

settlements, "Venus Flytrap." Not to mention their patriarch Fulcrum Maneuvers's disappearance there. Qui has long read the patriarch's supposed diaries, each filled with existential terrors, glimpses into the sublime of their hoary deity, the World Worm UrSegnus.

Now though, old Jubilation stands as a facsimile of itself, boasting the largest concentrated population in the Wildland Urban Interface, formerly Lake Michigan; still, a profound emptiness penetrates as they speed through her streets, turned inside out by some acidic malfeasance. If people live here, then some dark Chernobyl must have irradiated half. Something isn't right. Qui has never been deployed on this type of assignment with anyone—before alone an attractive woman, who must be no more than twenty—the scent of hanging puberty.

They pass Jubilation, heading vaguely northwest. He half-suspects that the occasional desert garden, undulating topiaries of a fabulismes hedge maze (hermaphroditic Gryphon, multi-horned Hydra), makes shift to disorient him by appearing too precisely cultivated. Why, this one (Qui surmises the stiff angles of Bush Bush's body) refused to crosscheck the most basic statistics with Mayor Gompers in Jubilation. And with increased reports of partisan activity.... She sped right through town, with barely a moment for Qui to surmise the relative success of his prior initiative to have spring begonias mask the increasingly noisome garland of raw eggs and sewage. No, something's not right.

Over headphones, Qui blasts feral spaces of blank data whispering inarticulately to the brain's digital processing center. And what of the possibility of memories becoming tape recordings? Qui keeps his own counsel on such matters, but when the low electronic hum of computers and toasters and automatic doorbells and VEVs and headphone noises finally moves into the background of every journey, there remains just enough to keep him jittery.

inspection room; her eyes penetrate the centres of outmoded satellites. —This Filmore is nothing to be taken seriously, Lincoln, never to be acted upon.—

From this electronic tincture, Consecration looms ever distant on the horizon, because it is expected and perhaps because the chance of any breakthrough here, without the comfort of the

past Jubilation, twisted husks of polymer swamp marsh trees, artificially aged beyond the four decades since the lake went dry, collapse in kindling piles sized for a ~~diogen~~ god.

Suddenly, giant ~~X~~-shaped sentinels rise ramrod from the earth. ~~Fifty~~ tall, some fifty. Everywhere at once. Branches of overgrown sagebrush cross slats of wooden pole and aluminum siding; anthropologists have hypothesized that the structures lay dormant under Lake Michigan for thousands of years, pushing up ~~giant~~ sequoias in the first months after the 2000 drainage. Did the Maeuverians, the ~~Cult~~, add the aluminum siding? ~~X~~ gleam proud under the remains of the baking sun. Heat lines shout arcane hosannas from the highest edge of the highest ~~bdge~~ pole

flatlands and sucking up pools of lake water into its bloated corpse, burping out a ~~saunter~~ and antimoon, shitting comets, vomiting stars. Just for a moment, there are such things.

—[when we wish for distemper, we acquire diphtheria]—

—These X's originally marked this section of the upper Interface into fire and ~~fire~~ zones, Mr. Qui,— Bush Bush Bush begins while ~~negotiating~~ a field of sand ~~draps~~.—Like the heads on Easter Island, don't you think?

—I can't hear one fucking word that you are saying.— Grunts. Endless sand. All that endless sand. Tiny bugs grizzle his voice ~~like~~ overcooked rib.

—The siding—. She screams, —THE ALUMINUM SIDING ~~is~~ wasn't added by the Umma Segnites at all, you know. I know that ~~seems~~ ~~seem~~ believable, but we've discovered from soil samples that go at least sixty feet below the ~~X's~~ that the siding could not have been applied after the structures emerged from the lake bed. And since aluminum siding has only been around since the late 1940s, and Lake Michigan, of course, only drained at the start of the ~~first~~ ~~twentieth~~ century...well, let's just say this we're keeping this...erdisjunction, quiet...—

