

City of Birds

A man searches
for his lost son
in a drowned
post-apocalyptic
landscape.

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The Captain opened his eyes and the shattered face of a street lamp jerked into view above him. Water slapped rhythmically against the hull of the airboat. He wiped the salt from the holes of his eyes, from his beard, his fingers up against his caked lips. He drew off a flake of skin, put it in his mouth and chewed it. A jarring sunrise revealed the endless run of the waterway, angles of concrete entering and exiting the water. He looked down parallel lines of street lamps following the curve of some absent road. Dark gaps in the water ahead where the overpasses rose and fell. A pair of cormorants perched on the roof of an emerging truck cab, drying their wings in the sun. He had never seen so many birds.

He moved to the edge of the boat, reached down and brought up a handful of brackish floodwater. He passed it over his face and through his hair. Out of habit, he moved a hand down to his pocket, circled his forefinger over the face of a watch he kept there. Under the pilot seat was a squat jar of muddied water. He unscrewed the metal lid and touched the rim to his lips, took down just enough to remind his body how thirsty it was.

Behind the airboat a set of pylons rose out of the water, suspending an overpass with two slanting feeder roads at each end. A banked course of gravel led up to the rise. The Captain stepped from the boat and onto the scree, feeling it moving beneath him, his boots filling with fouled water. Flotsam gathered in the gutter; rubber thongs, plastic coat hangers, cracked water containers, dental floss, a toothbrush, pill bottles, a steady migration of translucent shopping bags, like jellyfish. He moved the junk around with his boot and surfaced an asthma puffer. He picked it up and pressed the canister down and it coughed up a fine mist. He shook it and puffed again, this time into his mouth. Pin pricks of moisture in his throat. He put the thing away in his pocket and started up the bank.

A car was parked on the left incline. The paint was fresh and blue like it had just rolled out of the yard. Sam sat against the rear tyre, his head resting on his knees. The Captain walked up to him and Sam raised his head, his face a set of angles, every part of him reduced. Sam pushed the heel of his hand into his stomach. Cramps every morning now. The Captain held out the water jar and Sam took it with both hands and cradled it against his lips. The sharp turns of his adam's apple as he drank. The Captain's shadow closed around Sam. All

that water trapped in the body, he thought. In the skin, the bone, the blood, the organs. How muscle stored more of it than fat. How the thinner they got, the closer to water they became.

He looked through the windshield of the car. Parking tickets curled against the glass. He put his hands against the driver side window. A street map open on the passenger seat. Computer parts stacked in the back. He tried the handle but it was locked. He went back to the boat and returned with a metal coat hanger and eased it between the rubber flaps of the window seal. Down in the innards of the door he found the lock and pulled it. The door clicked open.

He got in through the driver's side and sat down, put his hands on the wheel. The pedals under his feet. The Captain made the motions to remind himself: ease on, ease off. Feel it shift. He went through the street map, the pages stiff and warm from the sun. Traced his finger over the lines he remembered. He reached into his pocket and drew out a knife and used it to work open the glovebox. Inside, the owner's manual fused in its sleeve. Spent pens. He reached up and checked the mirror. A mask of sunburn. Nobody he recognised. He wrenched it free.

The Captain went around to the rear of the car and put the end of the blade into the boot lock, his palm over the flat of the handle. He hit down hard with his fist and the mechanism fell through. He reached through the hole and unhitched the clasp. Inside was a set of jumper leads, two oily sleeping bags, a fold-up spade with a sharp edge, a tyre iron, wheel jack and ratchet spanner. The Captain took out the objects and laid them on the bitumen. He pulled away the carpet hatch where the spare would be. The tyre rubber was tight and he lifted it clear and leant it up against the rear bumper. The petrol cap had fused to the thread so he pried it off with the knife and put his nose to the opening. A vague smell of petrol. He poked a length of tubing down into the tank and sucked on the end, drawing out two litres into an empty milk container. He put it aside with the rest.

The Captain pulled the lever by the steering wheel and the bonnet clicked open. The engine hoses underneath had gone hard and split, the battery oxidised. Sam appeared next to him. They both looked at the radiator. The Captain hit the cap off with the ratchet he had found and stuck his finger in. Wet at the tip.

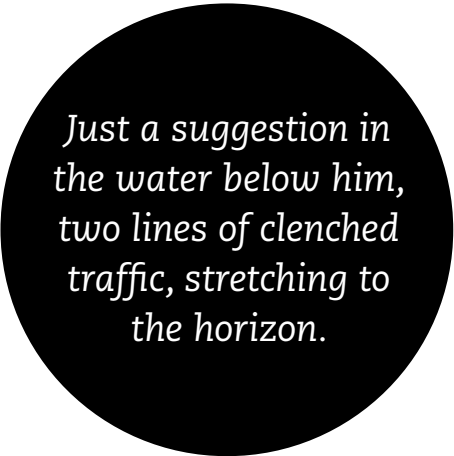
He got the jack from the roadside and used it to lift the car while Sam shuffled under with a battered juice bottle. He pried the radiator plug free and drained out the contents. When he stood up, the container was bright blue. Antifreeze. The Captain remembered that antifreeze was toxic to pets. Nothing about people, he thought, swilling the liquid around the container. He stuffed a rag in the top of the bottle. Not yet.

They went over the carcass again. The Captain freed a set of sooty spark plugs, spares for the airboat, and put them away in his pocket along with the washers and nuts. He removed the fastenings from the pipes and loosened the engine cap and looked in. The innards dry, seized long ago. The wire casing turned to dust at his touch.

He sliced through the floor carpet with a box cutter and tore up the speaker wire, coiled it around his hand wondering what use it might be. He stepped up onto the bonnet and then to the roof. At the top of the overpass, traffic cones marked out a perimeter, ready to start work. Out on the water, an endless sea of concrete archipelagos. Down beside the embankment was Jimmy, pulling his seal-like body up onto the airboat. Just a suggestion in the water below him, two lines of clenched traffic, stretching to the horizon.

