

UNFINISHED

GEORGE SALIS

After her husband Rand died of old age, something they had always dreamed and talked about doing together, she wished she had been first. For forty-five years, since Mary knew she loved him, she had always desperately wished for this, knowing—but neither of them expressing—how dying in sync was unlikely, but even then it wasn't ever as real as now. Her husband had looked so restful in the confines of his coffin that she had to suppress the urge to join him, to nuzzle his plaid-suited body and disregard the box's closing, or welcome it. She thought of those Indian women of the distant past who tossed themselves upon the pyre of their husbands. Had she been reduced to such a perverse and pitiable loyalty? The funeral was real, she had to keep telling herself. Funereal. But other than his still and sleeping form she could barely recall what had taken place only a week ago. For the better, she thought. She couldn't deal with the brunt of what had happened, only pieces and fragments of it.

Mary was alone for the first time in the house since family and friends came and went as ambiguous auras. They expressed their condolences: "He led a simple life, a noble one." "He will be missed." "My thoughts and prayers are with both of you." "He's in a better place now." The latter platitude hurt her the most, for its implicit connotation of abandonment. She had to squeeze her brittle hand into a fist to prevent herself from replying, "Then why didn't he take me with him?"

The hallway was colder than she was used to, forcing her to tighten her frayed robe, a garment she used to wear solely for special occasions, those times when she worked so hard that she could barely stand, so she'd lay in bed wearing it and imagine herself floating in air. Now she wore it as though it was body hair, any enchantment depleted from the follicles. She looked around. The condolences were almost always coupled with darkened flowers and baked dishes, odorous bric-a-brac left on various pieces of furniture. She noticed dust had accumulated everywhere, seemingly from nowhere. She stroked the rim of a green vase with her finger, half-expecting it to resound with a mournful hum. It was purchased during their two-day trip to Arlen Beach, a town too expensive for them to actually live in. They had been looking for a place of their own, left with few options due to their small budget. But they had enjoyed walking, arms locked, past the art shops and cluttered, gleaming restaurants, and the occasional pet store where she held the most precious puppies, feeling their rough, quick tongues against the smooth skin of her forearms and face. They eventually stopped at a restaurant that served coal-fired

pizza, and they were seated on a balcony with an unobstructed view of the sand, ocean, and sky, streaks of textured color. She drank margaritas and Rand a couple of light beers. The pizza crust was smoky from the coal oven, which they could see within the restaurant, a dollhouse stack of bricks with a nest of heated rocks inside. Volcanic. On the opposite side of them, the sun descended into a languid dream. It couldn't be real, she told herself, all this was an oil painting at best, which meant she lived within an ornate frame. By the end of their meal words were sparse, instead they spoke in the amorous language of glances. Afterward, they had wandered toward the beach and halfway there Rand reached for her hand but only caught her finger. He made no move to correct himself and neither did she. Gently grasping her index, they walked over powdered sand, then damp sand, until they stood ankle-deep in water. She didn't know it then, but this would be their wedding spot. Night was almost total by the time they found a patch of tall grass to lie behind and make love in the cool breezes that complemented their warmth. He had been her giant, and she something fragile, a being with sylphic skin. This was their act of creation, put to the tune of a hushing sea. The murmurs of the waves had found themselves inside her. Coupled with the moon of her mind, they fomented a secret sea that would last nine months. His weight atop her, he had whispered something in her ear that she could just make out through circling currents of wind, "Don't you worry. I'll find a place for us." She knew what he meant, that 'us' referred to more than the two of them. It included the one who would grow inside her. The next morning, he gave her the vase: a symbol of the home they'd have together. After fervent searching, Rand found about three acres for a "hot dang bargain," he said. It was perfect, but that was around forty years ago.