—Who the fuck are you, even? He hears her this time, but lowers his voice so she can't do the same, his eyes skirting over her business suit as his mind makes an allowance for the press releases: SIDING ON MYSTERIOUS INTERFACE X's FOUND TO PREDATE DRAINAGE EVENT. LENDS CREDENCE TO WORLDWORM CULTISTS. Qui isn't certain how the Maneuverians would even ~~pin~~ ~~pin~~ such a tidbit, but of course they would: Lake Michigan, they claim, before it became a lake during the last ice age 10,000 years ago, was actually a series of settlements with their own advanced technology "aluminum siding" and these X's thus prove... Qui cracks a malicious

Qui emerges from a state of motion sickness as one might wake from a dream. Sand smears his visions; he scratches and rubs, but tiny granules of silicate still cling to the folds that form the slice of the eyes. The landscape cycles sand more quickly than he can rub it out. He surrenders, burning his right arm along the hot chromium strips of the VEV, a smooth vertebra manufactured in a digital imaging lab.

—Lincoln! Good, you're awake; it's a windstorm. Hold on.— Bush tacks the VEV into the current, burning Qui's arm against the vehicle's side door. Hebs the growing welt with his left hand; the topography of the sore feels mountainous. The VEV tacks suddenly through the opposite angle, and Qui, a quick study, grips tightly. Sand obscures rumped molehills rising on the horizon. Bush tacks three more times before carefully opening the VEV's glove compartment, exposing a set of rusty silver, welded binoculars to Qui's lap. —Try these, Mr. Qui—

The binoculars clarify much of the landscape, or appear to, as an unexploded landmine might clarify the memory of Vietnamese rice paddy. Qui can't be sure how far they have journeyed toward Consecration. He discerns the mole humps: a Cultist shantytown, an abandoned settlement. Quadrilateral Commission policy absolutely construction of planned communities over top the Um-Segnite settlements. An old goodwill gesture to the aging Fulcrum Maneuvers..the Cultists kept their tiny communes but still fall under the doleful influence of Quadrilateral systems. Trash suburbs. As a child in the town of Calibration, Lincoln recalls his visits with Filmore to the outskirts of the old Cultist community. What was it called? Something like "Asterisk Falls"? Filmore would buy tiny salt cakes to eat on her way school. Just moving the cake to his lips rubs an open sore with lemon juice and hydrochloric acid, but

Filmore ate them whenever she could, purple berry stains drizzling into the enamel of her front teeth.

Now here, in the bones of the backland, twenty years from the melodramatic death of his sister, also twenty years from the end of Fulcrum Maneuvers, Qui wonders if such zoning gestures are even necessary. But then he remembers that, yes, Consecration is the most sacred place for Cultists. The “Descension” of Fulcrum Maneuvers somewhere in this land, but how many of them linger?

In answer, pitiful crowds, mechanical fires ants, surge suddenly from the aftermath of the flooded Amazon; they grab each other’s antennae in an animal disk of disposable bodies floating

Flat on his back, in an open grave, Qui sees ~~vest~~ ~~side~~ heat swirls in the reflected sail;
winged shadows fall fresh over the umbra of his body, saline phoenixes from oxygenated char.
In the mirrorsail, below the birds, the figures don three translucent robes, their skeletal hollows
fill with stripes of vertical flesh, peeling and unctuous, pink and sounding sore, crashing into
mirror bone. Sand falls about Qui's body like

consumed by the boiling spots of a celluloid flicker. Her eyes smolder over magenta pupils. The house of her body collapses in a smash of cinders. An airplane explodes from a damaged engine. Crimson streaks verminize the rotting meat of his inner ear. Candles snuffed by a metal bell, closed tight against the rush of sand flowing through his nose; he sneezes and feels his heart stop. The man engorges the outline of the burning woman, eats like the holy host of an ancient deity. Finished its profane meal, the reflective surface flies loose, explodes skyward in a fiery rocket before plunging in a canopy over the surface of Qui's sandy bed. Sparks bathe Qui while everything goes dark, suffocated under a parachute of burning tin.

Eons later, the next word sounds from the mouth of a shovel: the shake of a fire grate releasing ashy remains to a metal pan. Qui's breath is low, but he rises, for he can still decipher the echo of air, freedom. The tiny girl's next voice is water; she is free.