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Tyrannia

The man crashes to the ground, and then lies still, and birds fly to the site of him. They land on him from head to toe. He doesn't move, and won't move again of his own volition. In his arteries, though, are the beginnings of a journey.

Hands slap each other clean in the distance, and the sound moves away.

It took the man a long time to reach this moment. He had to fumble through decades of reality to reach this moment. Now, reality could not be his guide anymore. He had married young, had children—where are they now?—raised them, founded a school, grew flowers inside his house and bred horses outside of it, nursed a successful home-based business, buried his wife, dug her up to tell her one last thing, and buried her again. And then, nothing was important anymore. So he decided to become an agitator, to disturb the peace.

The birds are not at peace. The birds begin to equip themselves. They are making shadows on his bare torso with their wings. A rib juts out of his skin. A bluebird lands on the rib and perches there, as if overseeing the site, where the six other birds dance. They strut, lifting their skinny legs and talons high, posing for the sun that has at last shown its face in the valley.

Much is afoot. Preparations need to be made in the man's caves and tunnels. Treasures need to be inserted in opportune places: in the extremities at the ends of tunnels, and in the secret organs as well. Fortunes need to be pinpointed—they cannot be recognized piecemeal.

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If the man knew that a sparrow was putting its beak inside the slit in his throat and regurgitating beetle larvae there, he might have been surprised, but not terrified. If the man knew that an egret was measuring the laceration on his broken leg, he would have been amused, but not forlorn. He always had a fondness for unruly birds when he agitated. In the public square of the city, where sorcerers frequently used to burn to death—not of their own volition—he would watch the flocks swirl like aerial litter, homing in on crumbs. The man would pause from his agitation, take a sip of water from his canteen, and watch them overtake the People's Fountain, skimming the water for insects. The water had a brown film on it, but lovers and children would still throw coins in the fountain, under the watchful eye of the emperor's soldiers. People would pass by him and ignore him. He had a book that he read from, *Of Clouds*, which explained a complicated system for the deliverance of justice and bread, which he liked to distill in easy-to-remember exclamations.

Even in those energetic days, it was hard for him to walk. At some point, he knew the body wouldn't function right ever again. Everything once done with ease would become heavy with pain and small steps would be triumphs. And then, even those small steps would become dreams. In the meantime, he tried to convince people that the structure of reality that passersby experienced was a carefully modulated illusion. The soldiers, at that time, considered him a meandering joke that hadn't quite reached its punchline, and maybe never would.

In that, they were onto something. A few bears come down into the valley, stepping over all the other bodies, to keep an eye on the site. At a safe distance. The birds could be testy in the middle of their site management, especially before their mid-morning tea. The bears have traveled quite a distance through ashen forests and dry riverbeds to reach this valley. They wish they were small enough like beetles to really get inside the man. The freshly hatched beetles, on the other hand, wish that they were as large as

bears and could roam the countryside and really scare people. But they both realize, as if of mutual accord, that one doesn't always receive one's favored lot in life, and that in every loss there can be opportunity.

For example, the beetles imagine the man's bloodsystem to be a spectacular network of tunnels, which they lord over—though, really, they don't forget that the birds would always keep a watchful eye. They establish a base in the burst heart and set up defensive perimeters throughout the arterial system, depositing gold dung in strategic points that match the topography of the emperor's summer home. The birds twitter outside the body, clinking their tea cups together, which the beetles along the spine hear as brittle rumbles. And the beetles, in burrowing through the plasma, eat traces of the man's life, which they don't understand. But through the taste—iron, zinc, quicksilver—they gather a composite. Fresh quicksilver, recently cooled, poured into the mouth, cascading through the lake of the stomach and into the blood tunnels. But the words *no more, no more*, do they echo in the mercury? They do not. The man would not say those words, or the words, *I will tell you everything you want* or *Wait, wait . . . I will show you the safehouse, they will not expect you between the hours of three and four, and if you knock three times they will let you in the tunnel that leads from the outhouse to their map room.*

