wants to cry because her legs and feet hurt so badly, she decides to settle down on a slight outcropping in the hill and crosses her legs Indian-style, like Miss Kitty always asked her class to do before they entered Wraethworld.

Miss Kitty—poor, poor Miss Kitty.

The thought of what happened to her kindergarten teacher is almost enough to make her cry.

It will be ok, her mother's voice once said, when the roly-poly she named Mr. Bill died in his little glass of dirt. *Mr. Bill is in Heaven now.*

Could Miss Kitty be in Heaven now, even though she wasn't in the real world when she died? Mary isn't sure—doesn't think she *can* be sure, as she is only aware of the fact that Heaven exists somewhere in the real world, high in the sky and possibly beyond the stars—and in thinking about it her nose begins to drip. Snot slides from her septum and over her upper lip to where she can almost taste it—that tangy, putrid thing that really tastes like nothing but always makes her want to be sick—where, eventually, it travels down the expanse of her chin and hangs there like icicles in the winter. She imagines herself as a house with a big brown face and a nice broad grin. Her hair is the snow, her face the roof, her chin the shingles and the things that hold it all together. She is a construct, she knows, of human hands, and as the water begins to drip down, over the shingles and toward the ground, it freezes mid-stride and becomes a thing of pain, of horror and agony that, if disturbed, and if poised above a little girl, may fall and kill her.

In sitting there on the hill—looking out at not only the field of beautiful flowers, but the dark forest that lingers in the distance—Mary begins to feel as though she will never complete her journey.

How far, she wonders, will she have to walk until she gets back to the real world?

Though unable to know, and though doubtful of the fact that she will ever return home to her mommy and daddy and Mama Grandma, she finds peace in the fact that, at least for now, she can rest.

Leaning back, Mary closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

She knows that she can't be anywhere near the hills by the time the sun falls.

Something tells her that if she does, the things with red eyes will come back.

Near dusk, at the time where the sun is near the right side of the world and the sky is once again bleeding as if it is some great crystal in the sky, Mary decides to forego the path and begins to wander through the field of poppies to the right side of the hill. The grass is short and only scrapes across her ankles occasionally, whispering of life that exists beyond the world of intelligence, but the poppies are tall and come up to her waist. They are, she imagines, much too tall to be regular flowers, as no flower that she has seen beyond the sunflower is taller than a little girl, but she imagines that might have something to do with the fact that this isn't the real world, but Wraethworld, a place where people enter never to return. That, however, doesn't concern her, as in walking through the flowers she remembers what her daddy once told her when they were wandering through Mama Grandma's garden.

There might be snakes, daddy had once said, *and spiders and frogs and other things that bite.*

Could there be things that bite here? Surely if there were such things she would have felt them. So far she has only seen one animal that she remembers from the real world—the blackbirds. Beyond the things with the red eyes, there seems to be nothing here. This land is barren, a wasteland where nothing exists. To think that there might be more animals here makes her feel uncomfortable not because she herself is afraid of the animals, but because she is afraid *for* them. Where did the birds go when they flew into the sky? Did they try to leave this world and hit the glass bubble that Mary feels surrounds them, only to break their necks or wings and plummet back to the earth, or did they simply vanish, never to return again?

Rather than think about the consequences of her current actions, Mary sighs and runs her hand along the tops of the flowers to her left.

When she pulls her hand back, beautiful blue pollen lines her palms.

Though she brings her palm to her nose, and while she expects to sneeze, nothing happens.

How strange could this world be? No birds, no planes, no kids for her to be ashamed—if not these things, then what, she wonders, is here, if not monsters and things that went bump in the night?

In the middle of the field of poppies, Mary looks down and tries to see her feet. Though she can only see the tips of her Mary Jane's, she can tell that they will likely not last much longer, especially if she continues at the pace she's going.

With a short exhale out her nose and an even quicker inhale through her lips, Mary crouches down until she is all but hidden in the flowers and begins to close her eyes.

Sleep tugs at her consciousness.

She opens her eyes to find the world stark and almost devoid of light.

It is in looking at the sun, which is slowly-but-surely falling to the right side of the world, that she realizes that she is still dangerously close to the hills.

Sad, but all the more aware that she cannot stay here any longer than she has, Mary rises to her feet and starts to make her way across the field, hands at her sides and fingers spread to grace the flowers as they pass her by.

Before she can make it further than but a few steps, something stirs in the flowers ahead.

Mary freezes.

A row of flowers bows as if touched, then right themselves almost immediately.

A bead of moisture slides down the back of Mary's neck. Eclipsing her spine, it travels down her back until it all but disappears into her dress.

Before her, the same row of flowers shifts.

A breath of air catches in Mary's throat.

Whatever is disturbing the poppies begins to come forward.

The flowers flush to the left and right as though they are dancers slowly bowing atop a stage. Their stalks bent, their heads flushed forward, their inner parts revealed to show the red-and-white-peppermint center they all have, they seem to be beckoning her forward as from the near distance the thing disturbing the flowers begins to grow closer. They are dancing, she thinks, for the queen, the king, the prince and the princess and the duke, and they are beginning to descend as though they are mean birds to a poor innocent cat. The cat will run, the cat will scream, the cat will cry and the cat will fight, and though he might not necessarily die, there is the distinct possibility that he will be brutally injured. The thought alone is enough to make Mary believe that she herself is the cat being attacked by birds—as in that moment it seems impossible to simply stand there, let alone turn around and begin to run in the opposite direction—but somehow she is able to hold her ground, as Mama Grandma always told her not to run away from the things you are afraid of. *Even if it is a dog,* she had once said, *or a lion, a tiger, a bear, oh my! never run. Never, ever run Mary, because when you start to run, the things in the dark will chase you until the end of time.*

Standing there, her ground held and her heart beating a thousand times over, Mary balls her hands into fists and prepares to defend herself against whatever it is that is currently rushing toward her.

Breath short and labored, joints harsh and hurting, she waits for the thing to reveal itself for what it really is.

The flowers flush forward.

The wind comes up.

Mary's teeth sink into her lower lip and her body begins to tremble.

For but a moment, everything stops. The wind, the flowers, the trees in the distance, the grass at her feet—not a soul moves as whatever it is that is in front of her comes to a stop.

Then, slowly, it reveals itself.

He was born of many colors and seemed to have fallen from an olive branch. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet—he is a rainbow of color and an Armageddon of purpose. His head is a triangle, his tongue is forked, his eyes are harsh, without color and glaring right at her—he rises back on his long body and begins to wave his head back and forth as if he is entranced by an Indian man who holds within his hand a pipe long and wooden. He appears dizzy, in this moment, in hovering above the poppies and looking right at her, and it seems as though he will fall—dead, it seems, to the ground, without ever doing whatever it was he was supposed to be doing. However, much to her disappointment, Mary knows better than this. She knows that he will not fall dead, that he is not dizzy and that he is not being charmed by an Indian man with a flute in his hand that is long and wooden. No. She knows that he is waiting for her to respond, for her to cry out and for her to run, as it was he who fell from pride and glory and abundance and peace, not she. It is for that reason that Mary stands her ground, her hands balled into fists and her eyes set straight ahead.

As the one with many colors continues to wave his head back and forth, Mary summons within her mind the image of Mama Grandma and knows in her heart that he will not tear her down. *Do not be afraid,* Mama Grandma says, *for he cannot hurt you as long as you believe.*

Believe she does, and believe she will, Mary stands her ground. She is no longer afraid of the thing before her.

The one with many colors stops moving. His triangular head comes to a standstill and he blinks his eyes, the clear film of white flashing over his black scleras before his attention is set directly back on her. It is as if he has sensed that Mary is no longer afraid and is unsure what to do, as he merely stands there waiting for her to respond. In hindsight, Mary doesn't understand why she was afraid of him in the first place. He is merely dumb, a thing fallen from grace, and though he appears intimidating in both size and posture, he is really no more than a small thing in a very big world.

Mary takes a step forward. The one with many colors slides back. Mary takes another step forward and the one with many colors slides back once again. She imagines this process will continue throughout the field if she so willingly led the two of them together, a leader directing a follower in a grand dance, but she knows she does not have time for that. The sun is going down, the light is bleeding from the sky, and the left side of the world is slowly growing dark. There is no reason for this to continue any further.

When both she and the one with many colors come to a complete stop, Mary extends her arm and reaches forward.

Her palm touches the flat of his chest.

His mouth opens and a scream erupts from the depths of his being.

Mary presses forward.

The thing with many colors recoils and slides back into the poppies.

It is in but one moment, as she sees him disappearing into the flora, that Mary realizes she is much more powerful than she initially anticipated herself to be.

She can do this. She knows she can.

While the sun continues to fall down on the right side of the world, she begins to make her way forward, all the while knowing in her heart that there is nothing to be afraid of.

It is beyond dark by the time she settles down.

In the middle of the road, legs crossed and heart unsure, she stares straightforward and dares not turn her head in the opposite direction for fear of seeing the things with the red eyes on the tops of the hills behind her. In this darkness, so pure and absolute, things seem even more devious—sinister, even, for it is here that she cannot see anything, as there is no grey film in the sky that allows her to discern images upon the horizon. She cannot see the flowers at her sides, though she can easily smell them, and she cannot see the dark forest that lies in the far distance. That in itself is probably a blessing, considering that she already feels as though they are beyond dangerous, but being blind is never a thing a person wants to be. No. If she could see in the dark, things would be much better. She could be a cat, she could be a bird, she could be a dog, hog or frog—anything to see in the dark and at least secure within her a belief that would allow her to know that things would be just fine.

The wind is blowing tonight. Not harsh, but not gentle, it tousles her hair in her face and makes her dress shiver around her knees. She wishes she had a blanket so she could curl up and go to sleep for the night, as this eve is much colder than the previous and completely unforgiving. That, however, is impossible. She knows this to be true because there seems to be no earthly things in this place, save for the things left behind, and only once has she seen Jesus Picarazio. Baby Jason she could not find, though in this instance she feels as though that is a good thing—a grand gift from the men and women in the sky to keep her from crying.

Taking a deep breath, Mary allows herself a moment to consider her surroundings, as dark as they may be, then spreads herself out in the middle of the road, careful to keep her eyes closed when her head lies on the road where she could just as easily see the things on the hills with red eyes if they so truly happen to be there.

In but an instant, her head begins to swim.

Pain lives behind her eyelids. Cherry blossoms bloom along her vision and bleed tears down her face.

Her mother, her father, Mama Grandma—all of them, gone, nowhere to be seen.

As her mind begins to slip into the dark places—where, she imagines, not even the monsters can be seen—Mary begins to realize something.

She may never see home again.

She once more makes her way into the field of poppies come the following morning unafraid and not in the least bit terrified of their prospect. The one of many colors is long gone. He will not come back. She knows this in her heart in a way she imagines all little girls know that they are loved by their mothers, their fathers, their Mama Grandmas, and for that she is confident in the fact that nothing will stir her emotions unless she finds something that is more confident than the thing that fell from the olive branch. She imagines there are much greater things in this world than the one with many colors. The things on the hills, though afraid of her sound, were much more terrifying. The thing she encountered yesterday was merely a jester, a thing afraid of touch and the mortal implications that came with it. If she is to progress further, and she truly knows she has to, there will be much more terrifying foes to encounter.

Shaking her head, not wanting to deal with the implication that soon there will be even greater danger afoot, Mary straightens her posture as much as she is able to with her aching feet and back plaguing her and continues forward, hands flourishing amongst the poppies and her eyes trailing over the somewhat-small but still-vast section of the hills.

It won't be much longer until the fields of flowers end and the dark forest ahead begins.

Its trees are tall. There appears to be sharp needles protruding from many of their branches, though a good amount of them are dead, stretched forward like she so horribly imagined dead people attempting to grasp something final in life. These are the trees that make her worry. They are ancient, she knows, and when trees are devoid of leaves or needles or blossoms she knows them to be one of two things—dead or dormant. Since trees are not normally the latter in warm months, which she knows this place to be, she knows they are dead, but from what she can't be sure. Her mommy once said that bugs can kill trees by burrowing inside them until the things that transfer light and energy into their roots are all but gone. If there truly are bugs here, they must be awesome, because just looking at the trees ahead makes her feel like she is entering a place where there are graves and the dead are six feet under. She's only been in a place like that once—when, with Mama Grandma, she went to visit the Papa Grandpa she never knew—but in being there, she learned that the dead really can speak, if one is so inclined to listen.

Sighing, Mary continues forward.

It isn't long after her revelation is dead that she comes across a ring of grass.

There are no flowers that grow here, no bowing dancers to grace the stage or no ones with many colors to stalk her beneath the cover of stalks. There is nothing, one could say, if only by looking on this place, but grass. The ring, though small compared to the field, extends a fair distance away from where she stands—where, she imagines, a small car could park if one so truly desired. Within this ring there are a series of shoes. Some are heels, some are sneakers,

others are sandals and some are boots. All, she knows, belong to children, as their size indicates that they are only her age or only partially older than she.

Mary steps forward.

A part of her expects nothing to happen.

However—when a glowing scroll of parchment begins to materialize in the air, shifting out of shadows that cannot be seen and emerging into the world that she knows as Wraethworld, her heart catches in her chest and her breath stops short within her throat.

Slowly, it begins to unravel.

There are but a few words on it, emblazoned in black.

These are the stories of the little boys and girls who didn't know who they were, a disembodied voice says, *and this is how they came to Wraethworld.*

7.
The Little Boys and Girls Who Didn't Know Who They Were

There were little boys who looked like girls and little girls who looked like boys. The boys wore dresses and had long hair. The girls wore suits and had short hair. How they entered Wraethworld is not the reality behind the story, as their entrance was simple and plain and without any real merit. Rather, it is the venture into the place where realities could change and appearances could be altered that tells the story of these three boys and these three girls, these six children who didn't know who they were, and it is for that reason that, come time when they fully began to accept their new position, they truly realized they were one and part of Wraethworld.

Their names were simple and plain. The boys were Arnold, Gerald and Karson. The girls were Susie, Molly and Helga. Six in all they were, each five to seven, and each came from various locations around the world. All knew English—could speak it very well—and all could understand the dialects in which one another spoke. It need not matter that some were not in the same countries as the others and that some were younger and others were older—the universal language of children is that, if given the opportunity, they can learn, oftentimes much quicker than adults. It was in that reason that, upon entering Wraethworld, and upon coming into contact with one another, they each became very good friends, those of which could depend on one another in the most sinister of circumstances. So it was from the very dawn of the world—from the beginning of the bridge to the hills and beyond—that they wandered, in search of answers to the questions they so desperately had, and it was in this search that they all came to realize that they didn't know who they were.

Their problem, as complicated as it seemed to the adults who once nurtured them, was simple to those six boys and those six girls. The boys wanted to be girls and the girls wanted to be boys. They were, as they so desperately tried to explain once upon a time, trapped in the wrong bodies—that the little boys who were really boys wanted to be girls and the little girls who were really little girls wanted to be boys. Their parents scoffed at this idea, saying it was just a phase, while their teachers merely considered them as doing nothing more than playing games to further express their conflicted gender identities. To a psychologist, however, they would have said that they were one thing—transgendered, or possibly troubled with their current place and position in the world by being trapped to gender standards that the world so sadly places upon those even at birth.

It was during this time, when talking, that the little boys and little girls came to realize that they were all more similar than they really seemed to be, so it was for that reason that—in front of each other, and without shame—that they began to undress. The boys took their shoes and boots off, the girls took their heels and Mary Jane's free, and the boys undressed from the suits they wore and the girls the dresses that garnished their beings. They then exchanged clothes based on size and height, and while they weren't particularly-perfect fits, their newfound joy in being who they really wanted to be spurred them on to a new direction. One of the girls found a pair of scissors and asked the boys to cut their hair, and over the days and weeks and months they spent in Wraethworld the boys grew their hair until it was long and wavy. They did not hunger for food, oddly enough, and they had no need for water or anything else to wet their throats. It was as if they had stepped into their own personal dream land and were now able to live as they see fit.

Their journey was slow, their progress short and their prospects high. They wandered the barren fields of grass before the entrance of Wraethworld for many long weeks before eventually they began to advance toward the hills. It was natural that they feared the things atop them, as with red eyes they watched the six as though they were something of a spectacle, and because of that they feared to go forward. It was, however, one of the boys who urged them onward, as he said he smelled on the air flowers that reminded him of mints and beckoned them forward with but a wave of his hand.