They traveled along a set of vague sunken highways, tracking the slow arc of two pelicans circling for a place to set down. The angled shade of the lampposts strobed the airboat. Jimmy was on the rear bench seat with Sam, the hypnotic lashing of his hair in the wind. Ahead, a stretch of exposed freeway had collapsed section by section, the bitumen bleeding out into parallel sets of dull points breaching the surface. Beyond, the dim mirage of the city, drawing closer. He scanned the road with a pair of binoculars, searching for a place to make landfall. A man appeared in the glasses, naked from the waist up, a hide of sun-ravaged skin. Something in his hand that he drew up to his mouth and bit down on. A lemon.

A stand of saltbush had sprouted along the rubble shoulder leading to the exposed road. Up above, a set of traffic signs marked out the upcoming exits: Hepburn, Princetown, Greenwich. Perched on the gantry was a pair of pelicans. In the Captain's hands the rifle and a tin of bullets. Sweat poured out of his face and stung his eyes. Nearly noon, he thought. A single cloud dragged



*Just a suggestion in
the water below him,
two lines of clenched
traffic, stretching to
the horizon.*

across the sky. Shouldn't be out in the open. He crouched and placed the tin on the bitumen, pulled back the bolt, looking up at the pelicans resting, and pushed a round into the chamber, eased the bolt forward, trying to keep it quiet. He lay down on the road, the sting of the hot bitumen through his clothes, and fired. One of the pelicans bucked, and dropped onto the elevated road above. The other flapped its ungainly wings and rose into the air. The Captain emptied the chamber and felt around for the bullet tin. He pushed it over, heard the bullets ringing out on the road. He put the rifle down to scoop them up and then reloaded and raised the rifle again. The bird circled as it climbed and the Captain followed its line with the rifle, his finger poised on the trigger. He fired. The bird's flight continued. Another bullet went into the chamber as the pelican completed another circle, each stroke of its wings drawing it swiftly to a safe height. He fired, knowing that it would miss and watched the bird move off. He put down the gun and felt around for the casings, keeping his eye on the road above.

The remains of a fire. The Captain leant the rifle up against the road's crash barrier and moved his foot through the ashes, loosing a femur. He squatted and put his elbows on his knees, picked out the burnt edge of a photograph. A beach somewhere. More in the ashes. He separated a set of knuckle bones, tipping them from hand to hand to release their heat. Small bones, he thought, and tossed them aside.

He went to the barrier and saw Jimmy by the stand of saltbush, waving him over. The Captain picked across the rubble. He could see Jimmy's hand over his mouth and nose. He parted the branches. A butterfly torso, boiling with flies. The head loosely tethered, the face turned away from him. Rancid flesh piled in an open pit. The Captain covered his mouth and stepped through. A crow moved around him, drawing flesh out of the pit. Underwear and shorts folded in a pile. He circled around the remains, the crow mirroring his movements and then moved silently back through the bushes. He went to the road and walked out beyond the remains of the fire to where the pelican had fallen, its wings bent beneath its body. He put his hands on the concrete barrier and looked over, half expecting to see something there. Nothing. He dropped to his knees and vomited through his hands. Flies swarmed around his mouth, picking at his syrupy fingers. Behind him he could hear the clack clack of Jimmy loading and unloading the rifle. Above, the sun an open wound. The Captain's

thoughts evaporated. Somewhere high above him he thought he could hear the pelican flap its wings, leaving them behind.

He had bargained with the boatmaster. That was what he remembered. Tried to force the price down by pointing out the flaws in the boat: not enough torque to carry the load, the keel too deep, not likely to clear the debris. With his phone cradled between his shoulder and ear he pointed to the blisters running the length of the bulwark. Nail sickness. Dry rot. A slight collision and the planks would cave like sponge. He spoke loud enough for those already on board to hear, and the other passengers nearby began watching the two of them, he and the boatmaster, and taking in their lodgings with renewed interest.

Can you see him? A woman's voice squeezed through the tiny phone speaker.

The man turned to see his brother and child standing together. The boy fat from wearing all his clothes. Suitcases sitting between them, packed with food, headache tablets, an aluminium cooking set they had meant to use last summer, a gun, no bullets, a tin opener.

Yes, said the man.

Keep him close, she said. I've heard things.

He turned back to the boatmaster and noticed that he was looking at the boy. He moved his body between them.

A third, he said, regaining the man's attention. There are other boats going, he lied.

What is he saying?

Who?

The man with the boat.

He placed a wad of damp money onto the box and looked at the boatmaster while speaking into the phone. He's saying that half is fair. He pushed the wad so that it rolled across the box and settled by the other's fingers.

The boatmaster looked down at the man's money as if it were the remains of a dish he was deciding whether or not to finish, then rolled the wad into the bag

next to his feet. We leave soon.

Are you on?

We're on, he said, moving the phone to his other ear.

Where is he now?

He's standing right beside me.

You're lying.

Yes I'm lying, he said.

Tell me what he looks like.

He looks like any other kid who goes around wearing all his clothes at once.

The velvet sound of her cheek moving against the plastic. Let me speak to him.

We should save the battery.

Put him on.

Not now. He's not with me.

He's with your brother.

Yes. They're standing ten feet away. I'm in the line.

What is he doing?

He's just standing there. Looking at me.

Tell him something for me.

You can tell him when we get there.

Please.

Don't think of us as dead. He saw that the boy was still wearing his watch. What do you want to say?

I don't know. I don't know. Make something up.

Ok, sure.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder and he turned. A man in a business suit, mud on his cuffs. The businessman pointed to the phone.

Are you talking to your wife?

He turned his back. The businessman tapped him again.

Please. I haven't spoken to my family. If I could just...

No.

Who are you talking to?