Where had all the dust come from? She fought to dispel the idea that it was remnants of Rand, superfluous matter ejected from his soul as he entered into the other world. She would have to roll up her sleeves and give the dust a piece of her mind. She wouldn't let it overwhelm her. No, not for one second further. Stomping her flattened soles against the wood floors, she went into the kitchen and opened up the cupboard below the sink. She cautiously leaned over to avoid any unnecessary jolts to the fault lines of her back. Her entire body might as well have been made of a material only slightly more solid than sand, a transfiguration taking years, like the receiving end of an hourglass. She had found a roll of paper towels and a spray bottle of all-purpose cleaning product. They would be her companions this morning. She straightened up, using her palm as scaffolding for the base of her spine, and catalogued some of the mess. The Pattersons had left a plate of homemade macadamia cookies, the Tylers two casserole dishes, the Emmerts a basket of oranges picked from their grove, the Tardys a glazed ham, the Shellers a batch of sweet potato fries, and the Nordans a porcelain bowl of biscuits. The miasma of the food was overpowering, stinging her nostrils, leaving unwanted tastes on the tip of her tongue.

She stood still for a moment. Was she hungry? No, not really. Not at all. What had she been doing here, in the kitchen? Cleaning products in her hands. Yes, she had meant to clean. That was it. She had forgotten. Silly, silly. She saw dust on the countertops, lots of it. No wonder she had planned to do this. After throwing out all the flowers and some of the food, stuffing most of the other dishes in the freezer, she began wiping the kitchen island and then the other countertops, between the stove's burners, the face of the refrigerator, any surface that she

could make shine. The hallway was next. She worked on the oval, sterling-framed mirror that hung between two reprints of Hildegard von Bingen's artwork. One depicted a blue woman suspended in a tidal radiance, the other an angel, double-winged and flame-faced, with the head of a sage protruding from his silver stomach. She always fancied the woman as, not herself exactly, but a version of how she felt: sometimes lost, but always surrounded by warmth and cold, by a dissipating love and a festering fear. Yet she could float, not in water, but in air, which meant she could fly. If only she had the courage to do so. Conversely, the reprint of the angel defied meaning. She knew the artwork was based on visions of a twelfth century nun, so any meaning had to be divine in nature, right? The sage's head, a tumescent boil, what did it signify? Gluttony of the mind, overconsumption of knowledge? No. How come she hadn't thought of it before? The angel as chrysalis, the soul metamorphosed into migratory sage. She wondered what Rand must have thought of these works of art, although she had never bothered to ask. Where she had gotten them, whether from a flea market or a consignment store or as gifts from a friend, she couldn't remember. They might as well have sprung from a void. Then she noticed a green vase on a wooden pedestal handcrafted and polished by Rand. The vase, with its translucent swirls of floral greens, was a gift from him, during their getaway that was only two days long but so romantic, the essence of when they had fallen totally in love and did so many things, saw so many things. The trip had been responsible for their only child, whose name contained all of existence. She couldn't remember it, her son's name. A name Rand had regretted later on. Oh, what was it, what was it? She had a headache, so she focused on the memory of that trip to Arlen Beach, how he had taken her, carried her honeymoon-like and set her upon the breeze-blown cotton sheets of their hotel room and made love with the window wide open. She felt the chill of the nearby ocean against her being and the distant crashing of waves traveled to her as tender, well-meaning whispers. Rand hovered over her as a bright and powerful shadow. She was the source of light that projected him. He told her this, or something like it, and she declared the opposite as true, too. They were each other's shadows and light sources. Not long after conceiving, they were married in a local Catholic church. They weren't Catholic, but chose the church to rile up their parents, who always stuck their vulpine noses in Rand and Mary's business: "There's a perfect Baptist church not too far down that very street, Mary," said her mother. "But," added her father, "maybe they won't accept you for conceiving out of wedlock, is that it?" Inside the church, they had been overwhelmed by a stained glass depiction of Jesus, arms outstretched, bleeding from the head and ribcage. Jesus contorted by torture, yet with a numb expression, as if bored by it all.