They continued thereafter toward the hills slowly so everyone could keep up. It took many days and even more nights, as when they stopped many of them cried when the things on the hills would laugh like clowns who had lost their breaths. This reason, and many more, was what kept them from continuing on. Many of them argued that the road was growing longer—that somehow, someway, the time they spent travelling seemed like nothing. A few even questioned whether or not they should step off the path and travel on the grass instead. It was argued, in such plain and adult manners, that since the grass was not a purposed path, it could not keep going for one reason or another. This idea was quickly shot down when, on one morning's dawn, they saw footprints from strange creatures that resembled something like gigantic chickens, and for that they continued forward.

It took days to reach the hills, likely weeks, possibly months. By the time they arrived they were haggard—old, some would have described them as, and dirty, with dust on their pants and their shoes almost worn to just the soles. It was there, at the crux of it all, that they looked down and saw just below the fields of flowers that extended from the ends of the hills to the beginnings of a dark forest.

At this point, something compelled them to take their clothes off. What they couldn't be sure, but when they did they came to find something astounding—that their genitals, once poor and astounding within their poor trapped bodies, were gone. Instead, there was nothing—just smooth, pale skin, that of which did nothing to identify them as the boys or girls that such things most often do. This was it—this was really, truly *it.* They were no longer little girls and little boys. They could be whoever they wanted to be.

With their clothes off but their shoes on, the children descended the hills with haste almost impossible. There was no need to worry about the bumps in the road, how steep the path had become or how there seemed to be rocks and other unnecessary things in the way to trip them. Instead, it was one straight shot down—a single, direct route in which they could make their way to the poppy fields they so desperately knew was theirs.

Once in the fields, the children began to run.

It was a sight that could have never been imagined.

They traversed the field as though there was nothing to be afraid of. There was no need, no worry, no fear, trial, horror or action, no deceit or bar or any one thing that need be in their way. There was no man or woman to stand idly by, no monster or foe to prey on them from afar, and there was no distance they could not travel. They wore their shoes, their boots, their heels, their Mary Jane's; they kept their hair long and short as to what they believed themselves to be and they walked hand-in-hand as if they were all brothers and sisters naked and unabashedly unafraid as if they were at the beginning of time and clothes did not exist. Flowers parted at their waists and the grass beneath their feet seemed soft and warm—blessed, they could have said, by the fact that they were no longer afraid of the world or what it had to offer. It was as if it had been doused with water of the greatest value and proclaimed to be something more than what it really was, like the men in the black coats said in the times in which they doused heads beneath the water and proclaimed them sane. That alone was enough to make each and every child feel confident about the things they so openly professed, nakedly and without regret.

It would have seemed perfect to see six children so open in their display.

That, however, was not the case, as happiness and freedom are not always offered.

It came from the sky on swift wings of darkness and hatred. Its feathers broad, its eyes harsh, its beak glistening in the blood of innocents and within its talons the construct of innocence—it descended upon them from the sky in but a moment's notice and shattered before them the world and the ground beneath it. Flowers died within its presence and wilted into nothing more than ash, while the grass itself smoldered as though burnt and cast with sparks. The smoke that ebbed from said grass drifted forward and before the creature's vision, casting its eyes in shades of light so harsh and feeble that the children began to scream. Many began to run, breaking the chain that seemed to protect them so, while others held their ground in terror as the creature once more ascended into the air. Each one it took it freed of their shoes, which fell to the ground perfectly as though they'd just been placed there, and into the sky it would go until it could not be seen. It would then emerge from the clouds without the child in toe and take yet another, and as the children continued to run in circles, trying desperately to escape the sphere of death and fire that prevented them from passing, the creature came back and plucked each one off the ground.

Slowly, but surely, it took the children into the sky and never returned.

When all their shoes sat in a perfect circle, the grass still burning around them and the flowers wilted and dead within their presence, the creature did not return.

The little boys and girls who didn't know who didn't know what they were entered Wraethworld to escape the persecution the world offered.

They died in the face of their freedom.

I.
The Fourth Interlude

We are all, at birth, given the innate ability to voice what it is we so desperately wish to say. As infants we cry; as toddlers we begin to speak; as children we laugh and talk unabashedly and as adults we converse as though there is no end to the flow of words that ebb and whistle from between our lips. It is a gift granted upon most everyone who is born into the human world and is allowed to flourish within the beginning of our lives. There are, however, those who do not have such a gift. Those whose vocal cords were burned, whose box in their voice stopped

working, whose brains cannot process the words from the chest to the throat into the mouth and then out through the lips—there is many a person who suffers from this sort of thing. Often called 'dumb,' they are stigmatized throughout society and are forced into small niches in which they suffer throughout the entirety of time. There is no freedom, no salvation, no burning tide on which they can ride, and for that it would appear as though there is no hope, for if there is no freedom, no salvation, no burning tide on which they can ride, there is no way to continue forward—to converse, to interact, to make a place within the world with their voice and mouth and words and tales in order to make themselves as part of a society whose methods require the ability to speak like it is for a person to speak.

For Mary Matthews, born disabled in not body, but mind and soul, she is cursed.

It would be at this point in the story when the stakes are raised and the consequences for actions are increased tenfold, as without one of the five dominant senses it would seem as though she will not be able to continue forward. This world appears, for all intents and purposes, to run off the prestigious powers of mortals who exist outside of Wraethworld, and who are able to use them of their own accord. It is, however, not a hindrance to one such as Mary. Gifted with the extraordinary power of perception, she has conquered the previous horrors she has faced in Wraethworld without so much as even using her voice. Her conscience is strong, her actions bright, her decisions made with haste that are uncanny and far beyond those who have entered the world before her—she is, by all definitions, a girl who holds the golden wool, and whose string follows her intently and without regret, and with this wool she believes that should she be lost, she will be able to find her way back, as there is but one path within Wraethworld that she knows does not divide by twos or threes or even fours and fives.

However—it is at this crucial point in Wraethworld where, as has said before, the stakes are raised.

The dark forest lingers ever so close.

This is the beginning of the end of Wraethworld.

8.
The Forest of Spiders

She comes to stand before the forest by the time night falls and feeks within her heart a sense of urgency that she has not experienced since entering this world. The trees are tall, the grass is dead, the path is grey and the world before her shadowed not in light of grey or golden consent, but by darkness absolute and petrified—there is no one with many colors, no dead bodies, no beluga whale train or the things with red eyes at the top of the hills. There are none of these things and yet she feels so afraid. Standing on a path, waiting for something to happen, trying to decide whether to step forward or step back—she knows in her mind and soul that she has to continue forward, if only because the path behind her is long and the entrance to this world had long since closed, but in standing here, it seems as though a weight is pressing down upon her from the sky, willing her to crawl onto the ground and curl up and die. Were she to do that, she imagines she would become small—much, much too small—and would eventually be reduced to tears.

Why, of all things, was this place terrifying her so?

Unable to know and not in the least bit willing to find out, Mary holds her ground.

The dirt crunches beneath her Mary Jane's. The breeze shifts her dress and upends her hair. The silence is so deafening that it seems as though a million electrical devices are sounding all

around her. She wants to reach up and cover her ears. It is that loud, that deafening, that *horrifying.* She has never experienced such silence before, and had she the opportunity to choose, she would say no—that this silence, this *thing,* is not truly silence, but agony inflicted upon the ears and stabbed into the mind.

The path before her seems to grow long.

Mary takes a few steps back.

She hears behind her what sounds like cackling and turns to survey the world behind her.

As she has expected, the things with red eyes at the tops of the hills, though distant, are watching.

What would they do, she wonders, if she tried to go back? Would they descend upon the road again, no longer afraid of the gesture they so purposely thought would hurt them, or would they merely wait there and disappear until morning? Whatever the case, she doesn't want to find out, though she knows she very well could not stand here and wait to find out.

Turning, she looks at the forest and tries to make a decision.

To go into the forest at night, in absolute darkness, would possibly not be the best idea. There will be animals, she knows, of the most dangerous degree, as such imposing figures upon society or nature are always wrought with terrors known and unknown. However, in hindsight, there is a thought that lights behind her head like a bulb in an attic and makes her wonder whether or not waiting to enter during the daylight hours would be the better alternative of her ideas. She had seen, in the distance, when atop the hills and in the field of flowers, a darkness that seemed to shadow the forest. It could have been nothing more than a mirage—a spot of water along a long dark road on a long hot day—but for some reason Mary doesn't think that's the case. It would be too obvious for it to be a mirage, a trick of the eye and a flicker of the heart. No. This darkness is absolute. Even during the day she would have trouble crossing through, as above the trees not dead are tall and wide and spread their branches and needles across the sky. That alone is enough to confirm her belief that there would be no difference in crossing the forest in the dark or during the daylight hours.

After crossing her arms over her chest, Mary considers her feet, her legs, her back, her entire *body* and how much she hurts.

She has been walking so long today. Maybe she should stop.

It takes several moments for her to come to a decision, as one part of her is fighting to go forward and another is demanding to stay put. However, when the decision is made, and when her conscience finally begins to die down, Mary defeats the ultimatum within her head and begins taking her first few steps forward.

It is within but a moment that she is within the forest.

The world goes dark.

Despite the fact that she cannot see more than but a few feet in front of her, she continues on.

There comes a moment while walking that she feels as though this is hopeless. This trek, this endeavor, this journey, purpose, mire—what is the point, she wonders, if she will never find a way out? There seems not to have been portals that could have deposited her back into the normal world—back, where, she can find a man or a woman or a boy or a girl and find her way back home—and for that it seems there is no reason to continue onward. Her body aches so badly that she wants to collapse and cry, to curl into a ball and wish the world away, and her mind screams to be freed from the mortal agony it exists within her skull. She imagines her brain

cracking a hole in her head and sliding out until it is nothing more than sludge before her, a clump of pudding of the mortal variety. That is almost enough to defeat her, and in that moment of weakness tears slide down her cheeks and cross the scope of her face.

It isn't until she sees something before her that her thoughts begin to change.

It is a glistening in the distance, a crescent upon which the world is shards of light that pierce through the night and reflect through the old and greying bark of the trees alive and dead, a reality in which the land is bright with concept and the woods are perpetually grey. It is a miracle, a memory, a chance, a moment in which all is lost and which everything is given, when the clocks stop turning and the things known as hours and minutes cease to exist and thought is lost and conscience falters. It is this, Mary sees, that brightens the world before her, that gives light to a world that is dark and harsh and shallow and filled with remorse. In looking at it, she begins to feel hope—a dandelion sense of chance that allows her to believe for but one moment that nothing is wrong: that everything is fine and that infinity is at her disposal.

She steps forward, one foot in front of the other.

Were she able to see her eyes, she imagines they would probably sparkle, and her teeth would shine as her smile broadens and the bones inside her mouth are revealed to the world. Her blue dress, though dirtied, would shimmer, and her Mary Jane's, though scarred, would twinkle. She would look perfect, she knows, because in this moment she is in Heaven, a place where all is good and nothing can go wrong.

In looking upon the shards of light before her, a sense of happiness that seems unmatched begins to bloom in her heart.

The flower reveals itself. Its petals open. Its anthers contract. Its stigma vibrates and its pollen is spilled across the horizon.

The world is beautiful for but a moment. Then something shifts upon the horizon.

Mary's sense of wonder is gone in but an instant.

Her heart begins to beat inside her chest.

A drum sounds within her head.

Her first inclination is to run.

When she turns and sees nothing but darkness behind her, she is petrified into place.

There is nowhere, she knows, to go but forward.

She begins to take her next few steps.

It is all revealed in but a moment's notice.

They are white and glistening in color. From their abdomens they spin silver thread throughout the trees and create an art of which the abstract becomes one with nature. Their bodies are crystalline, made of what appears to be hundreds of thousands upon thousands of tiny pearls, and their legs glimmer like daggers slicing through a dark night to an old king's throat. From these daggers they weave through the trees their constructs of creation, their nests of beauty, their exhibits of cleanliness. There is not a rough within the diamonds within the sky, as between the trees they skitter back and forth removing any and all debris that can be seen. It is, as Mary can describe it, a colonial act, in which things that appear to be insects but could not be anything of the sort make their way back and forth in order to perpetuate their need for survival. In staring at them, she can't help but remember the things back in the real world that look so similar—when, suspended on webs, they would descend from the ceiling, only to be swatted away or crushed beneath her daddy's hand.

Had her daddy been here, she mused, he wouldn't have been able to crush these.

Her sense of fear is soon replaced by a growing feeling of bewilderment as once more her body becomes autonomous and moves her forward. One foot in front of the other, over and over again, she is led, seemingly, on a rolling rail through the forest and beneath the monoliths within the sky. They are castles, she knows, of the greatest variety, and it is within this kingdom of web and thread that she knows that there is something magical here—an essence, a peace, a normalcy in which the way this world truly operates when there are no humans or things to truly harm them. Why she is afraid she does not know, but as she continues forward, that growing sense of fear continues to escalate: growing, pulsating, turning into a tumor within her heart and becoming fleshier by the second.

In standing beneath the glowing silver threads that traverse the world above her, it seems as though she is in a place where everything seems fine—that these things, as horrible as they may seem, are nothing more than beautiful creatures who are trying to make their way in the world.

Above, a giant moth the size of a small dog appears in the clearing.

Mary watches, mystified, as it flutters around the area.

It seems for but a moment that the moth is intelligent—that despite the fact that most things like it are stupid, it will avoid the glowing thread and continue into the forest unharmed. It isn't until its body collides into the webbing does Mary let out a breath.

Immediately, one is upon the moth.

It begins the process of mummification first by injecting a single pair of glistening fangs into the moth's body. Twitching, pulsating, thrashing about the web, the spirited creature of beauty and freedom squirms beneath the gargantuan creature's body as it tries desperately to free itself from the mortal prison it has managed to get itself into. It is, however, with regret that the thing cannot free itself, and as the creature of pearls and many shades of white continues to inject within its victim a poison that is likely paralyzing it from the inside out, Mary feels in her chest a tremor of unease that begins at the center of her torso and branches out to her arms. This eventually creatures an impression of biting cold so deep within her body that it feels as though her bones are shivering. In looking at the creature, and upon the sad spectacle before her, she imagines this is likely what the moth feels as the pearlescent beauty continues to feed upon it—liquefying, as Mary understands from school, its interior organs, then pumping them back into its body. She knows the creature will not feed for long. This is revealed to be the case when, but in the next moment, the beautiful monster detaches itself from the moth and begins to spin it in its web, slowly but surely creating an imperfection upon its home that, to such seemingly-vain creatures, should be impossible in such colonial behavior.

While watching the creatures, and in trying her hardest not to make a noise for fear of attracting their attention, Mary's teeth begin to chatter. It is here, she knows, that it is winter, for beneath a forest so dark and dreary there are creatures of frost and spite—monsters not born of warmth and plenty, but of death and destruction, who are spewed from the womb of mothers after they have killed their fathers and carried on their backs until they are old enough to sustain themselves. It seems impossible for her to merely stand there and watch, as in but a moment one of the creatures could descend onto the ground and take her into its web, but somehow she is able to maintain hold on her emotions and merely watches as the creature wraps the moth in its tomb.

Slowly, as to not disturb the creatures above her, Mary takes a step forward.

One of the creatures making its way along a silver thread stops to view the progress of its brethren's mummification.

Mary freezes.

The creature shifts, blinks its many crystalline eyes, then rotates along the web until Mary can see the entire scope of its body. Spread eagle, it appears to be as large as a pig, if not bigger. Its daggers of legs flash in the light radiating from the webs and reflects miniature beads of color along the clearing, creating the impression that she is under a globe that has many holes and is filled with a light bulb in order to cast radiance across the room.

Not sure what to do, Mary simply stands there.

The creature rotates once again until its head is facing Mary.

A breath escapes from her throat.

The monster lifts its two front legs and begins to fiddle with fangs that just recently had been within the moth's body.

She continues to stand there, staring off with the creature which very likely wants to eat her, and tries her hardest to hold her ground and not make another noise. A part of her mind tells her that these creatures, like the things with the red eyes atop the hills and the one of many colors, will be vulnerable to such human things—because, she knows, they are not used to such sounds, such touches—but she isn't sure whether or not these creatures will be susceptible to the power of her Mary Jane's or even of the touch of her palm. She most surely doesn't want to touch them, as they seem hairy even though there appears to not be a shred of fibrous material on them, and though she could very easily click her shoes, that doesn't guarantee this thing will go away and leave her alone.