No one. I have to go. Keep the phone close by.

What if the phones go?

We'll send smoke signals. He smiled, knowing she wouldn't see it.

He heard the businessman talking to the others behind him. *He's got a phone.*

He should share it. We've all got family haven't we?

Just keep the phone close by.

Ok.

And I'll see you soon.

Don't come without him, she said suddenly, her voice breaking through the speaker.

We'll see you soon.

I mean it.

He snapped the phone shut.

A bargain, he said, kneeling down in front of his son. You ready to go on the boat?

Yeah.

First, put your arm out, he said.

Why?

I'm going to hold on to my watch for a while.

You said I could hold it.

I know.

I can hold it.

I know you can. But it's a really nice watch.

Rolex make nice watches. This isn't a Rolex.

It's not a Rolex but it's still a nice watch, he said. You see anyone else around here with a watch like that?

No.

Well I don't want anyone else getting jealous of it. They might try to take it from you.

Because they don't have watches?

Something like that. So I'll hold it for you. He unbuckled the clasp. I'll put it in my pocket, so you know where it is when you want to look at it. Ok?

Ok. Can I look at it now?

You just looked at it.

I know. But I didn't have a really good look at it.

Ok, he said, handing the watch back to him.

He looked around them. The piles of over-stuffed luggage sitting next to the bridge railing were growing rapidly. The line for the boat was losing order, people calling out their titles. Doctor. Nurse. Accountant. Engineer. Mechanic.

That's enough looking for now, he said, taking the watch and slipping it into his coat pocket. I'll give it back once we get there, ok?

Ok. But I can look at it whenever I want to, right?

Yeah.

Where is our new house?

Our new house?

The one we're going to.

Oh that one. It's on the other side of this, he said, pointing at the floodwater.

How big is the lake?

The lake? I don't know.

Ok.

Are you ready to go on the boat now?

I guess.

The man looked up at his brother. Keep him close.

The three of them stood by an open hatchway, the inside as black as they could imagine. Overhead, a set of cracked golden arches. Jimmy held a steel bucket while Sam readied a knot, passing a loop of plastic electrical cord through the handle. He swung the bucket into the hatch and they heard it thud a few metres down. He yanked it sideways and the cord went taut and he started to pull it up. When the bucket was out he handed it to the Captain who shuffled the contents onto the bitumen. A mess of plastic forks and dry food scraps dropped to the ground, preserved in a thin stream of amber liquid: cooking oil. He passed the bucket back to Sam and looked into the hatch. Jimmy turned away, heading for the airboat. The Captain waited as Sam stepped down onto the first rung.

Sam sunk to his thighs in oil and had to steady himself against the walls to pass the bucket through the muck. Each time the bucket went up, part of the contents slipped over the edge, raining oil down upon him. Sam wiped the mess from his hands onto his clothes and back again. The bucket dropped down.

On the bitumen, Jimmy had readied a drum to transfer across the oil and he used a sheet of fly-screen to strain the solids out. The Captain produced a jar of clear liquid, which he measured into a smaller glass and stirred into the oil. From a paint tin he produced a fine white powder and released it into the drum. The mixture went through the mesh again and into a gerry can. Afterwards, Jimmy tipped part of the oil into the airboat's fuel tank and stowed the rest in a storage container fitted under the pilot seat. The Captain watched Sam at the bank, scrubbing away the muck. The shadows of his bones clear across his torso. Each day searching meant another day scavenging. Sam pulled on his wet clothes and stepped onto the boat. Jimmy was waiting for them, the paint tin with the powder cradled in his arms.

They came to an airfield where charter planes sat low in the water like dragonflies, some of them washed together against the ribbed wall of a disused hanger. Inside, a population of swallows had built nests in the ceiling insulation, the air dense with flight.

The Captain pulled the airboat against a set of metal stairs that climbed to a landing and a second floor office. Feathered remains everywhere. A pine desk and a swivel chair behind it. Take-off schedules scribbled across a whiteboard calendar, the last few squares of the month blank. He checked the drawers for things they might need. Loose pens, a set of scissors, an unopened box of business cards. He put the scissors in his pocket. The pens were dry. No sign that others had been through the place already. In the filing cabinet he found yellowed invoices, back-dated payslips, old flight manifests, a half-finished packet of cigarettes together with a lighter. He pulled out a cigarette and the stale tobacco spilled onto the floor. He freed a drawer from the desk and put in the old invoices and payslips. He checked the other rooms. A kitchen. Coffee scratchings in a tin, a dozen tea bags, mugs sitting in their rings, plastic spoons. He poured a mound of coffee into his palm and put it in his mouth, moved the dust around with his tongue. He turned on the sink taps. Nothing.

Back further was a separate room for the toilet. The Captain lifted the seat, a dry hole beneath. He sat and looked up at the light coming through the ventilation fan. Where else, he thought. He got up and removed the lid of the tank. A thin line of water near the bottom. He put his fingers in and drew them up to his mouth. The water dusty and warm. Clean enough. He went back to the kitchen and took a mug and used it to skim the water out into the empty coffee tin.

He moved back through the office, stood by the photocopier, looking down through the glass at the electronics. He stopped by the back window, a view onto a disused field. A windsock limp over the still water. A set of mobile steps led up to nowhere. He picked at the flies dead against the glass and rubbed them to dust between his fingers. Somewhere out there would be a water truck to wet the runway, he thought. Somewhere beneath the water.

The swallows had built nests in the corner of the front office and he reached up and detached one, took out three small speckled eggs. Through the open

blinds of the opposite window he could see back into the hanger. He moved the eggs over in his palms as Jimmy leant back on the swivel chair, the rifle across his chest.