A portion of the vase's rim had been wiped clean. She imagined one of the guests doing this, walking in here to drop off their spoiled goods, then rubbing the dust, the filth of the house, between two fingers and scoffing at her, or pitying her. What could she do? She lost the man she loved, dust or no dust, nothing could change that. Despite the futility, she cleaned it, flipping it over, rubbing every angle and curve, wiping the inside. She wouldn't put flowers in it, though, she never did. By the time she had finished the kitchen and most of the hallway, the sun was beginning to rise. The movements of her body were akin to the rippling of a salted slug, slow and spastic, and, although she fought for control of her steps and reaches, there was little she could do in the way of resistance. Did her gooey trail, her presence, leave a residue? Was the dust her

fault, a kind of whole-body dandruff, a consequence of her decaying state, or was it simply the constituents of grief?

Near the end of the hall was a doorway to her right, just before the front door. She stopped and stared into it, the unfinished room, cluttered with tools and wooden planks, the floor itself a slab of concrete covered in fragments of cobwebs and petrified bugs. After her husband bought the land, he had worked on this house, building it out of nothing, and, when he retired from maintaining the apartment properties he had acquired, hiring replacements younger than he to handle the labor, he dedicated the rest of his days to working on this home of their fantasy, tucked in the soft shade of a forest beyond the backyard. But the shade wasn't enough. He kept working on the roof, stopping leaks, putting in new and improved shingles. From the front yard, she saw him up there, half silhouette and half angel, the architect of her dreams, attempting to protect her from the harshness of the outside world.

"Rand," she called over his hammering and the country music that drifted from a radio placed on a pile of 2x4s. She held a glass of ice water mixed with a scoop of fiber supplement to help soothe his rebellious stomach. The broiling sun was unforgiving, vengeful even. The heat noxious, seen almost as a mustard brume from afar.

"Down in a sec."

The glinting arc of his hammer reminded her of the war beneath the world, betwixt good and evil. He could smash wickedness with a single blow to its tarnished heart. But no, that's when the hammer fell from his hand and onto the ground with a steel echo. He suffered a heat stroke. Thank God he had been on a nearly level part of the roof, or else he would have rolled off and shattered something, a bone crucial for him to maintain a form in this world of rigid physicality. After that, he was different. Evil had prevailed. He hadn't been strong enough — she thought he was, knew he was, but he had aged over the decades. He wasn't the same man, his bones were not as solid, his muscles not as resistant, his eyes not as focused. The fainting spell plagued him with a constant fear of mortality, and at times a wistful awe: "It felt like forever, or dang close to it," he explained. "It was blackness but then it wasn't. There was light, a sort of gaping tunnel. I don't wanna say it led to heaven, but the light itself felt like a presence. I felt safe. Safer than ever, Mary. And then I woke up. I don't know if I'll ever be as safe again."

Mary remembered one evening, when she returned from running errands, how he was sprawled on the couch, snoring. A desperate snore coupled with gasps of air and vibrations of his upper lip and nostrils. She had approached him intending to stroke his brow with the back of her warm hand, to collect the few drops of dream-induced sweat, when she noticed the yarmulke crowning his hairless skull. A round little piece of cloth decorated in a blue and white kaleidoscopic pattern, a yellow Star of David in the center. She wondered then who this person was on the couch. The television played an episode of Family Feud on silent, patching his face with frantic waves of light, filling his cavernous mouth with shades. They both believed in God, but they never practiced an organized religion. From that evening on, Rand always donned the yarmulke and one day came back from the Wednesday flea market with a worn and torn copy of