At this point in time, during which Mary has been staring at the single monster for several moments, its companions begin to gather around and watch. They are like settlers, she thinks, from a foreign land. Perched atop trees, heads lowered, arms hanging limply at their sides—they are Bonobos waiting for their great destruction, for the final battle in which their entire race will succumb to genocide, and they will stop at nothing in order to protect not only themselves, but their friends. They will raise their tools, arm their constructs, hurl rocks through the air and slash her with twigs—there is absolutely nothing they won't do to protect themselves, so it is no wonder that they are staring. They are likely waiting for the first reciprocatory response, but what she can do Mary doesn't know. In that regard, she is as vulnerable to them as they are likely to her.

After taking a slow, deep breath, she decides the only thing she can do at this given point in time is to attempt to move forward and leave them behind.

Stepping forward, Mary holds her hands steady at her side and keeps her attention set on the road illuminated by the thread above.

Movement shuffles in the webbing above her.

She does not dare look up. If she does such a thing, one will descend, only to impale her with its fangs and strike her dead. It will inject within her the poison of a thousand pains until she cannot move, and when she ceases to exist, she will be wrapped up within a coffin: imprisoned, chained, and ensnared within a beautiful thread in which the world and all its nature is entailed. She does not want to die—not here, of all places, and definitely not now, especially not for monsters such as them.

As she continues forward on the seemingly never-ending road, beneath the chandeliers of thread that seemingly span the entirety of the current area, she begins to hum beneath her breath a tune that she believes will keep her at peace. *Dun dun dun duh, dun duh dun duh. Dun dun woo woo, dun dun woo woo.* It is the tune in which the world she initially came from operates on—when, in school, at big assemblies, they play the sound in which their world was born of, of which it was conquered and which it was rebuilt, and in this sound she feels safe, like an iron

cage is around her and nothing can get in. No fish, no pig, no shark, no lark, no animal of which is born of the regular or of Wraethworld can feed upon her in this very place, and shall they try, they shall be struck down, because they cannot transpire the iron and wood, the metal and electrical, the fist and the thorn. It is this, she feels, that keeps her safe, and this is why, she knows, she will not be harmed.

Keeping her pace brisk but slow enough to where she is not truly running, Mary continues on along the path like she has been for the past two days and tries not to let the burdens of her body get the best of her. It had seemed, up until the point where she continues walking, that her legs had ceased to hurt and that her feet no longer troubled her. Now, however, she can't help but wonder just how it is she will keep going, especially considering the fact that she is growing so deathly tired. Regardless, however, she knows she cannot stop here, especially considering the fact that the beautiful creatures above were still shifting—and, likely, following her.

With a brief sigh, Mary turns her head down to look at her feet, where she sees at the tips of her toes cracks in the leather. It won't be much longer until they begin to fall apart.

Above, something shifts.

Mary lifts her head just briefly so she can see the path in front of her.

Before her is a sight horrible and completely catastrophic.

It is a web that has descended from the trees above and has collapsed into the clearing—a place where, unbeknownst to those who have not entered, the world is a wreck and things within it are all but dead. Coagulated, mixed, fresh with dirt that makes its radiating appearance appear grey and dull and resembling something of a haystack in which several kittens have just taken play—it is an ugly sight to behold: a place where, obviously, the creatures above have not followed to try and repair the damage. It would have appeared from explicit behavior alone that these things preferred to be of the sky, of the heights and the world above. It is for this reason that Mary does not feel afraid to approach the web, which is all but wrapped around the trunk of a massive tree and is slowly but surely fading without the attention and proper care of the things that manage it so. It is not that, however, what bothers her about this web, this place, this mortal tragedy of a world called Wraethworld. It is the distinct shapes of two obviously-mummified figures that trouble her heart and make her breath skip a beat.

When Mary steps forward, what sounds like a voice of a dearly-departed angel begins to sing.

A scroll of parchment begins to come into view.

Slowly, it begins to unravel.

There are but a few words on it, emblazoned in black.

This is the story of the Littleton twins, a disembodied voice says, *and this is how they came to Wraethworld.*

9.
Shelly and Abby Littleton

Shelly and Abby Littleton were average little girls. Twins, aged seven, born of rich, secular parents—they lived on the outskirts of a large town in the woods near a place where a stream ran free right alongside their home. They were, as most anyone could have described them, quite happy, and the best of friends. They had no animals, save for a few wild kittens that may or may not have been of domesticated descent, and they had not an ounce of electricity within their life. They played no games, watched no TV, listened to no music, the radio or any other sort of

electronical device that could have, for lack of a better phrase, ‘fried their brains stupid.’ Their parents were quite clear on the fact that they were not going to evolve with the real world and therefore remain complacent in the past. So instead of turning to the electronical and the magical, the twins read of heroes and heroines for their entertainment. They helped their parents cook and clean, ran the property around their house and often pretended to be princesses in the small cabin home they lived within. Their lives were quite average, to anyone looking upon their situation, but there always comes a day in which the average becomes skewed—altered, distorted, changed and unraveled into a piece of violet tapestry upon which the whole world could be shrouded. It was because of this unrepairable law within not only the universe, but the world that one day, while running through the woods at the back of their home, Shelly and Abby Littleton came across something miraculous.

It began simply enough. With a game of tag, a promise of the last chocolate chip oatmeal cookie and the declaration that whoever won the game would get to blow out the candles that night, they set out from their starting position of their front steps and began their mad pursuit through the woods. Their routes memorized, their locations secure, their knowledge of plants and animals bad and abolishable more than clear within their minds, they took the route less travelled alongside the fast-running stream and made their way into the woods as deep as they possible could. Trees flying by, woodpeckers hammering in the distance, landlocked birds scattering when the girls ran forth and a few choice deer skittering along the bushes—quite realistically, it could be seen as magical: as a thing and place and time and moment in which nature became one with the real world and that little girls, who could not possibly be animals, could grow fangs and teeth and horns. It was for this effect that nature often has on little girls that Shelly and Abby Littleton began to make sounds like wild animals chasing after one another. Shelly would caw, flapping her arms like wings, while Abby would growl and jump through the air as if she were a cat hunting the bird Shelly so proclaimed to be. Their play seemed to be anything but of the real source, as the animals who looked upon these children would often stare in bewilderment before vanishing, but it was soon declared through their pursuit of the woods that something indeed was horribly wrong. Normally on such a day they would see many more animals—foxes, more deer, even the landlocked birds that they’d just scared before. On a day like this though, there was nothing at all and not a thing to disturb them.

Unbeknownst to the danger that could very well be within their midst, and unaware of the fact that they’d wandered much too far away from home and where their parents could easily find them, the twins continued forward through the forest and along the stream until they came across a range of rocks that bore within them a single rounded opening.

Upon seeing this, both the twins stopped and looked at the opening before them. Their parents had always said never to go into caves—that animals like wolves and bears and wild dogs often lived there—but based on past exploration of several mounds, hollow trees and nooks and crannies, there was but one solution to the problem of determining whether or not there was something in the cave. With little more than a shrug, Shelly Littleton crouched down, grabbed a handful of rocks, then began to hurl them at the opening in the side of the rock. Abby joined her sister soon after, and it was in doing this, and seeing that no animal was going to come out to investigate, that they exhausted their supply of ammunition and determined that there was absolutely not a thing in the world that would disturb them on their way.

The girls, unaware of what rested within the cave, ventured forth, hand-in-hand and feet shuffling the rocks beneath their feet.

It is not without punishment that little girls earn their rewards.

When they entered the cave, quite awestruck at the fact that it was so warm and even more bewildered by the fact that there seemed to be carvings on the wall, they began to look around the area directly before them and traced beneath their fingers the paintings in the wall. Some looked like people, others like dogs and cats, while some of the figures looked like nothing they had ever seen at all. They, instead, looked like monsters—like blobs of color so dark and faded they looked to be nothing more than spots of jelly upon a piece of very burnt toast and creatures like bugs who wove within their legs the fruits of labor. The girls examined these figures for a very long time, marveling over their ingenuity, before they noticed at the end of the tunnel something miraculous.

In the very near distance, the cave opened up once more—into, what appeared to be, another clearing, starkly-lit in vibrant white colors that made it look like the hottest day in the world.

"Should we go?" Abby asked.

"I don't know," Shelly replied, then frowned and added, "maybe we should go home."

"Why?"

"Because Mom and Dad will worry."

"We'll be back soon enough. Come on—let's go."

It was with utter trepidation that Shelly, the better-natured of the two, began to make her way deeper into the cave with her twin. No longer did they hold hands, nor did they stray close together in order to share the warmth and comfort of one another's body. Instead, they continued forward, toward the opposite side of the cave that opened up into a beautiful and marvelous world.

They knew not what they were stumbling into.

It just so happened that Shelly and Abby Littleton had found a bridge between the worlds.

They stepped out into the place called Wraethworld with no knowledge that they had left the real and physical world. They did, however, immediately pick up on the fact that this place was different—that the trees, much taller, were darker, and that the light, though vibrant above them, did not come from the sun, but instead something that glowed overhead. Both twins craned their heads up and saw directly above them what appeared to be glowing wire upon which trapeze artists could walk or balance or move or shake. It spanned the trees in perfect flushes, was thicker in some places than others, and appeared to be completely nondescript in regards to danger or anything supernatural. Neither of them were necessarily afraid, nor were they worried about getting home to their parents who were likely very troubled. Rather, they were mystified at what they saw before them—at the very things that looked so beautiful but also seemed so very haunting.

It was Shelly who made the first suggestion. "We should go," she said.

"Why?" her sister asked.

"It's… not right here."

Abby did not reply. She took a step forward and tested the ground beneath her feet, as if unsure of where she stood, then turned and spread her arms wide, as if she were about to fly. "There's nothing wrong here," the little girl said. "It's normal."

Normal, Shelly thought, wasn't exactly the way to describe it. She could not for the life of her understand how it had become so dark all of a sudden, nor could she discern why the strands of what appeared to be wire glowed overhead. She'd only been to a circus once—had, with her mom, passed one outside town to meet one of her mom's friends—and though she hadn't particularly been paying attention to what was happening overhead, she knew for a fact that wires did not glow: unless, of course, there was electricity, a thing so foreign that she almost

couldn't explain why she was thinking of it now. Were these wires, these things in the sky, made of electricity, or were they something else, something less *'normal'* then her sister wanted her to believe?

It was in thinking this, and trying to figure out just what exactly was going on, that Shelly almost didn't realize it as it began to descend.

It was beautiful—far too beautiful for it to be stared at for too awfully long—and resembled a chandelier with many crystals hanging from its surfaces. From its rounded body protruded several branches upon which beads of light shined. These, Shelly knew, were its structure, its marvel, its mechanical purpose, and in looking at them and seeing them move, she began to wonder just what it was, as at that moment it appeared to be far too inspiring for it to be an animal or anything of the sort. The fact that it didn't move, merely dangled also didn't help its case, but when the tips of its branches began to move up and down, then forward, as though a fly twiddling beneath its forelegs a piece of debris, Shelly's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open in surprise. Her sister, meanwhile, merely stared, her face a portrait of disbelief and even more horrifying shock.

"What?" Abby asked.

"It… it… it…"

There was but one moment to say a word before the thing descended and took Abby within its branches.

Abby screamed.

Shelly looked on in horror as a pair of glistening white fangs descended into the back of her sister's neck.

Abby convulsed. Mouth frothing, eyes bulging, legs flailing spastically, arms twitching—her body became a choir of pain and her gaping mouth whispered cries that could not be heard but could easily be seen. The creature, whatever it may be, wrapped its forelegs around Abby's body and pulled her close to its body, then slowly retrieved its fangs from the back of her neck.

Before Shelly's very eyes, she watched as the creature took her sister into her arms and began to reel her back up, into the tapestry of what she now knew were webs above.

So horrified was Shelly by her sister's fate that she did not see a similar creature descending directly behind her.

A spark of pain entered her neck, then nothing.

Shelly and Abby Littleton entered Wraethworld on pure chance at the height of an amazing game.

They died for the mistakes they made.

S.
The Fifth Interlude

There is an abstract notion that exists within many cultures around the world that there is an extrasensory perception that we develop over a series of time. This perception, that is said to be gifted to us from the moment we were born, is the innate aspect to dream. It is a subconscious mechanism defined by the rapid movement of eyelids when we are unconscious. It is, however, a fickle gift. Some dream constantly and are visited by fantastical images every night. Others never dream at all. It is for this reason, and more, that it is a constant struggle within the world of humanity—that dreams are sometimes called revelations, precognition, and that they are often called nothing more than fantasy.

In our story, little Mary Matthews has conquered many things—the things on top of the hills with the red eyes, the one of many colors and the things that shined like a million pearls beneath the light. Each of these has posed a challenge to our heroine, and as such each has been impacted by the various ways of human senses. These beings are the creatures that are susceptible to such human behavior, but what is one to do when something cannot be defeated by mortal means? What if, by some odd chance, there are creatures within this place called Wraethworld that do not suffer from sound, from touch, from song? How is one to defeat such a thing if it has no vulnerable weakness?

This is the question that will confront Mary within the coming hours—when, after she leaves the forest and steps into an ever-sweeping plane, she will confront a being that takes the form of another.

The greatest monsters in the world are the ones who are supposed to help us.

Mary will learn this lesson soon enough.

10.
The Sweeping Plains

Like most everything within this world, the forest seems not to end. Always for the past night and the beginning of what she feels is today has she kept her eyes forward—not up, not down, not left or right, but directly forward and upon the path before her. She knows, both within her mind and heart, that should she look up, and should she dare lay her eyes upon the terrible beauties that lie in the webs above, they will come down and take her whole. This feeling of paranoia is great not only because of the fact that she has been here, but because she has heard the story of Shelly and Abby Littleton, of two girls who may have only been two years older than her but who both ended up in the exact same situation as she is in. Both were taken by the beautiful creatures, and though they'd both stopped to pause not only out of fear, but disbelief, they'd been captured by the very things that had hunted them so. It is, for this reason, and without regret, that Mary continues forward.

The path stretches before her endlessly.

Her body is tired. Her feet ache, her legs feel like pins upon a doll which has been stretched too far, her torso a Barbie that has been twisted and turned into unnatural positions. It is her body that hurts like an old man in a chair that rocks, but it is her mind that truly feels the pain. Her head feels as though it is a weight, her eyes the dumbbells that lie in the gym, and her mouth is parched. She should be unaware of this mortal pain she feels, of hunger and water, for she was told in the story of the little boys and girls who didn't know who they were that they need not feel such things within this world. It is different, it has been explained, and operates on a completely different level. She should be immune to such a thing.

In thinking these thoughts, Mary stops to consider something that has not crossed her mind until this instant.

What if she hasn't adapted to this world? What if, quite possibly, she has not been trapped here—that somewhere, in the distance or possibly nearby, there is a portal to the real world, to the place called Earth and the big blue world they live on?

The thought, as unexpected and warranted as it seems to be, thrills her to no end, so it is with haste that she begins to run forward, that her Mary Jane's click beneath her feet, that her dirty robin's-egg-blue dress shifts about her knees and her hair swings side to side like a monkey in a playpen. She is invincible in this moment, a man with an upside-down triangle and an S

upon his chest, and it is for that that she feels no pain. There is nothing, in this moment—no sorrow, no hurt, no joy, no catastrophe or bliss. There is nothing at all, nothing except her and the road.

It seems like forever that she runs. Her feet above the ground, her mind within the air, her heart deep in her chest and her emotions flying high in the sky—she doesn't need to look anywhere but forward, for there is nothing above, below, to the left or to the right. Instead, there is only what is forward—light, it seems, that is not white, but golden, that is spilling across the horizon and lighting what appears to be the world before it.

Mary quickens her pace.

Her heart thunders within her chest.

Her lips are chapped.

Her feet feel like weights that are trying to wear her body down.

She begins to near the exit of what she knows is the Dark Forest.

Slowly, light begins to stream through the needles overhead.

She dares but one look up.

There are no webs, no creatures, no shadows or darkness that darkens the world and makes everything appear solemn and hollow. There is nothing, she sees—nothing except green needles, the dead branches of trees, and the light that is shining through the foliage alive and dead above.

Her heart begins to soar. Had it a will, she imagines, and a purpose capable of action, it would have flown out of her chest and toward the place that it would likely call home.

She breaks free of the forest.

Her heart stops beating.

It is a plain that extends forever into the distance. There are no trees, no shrubs, no foliage to speak of and the grass on the ground is pale and yellow. It seems to merge with the road in places, like creeping hands extending forward as if reaching out to embrace the dirt which makes the path through this world, but eventually tapers out before it can get there. It is but an illusion, she knows—nothing more than a trick of the eye—but the fact that the grass is high in the distance, much like the poppies were before when in the fields, doesn't settle her conscience any.