They broke down the desk and made a fire with the wood and the papers from the drawers. The Captain fished out a pot from their things and filled it with floodwater, sat it in the hot coals to boil. He read out the manifests of flight paths long gone and fed each to the fire. He read out the surnames on the payslips, added them to the fire too. When the water was hot he put in the eggs they had collected, taking care not to break them. They cooled them by passing them from hand to hand around the fire and then peeled them down to the sweaty whites. They drank the water from the kitchen mugs. More names went in the fire as the light outside went to black. From the nests above, a thousand eyes looked down at them like stars. The three of them lay down, each set of feet angled against the other to form a circle around the fire. They pulled over the blankets, stiff with salt and sweat. The Captain lay on his back with his eyes open, fingers moving over the watch face in his pocket.

He sat by the grabrail watching the old world move beneath them. The keel shifting aside bodies thickened by water and sun. New world conversations going on around him. Things will be different, he heard a man say as he put his arms around his wife's shoulders, holding her against the wind. Her face shivered. Everything back to zero. He turned away and climbed to the helm, moving above the din of the boat. The boatmaster stood at the wheel, an unlit cigarette hanging in his mouth. Behind them receded the dim towers of the city. They passed under the shadow of a freeway interchange, its concrete footings stained by the new high water mark. Traffic had stalled along the incline and a woman stood at the crash barrier struggling to hold down the edge of a sheet being thrashed by the wind. HELP US it said. The wind beat at her until the sheet slipped from her hands and sailed out over the water. He followed its flight, watching it sink towards the city. As it touched the water he saw in the distance a line of white marking the horizon. He scanned the length of it, not sure yet what he was looking at. Then came the sound of distant combers breaking. The ship's engine whined as flotsam carried against the bow, headed back towards the city on the undertow. There was an explosion and a plume of

black smoke lifted clear from the engine hatch. The boat began to list, drawing into a slow arc as the water recoiled before the oncoming surge. He saw his brother on the level below and called to him, pointing towards the whitewater. His brother opened his mouth as if to say something, then turned back mute.

Where is he? He shouted down.

Below again, with the rest of them.

Below? Where below?

The hold, said his brother. With the rest of them.

They waited out the heat of the day under the shade of a railway footbridge. Nearby, a team of finches swarmed around the head of a CCTV camera protruding above the waterline. In the cool The Captain took apart the engine housing, checked for oil and water leaks. He scrubbed each of the spark plug ends. Checked the seals, checked the air and water pumps were drawing, the gaskets, looked for blockages in the oil filter, for water passing through the exhaust. Jimmy moved around him while he worked, close over his shoulder as the Captain checked the fittings. He took the parts in his hands as the Captain passed them over, remembering what they did and how they fit together. Afterwards, the Captain passed around the water jar and closed his eyes, resting his head on the propeller grill. The current nudging them against the bridge footings. The earth shifting them around the sun. Soon he felt the heat on his face. Time to move again.

He took the airboat past a faded billboard advertising office space for a new commercial district. Ahead, an unfinished building site waited above the flood line. The lower levels were finished with glass, the remainder sheathed in scaffolding. A crane perched above it all. He brought the airboat to the footings and they climbed a central stairwell through the cavity, each looking in at the damp concrete crypts. On the roof there was a buckled demountable office and high above it the cabin of the crane. The loneliest place in the world, he thought, staring up at it.

They went inside the office. Smearred blueprints across a melamine desk. A plastic dinner box left in the microwave, its contents hard and black. Cigarette

butts in the coffee cups. A notice board with objects for sale; laptop computer, motorbike, a set of speakers, almost new it said. The Captain thumbed his beard and pulled off one of the sheets. A crude drawing of two stick figures standing in a boat. In the background, a wave breaking over a house. He traced the uncertain lines of the wave with his fingers. On the wall hung a monthly calendar with a woman baring her white tits. Her eyes scribbled over. There was a date circled: February 26th. He couldn't tell how many weeks or months had passed since.

There was a utility sink against the back wall. The Captain turned on the taps, releasing the last dribble of water. He collected the droplets with his hand and put them in his mouth. The sink pipes led through a hole in the floor and he knelt down, trying to see which direction they were headed. Jimmy and Sam stood in the doorway, waiting for him to say something. He pushed passed them and went out onto the open roof and put his hand on the side of the demountable, peering underneath the supports. The pipes fed through the floor and headed out towards the rear wall. He walked around, kicking away the trash blown against the footings. The pipes connected to a rain tank secured to the back of the building. There was a small outlet tap on the lowest point of the tank. He sunk to his knees, knocking the tank all the way down. He wiped the dirt from his palms onto his coat. Gingerly, he turned the tap and the water flowed freely over his skin. He scooped up a handful and pushed it into his mouth. The taste intoxicating. He turned off the tap and sat against the wall, feeling the earthy water move into him. Jimmy stood by the corner of the demountable. The Captain turned to him, pointed at the tap, a droplet of water still clung to the spout.

We stay here tonight, he said.

The Captain walked beneath the footings of the crane and brought out the paper with the drawing and looked back at the demountable then up at the crane. There was dried mud on the bottom rungs. A long way to go for nothing, he thought, and started to climb.

At the top he steadied himself against the safety rail. The wind lifting his coat. He could see the stonehenge ruins of the city in the distance. The dim lines of the old freeways loosely guiding the floodwater. There were boats migrating

through the other sections. More refugees. Pirates maybe. He shimmied around the platform and felt for the handle of the cabin door. Inside he had to duck under a grove of green tree air fresheners hanging from the roof. The interior was no bigger than a small tent, a seat in the middle, controls at the front. He closed the door behind him and sat down, looking out through the windshield. Terns were roosting in the exterior beams. The floor in front of the controls was clear perspex so that he could see the demountable below. A soft flickering light showing through the windows. There were pill bottles stacked against the cabin windshield. He picked one up and poured the contents out into his hand. Pebbles. Another with sand. Earrings. Windshield glass. Each one different. There were photographs on the floor, their colour stripped back to the primaries. The images sorted into piles; girls and boys, young and old, beards, blondes, freckles. He leafed through them, half expecting to recognise a face. He put them back on the floor.