the Torah. For many hours of the day, he carried it under the crook of his arm. She never asked him why. She wondered where this Jewish obsession came from—it couldn't have been a joke, could it? Rand was never known to be facetious. She knew it had something to do with the fear, but why Judaism? She didn't see him reading from the Torah and didn't think he ever did. It seemed to be more of an object of superstition, like a four-leaf clover or a rabbit's foot, than a guide to life. When he would clasp it to his chest at night, she couldn't help but feel like she had been replaced by a two-hundred-year-old tome, because, during the rare moments they used to cuddle in bed, it was him who would say, "I feel safe." But then he cuddled the Torah, used it as a paperweight to his body. She recalled, although it seemed so long ago, when Rand used to face the world without fear. Confronting her parents when they challenged him, or giving the boot to unruly tenants. The idea of building a house with little help had proven to her that he was capable. But in her old age she was more afraid of the world than before. If her protector had had less hope than her, what did that mean? When he began acting skittish, sometimes pursing his lips over breakfast in prayer, or refusing to shower without her listening outside the door in case he fell—he wouldn't actually let her inside, not so she could see his crenulated body—and when he began talking like that, about how the light was a gift and everything else a curse, that's when she knew someone would die soon. Not together, but separately.

"Why," she muttered to herself, staring at a hammer that hung by its claw from the splintered edge of a plank.

Disbelief was the air she breathed. Everything that came before, even her childhood in Louisiana, her parents and their religious devotion, the constant revivals—how many revivals did they need?—everything seemed unreal, as if it had happened to someone else and she remembered that someone's account only vaguely. Another person's dream through unsure coincidence. It would never be lived again, if it had been lived at all. Her brain was a stronghold of her past, but as hard as she tried she couldn't access it, and it seemed the harder she tried, the less and less she could actually remember, as if she had lapped from the rivers of Lethe.

She noticed a tear attempting to cross the terrain of her cheek, a saline drop of liquid in an otherwise arid expanse. Oh, she couldn't do it. Despite the excess dirt and dust, she couldn't touch a single thing in that room. There was a marble frame against the far wall with a header and mantle on top, a fireplace in perpetual incompleteness. This area was meant to be the living room. Rand would talk about his work as if it was so close to being done, and it was, it was. He had wanted his son, now grown with his own family, to visit during the winters and gather around the fireplace, even though the weather was nothing like up north. But it was the idea, the essence of the idea, of warmth and belonging, togetherness and love. These concepts were what they needed, what they thrived on, but were starved of as their relationship aged with their bodies. They began as all couples begin, as lovers. But eventually they settled into a life as companions, people who accepted each other as desultory remedies for loneliness.

The tear found its way to the precipice of her jaw and stayed there. She let it. It was small evidence, but evidence nonetheless, of her heartbreak, and there was more where it came from, much more, whether it would show itself or not. She stepped into the unfinished room. The floor

was a frozen pond beneath her feet. The room, its starkness, had the sensation of being underground, like a basement struggling to hold back the pressure of earth. She tried to ignore it, the feeling of impending collapse. The inflammatory tingle of sawdust remained airborne. It stimulated her brain, fabricating the sounds of pounding, sawing, Rand's hacked up curses when something went wrong, or his silent sound of delight when he finished a project, rubbing the wood with his coarse hands. Those hands were made of gnarled oak, they spoke of ages of labor, and Mary was as proud of them as Rand was. He was her weepless willow. She would take one of his hands and rub the palm against her cheek, as if trying to give him some of her smoothness. Other tears were welling inside her and she didn't know if she wanted them to stay dormant or not. It was a few hours before noon and she was tired. She had been up since one in the morning, thinking. It was what she had done ever since she retired from the diner. She had been a waitress at the Classic Southerners for over thirty-six years, and she had loved it. But after continually forgetting orders and suffering from back pains, she was forced to retire. She felt like an injured ballerina, and she tried to avoid her lifelong customers while shopping for groceries or fueling up on gas, her head held down at the rusted hinge of her spine. It seemed her three or so years of nocturnal behavior in retirement, her years of thinking, were simply preparation for this, for what she was condemned to think about for the rest of her days.