With tears of joy in her eyes for the fact that she is no longer beneath a canopy of creatures that could descend at any moment and feed on her, Mary collapses to her knees and cries as though she has never cried before.

Shortly after, she falls forward.

Her head spins.

Her world becomes shallow.

Everything goes dark.

She wakes in darkness.

Her first recollection when she opens her eyes is that it was all a dream—that her trek through the poppies, her journey into the forest and her encounter with the beautiful creatures made of millions of sparking pearls was nothing more than a carnival of activity inside her brain, a menagerie in which all the animals have been let out and the circus has been destroyed. This recollection, and the feelings that come with it, are what force Mary to raise her head, and it is this combination of several factors that forces her to her feet and makes her look around. There is, like she has come to know, no moon in this world, and there is no grey haze within the air that allows her to see her surroundings. Instead, there is only darkness, pure and absolute, that extends forever and beyond. There are no things with red eyes on the distant horizon, as there are

no hills for them to stand upon, and though she is very near the forest there is no light that emanates from the darkness. She could be on the surface of a rock far, far away and not see a single thing. No flag, no debris, no construct of which brought them to a place where man first stepped down, when it was first one small step for man but one giant leap for mankind—nothing would be there, in this place of rock and ash, and it is nothing here and now that exists within this world.

It is in standing here, looking out at the darkened world, that Mary once again grows afraid.

How much longer will it be until the sun rises—when, from the left side of the world, the ball of light within the sky brings forth the radiance that spills over the world? And how long, she wonders, has she been asleep? Her body aches as though she has been sick for several days, and her head is clouded, filled to the brim with muck, and though there is no snot within her nose, there seems to be a pressure there, slowly blooming like an orchid plagued with spots that call it a tiger. These things alone should be warrant enough of the fact that she has been asleep for a very long time, but how long exactly? A few hours, a day, a week, maybe even a month—at this rate, it is hard to determine, but regardless her throat is still parched and her stomach still rumbles for food.

With a brief shake of her head, Mary takes a step forward.

Dirt crunches beneath her feet.

A faint gust of wind brings to her nose the scent of water.

Looking up, Mary seeks for the clouds and the lightning in the sky that should be spilling from them. They should be there, in the distance, forming slowly like ants to a piece of candy, but they are not, so far as she can see. Then again, if she honestly thought about it, she wouldn't be able to see anything in this lack of light, especially not clouds. But lightning—she would for sure see that. A glimmer of hope, an arc of reason, a trust of nature and a sign of God—it is but one light in the sky that she needs to see to heal her heart, to marry her mind, to secure her judgment, but there is none. In that regard, it would seem as though she is alone, that no God or Gods or nothing exists within the air, but something tells her that she is wrong: very, very wrong.

Standing there, waiting for the rain to come and for the wind to settle, Mary begins to cry.

Why her?

Why was she chosen to save the little girl who looks like a fish?

She loses track of time sometime during the night. When she can't be sure, as beneath a moonless and starless sky there is no wish or sign for time and surprise, but that does not necessarily matter. Forward she continues, not once looking back or to the left or right, as within the middle of the road she knows the path will continue, stretching forth endlessly and through the plains that she has seen but the day before. There is nothing to stop her.

When it begins in the sky, it weaves its thread through her heart and her mind anew.

It begins slowly. First it ascends the horizon in shades of blue that seems to spill like ink across a piece of parchment, then it begins to bleed as though cut and sliced by a dagger. Slowly, carefully, meticulously oozing across the horizon, pink turns from blue and red from pink, then orange begins to overpower everything and wastes forth all that has come before it. It is only then, and truly then, that the orb begins to rise—that the king has ascended, that the queen has fallen, that tyranny has ruled all and monarchy has collapsed within the world. The dogs are running and the women crying, the children sobbing and the reindeer falling from the sky. The peasants are killed within the streets and the ugly men are theirs to keep. It is horrible, she

thinks, this act of self-deprivation, but oh so beautiful, and it brings her happiness that she could have never possibly imagined.

Before her the yellowed plains are revealed in splendid glory. The grass glows gold.

Empowered by the very thing she knows that fuels most, if not every part of the world, Mary stretches her arms over her head, arches her back and lets forth but one single sigh from between her lips.

It is here, and now, that she can continue—forward, into the world that she knows may swallow her whole should she begin to doubt herself.

With one step, Mary begins into the plains.

A growing sense of dread begins to pound itself upon her conscience as the day continues and the sun crosses the sky. It begins with a depression that slowly and seamless begins to coalesce her being, first by swallowing her mind with a maw of unease, then by escalating the nerves within her heart to a fever pitch. Several times, her skin stands on end and gooseflesh rises across her arms. Added to this are the unconscious tears she sheds, which swim down her face and eventually drip down her jawline and to the ground below. Together, these things create a portrait of terror that seems needed only for the most desperate of situations—for the things with red eyes on the hills, the one with many colors and the things that sparkled like a million tiny pearls. Why she feels this way she can't be sure, as throughout the entirety of her time in Wraethworld she hasn't felt any form of emotion like this. It could only, she imagines, harbor ill intentions.

Pausing in midstride, Mary turns her attention to the distance and the continuing, rolling plains that extend across the horizon.

The road goes on forever. It sometimes winds in peculiar patterns, much like rivers do when rain is spilled and there is no dry land to catch it, while at others it simply continues straightforward—like here, where she stands looking upon the world and all its glory. This fact, and the reality that there is nothing before her, makes her wonder just how she is going to continue forward and just where, if anywhere, this fish girl could be. She smelled water last night—when, after she woke, she began to cross the plains—but that didn't necessarily mean that there was an ocean or any place of water where fish girls or people could live. Wind drove home scents of smoke and ash, of rain and pain and oceans and salt, could do so for several miles or even vast distances at a time. But if that were the case, and if she had indeed smelled water on the wind, that had to mean it had come from the left—where, in the vast nothing before her, the plains continued on with no breaks or dips in land whatsoever.

Her teeth sink into her lower lip.

Her heart begins to flutter like a butterfly in her chest.

Her stomach convulses, seems to flip, then settles back into place with a growl.

Frowning, Mary turns her attention back to the road and tries not to imagine just how much further she has to go. Surely something will lead her in the right direction or show her just where it is she will be going, and if that's the case, then something will have to reveal itself eventually and guide her forward. This world, though seemingly simple, is far too complex to simply allow her to wander down a road. Such a thing is only a precursory attempt to instill within whoever wanders here a sense of hopelessness that there is nothing when, in reality, there is much here. A world like this can't repeat itself more than once, can it?

Unable to know and not sure if she wants to, Mary takes a step forward, then locks her hands at her sides, tangling her fingers in her dress and trying her hardest to maintain control of the unsurety that threatens to send her into another crying fit.

She's been here for at least three days now—alone, lost, and without companionship or protection. What will her family think if not fear, torment, pain and agony? She was not captured, was not forcibly coerced into coming into this world or even given the suggestion as to what, if anything, she was supposed to do. She had nothing more than a dream that, to her, could have been nothing more than a dream—a vision, one could say, of monstrous proportions—so for anyone to believe that she had been taken by a man with a gun would have been wrong. The knowledge that she is here, mostly-unharmed but still emotionally-damaged, should be settling, at least in her mind, but how is her family to know that she is in a different place within a different time in a completely different world?

Once more the idea that she will not be able to get out of this world enters her mind.

She will not cry—not here, not now, not in such a vulnerable position.

She steels her mind and forces herself forward.

Something begins to sound behind her.

Thinking that she is hearing things, Mary turns.

There is nothing in the near distance.

Once again she continues forward.

The sound grows louder—more audible, more eager. It sounds like the sirens from a police car blaring on the street, but surely there can't be a policeman or his police car here, as that would be far too normal for this world.

Believing that it is nothing more than her imagination playing tricks on her, Mary clenches her fists together until the knuckles on her fingers begin to pop, which sound like gunfire like on TV when the cops take down the robbers holding the people hostage.

The sound continues to escalate. It rings in Mary's ears.

Her eyes begin to water.

A series of small rubber honking sounds enter her consciousness.

Mary turns.

There are two little girls with bright blonde hair and regular nondescript clothes riding bicycles on the side of the road. They are, as Mary would describe them, quite happy, and at the front of each of their bikes is a cart that appears to hold a lunchbox of some kind. The idea of food and water, of juice and sandwiches makes her mouth water, to the point where, upon seeing them, Mary begins to falter. She wants to cry out and ask for them to stop—for them to pull over so she can have a little bit of their food—but a part of her tells her that something is not, in the clarity of the situation, right. Why, she tries to imagine, are there two little girls like her in this world, and why, she can't figure out, are they riding bikes? Did they come in on them like girls atop the mightiest of ponies, or did they find them somewhere? And what about the lunchboxes—did they come in with them as well, or what? No matter how hard she tries to look past the situation—to hope and feel and love and grace the fact that there are two little girls that look just like her—she cannot rest easy with the fact that they have suddenly showed up.

In light of this new and terrifying situation, Mary grounds herself in place and looks upon the two girls that are slowly riding alongside the road.

The little girls in nondescript clothes continue to pedal their bikes until—at the brink of it all, near where they are at the side of the road—they stop and consider Mary for the first time since they have appeared on the horizon. Both are blonde, blue-eyed, pale-skinned. There is

nothing remarkable about either of them, not even down to the way they've dressed, but in looking upon the two of them, Mary can't help but wonder if these little girls really are what they appear to be. If her mind has its own way, she imagines they are nothing like little girls—that beneath it all, the skin and clothes and hair and eyes, they are really ugly creatures who look like blobs of jelly that eat everything in their path. Such a thing isn't entirely impossible, considering that she is here, in Wraethworld, but a horrible and uncalculated part of her wants to believe that the two little girls might actually be someone who can help her.

No longer willing to deny herself the pleasure or the possibility that something right could come of this, Mary steps forward.

The two little girls stare.

As Mary reaches the side of the road, no more than a few short feet from where they sit atop their bikes, the two little girls descend to their feet and begin to make their way toward Mary.

The three of them are two ships bound for a harbor but unable to control their notions. Their captain is dead, their crew drunk, their controls off-kilter and their courses set and determined—they are full of people and in each of those people is a soul that longs for safety. This safety, however, is not possible, as when set forward and calculated two things cannot be torn apart, and as each of them draw closer—she, Mary, and they, the two little girls—a sense of haste is inspired within Mary's body. It's as though she is sitting at a table in a restaurant with an idea so great it could change the world. It is as though, at any given moment, something horrible will happen, and it is in such a moment that the ships begin to draw closer. Their sirens are ablaze, the people are abrupt, the world as they know it is a giant constellation in which everything is drawn without lines or colors—they are on a course bound for destruction and there is nothing neither party can do about it.

When both Mary and the little blonde girls stand no more than a few feet away from one another, the little girls raise their hands and wave. Both do so at the same time.

Mary frowns.

"Hello," they say, both at the same time.

"Are you hungry?" the one on the left asks.

"You look hungry," the one on the right adds. "Here—eat with us."

Before Mary even has a chance to respond in any way, the little girls turn and walk the few short feet back to their bikes—where, there, they both bend down at the same time and retrieve the lunch boxes within their carts at the exact same moment. Each of their motions is fluid—mimicking, Mary could have described, the most exquisite of behaviors—and they both move in the exact same way as the other. Even their steps, usually not so easily synchronized, are balanced, and each moves forward with their lunch boxes swinging at the exact same in the exact same way. They blink together, their smiles expand across their faces in the same fluid motion, and their fingers even tighten accordingly around their lunch boxes at the exact same time. It takes but a moment for the two of them to come forward together, at the exact same time, and when Mary blinks, they, in turn, do the same. Their smiles falter and their lips close together, then they fall to their knees and beckon Mary down with them with but a single flush of their hands.

"Eat with us," the one on the left says.

"We have sandwiches," the one on the right adds. "And orange juice."

Orange juice: how great that would taste; and sandwiches: how amazing it would feel to have something solid and filling within her mouth. Mary's mouth once more begins to salivate at the thought, but like before, she feels as though something is wrong—that once again these little

girls are no more than gelatinous blobs that cross the countryside and swallow any and everything whole. This form and notion is enough to make her feel that it would be wrong in joining the two of them to eat, but she is so hungry—so very, very hungry. Her stomach rumbles and her throat feels more parched than ever.

Would it hurt, she wonders, to eat just one little piece of sandwich, to drink one small sip of orange juice?

Mary takes a few steps backward, then turns.

"We can wait," the little girls say.

Their monotonous voices are haunting in the warm afternoon day.

While Mary begins to look out at the distant horizon on the right side of the world, trying her hardest not to say anything or to respond to the little girls behind her, she hopes to find a message upon the sky that will allow her to decide just what it is she is supposed to do. She surely can't eat with them—that would be far too convenient—but could she possibly just abandon them by lying and saying that she is not hungry, that she feels not the need to eat or drink or sleep? The idea is very probable, and in standing there she believes very evenly that she can do it, but what of the little girls on their little red bikes and their little red lunch boxes? Will they follow her to the ends of this world, to the Heavens and Hells that exist within this place called Wraethworld, or will they simply disappear to wherever they've come from?

In thinking these things, Mary hears the little girls rise behind her.

"Give us a moment," the little girls say.

When they turn to return to their bikes—likely, she thinks, to fetch something more—Mary turns, falls and opens the first lunch box on her left.

The meal looks exquisite. A sandwich, a cookie, a small plastic bottle of orange juice—it is a lunch that she has been dreaming about since the first day, when her stomach first began to rumble and her throat began to feel dry and without any moisture: a thing that, though simple, is remarkably-beautiful in purpose. It is, without any consequence, a magical thing, but as such is ordained by the laws of nature, both human and not, there is an evil that exists within it, and it is in a small little vial that clearly has marked upon its surface a skull and crossbones symbol that signifies death. Mary knows this because she has seen it before—when, in school, and visiting Mama Grandma at the hospital, items with such notices were warned away with a single sign: a single black or red skull and crossbones that, even to little children such as herself, spell things worse than simple punishment.

In looking upon this vial, and in seeing the little girls with blonde hair and blue eyes in the distance, Mary knows in her heart and mind that there will soon be trouble coming if she is not careful.

With that thought process firmly grounded in her head, Mary takes the small vial with the skull and crossbones and uncorks it, then takes the orange juice and pours it in.

A sizzling sound rises from within the bottle of orange juice.

Mary opens the other lunch box and pours the other vial of poison into the other bottle of orange juice, then takes both vials of poison within her hand and tosses them off the road, into the tall grass that stands in the distance waving like friends to one another.

Soon after she has committed her act, the little girls come back. "Oh," they say. "Are you ready to eat?"

Mary nods.

The little girls fall to their knees and begin to unwrap their sandwiches.

It is with grace and dignity that she could never possibly imagine after committing what will soon be an act of dangerous proportions that Mary takes half of each of their sandwiches and begins to eat. The ham, the cheese, the tomato, the white sauce that she thinks may be mayonnaise but isn't quite sure—all are exquisite within her mouth, within her throat and then, after swallowing, within her stomach. She soon accepts a half of each of the little girls' cookies, as they seem to know that she is hungry, and she devours them hungrily, the oats, the chocolate, the peanut butter and all. It is, however, with regret that she shakes her head when they offer their orange juice, as taking a drink would surely spell death.

The little girls tilt their heads back and drink with plenty.

Mary sighs.

It is in but a moment that they both begin to convulse.

They are like dogs, trembling on the ground with their hands around their necks and their eyes bulging out of their sockets, as from their mouths come froth the color of orange juice that bubbles from between their lips and pours down their necks. They twitch, they spasm, they roll, they gargle—it is without mercy as Mary watches them that she sees in their faces portraits of madness and evil. When their eyes turn from the color of blue to pitch-black darkness that flowers their whole sclera in both eyes and their nostrils expand far too wide for two little girls they are revealed to be something else—more, Mary knows, than little girls on little red bikes with their little red lunchboxes. They are, instead, monsters: creatures whom, by all definition, have taken the form of innocence in order to prey on those who really, truly are.

In standing there, watching the little girls who aren't little girls die, Mary begins to cry.

A siren begins to blare.

She looks up.

It barrels from down the road and begins to fly right toward her.