Behind the seat was a crawl space stuffed with blankets and clothes. He remembered his brother telling him about crane operators in the Middle East, where buildings were so high that men would stay in their cabins for weeks on end, living their lives on phones, watching faces on computer screens. Families waiting for them to come back to Earth. He went around to the crawl space, pushing aside the hanging forest. Threadbare sheets. A pair of jeans cut off at the shins. Mothballed clothes. Two small impressions in the sheets where the occupants might have slept. He brought up the sheet and it smelled stale. No one had slept there lately. He crouched and felt under the seat, his hand closing over a plastic ice cream box. He maneuvered it out from between the seat brackets and sat against the back wall, legs across the sheets, for the first time feeling like he was trespassing. He put the box on his lap and opened the lid. Inside he found watches.

He watched the last signal bars on his phone fall away and then he knew that they were clear of the city. The throb of the bilge pumps came through the floor as a woman on a nearby bunk pushed a wet cloth against the head of her pregnant daughter, struggling to keep the infant inside her belly. His son looked down at them from the top bunk.

What's wrong with her?

You're supposed to be asleep, he said.

Is she going to be pregnant?

She's already pregnant. She's going to have a baby.

What? Here?

Maybe. She's trying to hold on.

Why?

Because it's not good to have a baby on a boat.

Why is it not good to have a baby on a boat?

He snapped the phone shut and put it away in his pocket. Smoke from the galley stoves hung in the air about them. Because babies can't swim.

Oh. The boy rolled over, brought the blankets up around his ears. Moments later, he rolled back. Can I swim Dad?

Go to sleep.

I can't swim can I?

No.

Can many children swim?

Some of them.

Then maybe I can swim even though you never taught me.

Maybe.

The girl's groan pushed through the deck.

Maybe some babies can swim too, the boy said.

He pulled the airboat up by the loading deck of a shopping centre. There a service ladder lead up to the roof which was dense with seagulls, the staccato sound of feet picking across the tin. A manhole lay open in the center of the roof and the Captain walked over, the throng parting around him. He heard one of the others come up the ladder behind him. The heads of the gulls switching between them. The black scar of an extinguished fire by the manhole. A pair

of boots, a coat and trousers. An empty sack for the spoils. The inside of the manhole was black but he could see the reflection of water moving down below. He thought of all the canned food rusting in the aisles. He picked up one of the boots and measured it against his own. Jimmy and Sam waited behind him. Their blankets in a pile at Jimmy's feet. The flock turned back to him. No way to get at it.

He wasn't sure how long he had been in the water. Hours. Days. Cycles of heat and cold. Someone called out for water and it set off a wretched chorus. He tried to move further up the crate but it pitched and rolled, sending him back to the edge, his body deep in the water. Someone will come soon, he said to himself. The girl nearby clung to the frame of a bunk bed, her dead baby bobbing in the water next to her. The umbilical cord still binding the two. He couldn't remember when she had given birth. Out further, an old man spoke softly to his granddaughter, the two sharing a plank of timber. I cannot hold on, the old man was saying. Give my blessings. He called out a list of names. Please forgive me. I cannot hold on. The granddaughter was crying, shaking her head. He touched her palms and went under. The man passed more water over his face, slapping his cheeks. Don't go to sleep. Don't sleep.

The captain woke to the sound of an engine turning over. He rose groggily to his feet and rushed to the edge of the roof as the white noise of the gulls filled the air around him. Down in the water a figure wrestled with the controls of the airboat, jerking it forward. He looked for the rifle and saw it lying beside Jimmy's sleeping form. He took it up and pulled back the bolt and reached for a bullet, thumbing it into the chamber. He dropped to one knee and raised the sight, waiting for the airboat to pass by. A man's face came into view and he fired. There was a spark as the bullet ricocheted. The Captain's hand moved around the tin, scrambling for another bullet. The boat drew away from him. He cocked the rifle and fired. A glimpse of the bullet arcing through the air then it hit the man in the neck, a hand clapping over the hole it tore through. The man slumped forward on the pilot seat, and the airboat shifted into a slow spin.

Jimmy came up beside him and saw the circling boat and closer a dingy tied against the service ladder. He dove into the water. As the airboat made a pass,

he took hold of the gunwale and hauled himself onto the deck. He kicked aside the hand and steadied the boat. The Captain watched from the roof. A gulf of floodwater set between them. Jimmy looked out towards the waterway, then back at the Captain, the gun in his hands.

The Captain stepped into the dead man's metal dingy. The bones of some small animal were stacked in a pile at the bow. A bucket used for a toilet. Two oars sitting loose in the rowlocks. A butane stove. Loose cutlery in a shoe box. A machete. A juice bottle half filled with liquid. He put the opening up to his nose. Juice from a can of peaches. The Captain picked up the butane tank and shook it. Empty. He put it aside. The dingy rocked as Jimmy steered the airboat into the loading dock. Sam's weak face appeared above the service ladder. The Captain opened the shoe box and drew out a mess of bent spoons and forks, a knife fashioned from a cut tin lid. A screwdriver. There was a cloth sack with a drawstring like a gym bag stuffed into a space at the bow. He sat it between his legs and tugged the string loose. A handful of small hard biscuits in a cocoa tin. A bottle of brown liquor. Cans of pickled tuna. A tin of pureed tomatoes. He placed each of them at the bottom of the boat. He shook the bag and there was still weight in it. He reached in and drew out a watch and laid it across his palm. He passed his finger over the face. The hands stopped at 2:19. He looked around the dingy again and then over at the body of the man stretched out on the airboat. A spurt of dark blood escaped the man's neck. His face a mask of sunburn.