The man's compatriots didn't have a safehouse, but that is beside the point. Even if they did, the man wouldn't have spoken of it. He would have let the wind, chattering through the charcoaled pines outside the interrogation facility, do the speaking for him. With the quicksilver gurgling in his mouth, it would not have been enough to save him. The wind's words could not satisfy anyone, let alone a questioner. Who grew bored and decided to break the man's legs—no, break the legs and then puncture a hole in the rib cage, for starters, after the full application of quicksilver. The questioner's benevolent aides flipped through the manual. The man tried to look his questioner in the eye, but he wore a mask

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of downy black gauze with no visible eye-slits. Plenty of precautions were taken to prevent eye contact. While his legs were being broken, the man thought of his compatriots, who had scattered to the winds after the man was detained. The others were nothing special—neither was he—but they believed in ideas and the illusory nature of the empire as well. They worked amongst the poor—as they themselves were—and landscaped the courtyards of administrators and baked bread for court scribes who they tried to poison, rather unsuccessfully. But no matter. They liked the man agitating in the public square. Many of them had gone to trade school together, or worked in the same fields together, or served in the same prisons for minor offenses together. They decided to bring him into their disparate circles. What were they going to do about the empire? That was unclear. The man tried to talk about the book, *Of Clouds*, with the compatriots, but they weren't sure of the proper prognosis from that book, and thus moved onto other things. They grew together socially, which was deemed necessary, in those trying times, to persevere through the long days of the empire's zenith. They played a lot of bridge, drank unlevied beer, and the more adventurous among them even found themselves in mutual trysts, though the man himself was too old for that. All the same, he didn't disapprove—in sorrow there had to be love and in love, sorrow. The theory pleased him, but became horribly fitting when, after one of these trysts went sour, one of the estranged parties became a collaborator for the empire. The empire, though it knew little of love, counted on these betrayals.

At root, he and the collaborators were harmless. He knew no one would believe that. Many of the collaborators have become even more harmless, on account of their deaths, strewn in the same valley where he resides. The empire has deposited many bodies in this valley, about a half-mile walk from the capital city, through a narrow riverbed road, piled high on each side with refuse, watched closely by gray vultures (themselves birds who would never participate

in a site investigation, choosing instead to skulk and cherrypick the remains).

Out of all of those bodies in the valley, the birds see something site-worthy within the man, a *joie de vivre* in his broken nature. A hue, one which becomes even more apparent as the man starts to really come in his own. The secret organs are blossoming. A thorn grows out of the tip of his appendix, which the beetles circle. But even this is only a harbinger of the white rose, with a full arsenal of thorns, to burst out of that vestige. Tiny daisies spring from the roof of his mouth, which the beetles frolic amongst, upside down and clinging. And the birds, after their tea, have their imaginations captured by the bruised torpor of the man's skin. They lattice the exterior with their beaks, crushing berries and grapes against his chest for an autumn ointment. The egret mulches the grapes against his stomach with its feet, as if it is a supreme winemaker. Once the oil is prepared, the admixture is smeared across the body with their heads, the ointment seeping through the exterior into the unknown interior of bodily pastures and hideaways.

Now, the man knew, well before he was blindfolded and taken to the interrogation facility, that the empire also had its core bodily principles: every question needed an answer, no matter the absurdity of question. For his captors to think otherwise would be a desecration that had to be recorded on the body, in order to purify it. While his questioner would try to make him break, the man thought about the time before the empire, when men and women lived in karst caves and serpentine tunnels, and hunted the giant terror-birds with poisoned spears. When the intricate checks and balances of society were nonexistent. He had read somewhere that the emperor was an avid collector of terror-bird skulls, large as melons. Those birds had been hunted to extinction. He tried to think thoughtless thoughts. At night, shivering in his cell, he watched the moon turn the cloudless black sky into a dark blue. The moon forced the sky to drown the stars. And he laughed—though