Mary turns and begins to run, but it is without purpose, as soon it is upon her at the side of the road near very where she has killed the two little girls who are not little girls. It is a creature of monstrous proportions, of metal and agony, with two bright eyes that shine at the front of its person and two dorsal constructs that flash the colors of pain and serenity overhead. It is hollow inside, much like all transportable constructs, and within its driver's side compartment is a man wearing a police uniform. He is fat, he is bald, he has a thick mustache that resembles a handlebar and a double chin. There is drool down his chin and fire in his eyes, a hat on his head and a badge on his breast, and it is swiftly that he transitions from the side of the path onto the very road before her, that he begins to rev his engine up as if it is a purpose of terror that is meant only to scare little girls who have only done the right things to save themselves. It roars, like a lion, and charges forth, toward her and the place of which can only be described as madness.

When it comes far too close for comfort, Mary jumps.

She sails through the air.

She covers her eyes just like her daddy once told her.

She lands, on the ground, in a fit of rolls that scrape her skin and send her skirting through the tall grass on the right side of the road. She could have screamed, were she given the opportunity to, but the fact that she may so very easily die here, in this very moment, keeps her silent.

The police car continues on for several more feet, propelled forward by its engine and the parts within it, before it stops completely.

Mary freezes in place. Knees screaming, joints throbbing, she remains as still as possible and breaths only through her nose.

Things seem to be calm—perfect, even, despite everything that seems to be going wrong.

Then it happens. The siren stops blaring, the lights stop shining, and the horrible growl that emanates from this creature's metal throat dies altogether.

Ahead, a door opens, then closes.

Mary purses her lips.

"You've been a bad little girl," the policeman says, and while Mary can barely see him through the thick and high grass, she can make out the fact that he is rounding the vehicle with ease that seems chilling—calculated, even, despite the fact that he, like the little girls, is probably a monster made of gelatinous nothing. "Come out, come out wherever you are."

The man's high-heeled boots come down on the ground with a crunch that Mary imagines will be her bones should he come anywhere near her.

While the policeman continues to round the side of the vehicle, each foot crunching dirt beneath its surface as if it is a giant walking across the grandest of plains, Mary's breath soon becomes even—slow, surly and almost impossible to imagine. She at first tries to control her breath, as she feels it will do her better in the long run if she can at least maintain a grasp on her bodily functions, but it soon becomes apparent that she cannot do any such thing. Even her eyes—which, up until this point, have not faltered—begin to weep. Thankfully her nose is almost always good at keeping the snot away for the first few minutes, otherwise she would start sniffling, a thing any good policeman would surely catch.

Do not be afraid, Mama Grandma said.

She will not be afraid—not for herself, not for her family, and especially not for the policeman who seems so intent on making her feel as though she is small and helpless.

The policeman with the big black boots shifts, then turns his body to the side. Mary sees within his hand a gun much like the one Jesus Picarazio had when she first entered this world.

A thought occurs to her soon after.

Did this policeman, like the two little blonde girls, come into this world the same way she did? And did he, she wonders, take Picarazio's gun? Unable to know and desperate to maintain her anonymity, Mary hunkers down and presses herself as flat to the ground as possible. It seems to work, as when he turns the policeman's eyes do not linger on the place where she is hidden, but how long will she be able to keep this up? She can't move, she can't breathe, she can't fall asleep, for surely if she does any of these things the grass will move and the policeman will see where she is going. Added to this danger is the possibility of the grass rustling. It is not green, but dead—yellowed and pale. Surely it would make a noise if she were to try and crawl away, like an old cat yowling when it has not been given its milk, but even if she could, where would she go from there—to the right of the world, where she knows there is nothing but an open plain, or forward, where she could very likely get caught by the policeman?

Before Mary has the chance to continue pondering on her horrible ultimatum, the policeman grunts.

Mary turns her eyes up.

From her place in the bushes she can see that he is changing. Much like the little girls whose eyes turned from blue to black and whose nostrils flared like a bull's, the policeman's face begins to become an art of destruction. His jaw extends, slopes down, drops until his upper and lower lip are a good fist-length apart, and his skin begins to pale. It first pales to a shade of grey, then black, then putrefies until it becomes a sickly green. The gun in the officer-thing's hand

drops to the dirt below while his legs begin to lengthen, soon turning him into a titan of epic proportions. Mary desperately hopes and prays that the officer-thing will not see her as he grows, as in her current position she is highly likely to be discovered within the grass, but it isn't long after that the policeman uniform begins to tear and break. Muscles vast and expansive bulge up along the thing's chest and arms and eventually gives way for the same green skin that looks so grotesque. It isn't, however, the skin that scares Mary. Instead, it is the eyes that turn and look across the vast plain that frighten her to no end—those deep, dark pits of nothing that seem to speak of everything and more at once. *I am here,* the thing's eyes seem to say, *for you.*

"Come out little girl," the creature says, its voice now so deep it hurts Mary's chest to listen to it. "Come out, come out wherever you are, or I'll huff and puff and blow your house down."

Her house, Mary thinks? That's ridiculous. She is in no house, no place of protection or warrant or respect. No. She is here, in the grass, trying her best not to run or crawl or even die.

It is in but a moment that the monster's body stops lengthening and it stands as tall as a giraffe. Its hands—long, bone-thin and with sickly appendages upon its fingers—flush through the air and its jaw grinds together, making a clicking noise much like some large bug would if unsure of its current position.

Mary holds her breath and begins to count as slowly as she can.

One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand…

She has learned from experience that it takes but one moment for things to change—that for every time a little boy drops a dime a person on the other side of the world enters a place where monsters are real and where prison is but a laughing matter; that a kitten skips along the side of the street and encounters a rat that it soon becomes friends with; that a little girl, dressed in a school-day's best, walks along the side of the road with her class only to discover upon happenstance the entrance to a world that is horrible in all respects and nature. It is for that reason, and that reason alone, that in hiding within the grass—in hoping, praying and wishing that this creature of monstrous proportions will go away—she begins to wonder just whether or not she will make it out alive.

Her short life flashes before her eyes.

Her mommy, her daddy, her Mama Grandma and all the cousins and friends—she will never see them again, she knows, because in but a single moment the thing with the sickly skin and the horrible black eyes will find and destroy her.

With a short exhale of air, Mary closes her eyes as tightly as she could.

Her mommy once said that monsters can't get you if you closed your eyes as tightly as you could.

Mary begins to hope.

The inside of her skull throbs, her cheeks expand, her eyes begin to water and within her head a pain beautiful and visceral begins to spiral before her conscious matter as if it is a flower woven with beads and sweat and tears. There is yarn, she knows, that connects it, that has not been chewed by kittens or puppies or any of the magical things in the world, and it is this yarn that has not been touched by the witches—by the evil kids and all their ditches. There is nothing here, she knows, but good, and in seeing it spiral before her, all her pain disappears in but an instant. There is nothing that can stop her, nothing at all—not even the monster with the green skin and pitch-black eyes—and it is with that she knows that everything will be ok, that there are no golden wires and no scissors of which to cut the world asunder, no hags that will laugh and no dogs that will cry. It is, purely and simply, the reason she knows she can continue on.

When Mary opens her eyes, she expects to see a world magical—a place where, though the grass is dead, the innocent run free and the terrors are exiled from the world. What she sees instead, however, destroys her world, her freedom and her cause.

The thing that is as tall as a giraffe with the green skin and the pitch-black eyes has found where she has hidden and now leans forward with its back hunched and its neck elongated to the point where it seems as though it is a piece of putty that has been stretched to all infinity. Whether or not it can see her Mary does not know, as within its black eyes she can see no film which could reveal its problems and the things of which are blind. It does, however, seem to smell her, as its nostrils expand constantly and without apprehension. Even its mouth—which, in this instance, seems not to beckon any real sense of gravity—shifts. Saliva drips from its lips and its teeth gnashes through its gnarled flesh. It smells of death and destruction, of children lost and of rabbits sworn. Most importantly, it smells of carrion and of birds on swift wings—of buzzards in the air sweeping down from within the deserts in far-away lands to eat the things that have been killed on the road.

In looking into the horrible creature's eyes and seeing nothing but hopeless abandon, Mary can't help but wonder whether or not she will be able to move—if, by any slight whatsoever, she will be able to run before the thing that was once the fat, bald and handle-mustached police officer can eat her.

Mary purses her lips.

The thing tilts its head to the side, then parts its lips. A single, long tongue, dripping-wet with bile the color of pale honey slides forth and affixes itself to the side of her face.

She whimpers.

The thing laughs.

The tongue's suction-cupped tip pulsates along her cheek.

Closing her eyes, Mary begins to dream.

She sees within her head the thing that is standing before her slowly but surely walking away. Its tongue retracts, slides back into its mouth, is caught between its teeth and freed from its mortal prison in a splash of blood. It screams, a sound of agony and pain, reaches up to embrace its jaws, trips backward, hits its head on the ground. It lets out a mighty groan of which shakes the world and makes the grass trip and falter and eventually begins to die down—loudly, but quickly, as if it were impaled by a sword and not truly killed by the rock which its head has fallen upon. It takes but a few moments for the thing's life to eclipse its body and escape into the air above. Its eyes flicker one last time before, beneath its head, a sickly matter begins to spread and kill all the grass around it. It is like the bird that took the little boys and girls who didn't know who they were—a deathly omen which, with a single touch, can destroy everything around it. It is this dream, and hope, that spurs Mary on—that makes her open her eyes to see whether or not her wishes have come true—and it is this moment that seems will destroy the world and all its entirety.

When Mary opens her eyes for but a second time, she sees before her the image of which has played within her head. The thing stumbles back, its tongue goes free, its body goes down and its head strikes the rock which seems ancient, of magical proportions that can kill on contact and spread within the world the essence of which is the end of things alive and willing.

The king is dead, she thinks, as she looks upon the body of the slain, and he no longer bears his crown.

Rising to her feet in a fit of agony caused not by pain but sorrow, fear and just, Mary stumbles out of the high grass and back onto the road to find the police car still standing in place, its dorsal lights still shining and its eyes still beaming into the distance.

Maybe, she thinks, she can take refuge in the vehicle tonight.

Slowly, she begins to remember.

Never sleep in a car that's running, her mother once said.

The gas was said to kill.

It is with grief and sadness, of youth and inexperience that Mary begins to walk forward—toward, what she imagines, is the great nothing before her.

11.
The Great Nothing

It expands endlessly and without any need. It is lost—a treasure which the queen has abandoned and knights have searched for time and time again—and it is without purpose that it is never to be found. There are no men with sights and glasses, with pins and needles or shovels or picks; there is no longing, no just, no mortality or virtuous lust. There is no greenery here, no trees to bear the fruit, and there is no life that seems to exist beyond her sides. The grass is long and dead, like girls on islands shaking their hips, and there are no shrubs which sprout from the ground like giant mushrooms that little men could sit on and laugh all day. There are no birds, no salamanders, no butterflies to grace the afternoon sky. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in this great place of marvels and wonders, and it is for this that, while walking, Mary begins to cry.

For each moment that passes her hope grows worthless.

There is nothing here—nothing at all.

She has long since passed the terrain where she has left behind both the little girls in nondescript clothing and the bald, fat and handlebar-mustached man that turned into the thing that looked like a giraffe. No longer can she see the eyes of the mechanical construct that beam out into the afternoon and light the road before her, nor can she smell the ocean that so comforted her last night. She imagines that, come nightfall, she will be able to turn and see the eyes that beam into the darkness. She does not know if she will be able to smell the ocean though. She imagines not, as it seems in this great nothing there is no respite. For that, there appears no reason to continue forward.

It takes but the span of a breath for Mary to stop in the middle of a road, then a second for her to collapse to the ground—crying, uncontrollably, for a purpose that seems hopeless and punishing.

In the middle of the road she cries as though she has never cried before. Her eyes puffy, her lips trembling, her teeth chattering within her mouth as if she is in the cold and waiting for her mommy to come get her—there is nothing innocent about the situation, about the cause and about the need, for she is nothing more than a little girl in a big big world which seems to want to swallow her whole. Already she has passed the green plains, the great hills, the descending fields of poppies and traversed through the forest of darkness, and in each of these places she has faced monsters which could have eaten her alive. It is here, however, within the great nothing, that things seem lost—that purpose, as magnificent as it was, is divine, and reason, as needed as it may be, is all but gone. There is only one road to walk, but many paths to take; there are but two fields of dead grass that extend forever and beyond, hopelessly wishing for the things that need be present; and for all her longing—for all her prayers and sorrow—there are but two shoes upon

her feet, those of which are likely to fall apart if she is to continue this venture. She has been clumsy, she knows, and very unpractical. She has fallen, she has ran, she has walked without looking and has paced as though there is everything in this world worth waiting for. It is for this reason she cries, that as she sits in the middle of the road she wishes to die, and for that, it seems, her intent is lost.

There is nothing here, she knows—nothing but two great, wide plains and one long, winding road.

In thinking about such things, everything seems hopeless.

She might as well give up now.

The overhead sun is cast in shades of gold and white that, to look at it, blinds Mary not of sight, but thought. In staring at the creation that lights the world above, that makes the world grow warm and which brings about on Earth the plants and the animals that propagate it so, she feels no harm, no pain, no gravity, no shame. She feels absolutely nothing at all in looking at this thing of two single colors, this thing of one single name. It should have been apparent to anyone who saw such a thing that it was a sign—a moment of purpose and a sign of clarity—but most ordinary people would have never seen such a thing. Mary imagines this to be true because such testaments to nature are noticed far too often and given far too little acknowledgement. The sun, she knows, comes up each and every day to light the world, to feed the plants, to grace the animals, and it falls each evening to give way to rest of which men and women and children would not normally have. The world offers air for them to breathe, food for them to eat, friends for them to cherish and people for them to love. Such things, when given thought, are quite magnificent, but it is without regret that most normal people forget; so in looking at the sun overhead that, to Mary, lights this beautiful and marvelous and horrible place called Wraethworld, she feels within her body a message of perseverance that could very well have been misplaced had she not the opportunity to look upon it.

Go, this message says. *She is waiting for you.*

When Mary rises to her feet to dust off both her shoes and her dress, she knows that she can continue forward.

For Mommy, for Daddy, for Mama Grandma and for the long-gone Miss Kitty—she will go forward, into the abyss, and conquer any monster that stands in her way.

She walks until night has fallen and her feet have begun to hurt. She tests beneath her heels the impact of earth and feels along her flesh bumps and ridges that were not there the day before. They hurt and burn, as if she has just cut her hand open and allowed the blood to run free, and make walking terribly agonizing if she truly concentrates on the wounds that placate her body. It is because of this that once more, for almost no reason, she begins to cry—not because she is afraid, and not because she is in more pain than she can handle, but because it once more seems hopeless.

Though she has no clock or way to tell the time that has passed, she knows she has been walking for a long time—far, far too long for any normal person to have endured it, much less than a little girl.

With her heart depressed within her chest and her stomach rumbling likely because it now wants more food, Mary settles down in the middle of the road and starts to cross her legs, but stops when her knees protest the effort by sending spikes of pressure into her thighs.

She sighs.

The wind skirts along the land from the left. As she expects, there is no smell of the ocean, no salt or water which could assure her that she is heading in the right direction. That in itself should have given her cause for defeat, as she is more than significantly sure that she is supposed to go to where the water is wide for her to rescue the little girl that looks like a fish, but she decides before her thoughts can force her to tears that she is doing the right thing in following the path. All roads, her daddy once said, lead to somewhere. They can sometimes lead to a friend's house, to a community park, oftentimes toward a school. They can lead to where waters cross beneath a bridge and where cities and boundaries begin and end. Most importantly, they eventually lead somewhere. Where that somewhere is in this world Mary doesn't know. She feels, however, that if she continues walking, and if she continues forward with only occasional pause, that something will soon begin to rise in the distance, thus marking her path through Wraethworld and, ultimately, to rescue the little girl who looks like a fish.

Though she knows she is a vast distance away from where she has abandoned the bodies of the little girls in nondescript clothing and the thing that looked like a giraffe she can still see, in the distance, the police car's eyes radiating their light across the road. They look, from here, like candles in a living room, constantly flickering likely because the vehicle is dying and will soon no longer be able to sustain itself on the electricity and gasoline that surely has to run through it. The thought is enough to console her—given the fact that, soon, she will have nothing to worry about from the dead policeman and his running car—but also intimidates her, as she will soon no longer have light.

With a frown, Mary spreads out along the middle of the road and blinks, trying to discern within the sky the film of grey or white that before had allowed her the luxury of making out shapes. When she finds no difference, however, she caves to her body's desires and once more closes her eyes.