He woke from a dream of the street he had grown up on. Refuse gathered in bric-a-brac piles on the footpaths. Weed on the leafless trees. The telephone poles leant over. The buckled road leading to the front door of his parents' house. Sagged weatherboard panels propped up the roof, the panes of the windows lay in the dirt beneath the frames. A house for crazy people, he thought. A feeble light bled through the cracks in the paneling. He walked to the entrance and saw that the door had caved in and was on the ground caked in mud. He stepped in and felt water move between his toes. A grim panel of light at the end of the darkened hallway. The sound of some animal moving in one of the rooms. The ragged flood line called out against a load of washing draped on a makeshift line across the living room. He dragged his hands along the

walls like he had done as a kid, but the plasterboard gave beneath his fingers, falling away like wet paper. The light was on in the kitchen. A single burning globe swaying from the ceiling. A gull thrashed about on the sink. He tried the switch, flicking it up and down, but the light stayed on. The gull bent its neck up and squawked at him. The light pulsing now. In the basin a glut of tiny body parts, legs, arms, eyes, fingers. He reached up to grab at the globe and as he touched it, the light blinked out. The air left the room. Water rushed into his lungs.

They slowed the airboat at the edge of an industrial district and picked their way around the channels of leaking diesel. The dingy tugged on a lead behind. Sheets of diseased fish matted the water. Chemical smells leaching up from the deep. A pelican caught in the muck drew out two black wings slick with oil. The shovel of an earthmover raised above the water, waving them on.

Loose shipping containers bobbing in the water led to a cargo ship listing on its side. As big a thing as he could think of. The rear propeller twenty metres above the water, a trench of ruin stretching behind it. There were crows circling the pilot cabin, honing in on the heart of it. The ship groaned, scattering the birds for a moment. The Captain scanned the sides for a place they could climb up, but the task seemed too big to comprehend. Sam shivered as another groan cut through them. Jimmy met Sam's eyes briefly. In the silence between them, the crows descended.

The Captain looked up at the sullen shapes of the city. The beetle rooftop of the convention centre. They were as close to the city as he could remember. A flock of birds scattered from a nearby tree as they passed, then wheeled away inland. Jimmy turned to see them off.

The outer suburbs closed around them. No place to go now but deeper into the city. They zigzagged through the papier-mâché ruins of the old neighbourhoods. There were higher sections of land where the water had receded. Sodden rubbish blanketing the streets. Cars sitting where they were evacuated, doors open, keys inside the ignition.

The Captain stood in the doorway of a post office gutted by mould and damp. He walked inside, stepping around piles of muddied letters fused together by

the damp. Bodies had been deposited on top of cupboards where the water had come in and out. Would the boy know this place? He pulled the door off a stationery cupboard and lifted out a full tank of water meant for a cooler. He walked back through the office and put the tank down by the entrance. Sam held himself against the doorway and retched into the water. Jimmy was re-packing the boa, eager to move on. Some new smell rose through the damp around them. Sam groaned, sliding down the arch. The Captain moved back through the office, closing the doors behind him.

They sat in the upstairs bedroom, the boy asleep between them. We should leave, his brother said. They say it will keep coming. Surge after surge.

So that's it then?

I guess.

When?

They don't say. Just to expect it. We should leave.

Where is there to go?

The evacuation lines.

You mean the convention centre? No way.

The boats then. They pull up to the bridge at night.

Smugglers?

You won't join the lines.

But smugglers? Is that what we are? Goods?

Everyone is leaving.

She won't like it. Not for him.

She isn't here. You are.

I don't know.

What is there to know anymore?

The Captain woke to find Jimmy and Sam gone. The airboat too. By the door they had left the tank of water and a few cans of food stacked on top of each other. A box of waterproof matches. The rifle missing. The dingy they had left for him. He listened out for the whine of the airboat. Nothing. Jimmy would have paddled them away as far as he could. It didn't matter, the Captain thought. He dug into his pocket and drew out the watch, put it on the counter beside him. That they had left him was no surprise. He brushed the salt from his eyes and started to think through the days ahead.

The timetable screens in the central train station were blank. He tied the dingy and stepped up the escalator. There were suitcases in the water. A corpse bent around an access gate. He sat behind the ticket booth and traced the lines of the train network, sounding out the names of the stations. He tried to think of the ones the boy might know. He knew of a park nearby, set on a hill. They had been to it a few times near the end. He went there and sat in the middle of the grove surrounded by sharp, leafless trees. The sound of a brass instrument as the wind shuffled through. He called the boy's name. Nothing.

His apartment was on the east side of the city. The block now underwater but the upper levels dry. Algae climbing the stairwell. The door was locked but the key was where he'd left it on a ledge above the doorframe. Everything as he'd left it. A newspaper open on the table. Dirty plates stacked in the sink. The fossilized remains of their last meal. Two shrunken oranges left in a bowl. He stood in the doorway of the boy's room staring at the ruffled bed sheets. There was a half finished spelling test on the desk. He walked through to the bathroom, his boots making holes in the dust. His razor sat by the sink in its caddy. He checked the small rooms; the laundry, the toilet, the linen press. No sign. He called out the boy's name, the sound of his voice from another time.

In the kitchen cupboards there was dry fruit in a glass jar. Uncooked rice noodles. A tin of vegetable soup and jars of mustard. He picked up an empty box of cereal, the rear of it gnawed through. Bottles of water in a cabinet in the laundry. He dug out a coil of electrical extension cord and went back down the stairwell, rowed the dingy into a side alley and pulled a sheet of roof iron across it. He tied the electrical cord to the bow buckle and waded back through the water and secured it to a table leg in a lower apartment.