She walked to the other end of the hall and began to hike up the steps, one at a time, each foot placement a crucial decision, for one wrong move would cause her delicate body to tumble backward and spread out into a million pieces on the floor. More dust. Yawning, she entered the bedroom. She saw the bed in its wooden frame, the skewed fan above, the slightly moth-nibbled curtains, and the short bookshelf near his side of the bed. If she could, she would sleep elsewhere, because their bedroom invariably summoned the image of his death, a mere shiver in his sleep. At six in the morning, she had awoken and propped herself with an elbow. With her other hand, she had shaken his corpse, a stiff dummy with dull wax for skin, his pajamas appearing as if they had been starched during the night. His face, which was usually sprinkled with dirt or sawdust or patched with televised light, looked hard and hollow. His cheeks concave and his eyes seemingly sewn shut. The overbite he had since childhood was then a caricature, as if he were eating his lower jaw.

"Don't do this, not now," she had said.

He had been ready, more than ready, and shed the husk of his body like a human caterpillar turned metaphysical butterfly. But she hadn't. She often thought that she wasn't worthy, that he went home to the light while she was abandoned to an apocalypse of banality and loneliness. Because, as his departure had neared, he began to prepare for something. Brick by brick, he had blocked the windows of the guest bedroom two doors down from the kitchen, whose steel door Mary would shudder past, then he started hoarding canned goods, dried fruit and meats. He never said anything about this project, but one evening he marked the calendar with a red X. Then she knew. He was preparing for Judgement Day. Three nights before the marked event, he died in his sleep.

There was a half-empty glass of water on her nightstand. She slid open the small drawer and retrieved a bottle of sleeping pills. She managed to wash down four. It would put her to sleep quickly and liquefy her dreams. She'd been having the same dream more often, with minor variations. She dreamt of waking up, over and over, and finding Rand next to her, or not Rand exactly, but his body, hollow as a decayed log. Sepulchral. When she spoke—"Rand. Are you okay, Rand?"—her words would echo off his marmoreal vertebrae and return to her in his voice. "Mary. Are you okay, Mary?" Confused, she'd reply, "Yes, I'm fine. But what about you, Rand? You're empty inside. Where's your stomach, your heart?" "—Mary? You're empty inside. Where's your stomach, your heart?" Other times, he'd take the form of a mummy, wrapped tightly in aged linen, and respond to her pleading questions with coughs until he filled the room with cinderous dust. Her fear was new each time, as if she hadn't had the dream the preceding nights. So the pills were a habit now, whether she was exhausted or not, because with them she saw her dreams in an underwater haze, anything she made out at such depths, she ignored as chance tricks of light. Light couldn't harm her, could it?

The bed was harder than she remembered, or her spine was less conforming. She slept as soon as she agreed with herself that it was probably both. As hoped, she didn't dream of a mummified Rand, but of noise. She descended into the ocean's depths, twenty fathoms, thirty fathoms, the passage of blue and black, indistinct shadows waving to and fro before her eyes. And then the noise, muffled by the pressure of the water within her ears. But it sounded so familiar. It made her want to cry and she wondered if she wasn't already submerged in her own tears, in the unreleased reserve that had been growing larger from the inside. Her own ocean. She would drown in it, to the tune of an unremembered beat. Yes, beat. There was something rhythmic to it, chaotic yet rhythmic. Before she could identify it, she had already sunk to the ocean's bottom, enwrapped in wetness and blackness and, most of all, loneliness.