Candles can flicker out in but an instant.

Like those candles, Mary's consciousness grinds to a slow halt soon after.

Then she begins to dream.

There is but one shining beacon of hope the following day as first the sun comes up and then as it crosses throughout the sky. It is in the form of something flickering on the horizon. Tall, distant, with a peak which seems to resemble a mountain but is shadowed over not by fog or mist but seemingly by the sky itself—it twinkles within the air like a falling star slowly eclipsing the horizon and plummeting into a grand desert on the planet Earth and beckons any and every to look upon it. The sight alone inspires within Mary a sense of accomplishment that she feels, in that instant, is merited. Given how long she's walked and how far she's come, it's any wonder that she hasn't collapsed dead either from lack of food or water. Like this world, however, she is strange—foreign, obsolete, needed in a grand scope of things but not the matter of justification—and for that the forces that be have seemed to allow her but the time to cross the great nothing to eventually make her way toward what she feels is the very end of the world. How she knows this is, pure and simple, *the end* she isn't sure. It's a feeling trembling throughout her being like a great shiver after a nasty insect has crossed the surface of one's spine. There is first the initial shock that comes from the base of the neck, then the rolling wave that eclipses the spine until, finally, it hits the tailbone—where, there, it all seems to make sense. If that isn't reason enough for her to feel as though this twinkling in the sky is something remarkable then she isn't sure what is.

It is during the midafternoon half of the day—when, in the distance, the twinkling continues only occasionally—that Mary begins to quicken her pace. Her feet are pinwheels upon which the flesh is torn and the nerves spun aplenty, her breath a wheel in which many hamsters run, but still she continues forward. She eventually is able to ignore the pain completely and begins to go as fast as she can—sprinting, it seems, like the fastest animal in the world: a cheetah, which can only do so once every few days in order to catch the gazelle. Unlike that cheetah, however, Mary has no need to catch a gazelle. It is for that reason that she is able to keep running for a very, very long time, as her body—her chest, her legs, her knees and her poor haggard feet—allows her to do so without penance.

Anyone with any slight rationale in this world would have imagined such a feat impossible—that little girls, as worn and destroyed as they were, would not be able to run after a near five-days' worth of travel without sustenance. Given that this world is strange, though, and that gifts of plenty are bestowed upon those who survive their initial encounters with the demons of this place, it seems perfectly obvious that she would be able to run as she is in this instance.

She continues forward in her awesome journey for a great part of the day, never tiring, never slowing, never stopping to catch a breath as one is never wasted and they are always replenished. The sun, as always, crosses overhead. There are no clouds to block it, no birds to fly across its expanse and no butterflies to mar its surface. The grass, while dead, continues to shake, and the wind, though slight, is always present. This seems to make it apparent that whatever is in the distance is not, in any way, shape or form, a mountain or any other treacherous formation that could block the wind. This pleases her to no end, as it seems in possibly a day or so she will have reached the place she is supposed to go. She will find the ocean, save the fish girl and possibly enter a castle in which a kind man lives to offer her shelter and a way back home.

With a smile beaming across her face, Mary continues to push herself forward.

Things seem perfectly reasonable up until an undetermined moment—when, in but an instant, something happens.

She loses control of her footing.

She falls.

She lands in the dirt and goes sprawling forward.

Her lip, cut by rocks, begins to bleed.

Mary looks up.

It appears in but an instant.

It is not a mirage that was made by water or a constellation of glowing lights in the sky, a trick of the light that could have resulted from the overhead sun, nor is it a confusion in her mind caused by the miraculous horror which overcame her in looking upon its face. No. It is none of these things, so simple and pure, so boundless and plenty, because it is without accord and reason that she stares at it as slowly it materializes in the sky. Suspended in midair, held taught by imaginary ropes that do not exist, glowing as though it is a scroll of parchment used to foretell the events of Wraethworld and the consequences of those who had entered it—it is, quite simply, a message: an omen which can destroy the world, a belief in which all is shrouded, a desperation in which the willing all stretch forth.

It is something Mary can hardly believe she is seeing.

It is a sign in the sky that says: There is Nothing Here. There is No Hope, No Just, No Reason for Existence of the Plains on which All were Sewn. There was no Adam and there was no Eve, no woman that ate from the Leaves, and there was no Abel and Cain in which were

birthed. There was no Rock, no Plight, no Might or Betrayal. There is no Man in the Sky. There is Nothing.

It is a statement impacted upon her mind as if it is a dagger sliding through loose flesh. First penetrating the skin, then molding into one, blood pours from the wound and creates upon her body the succession of death. It is thick, it is molted, it is dark, impure, unchaste and completely unforgiving—it is sticky and wet, slimy and gross, and permeates her being as if it is water that has been touched by the red man's hand. A curse, a whisper, a fabled promise Arthur was given when he was sent to Avalon to recover after the Battle of Camlann—it is everything in her world that is wrong: a thing that, while completely unimposing, is threatening with its presence alone.

Stunned, frightened, and not in the least bit willing to cave in to lesser inhibitions, Mary crawls to her feet, then reaches up to finger her lower lip, which has since swollen from rock and teeth imprints.

There is Nothing Here, the sign continues to say, even as she begins to once more progress forward and up the road that leads to the end of the world. *No Hope, No Just, No Reason for Existence of the Plains on which All were Sewn.* It is menacing in respect, terrifying in nature and even more frightening in aspect, as to look upon its surface means to deny all of which she has been taught by her parents and the men in the nice long cloaks, by Mama Grandma and by the men and women who know it all. There is, however, another side of this, that of which Mary considers while walking—that this place, this land called Wraethworld, may not necessarily have a Man in the Sky, a Something or Other that Ordains and Defines it All. If that is the case, then really, she cannot be scared—marred, of course, by its proclamations. That is enough to convince her that things will be all right, that things will be ok, that nothing can defy her and the things that she so truly believes in.

In thinking such things, and in denying the aspects which the sign proclaims, Mary reveals from her inner self a power of which no man, no monster and no thing can destroy—her faith: her pure, God-given faith.

Her mother once said that if you believe in Him, He will protect you and He will keep from you the Devils that haunt the world. If that is the case, then surely nothing here will be able to harm her.

With the knowledge that the Man in the Sky will keep her safe, Mary closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, then comes to a complete halt.

When she opens her eyes once more, the Sign proclaiming All is nowhere to be seen.

She continues forward.

She has defeated a thing that has once more attempted to stop her.

She is strong.

It is night before she stops, and once again the thing that Proclaims it All is floating in the air. It is no longer a hindrance to Mary's being or conscience, her brevity or her sin, as in the current circumstance she knows that such a thing can do nothing to shake the testament of her being. If anything, it serves a use. With light pouring from its surface to Proclaim all there is to Say, it illuminates the scenery around her, casting the surrounding area in a pure white glow that reminds her of a night light she's not had since she's been in the real world and reveals unto her conscience the truth of a world which is almost always hidden by dark.

It is dark and diluted, painful and obvious, torn and wrought with things that appear to make it sad—a woman whom, at her lover's side, cries with roses in her hand. The grass, which was dry and pale yellow during the daylight, appears green—wet, she could say, with perspiration, as

if it has developed a life of its own and sweated out its own insecurities. Even the road seems to have taken on a different hue, as in this current position it no longer appears to be the color of a fine beige coat, but of a muddy terrain that has just been doused with rain. Why the area has come to look like this she can't be sure. It feels no different than it has before. There is no moisture, no dew, no rain that could have impacted her surroundings, so for it to look like this is completely baffling. That, however, seems not to matter, as in settling down on the road for her night's rest she feels not damp earth beneath her feet, but pure, solid ground.

With a breath in her nose and out her mouth, Mary pushes her hands behind her head, spreads out along the road, and considers the starless sky above her.

It is poignant and vain, decrepit but sane, modest in youth and agonizing in portrayal. This creature overhead, which is blind but should be looking down upon her with a thousand kind eyes, is a million years old. It should know all the knowledge of the World, of the Seas, of the Mountains, Lakes and Rivers. It should know the Roads that she travels upon, the Path which leads to Nowhere and Everywhere at the same time. But, she wonders, for what reason? Is She, the Sky Above, Blind because she has been Blinded—because She, by all respects, has been stabbed with a Trident—and if so, what is it that They have to hide? The Ones who Blinded Her surely are not the things that rule this World—the Ones whom, by all respects, have Secrets to keep away, for if they were why would they let a little girl through who could save this world? Why, she wonders, make passage for those from the Other Side, from the Planet that is called Earth in the system that is known as the Milky Way? Is it because they demand Those to Honor Them, to bring forth from the Other Side the things of which they Do Not Have, or is it because they are evil, lewd and vile—things whom, slowly but surely, will eat the Innocent and the Ones that Run? It is quite possible, considering that, along the way, Mary has found in this world called Wraethworld messages surely meant to ward the weary away, but if that is the case, then why are there not portals or entryways leaving this world? Do they just not exist, or are they just hidden—placed, firmly, in solid ground that cannot be cracked not even with the mightiest Hammer?

In thinking such things, and in pondering over just what it is she is supposed to do and how she might happen to get out of here once she saves the little girl who looks like a fish, her eyes begin to grow weary. They droop, quickly, together, then eventually seal shut as if they are grand doors upon a pyramid's frame. This action eventually forces her breathing into even, regulated patterns that raise her chest up and down. Sleep, she knows, will come soon, but when? Will it be when the Night is Old and They are Restless, or will she not fall asleep at all and instead remain away for the rest of time?

Sighing, Mary opens her eyes.

Above, the Sign that Proclaims It All begins to flicker, as if it is a store display that is being turned off for the night. She has but a brief moment to consider just what it is doing before the lights go off entirely.

In the distance, something shrieks.

Mary bolts upright.

Panicked, heat hammering in her chest, she looks left and right to see what it is that has made the noise.

Tears slide down her face.

Her teeth sink into her lower lip.

Her heart, quickly beating, begins to slow.

Sweat slides down her neck and into her dress.

Surely whatever it is that has shrieked is merely an animal of some kind, much like the things with red eyes on the tops of the hills. Perhaps it screamed merely because it was excited or overjoyed—or, maybe, it is coming for her, on swift wings to take her away to the nest on top of the mountain to be fed to its young.

Swallowing a lump in her throat, Mary pushes herself to her feet.

Whatever it is that shrieked before shrieks again. This time, however, it spikes every piece of flesh on Mary's body.

What is it, she wonders. A bird? She knows that birds like owls hunt during the night—search, desperately, under the cover of darkness for rabbits and rats that it can eat—but she's seen none of those creatures here, at least not in the real, present world.

Unless…

Mary closes her eyes.

Could the bird who took the little boys and girls who didn't know what they were away be coming for her next?

She decides, at that moment, that it is best to move forward.

Mary takes a few steps up the road.

In the distance, she sees, through the film of grey that seems to have permeated the air from the Sign's presence, the road that winds like a river throughout the dead grasslands. She has seen this point in the road before—when, from far away, and atop a slant in the road, she looked upon the world and wondered just what it was—but whether or not it is significant of something she doesn't know. All she knows is that if she doesn't continue moving forward, something bad will happen.

Her breath caught within her throat, Mary reaches up to grasp her hands around her trachea.

Her heart begins to hurt.

Overhead, something flies on grand wings.

Mary looks up.

She sees not what exactly it is but for its wings—large, massive, that extend across the horizon like a great plane that carries men from place to place. It is, however, enough to drum horror through her heart.

Without much thought, Mary jumps.

She falls into the grass, then begins to crawl—slowly, carefully, through the weeds, until she settles down in a place which she is sure that no thing, flying or not, will be able to see her.

Though she is not sure where it is, it lands somewhere nearby.

She passes out almost instantaneously.

She could have died from fright.

When morning comes and the sun is once more bleeding into the world, Mary rises and pushes her way out of the grass and onto the road—where, nearby, she sees the impression left by its presence. They are long, drawn-out marks, much like what one would expect when dragging their shoes through the mud. In this case, however, they also appear avian—sharp, obviously made by talons purposely to mark its appearance in the world. There also appears to be scars in the earth where, it seems, a fire has been made, or at least ignited in an attempt to draw from the ground warmth that could and should not exist. These scorch marks extends for the next several feet until, in but one grand flush, they disappear altogether. Because of this, Mary imagines that, were this world normal, and were she several hundreds of thousands of years back in time, there would have been men here—wielding, of course, clubs and canes—and

they would have tried to start fires. They would not have yet mastered the wheel, as that would have had to have been many years after, but they would have started these fires, sat, ate, maybe even talked. They would have had a jolly good time, as if nothing was wrong. Then they would go to hunt the elephant and leave only their mark upon the world and nothing more.

Startled by this new development in the world, Mary takes a few steps forward.

When she stands no more than a few inches away from the edge of the first scorch mark, she crouches down, then begins to drag her hand through the impressions.

Fresh ash the color of silver parts between her fingers.

Mary gasps.

The remnants of the fire that has occurred no more than last night glimmers in the light as if they are thousands upon thousands of splendid diamonds.

Mystified and unsure what it is she is supposed to do now that this revelation has been bestowed unto her, Mary continues to crouch there for the next several moments, sifting ash through her fingers and trying desperately to understand her purpose in the world. It takes but a moment for her to come to a conclusion, one so admirable and honest that she feels as though it would have earned her a purple star in Miss Kitty's class had Miss Kitty still been alive and well.

Standing, Mary takes one last look at the ash, then begins to advance up the road.

The ash tells her to go on.

There are moments in time in which things are revealed to the world and from upon the horizon give hope to those who advance on. Those things, as small or trivial as they seem to be, may be one of many things. They may be a road on which all students walk, a path which all men take, a step-stone route where little girls skip to make their way to ponds that give to the world the essence of life. They may even be trenches boys dig to hide from the martyrs, from the bullets and the steel and the rash and the ill. Regardless of their nature, regardless of their intent, there are but many things in life to spur men, women, boys and girls forward—things that, while seemingly-fruitless to many, may hold a shroud of truth for some. It is in one of these moments—when, upon reaching the top of a hill that was so high and wide that Mary could see nothing beyond it—that Mary's entire outlook on her situation begins to change.

Things are, as she sees fit to describe, almost perfect. They are, however, quite frightening, and it is for that reason while looking on the horizon that fear once more begins to drum in her heart.

She sure was a long way from home.

The structure before her is enormous and preposterous in nature. It is cold and toiled in appearance and black and jagged in color, and into the air it extends like a great chasm that has been inverted from the earth and spirals constantly as if it is a strand of matter that makes up all things. At its highest peaks are jagged ends which appear to be sharp knives that are meant to cut the sky and reveal in its place the insides of everything that exists, and along its loops and coils are remnants of the past that appear to show that, once upon a time, there were things here. The stone, even from a distance, is distinguishably scarred—broken by axes, Mary imagines, when the rest of the world fell—and while it isn't necessarily an ugly feature, it does make the sight before it appear frail: tired, she could say, and ready to collapse. Such a thing seems possible, as when the wind kicks up the tower seems to shift side to side, left and right, but something tells her that the act of insolence itself would not be inflicted upon this sole piece of architecture within the world. That, of course, would be too simple. What use would a dying landmark be if it did not stand in the air?

In looking at the twisted spire and the way it ascends the air like a brisk hallelujah, Mary almost fails to notice the thing that separates the two of them by but a few thousand feet.

It progresses onward, spiraling forth like the eighth character in a series of numbers that mark upon the world a juxtaposition which is meant to secure within everyone who looks upon it a sense of remarkability. It is beautiful, this strange thing, and impresses upon her the finality of the situation—that, before her eyes, and in the near distance, is a castle wide and tall, of which she knows is the end of the world, this journey, this place. No longer will she have to sleep under cover of darkness, afraid of things with red eyes, the one of many colors, the things that sparkled like a million pearls or the thing that looked like a giraffe, nor will she have to worry about visions of horror that could destroy her mind, heart, body and soul. She will have to worry about none of these things, as in but a few hours it will be over. She will, she knows, rescue the little girl that looks like a fish, find a portal that leads out of this world, and return home to her mommy and daddy. Grandma Mama will sing and the police will stop looking. There is absolutely nothing in the world to be afraid of.

Mary raises her eyes.

As what appears to be lightning strikes in the distance, cracking the sky like a great hammer when the man raised his fist and declared that the world would be his, it becomes increasingly apparent that things will soon go back to normal.

With but one step, Mary begins to descend the hill.