He piled books into the bathtub and used the waterproof matches they had left him to set one alight. He put the wad of flames down with the other books and left the room, came back with a shelf. The novels were catching. The shelf was too long to fit in the bath so he leant it against the porcelain edge, stepped back, and drove his boot into the center of it. A jarring pain shot up his leg, and the wood gave a little. He tried again and it split in two. He piled the wood onto the flames. He brought in a dining chair and broke it down to kindling on the tiles, sticking pieces between the coals. A stack of unsigned legal papers on top of that. He sat on the edge of the bath, the fire warming his back, and removed his boots. His socks were wet and underneath his skin was swollen and blue. Angry blisters had burst around his heels. A vinegar smell lifted off the macerated flesh. He limped to the kitchen and retrieved a saucepan, poured some of the bottled water into it and set it on the fire to boil. He took apart his clothing, feeling like he was removing another layer of skin, and used a flannel to clean his body. He shaved and cut off lengths of his hair with a pair of nail scissors. There were two toothbrushes sitting in the caddy. He picked up the smaller one and rubbed his finger over the bristles, put it up to his nose. He thought he could smell the boy on it, but that was impossible. He put on some of his old clothes and found running shoes and several pairs of clean dry socks. He rolled the socks over his feet and sealed the other pairs in a plastic bag. He boiled more water and cooked the noodles and ate them with a warm tin of soup.

Up on the roof of the apartment was a wire coop where his neighbour kept homing pigeons. He thought he had shown it to the boy once. The door had been left open for the pigeons to get out but they had stayed put, hundreds of them crowded into the cage. There was a chair sitting amongst them with the old man slumped dead on it, his arms drawn across his chest. His face hidden by a shotgun blast.

He was wrong. The boy didn't know this place.

You're leaving again.

I'll come back.

You always say that. The boy dragged the cereal around his bowl.

But I do right?

Mum says you're like a duck that lost its compass.

Is that what she says?

Yeah.

Well, your mum's usually right. He moved his hand in front of his mouth. Quack quack.

Don't you like it here?

Sure I like it here. I wouldn't come back unless I did.

I guess.

Ducks like me have got to keep moving. Cold bones.

Cold feet?

Cold feet too. You'll visit me?

Is your new place going to be like your old place?

Did you like my old place?

No.

Then it's nothing like my old place. It's in the city, he said, not knowing what that would mean. We can walk to McDonalds.

Yeah?

Just down the street.

That would be good.

Better than good.

I guess.

He laid out a blanket in the middle of the living room and dropped a gas-powered oven lighter into its center. A chef's knife. A packet of band-aids and some antiseptic gel. He found jars of pickled vegetables and tinned fruit in the other apartments and stacked them with the other things. He gathered up the blanket by the corners and took it down through the lower apartment and then

pulled the dingy around using the electrical cord. He lowered the blanket and got back into the dingy. A sour reek had settled into the boat and he looked around, half expecting to see the smell. The sun was coming up.

He steered the dingy around a corner and saw behind him the high street of the city. Water lapped against the mirrored faces of the skyscrapers. Perched on the gunwale of a yacht struck against a church spire, were a hundred shags. Their eyes watching him move by.

On a dry section of road an old lorry used for hauling fish was pulled against the barrier. The back open and full of bodies sitting up against each other. More bodies on the road, shirts pulled over their faces. There was paint on the ground and he climbed up onto the bonnet of the lorry to get a better look. NOBODY CAME.

From a side street he heard the sound of barking. A dog stood on the roof of a submerged bus, baring its teeth. It had forgotten the old way of things between man and dog. The fur matted around its jowls. He dug in an oar and swung the dingy back the other way. The dog dropped to its haunches and whined.

In the water he caught the reflection of an air balloon. A globe of red against the blue sky. He couldn't bring himself to look up at it. It carried off inland.

He climbed to the roof of a public library and stood with his feet apart on the beams looking down into the rooms. A station wagon lay among the bookshelves. The soupy corpse of the driver still strapped to the seat.

He called the boy away from the balcony as the water entered the street below and they watched it transform into a flooded gully of housing timber, trees, tin, people, cars, pitching and rolling forwards. The smaller houses came loose in clouds of dust, moving like boats until they too were upended and fell beneath the black water. He could feel the boy squirming and he gripped harder, his white hands clenched around the boy's shoulders.

He broke through the face of an office building and dragged in the dingy. He walked among the cubicles, picking up files and flicking through them, letting them fall behind him. A storm blew in from the ocean with coils of lightning. He

put his hands on the window and felt the thunderclaps bouncing off the glass. Arcs of electricity rang through the city. Soon after, a smoldering haze settled over the evening, the night red with fire.

In the morning he tied a t-shirt around his mouth and got back in the dingy. A blistering wind blew into his eyes and he had to douse his face regularly with the drinking water. He pulled the dingy up the ramp of a multi-story car park and sat in the gloom eating slippery mushrooms from a jar. He walked up to the roof and watched the smoke dismember the city. The woosh of buildings collapsing. The city had only ever meant something to him. Not the boy.

The days that followed were lost in a blizzard of hot ash. The deepening reek of the dingy sunk into him. He stripped down and scrubbed his flesh with antiseptic, then left his clothes in a pile and wandered through the levels naked. He tried to eat sparingly but the smoke blurred the days and nights and he woke up with empty tins scattered around him, famished. No memory of his last meal. With a rock he started to scratch a note onto the bitumen but he stopped, unable to comprehend what he had written.

When the smoke lifted he climbed back into the dingy and pushed off, taking the stench with him. The city unrecognisable. A swamp of carbon. The heat trapped in the city's skeleton pushed him back through the suburbs. The blisters on his hands burst and the handles of the oars stained red from the blood.