Her eyes opened to the dark. The grainy radiance of a green analog clock in her peripheral read 2:04 a.m. She thought of Rand and, for a moment, he was stripped of death, and she nearly turned to her side to press her lips against his prickly cheek. Within that same second, she swallowed and drowned in reality. The expanding ocean could be contained no longer and she erupted into a convulsion of tears and wailing, grabbing and gathering the sheets in her gaunt hands as if she held a living body, his living body, so conformable to her sorrow. She curled into a fetus for almost an hour, never letting go. Yet her strength was limited and she finally surrendered to utter physical exhaustion, attempting to breathe and managing only shallow inhales and exhales. Her face eventually dried, varnished. Lying there, she became livid with herself, recalling how she had discarded Rand's copy of the Torah after his death. She pried it from his fingers in a frenzy, and then days later emptied the trash can on the kitchen floor in order to find it, but it was gone. Perhaps she had burned it, as she felt like doing to the entire house at times. She sighed. After a while, she felt parched. The glass on her nightstand was on its side, empty, used earlier to wet her barren throat.

She arose, not without every iota of biological resistance, but she did, and felt her way out of the room, switching on the light in the hall. She readied for the descent downstairs and then saw something, a light emanating from the unfinished room below. There were shadows

moving. She hurried down and then, halfway, her toe cracked against the hard wood and, grabbing for the railing, her body hit the side of the staircase. The pain was not limited to the toe but encompassed her entire nervous system. Firings upon firings. She clung to the railing with outstretched hands while her body was spread across seven steps. The pain continued until, after what seemed half an hour, it localized to the point of her broken digit. In her crooked position, she stared from under her arm at the light, at the swinging of the shadows, as if the lightbulb was in motion. She hadn't left the light on, had she? No, she remembered turning it off, didn't she? Yes, yes, she had switched it off. She was certain.

"Rand?" she said, testing her voice, the air. "Rand...if you're there...please."

With a clenched throat, she cried some more. All she had wanted was a drink of water. She moved herself so that she sat on a step. Examining her toe in the dim light, she was thankful it wasn't broken. It bled a little under the nail's edge. Standing was possible. She began to climb down the rest of the way, more precisely than ever before. Each step on the right foot caused more firing. When she made it, she limped her way to the source of the light. Shadows were still swaying, not of people, but of the miscellaneous junk inside. The naked bulb that hung in the center of the unfinished room was on, even though she now remembered this particular light had never worked before. Rand had been unable to get the wiring right, which caused a flurry of curse words to invade her ears every so often during breakfast, lunch, and dinner. During such problems, she'd have to keep his meal in the oven or he'd continue to say, "In a sec, Mary," until the food was cold. On some days, he'd eat little more than beef jerky or the occasional apple. Poor thing, poor Rand. But perhaps he had gotten this light to work after all. The very thought caused her mind to crackle with a strange form of exhilaration. She could barely believe it. While she slept, Rand had finally fixed the lighting. She touched the frame that led into the room, it was now bordered in engraved wood, smooth as something only her husband could produce. And the fireplace had been worked on, too. She saw it all now: the floor had been wiped clean, the tools moved to other areas. The smell of sawdust was fresh in the air.

"Rand," she said. "I knew it. I knew you could do it."

For the first time since everything had happened, she was happy for herself, happy for him. He had done it. Created light where once there was darkness. She didn't think of it as a haunting so much as a visiting, as her husband continuing his unfinished and rightful work. For himself. For her.

Sipping her coffee, she sat in the kitchen for some hours and thought about how Rand was out there, or in here, with her. It was all that she needed, this reassurance of his presence. The light of day, sliced into segments by the blinds of the windows, began to stain things with color. Beautiful, she thought, the way light can reveal the true nature of an object. Perhaps that was the purpose of light, and the purpose of darkness was so you could wish it away, condemn it to a region of shadow and nothing more. If Rand was in his house as an entity, unbounded by time and other constraints, then she could feel him, breathe him. Yes, they were in this together,

as they had been before. A high-pitched noise cleaved her thoughts and she turned. On the stove was a vibrating kettle. She nearly jumped from the chair, her toe stinging. Making her way to the stove, she removed the kettle from the bright red coil. She had already made coffee, but she didn't remember wanting or preparing tea. When was the last time she even craved tea? It was Rand's drink. But he couldn't have.... She emptied it into the sink as a scalding swirl.