12.
The Twisted Spire

It begins to grow taller as she gets closer and closer. Whether or not it is because she is actually nearing the structure she can't be sure, as whenever she looks up it seems to continue extending into the sky, wrapping around itself over and over like a snake bound to the large trunk of a tree. It could, she knows, be because she is small—because, in her current state of frame, she is but five feet tall—and because this twisted spire is an icon upon which all things were built, but something in her heart tells her that is not probable. To think such things would serve to misjudge her rationale and therefore dissuade her from believing in things that may actually be true. It seems too perfect, too *convenient* for the spire to simply appear bigger, and in this place called Wraethworld, there seems not to be a lack of superstition that could make normal things whole. For that she chooses to believe that this thing really is growing larger, and that the secret within most would be so horrible and tainted that it refuses to acknowledge itself in but a small state.

As she continues along the path, taking extra care not to trip over herself as to her sides there are now jagged and grey rocks, Mary begins to wonder just how long it will take after she enters the spire for her to get home. She knows that this is the final frontier, that this is land where settlers crossed through and where the other side of the road was revealed, but does that mean the way back to the real world will be in plain sight? Will she have to play a game, she wonders, or solve a riddle? Such a thing would not be out of the question, considering the circumstance she has been thrown into. If that happens to occur, however, will she be able to solve said riddle? She's never been one for tricks, for games, for puzzles jigsaw or not, but that doesn't mean she'll be unable to do it, does it?

Rather than risk the consequence of overburdening herself before she can even get to the place where she knows the world ends, Mary raises her head and tries not to let her eyes wander

the spire's wispy and oftentimes-moving surface. Instead, she concentrates on the world around her and the agony that seems to have been inflicted upon the earth.

They have come with forks and hammers and cut into the ground jagged chasms that descend forever and beyond to where there are no glimmers of hope within them. The rocks are grey, the earth black, the individual respite where grass or other weeds should have grown stained white as if they have been marked by paint. It is these spots that is the blood of the innocent, the rule of the plenty, and to think of the notion is to deliver into one's mind the idea that this place was once beautiful—that this land was fertile, that there were cows and moons and mice, and that there were people in fine houses in a grand city where everything was nice. What happened could be anyone's guess, but were she to imagine it, she thinks that something fell from the sky—the great, cosmic sky, of wood that stained the waters and killed all who drank it.

These thoughts, and more, continue to haunt her as she progresses up the road.

In the shadow of the monolith, hope seems all the more futile.

Maybe, Mary thinks, it is because she's drawing closer to the valley in the shadow of death.

It seems like the path is stretching ever forward and tempting her to stop and rest upon its surface, as it takes her seemingly all day and well into the night for her to break any real progress on her advance toward the spire. When she finally stops for the night to consider the possibility that she may very well not make it until sometime the following morning, her feet are tired and the sores on her ankles are weeping. Blood wells in her shoes and makes squishy noises whenever she walks, her stomach rumbles even though she has eaten a day or so before, and her throat is all the more parched with the lack of water. Pain, it seems, exists here, as do physical, mortal burdens. That alone is almost enough to dissuade her, but had she not the purpose, and were she devoid of the inclination, she would have fallen to the ground and began to cry. However—as big girls do not cry, she merely stands there shivering, her arms crossed over her chest and her heels, though bloody, clicking together.

In but a few moments' time, Mary begins to contemplate whether or not continuing toward the spire is a prospect better left until tomorrow or acted upon now. If she waits, her body may protest—her heels may grow too horribly-painful to walk on and her stomach may throb as if it demands into its confines the entirety of the world and all its fruits. If she goes now, however, she may be able to reach the spire before any real sense of pain begins to set in.

Sighing, Mary takes a few steps forward, then glances at the rocks on both her left and right.

Once again, lightning cracks overhead, spilling blue across the horizon and lighting the spire in a wicked glow that seems to exist even after it all but disappears in the sky.

Mary frowns.

Is there any sense in going forward now, she wonders, especially if it will soon rain? All she wants is one drink—one little, single drink.

With a quick shake of her head, Mary skips forward.

Pain shoots from her heels and into her knees.

She screams.

Had there been birds, they would have erupted from the spire and into the air.

In the moments that follow, during which she feels as though the world will end and her body will cave to the pains that wreak havoc over it, Mary doubles over with her hands on her knees and her eyes weeping fresh tears. The sensation of agony shooting up and down her legs is nearly enough to make her throw up, but somehow she is able to refrain from doing so, likely only because she has not eaten nor drank anything in the past two days. She takes several

moments to recover from the episode, as with each passing moment the pain seems to grow worse, but when she finally does and is able to take another step forward, she once again realizes something.

Like she's thought before, with each step she takes toward the spire the pain begins to grow worse. Does this mean she is getting closer and closer to the real world?

Choosing not to believe in such things if only because she does not want to disappoint herself, Mary sinks her teeth into her lower lip and tilts her head up to look at the sky. The spire, still illuminated by the faint, radiating traces of blue lightning, appears like a monster—a titan which can only be found in Wraethworld and who, in appearance alone, summons the gift of pain and imparts it upon anyone who steps too close.

Each step forward is agony. Her blisters pour blood into her shoes. Her stomach convulses within her torso. Her throat symphonizes accordingly to the dire forward motion toward the tower and tears within the confines of her trachea gashes that trumpet unease. It is not pain she feels, but terror, which dries her mouth to an almost unbearable hue, and when she tries to make spit and swallow it her tonsils burn and dangle at the back of her throat. All of this, and more, create a maelstrom throughout her being, a typhoon within her conscience and a whirlpool within her person. She has never felt so weak in her life and, she imagines, never will again, as it is with this advance that she knows that she will never leave home once she returns to the real world, never step foot outside, never leave the confines of her room or her bed or even the blankets that are spread atop it. She will do none of these things because she has known true pain. She understands that, once she gets to the real world, things will never be the same as they used to be. Always and forever will they be different—scarred, she knows, by Wraethworld, and for that she knows her journey is not without consequence.

In walking forward, tearing herself apart piece by little piece, she knows that, soon, things will be just fine.

It seems like eternity that she walks the road that leads up to the twisted spire.

Mary begins to cry.

Slowly, it dawns on her.

She turns her head up.

She is no more than but a few feet away from the entrance to the place she now knows as the end of the world.

Heart hammering, heels pulsing, stomach throbbing, Mary closes her eyes and sobs.

It is with all the trepidation in the world—with all the agony, distrust, unease and complete terror within her head—that she takes one final breath before she begins to run forward.

Everything hurts so bad.

She feels in but a moment she will simply collapse and die where she really, truly stands.

It takes no more than a second for her to cross the distance that lies between her and the entrance to the twisted spire.

Mary opens her eyes.

The moment her feet cross the threshold all pain ceases to exist.

Her sense of reality falters.

If this is the end of the world, then why is she not in so much pain that she can no longer stand on her own two feet?

Disheartened beyond belief, Mary turns her eyes up and looks into the darkness that lies beyond the entrance to the twisted spire.

She will not be able to see until morning.

She collapses to her knees—then, slowly, curls up into a ball and wishes for the world to drown away.

Dappled sunlight pours in through the cracks and scars within the wall and lights the inside of the twisted spire in tones that reminds her of early morning—when, just as the sun has risen in the real world, energy from the new day spills across the confines of plastic-based windows and casts the room in a melody of happiness. Coupled with the grim prospect of the twisted spire, it seems impossible for this to be true. There should be no happiness here, no relief, no calm which she can exploit to make herself feel better about the world and all its principles. That, however, seems not to matter, as in looking upon the light and the interior of the spire she feels more at peace than she has since she first stepped foot into Wraethworld.

It is old and cold in here, cracked and chipped as if the Things Above have dragged their Spears and Tridents through the stone and created impressions meant to dissuade anyone from entering. There is little that seems even remotely like the old world this place must once have been. On the walls there are torch holders that are long since gone. The floor, though hard and dry, sings memories of carpet, of furniture that once roamed these halls. And the ceilings—they're perhaps the most magnificent of all, as from their surfaces dangle what appear to be the remnants of chandeliers and upon their faces bear the faint whispers of paintings that can no longer be seen but in shards of color alone. This was, Mary knows, once a beautiful place, as upon each and every surface there are passions which could have only been created by the kind, benevolent benefactor who created this structure. Whether it twisted or turned, rolled forth or curled aplenty, this place, this *twisted spire,* had been designed with the utmost intentions in mind, so to see it like this is enough to make Mary feel sad and bewildered. Just what could have happened to destroy such a beautiful place, to curl within the aspects of the world evil and violence that surely must have destroyed all who once settled here? To think such things is uncomforting, but to experience them is another sensation completely, one of which she does not want to feel within her heart.

After rising to her feet, Mary takes a deep breath and tests beneath her body the strength of her heels. When she feels no pain, she decides then and there that now is the time to continue forward.

While she knows not the reality of this world, something tells her that she will make it, if only because of the confidence which spills within her heart.

The path is straightforward and without pause. For each forward advance she takes there is a curve within the spire that beckons her to the left. Always, endlessly, she walks to the left, taking not a moment of her time to reflect back on the spire and the history it surely must have endured. It is useless, she knows, because there is nothing she could think in order to better justify the fact that this place, she feels, once suffered a great tragedy. It is in the walls and within these floors, within these stripped, broken chandeliers that hang from the ceiling and these halls that she inhabits. It is a song which tells the story of the world, a melody which recants the tragedy that destroyed this place and took everything beautiful and solemn from it. It is an old song, one which would have been sung from a grand deity's throat, and it would have echoed across the horizon and lands as if it were a trumpet of ease. All would hear, all would bow down, and all would take a moment to listen to the thing that told their story and gave remembrance to the beautiful things that created this world. That, however, exists no more, and it is with sad reality

and conclusion that Mary begins to understand that she must block off any and all sympathy she has for this place, if only to better serve herself.

She takes the path for hours, never stopping to recant, never pausing to catch a lost breath. She feels, almost scarily, nothing within herself. Not even the breath that she normally feels enter and leave her body is present within her conscience. This reality is so chilling that when she does take into her body a deep breath and expels from it a long exhale it feels almost wrong—that this creation, *her person,* has progressed to operate on a mechanical level, one of which needs no human interaction whatsoever.

In lieu of this strange and terrifying reality, she begins to count the rotations she takes around the spire.

One… two… three…

Four… five… six…

She eventually reaches ten and begins to feel weathered, like she has climbed a grand mountain without water or nourishment to fuel her being. It is this feeling that beckons her to stop—to settle down on the ground and take a moment to compose herself for the journey ahead. She knows, however, that she cannot stop, as in this place of curves and bends, of downward slopes and endless drops, she will very likely stumble and go soaring back down—falling, she knows, like dominos, until she is at the very beginning and has to start all over again.

After composing herself yet again, Mary straightens her posture out and continues forward.

It is on the thirteenth floor, and within the twelfth rotation she has taken in order to get to this point in the spire, that she begins to hear a sound. It is soft and hollow, as if the inside of whatever it is making the noise is without density, and it whispers across the walls and echoes off surfaces and into her ears. It's pleasant at first—calming, even, to her shattered nerves—but eventually it becomes more of a nuisance than anything. In time it builds to the point where Mary lifts her hands and covers her ears, but in doing so she only begins to hear the nursery rhyme in which her name was so cleverly pulled from, the one that was played so heavily during her infancy that she sometimes even hears it in her sleep.

When she can take it no more, Mary throws her hands into the air and lets out a tiny sigh of frustration.

It isn't until her frustration clears and the cloud of film lifts before her eyes that she sees that she is no longer in a rotating room, but in the threshold of another—a straight, box-shaped construct that seems completely unnatural for the shape of this twisted spire.

Standing there, unsure what to do and shocked that she has discovered something that may make her journey much easier, Mary doesn't notice much of anything until the sound once again begins to play in her head.

She lifts her eyes.

She looks into the darkness.

She sees a figure step forward.

13.
The Little Blonde Girl

She is a polar opposite like the caps in the north and south, a parallel universe in which two completely different worlds exist, a dab of chocolate atop a cream of vanilla that makes it marvelous and completely-unnecessary treat. She is a creature of delight, a thing of innocence, a construct of reality that is shaped in the greatest formation that has ever taken the world. She is a

little girl that looks just like her, and in looking at her, Mary thinks for but a moment that she is looking in a mirror—that on the opposite side of the room, there is a pane of glass that reflects everything and nothing back and then again. It isn't long before she begins to reconsider just what she is looking at and takes everything into more detail, as when the figure steps forward she reveals to the world the source of the noise. She is, of course, a little girl that looks just like her, right down to the faint freckles that cross her noise and the pale pink hue of her heart-shaped lips, but her hair is blonde and there are bells braided into it. Her dress is also a different color—scarlet, like the letter given to the queen who was adequately shamed—and it echoes things that Mary feels are wrong and completely threatening. She does not come forward, this Other Mary, and she does not shift or slide. Instead, she merely stands there and watches her—unmoving, unblinking, and completely unforgiving.

There are moments during the time that she is standing there looking at her other self that Mary feels self-conscious. It is as though she is looking into a mirror and seeing the greatest flaws within her person. Her dark hair, natty and seemingly-unkempt; her dark eyes, ugly and without color; her fair skin, an anonymous standard of beauty—even the set of their eyes seem different and the height of which they stand seems diluted: stretched forward, into infinity and beyond, but compacted to the point where even from so far away they look alike. These things, and more, are what frighten her, as she soon realizes that she is not looking at herself, but something beautiful—an ideal, one could say, that the world would like to see.

With tears threatening to break the surface of her eyes, Mary lifts her hands.

In a parallel of moments, she expects nothing to happen—that the reflection directly across from her will merely stand and wait for something to happen.

It doesn't take long for this fact to be disproven.

In but a moment, the Other Mary lifts her hand.

Mary stops, then lowers her fists to her sides. The Other Mary does the exact same.

Taking care to watch her movements, as it seems that whatever she will do her Other Self will do as well, Mary blinks and watches, before her eyes, as the Other Mary does the same. She lifts her hand, runs it through her hair, watches as the Other Mary does the same, then lowers her hand and witnesses the action repeated just the same. Even the shuffling of her feet, back and forth and then again is repeated down to the exact moment, which is so chillingly-calculating that Mary can't help but shiver.

When she reaches up to rub her arms, the Other, blonde Mary does the same.

What could this mean, Mary wonders, as she continues to play her fingers across her arms as if they are a clarinet sung forth from the mightiest of woods? Could this mean that she has truly reached the final frontier—that in order to escape this world, she must face the cruelest aspect of herself—or is this simply a test on which she must score the highest grade? She sees no teacher within the hall, her chalk stick raised and her hair done plenty, and she sees no peers which she can relate to, but does that really mean anything? When it really, truly comes down to it, does seeing none of these things really mean that she is, in fact, in the clear, or is this façade merely a curtain in disguise—a little girl with bells in her hair meant to dissuade her from stepping forward and leaving this place behind?

Scared, disgruntled, and not entirely sure what to do, Mary takes one single step forward and waits for something to happen.

The Other Mary takes a step forward.

Mary takes a step back.

She hops forward and then back again.

They are two dancers atop the greatest of stages, a boy and a girl with their hands intertwined and their legs twisted about their bodies. They are flying through the wind, a song of paradise and wonder, and they are swimming through the channel in which crocodiles dwell and wait to devour any who come close. There is a castle in the distance, slowly growing closer, and as they near its passage, atop which archers stand with bows and arrows, there comes from its depths a dragon—a cold, black creature which spews from its mouth green fire in the name of queen maleficent who within her robes holds the damndest of men—and in this dragon the world collides and then again. Stars explode overhead and raise the dead, while dogs run away and children are here to stay. It is a brilliant dance, of a knight in shining armor who has come to slay the dragon, and as this knight raises her sword to slay this creature from Hell, she thinks for but a moment that things could be wrong—that this battle should not be fought and instead should be discussed with biscuits and tea, with crème brulee. It is for that reason, in hopping back and forth, that Mary comes to a complete standstill and tries to imagine just what, if anything, she can do.

With her heart creeping slowly up her throat, threatening to dissolve her into a pile of mush, she begins to open her mouth to form what she knows will be impossible words.

Then it happens.

A voice comes forth. It says, "So I see you've met Mary."