He woke on the searing edge of the gunwale, the sun pouring down. The smell immediately upon him. He vomited over the side, regretting it instantly. He rummaged through the things in the bottom of the dingy and found a tin of fish and heaved it into his mouth with the dead man's fork. His eyes became fixed on the minuscule details of the day: a bead of water dragging down one of the oars, the sun-bleached hair on his arms, a screwdriver sitting out of place amongst the cutlery box. He picked it up and looked around at the empty bowels of the dingy. His mind jumped between misplaced thoughts. What should he have done differently? He tapped along the inner wall thinking there might be a hidden compartment. He stood up and worked around the stern and then hit the centre plate and the tone changed. He crouched, feeling the sides of the plate with his hands. There were two screws at either end fixing the plate to the bench seat. He loosened them with the screwdriver and then lifted the top

plate free, exposing a small compartment beneath. Flies swarmed forward into the hole. He wiped his face, his eyes watering, and reached in and brought out a fist-sized bundle wrapped in a towel. He dropped it on the centre plate and part of the towel fell away, revealing a flap of decayed flesh. A gull landed on the gunwale beside him. Its unchecked eyes moving over him and the bundle. It stayed for a moment, swaying slightly in the breeze. Then it took off. The sour smell filling the void it left.

He went below to check on the boy and he was awake and asked about the whales. Said he heard whales breaching out on the water. The man said he didn't know about whales, he only knew that bodies filled with gas after a few days and rose to the surface. That's what it would be. He scrolled through the contacts on his phone, pausing on each name. Who was dead? Who was alive?

There was a crane attached to a furniture warehouse and he had to leave the dingy and climb through the cabin of an earthmover to get to it. He stepped onto the side of the mover and hauled himself into the cabin, looking out through the open window to the crane on the other side. He tried to make his arms and legs as light as possible. There were the remains of Playboy magazines lying on the floor. The girl's body eaten through. The water was up above the third level of the building and something below the surface propped the earthmover up. As he moved across the cabin his hands slipped and he reached out for balance, taking hold of the steering column and turning it. The mover shuddered and the cabin keeled over. He watched through the window as the crane jerked out of view, replaced now with his reflection in the water, his face set amongst the debris, surging forward to meet him.

He was staring up at the floor, he could see that now. The makeshift bunks had been loosed from their fixings and were moving across the ceiling. The peculiar sight of a lit globe projecting upwards. He reached out and the globe flickered in recognition. An aching silence as the motor quit. The globe blinked out. Screams rose from the galley. A figure rushing past stepped on his hand.

A smashing pain as something fell on him, thrusting the globe into the side of his face. He tried to make out the different kinds of darkness. Where was the hatch? The deck rolled again and he fell hard on his side. The boat ribbing cracked like thunder. There was a burst of flame and everywhere he could see arms and legs mashed together. There in front of him, the hatch to the lower level. He pulled himself to the rim and looked down. Darkness. He called his son's name. He could hear water moving in front of him. An arm slipped around his neck and pulled him back and he bit down and the arm released him. He crawled back to the hatch and called again. There was movement there and he reached down, felt his arms go into water and he drew up, his boy in his arms. Shivering and quiet, but breathing.

He felt another angle coming about and he rolled his body with the pitch of the boat. The boy's breath on his chest. Someone grabbed at his legs and he kicked out. He waited and listened to the boat groaning, thinking what he should do. A woman impaled on a shattered bunk beam looked at him, her mouth open. He felt the boy looking at the woman, and the man closed his eyes again with his fingers.

He wasn't sure which way now. Water came in from all the hatches. The fire from the galley stoves hidden somewhere behind the smoke. Where else was there light? He thought about all the places you couldn't be when a boat went under. He wanted to believe that this was happening in another place. He found daylight showing through a section of smoke and fought through the galley and came out on deck. The boat was sitting at heel in the water, the helm and top cabin sheared off. The water strewn with debris and foam. The boat shifted forward on the surge. He took off the lifejacket and stood the boy in front of him while he wrapped it round his arms. The deck shuddered and there was a cracking sound, he felt the boards give and he knew that the boat was coming apart. He looked around for something that would float. There was an icebox caught under the grabrail and he crawled over to it and emptied the water out, sealed it shut. He kissed the boy's forehead and took him from his waist. He shouted to him that when they hit the water they would separate. Swim across the current. Across. The boy began to cry. Just move your arms. Kick your feet. Find something you can get up on. You're small. Do what you always do. A passenger pushed past and knocked the man to his knees. The passenger

looked at the boy wearing the lifejacket and grabbed him and went for the zip. The man got up and kicked the passenger towards the edge. The passenger turned on him, punching whatever he could connect with. The boat groaned again and the deck dropped. The passenger rolled off him and into the water. The icebox slid past him and he caught it, stood up as the stern sheared off. He couldn't see the boy. The water was moving in every direction. Where was he? The deck came apart beneath him and he took one last look around, but there was only water.

There, said the boy, pointing. He stepped to the edge of the road and drew the body towards them with the oar. Can you see it? His friend was standing nearby. The boy pushed down again, trying to shift it closer. The body rolled onto its back, exposing a black, yawning face. It's a good one, he shouted. A tourniquet on the wrist had balled the skin, the hand swollen. The boy pulled the body against the bitumen, the stink forcing him to put a rag over his mouth. He knelt down, studying the wrist. This one is deep, he said.

Maybe we should leave it, said his friend.

I can see the clasp, he said, pointing at the fleshy underside of the wrist.

Can you get it off?

I think so. The boy used his finger to work loose the strap, edging it back through the clasp. He tugged and the watch came free, dragging with it a layer of dead skin. He rubbed the face on his shorts and showed it up to the light. He frowned.

Is it a good one? his friend asked.

It's a Rolex.

Is that good?

I guess, he said quietly.

Out on the water a dingy rolled against the tide of debris. The boy looked up and saw the boat and the muscles in his legs stiffened. A figure stood between the rowlocks. The face a mask of sunburn. A blast of sunlight sheared off the water, obscuring any other features. The boy felt a hand on his shoulder.

Should we run?

The figure waved, a movement of dark against the light. The boy glanced behind them to where the road rose to connect with the overpass. A set of traffic signs overhead marked the upcoming exits. In his hands the watch. He circled the face with his finger.

No, he said. Let's wait.