On the couch, she fell asleep to an episode of Family Feud, a shallow slumber where every sound could be heard, half-incorporated into her makeshift dream. The families laughter, their smiles, the upward movement of lips, the dings of the game, and the confident, affable articulation of Ray Combs' voice. Among the bells, she heard a slightly different bell, one tinged with a buzz...the front door. Her eyes split open as though she woke up late for work. Was it the mailman, a salesman, or was it Rand? She managed to blink away exhaustion and answer the door. There stood a man in his thirties with a curious tan, as if the sun had delivered the light especially to him. His clothing, a plain white t-shirt and dark blue jeans, had faint grit on them. His chin and cheeks stubbled, and his brown hair was long enough to cover his forehead and brush the helixes of his ears.

"How are you?" The teeth of his smile were symmetrical, with the faintest yellowing. She read sincere concern in his features, so she ruled out Jehovah's Witness. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "I rang the doorbell a few times. Are you doing okay?"

She stopped herself mid-recoil. "I dozed off for a while, is all." Remembering her manners, she added, "And you?"

He made an attempt to step inside and his forwardness worried her, but she backed up into the house and opened the door wider to allow him in. She imagined that, yes, she knew him, but had forgotten who he was. He did look familiar, and he certainly knew her, but she decided not to say anything for fear of embarrassment and to avoid hurting his feelings. She'd allow her memory a fair chance.

"A little tired, but it's coming along," he said. He neared her with open arms and gave her what felt like a natural hug, followed by a kiss on the forehead. It made her feel loved, cared for in a way that Rand couldn't offer, a simple hug and kiss. The man's smell was warm, but held a hint of gasoline.

She thought maybe he could discern the confusion in her face, but he only said, "I figured you'd be sleeping. Mind if I have some of those cookies?" He nodded toward the kitchen.

How did he know about the batch of cookies? Could he be a Patterson?

"We've been working on some of the other food, but we sure love the sweets," he said, his voice trailing off as he entered the kitchen. "I know how you wanted..."

We? Were these people her neighbors? It was difficult keeping up with so many faces, so many names. Most of them only minor acquaintances. She didn't need the company, really, but she didn't mind it, either. It distracted her from the thinking, if only superficially. She took some

steps down the hall as he rummaged through what sounded like the refrigerator. "...you didn't have to do that. We would have cleaned it up." She wondered what could be the reason for his visit, but nothing came to mind other than vague possibilities. "Don't tell me they're gone." A few more steps and that's when she saw it, a saturated hole in the wall, ovoid, about the size of her head, between two drawings by an unknown artist. She couldn't see inside the hole because it was curved inward and warped the light as though it was the internal region of a sphere. Was it Rand, was this the form he took now? She couldn't believe it. His apparition. Stepping nearer, it swam and swallowed itself to a smaller point, then expanded to its original size.

"Rand," she said.

"What'd you say," called the man in the kitchen, over the banging of cupboard doors. "Listen. I was on my way to the Base and just came to see how you're holding up."

Base? Was he a soldier? Oh, who cared? Transfixed by the ghost on the wall, she heard the man as though he spoke in a foreign tongue from afar.

"I'll come back later with everyone," he said. "If you're sleeping again then don't worry. You need the rest."

She mumbled, "More visitors?"

There was a face in the reflective hole, but whose she couldn't say for sure. So familiar, oh so familiar. It must be Rand.

"You look fine," he said. "Get some rest."

He kissed her on the cheek and left, the closing of the door echoing.