14.
The Thing That Looked Like a Snake

The figure is tall and imposing, with a billowing cloak that descends around its knees and eyes at could have slain the world and then again. Its eyes—yellow, slit-like, and appearing much like that of a cat—look upon her in a way that makes Mary's skin crawl. It is as if she is the doe and it is the lion, the bold creature that strides across the plains to slay the gazelle that drinks from the golden pool, and it appears as though at any moment it will lash out and attack her—cold, brutally, and with an intensity that would have been akin to several exploding mushroom clouds in the distance. Such is the appearance of its eyes that she has a remarkably-difficult time even looking upon it, as it seems she will simply be swallowed whole, and for each moment she spends looking into its horrible eyes she is filled with a sense of apprehension that makes her weak at the knees and shake at every joint. But it is not its eyes that disturb her to the point where she feels as though every ounce of happiness within her has simply erupted and vanished into the thin air. No. Perhaps its most terrifying feature, however, is its face. Serpentine, with impossible angles not imposed upon creatures that climbed trees and waved through deserts, its cheeks are hollow, its jaw strong, its chin cleft, its lips painted. The tongue which pools from its mouth to taste the air is forked in three and flits before her eyes as if it is a diamond prize plucked forth from the greatest mine in the most exotic of countries. This appearance, coupled with the voice which had spoken no more than a few moments beforehand, startles Mary so much that she takes a few steps back. She stumbles, quickly, and would have fallen had she not pin-wheeled her arms to steady her posture. But somehow, someway, despite the thing before her, she is able to maintain hold on her ground.

Do not be afraid, Mama Grandma had said. *Nothing you don't fear cannot hurt you.*

She holds this truth to be evident, to the point where she realizes that should she be afraid, she will only feed into the thing's sick desires, so she holds her ground with her hands balled at her sides and stares straightforward as if she is looking at the things before her.

Several undeterminable moments pass in the time which she stands there. Nothing transpires, at least to her knowledge, though with each passing moment the air grows cold and the dappled, golden sunlight dilutes until it is nothing more than grey. The walls grow impossibly tall, shadows stretch, time seems infinite in a place where it is most obviously not. The world, as she knows it, is shifting—transforming, extending, morphing into something that is so horrible that not even the most terrifying of soldiers could have protected her. They were nothing, she knows, in but their size, their strengths, their humble weaknesses and their exhausting prowess. This is what makes her feel as though this thing—this *monster*—is the master of everything, the man which holds the golden scepter atop which there is an emerald gem and the girl who bears upon her feet the ruby slippers. That alone delivers the opinion that she should not be able to conquer this thing—that if for some reason she is unable to pass this monster, her Other Half and the walls which they stand within—there will be no chance for her to ever go home.

"Speak," the tall, imposing thing says.

It is an ultimatum which she cannot recognize, a dice which has been rolled and cast upon its sides a single one, a black cat that has crossed her path and three false Os with tails upon their tops. She wants to scream, wants to cry out, wants to call within the most serene of voices that she wants to go home, but words are objects which cannot be used, which cannot be formed, cannot be said. She is a fish above water, a loon without a cry, a cat without its meow and a dog devoid of its bark—she is everything wrong with her world and then some. There is, in this moment, absolutely nothing she can do.

The knowledge concrete, the truth defined, the voice of reason is all but silenced.

Mary begins to cry.

The thing with the serpentine face steps forward. The Other Mary tries to follow, but the creature that holds no name or staff or even title pushes its hand that is shrouded in black back to hold the construct in place. The porcelain being pouts, stamps her feet, then tries to step forward.

Mary's mouth opens.

In but one moment, the creature turns and slams its shrouded hand into the Other Mary's face. There appears but one crack upon her porcelain surface. Then she explodes in a cloud of dust that instantly disperses within the air.

"You cannot speak," the thing with no name says. "You cannot talk, cannot laugh, cannot sing. If you can do none of these things, than what are you?"

What is she, Mary wonders? She is a little girl. Her name is Mary Matthews. She is five years old. She attends a primary school in one of the greatest places in the country and was taught by Miss Kitty before she met her ultimate demise. She lives in the city with her mommy and daddy, goes to see Mama Grandma occasionally, and has a dog named Scooter, who's quite funny when offered treats and his belly is scratched. She lives in a three-story house that is red on the outside and blue on the inside and is quite happy with the existence she is in. She is all these things, but for some reason she believes that this is not the answer to the nameless thing's question. It would be too simple, too direct and straightforward in a way which everything could be so easily recognized. She knows that this world is not simple, and answers, though often fruitful, are not the same. For that, she knows, this is not the question she is being asked.

Mary takes one step backward.

The nameless thing takes a step forward.

"You cannot answer," the nameless thing says, "for which you were born. You cannot answer," it continues, "for which you are not."

Mary's foot broaches the entrance to the threshold that separates this room from the endlessly-rotating spire she stands within. Dust lies there, the remnants of the Other Mary, and sparkles in the greying light that is all but disappearing. She knows it wants her to leave—wants her to flee back into the other world called Wraethworld—but if she does, she will never make it home.

She is so close, oh so close. To turn and run now would mean that all her progress would be lost.

The nameless thing continues to come closer.

Mary, in but a moment of strength, holds her ground.

Mama Grandma once told her that nothing you fear cannot hurt you—that monsters, beneath the bed, cannot climb the post unless they have claws; that giants, who do not have eyes, cannot see you from far distances; that animals, without encouragement, cannot attack in the dead of night. She'd said these things on a long, cold night—when, outside, the world was revealed in shades of blue and white—and near the fire, before which they were wrapped in blankets, she learned that fear is an instinct: that nature, without nurture, is but a secondary notice, and that actions, without consequence, are never given any reward.

It is in this moment—when, it seems, the entire world will begin falling down—that Mary realizes she cannot be afraid.

As the nameless thing continues forward, encroaching upon the ground which she stands upon without fear in her heart, Mary reaches up and presses a single hand to her chest.

Beneath her palms she feels the life of which she is.

She comes to a realization.

If she believes, then she can conquer anything.

The nameless thing's footsteps echo across the room.

Mary raises her eyes. Hate lines their surfaces.

The walls begin to burn.

There is a belief that says thought is the greatest weapon—that feelings, when given life, can create the world. Shadows can be born of memory, light the means of confidence, destruction the fruits of consequence, and nature, once given the greatest of meanings, can impose upon the world flora and fauna that can propagate the world one time over. Babies can be born, puppies can cry, children can meow and adults can sing; animals can laugh and stand upright and dress in people's clothing and deliver unto the world their own form of government which has been established after securing their own nation on the farm after they have driven its owner away. It is this belief, in which Mary feels her power is all but supreme, that she casts upon the world around her a fire that surrounds the entirety of all the things that she fears. The world is lit in brilliant light, in orange and red and white and blue, and the nameless thing, so tall and imposing, is set ablaze like a candle atop a birthday cake. It screams, its mouth a purpose of destruction, and it raises forth as if it is praising something high above for the sake of which Mary knows is salvation. She fuels everything she feels into this fire. Her fears, her doubts, her insecurities, her pains, sorrows and frustrations—she implicates all of these things, and more, into the flames that cast the world afire, and it is no surprise when in but a moment the nameless thing that was so tall and imposing with yellow eyes and a serpentine face collapses into nothing.

It takes an eternity for something to be created.

It takes but a moment for everything to be destroyed.

When the fire begins to die down—when the world, so vast and impure, begins to fill with golden light—Mary takes a step forward.

It begins to descend.

It is a blue orb in which the entirety of Mary's focus throughout this past week has been channeled.

Mary, she says.

The little girl that looks like a fish is leveled from the ceiling to the ground before her. The orb dissolves, when broken by Mary's thought, and the little girl that looks like a fish hovers in thin air and waves her arms and legs as if she is swimming. There is no smile on her face, as Mary knows fish cannot smile, but there is a sense of relief within her blank white eyes that Mary knows signifies the truth that she is thankful for. That alone is enough to fill her with a sense of relief for all that she has done.

You have saved my world, the fish girl says. *There is only one thing I can do for you.*

At the very end of the room, where there is but one single hall that leads to what appears to be a dead end, a sphere of blue light appears where which there is the outside world that Mary knows is so beautiful.

You can go home now, the fish girl says. *Thank you.*

Mary steps forward, then stops just as she passes the little girl that looks like a fish.

How, she wonders, will the fish girl get home?

Do not worry for me, the fish girl says. *I know the way back.*

It is with those words alone that Mary begins to run.

It takes but a moment for her to cross the room, then for her to step into the portal.

There are moments in which things are defined—where tragedies can be opened, where wounds can be sewn shut, where memories can be forever imprinted into the minds of people whom certain events have impacted. It is within this moment—when, Mary assumes, she is transitioning into the real world—that everything begins to fall into focus.

The portal into the other world, Wraethworld; Miss Kitty; Jesus Picarazio; the things with red eyes on top of the hills; baby Jason; the poppy fields; the thing of many colors; the little boys and girls who didn't know what they were; the thing on swift black wings; the forest of darkness; the things that sparkled like a million tiny pearls; the Littleton twins Abby and Shelly; the little girls in nondescript clothing and the police officer who turned into the thing that looked like a giraffe; the scars in the road within which there was dust the color of silver; the eternal nothing and the twisted spire in which she met her Other Half and the tall imposing thing with the yellow eyes and the billowing black cloak—all happened, she knows, for a reason, and all were meant to each her a lesson. These things, these people, these stories, triumphs and consequences—they were meant to show her that things, as horrible as they may seem or appear to be in the real world, are not really as frightening as what reality may wish to impose upon the world.

Nightmares, she understands, are the consequence of all our desires.

It takes but a moment for Mary to realize it all.

The sky opens.

Stars explode overhead.

Her body succumbs to torturous pain and her life falls into focus.

As she falls into an alley, at the beginning of which there is a yellow tape with swirls and flourishes that mark the entrance to one of the greatest crimes that has ever been committed upon the human race, she realizes what all has just happened.

When she feels as though she can continue on—when her body, though pained, allows her but one moment to suffer it all—she rises to her feet and begins to make her way out of the alley.

Nothing can stop her.

She now knows that she is strong.

M.
The Final Interlude

It is with the utmost intent that within the Twisted Spire and the Final Frontier of Wraethworld that our heroine, little Mary Matthews, discovered the most crucial gift of all—faith. Bestowed upon her by her Mama Grandma, by the things she said one cold winter night and by the words of which she granted, it was within a few words that Mary was told that monsters can never hurt you: that faith, if prevalent within one's being, can save the world and the people within it. This notion has encompassed many a moment within the world known as Wraethworld—when, while making her way toward the hills, Mary began to falter; when in the dark forest she continued forward; and when, while facing the police officer who turned into the thing that looked like a giraffe, she conjured within herself a dream. These are actions that are defined by the notion that a greater power beyond ourselves exist—that in the Sky, in the Boat, in the Universe or on the Island, there are places in which grand sources of triumph exist that we may call upon at any given time. When exploited, these things can do many a thing—save a life, save a person, save a world.

Despite how great these things are, however, this is not the point of the story. Those of you who have followed Mary Matthews from the time which this story began all the way up until this moment are likely wondering just what happened after she escaped from Wraethworld and landed in the exact same place she entered through. It is here, dear reader, that you will learn her fate.

For hours Mary wanders when back in the real world. She knows not where she is going, where she is, if she is even in the place she calls home or if there are really people that live here in this place she knows as the Real World. It is for that reason, and for her pain, that she begins to cry as she wanders the streets. So deserted are they of people and even animals that she feels as though there is nothing she can do—that regardless of her triumph, despite what she has accomplished, she has only ended up back in a place where no one and no thing exists.

Defeated, at last, by both the elements and her emotions, she collapses in the middle of the road.

It is there, in those short moments that follow, that a police car shows up.

They know who she is the moment she raises her head. She is a power, an icon, a testament on which all happiness is bound, and she is sitting in the middle of the road with her head raised and her eyes brimming with tears. Her dress is torn, her ankles are bleeding, her shoes are all but gone and her hair is in disarray—her skin is sallow, like pruned flesh when left under water too long, and her eyes are screaming for help. The policemen know who she is. She is Mary Matthews—five years old and missing for a week—but they do not know what has happened to her.

Immediately, they disembark from their construct of salvation and step forward, their nice boots clicking and their badges shining in the light.

They are, for but a moment, illuminated by the lights piercing through the darkness of the night. In that moment Mary sees the ringlets hovering over their heads—soft, stark, but completely golden. It is a sign, she knows, that these men are good—that though they have been stripped of their wings, they are harbingers of life.

When both men step forward and crouch down to greet her, they say only one thing:

"Mary Matthews?"

It is with horror and the utmost humiliation that she has ever experienced in her life that Mary realizes she cannot speak, for once upon a time there was a man in the big blue sky with his big white birds who delivered in their big brown beaks the cradles of which all infantkind was born, and this man said, "This is Mary Matthews, and she will not speak because she need not use words to tell the world her story." It was this man in this big blue sky, with his big white birds and their big brown beaks that touched her head and bid the birds to go, and it was on the winds of the big blue sky that she was delivered to Donna and Leonardo Matthews, her mommy and daddy who loved and love and will always love her very much. So desperately she wants to say the things that she needs to say—that she lives on a street, near a hill, in a yard with one big tree and a swing made out of an old tire—but she knows that she cannot, and for that she begins to cry. The policemen both looked stunned at this reaction. Neither of them seem to know what to do, since they don't reach out to touch her, but one reaches down and takes from his belt a Walkie-Talkie and speaks into it the phrase that she has wanted to hear for so long. We've found her, *he says, and that is when Mary screams and her world goes dark.*

When she awakens, she is in a big white room. There are tubes running into her arms and a thin white sheet over her body. There is no pain, no agony, no fear of which can terrify her so. Because of that, she does not scream.

From the front of the room comes a rustle of movement.

Instinctively, Mary curls her hands into two tiny balls.

A nice lady in a white suit comes forward and settles down at the end of her bed. "Mary Matthews?" she asks, and when Mary nods she smiles and says, "Your family is on your way. You don't have anything to be afraid of now."

It is there, in the moments that seem undeterminable, that the world goes dark.

When she opens her eyes again, the world is lit in white. Startled, afraid, unsure of her surroundings and of the light blooming within the open space, she seeks out the source of the luminescence with her wandering vision—first to the machines at the side, who seem so bright but are so soft, then to the door and the light that shines under it. It's supposed to be open, she knows, because it has always been promised, but tonight there is no light. There are only shadows cast across the room—like water slowly drifting across the sea.

It is in but one moment that Mary knows what has happened.

Hello Mary, *the voice says.*

Mary opens her eyes.

The little girl who looks like a fish is hovering in the air at the end of the bed—suspended, it seems, by wires from the ceiling. But there are no wires, Mary knows, because like her, the little girl who looks like a fish is special.

In the short moments that follow the little girl who looks like a fish's declaration, Mary feels within her heart a rush of warmth, one that spreads across the entirety of her body from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.

I just wanted to thank you, *the little girl who looks like a fish says.* Thank you, Mary. Thank you for saving my world.

It takes but one moment for the world to fade away—for the fish girl to disappear and for darkness to return to the room.

Mary closes her eyes and goes to sleep.

Sometime during the night, her parents arrive, then in the morning Mary cries. The doctors say there has been a miracle—a 'miraculous healing'—and that none of the wounds that Mary had the previous night are no longer there. They pressure them to stay, but Mary knows better—knows that the little girl who looked like a fish has given her one last gift—and shakes her head. It is then that the doctors let her go, and when in the car, and while driving home where Mama Grandma waits, Mary looks out the window at the afternoon sky and realizes something, something so great that she begins to cry just as the sun dips behind the clouds and shadows the world in grey.

She is home.

It is here, dear reader, that our story ends. Whether or not Mary Matthews will live an ordinary life is up to anyone's discretion. She has seen much throughout her time in Wraethworld—has seen tragedies and torments of not only men and women, but of children and the fates they have suffered all for their inhibitions—and for that it will be any wonder if she truly can recover, if she will lead a normal life or if she will ever be able to walk by an alleyway without hearing from its depths a voice or a bell or even feel a breath of wind shift her skirt. Whether such things will occur, however, do not matter.

As things draw to a close—as our curtain begins to fall and our heroine begins to sleep once more—a faint luminescence begins to twinkle in an alleyway far away.

Is it there that another will suffer Mary's fate?

Only they can know.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Southeastern Idaho, Kody Boye began his writing career with the publication of his story [A] Prom Queen's Revenge at the age of fourteen. Published nearly three-dozen times before going independent at eighteen, Boye has authored numerous works—including the short story collection Amorous Things, the novella The Diary of Dakota Hammell, the zombie novel Sunrise and the epic fantasy series The Brotherhood Saga.

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