In a state just before hypnagogia, beneath a mound of tangled sheets, she could have sworn that the man had spoken further to her. Either she simply could not remember, or she heard his words not as language, but indecipherable sounds, human noise. You look fine. Had Rand complimented her, reassured her of her beauty? But, the last few years before the end, he had never said such things. Nothing about her was fine. She didn't look fine, she wasn't fine. She knew she was a mess, a volatile cauldron of emotions. She wanted Rand, needed him, to see him clearly, to talk to him, hold him, something more than a pervading force. His ghost on the wall had disappeared after she had taken her eyes from it to peer through the blinds and watch the man walk to his vehicle, then grind over the pebbled driveway and out of sight. When she had gone back, there was nothing but a foggy translucence revealing the wall. Protoplasm. Yet, she knew she'd see Rand again, she knew it, felt it. She suddenly remembered who the man had reminded her of: her grandson, that cute curly-headed little boy. She couldn't remember the last time she saw her grandson, or her son for that matter. Did he even attend the funeral, his own father's funeral? Oh, what had become of her lovely child? How could he turn into something so cold and absent?

Mary fell asleep, fully submerged in her own ocean, the one that had been drained and now replenished. Cyclical. Her body tucked in a trench, she could feel her hair turn to seaweed, her bones into brittle coral, her skin slimy algae. What would happen to her eyes? Would they harden and jut out as Junonia, falling from her sockets and into the perpetual motion of waves, always seeing things in passing but nothing more? And her body, would it be left behind, agape with decay, a home for aquatic aliens that would nestle in her ribcage, her skull, birthing yellow eggs where her heart used to be? Mary? Mary? Where is your stomach, where is your stomach, where is your heart, where is your heart? She heard the noise again, above the layers of sleep, not human like the man who had visited, not exactly. The same chaotic rhythm she swayed to while at ocean's bottom in a previous dream, but this time she felt herself being pulled upward, thirty fathoms, twenty fathoms, toward the bright and blinding surface. Above, the reflective film that stretched the world over. Below, the husk of her being, abandoned as sustenance. Breaching the water's surface like a newborn from an amniotic sack, she awoke.

The sound was clear: hammering, sawing, all the components of construction. Rand was working. She clambered from the bed and flew down the stairs, never minding the burning nerves of her toe. She stepped over the squirming black roots that grew outward from the doorway of the unfinished room.

"Rand," she called.

He wasn't there. Others were working, four of them. Sweeping, lifting, pounding, ripping.

She placed her hand over her throat, and felt that her pulse was erratic. "What is this?"

One of them turned to look at her. It was the man from earlier, covered in more grit, but still the same man. He smiled. "You're up." But then he noticed Mary's misshapen expression. "What's wrong?"

The three other men were looking at her now. She didn't recognize any of them. They resembled nocturnal animals, with large glowing eyes that were without emotion. Unless that emotion was hostility.

"Stay back!"

"Mother," he said, putting down a hammer. "What's wrong? Tell me."

"I—What'd you say?"

The man put a hand to his chest. "It's me." He looked at the others and someone else she didn't notice, a child sitting on planks of wood in the corner, as confused as everyone else.

A balding, large man, who was holding a toolbox, asked, "Were you having a nightmare?"

"What's a child doing here?"

"Adam had off from school. Mother...."

“Stop calling me that.” She was crying. “I don’t know where my son is. You-you’d think he’d have the decency to show up to his father’s funeral.”

“I was there, Mother. I was at—”

“Rand,” she said, liquescent eyes fixed upon something in the middle of the room, near the ceiling. A swaying hole in space-time. Rand’s ethereal orb.

The others attempted to see what she saw.

She pointed at the reflective inside-out sphere. “Look! It’s him!” It showed her so much light. She was drawn closer, and the light became sheer brightness, reflecting the sun, or was the sun itself. Yes, Rand had become light, had become the sun. She jumped to touch him, to touch the expanse of reality, for she could see nothing but uniform light in her vision now, and then she felt the fire come from a point below, top to bottom, bottom to top, ending her vision with a bombardment of flaring spheres, black and purple, red and orange. Rand as multitudes. She heard shouting.

And then the zenith of night. Rand as the sun was no more.