

## Uranium

The dream again: you're in a tent with your once-girlfriend, staring through a screen that opens onto the stars. Her body is curled sideways onto your chest, your two sleeping bags an amorphous tangle, her fingers lightly exploring your neck, collarbone, earlobes. You start to speak, but catch yourself. If you speak in the midst of this moment, you'll shatter it, as you do all things you touch. You're stupid. Your father's voice, telling you that. Then your girlfriend's hand ventures over to your upper arm, to where the scars are threaded, and you turn to swat her away and you're awake.

You awaken to a world in which there are no stars, but a day-in, day-out sun, a purgatorial daylight that you somehow close your eyes and sleep in, in your spacesuit, a guard from the toxic air.

You look to the geiger counter, which seemingly spent the night locked in your grip. It provides a steady click, hovering around 5 millirads. There must be uranium nearby.

The first time you found uranium in this post-breathable world, you didn't know what to do about it. The man who lent you the suit had persuaded you you'd need a geiger counter, too, but he'd said it would be to locate and *avoid* uranium, so once the geiger counter had actually led you to a pile of the stuff, craggy and green, you'd stood there dumbfounded; what should you do? You'd noticed that it gave off a kind of tingle in your boots and in your shins, the uranium did, so you said what the hell and stooped down to pick it up. The sensation of your father's fingers gripping around your shoulders. The tingle spreading to your hands and forearms as fire.

A while after this, you saw a couple fellow foragers locked up against each other, in their suits, doing a strange kind of dance; they seemed to be testing whether they could peer around or through their opaque glass masks, get a look at each other as they were inside. “Hey,” you called to them; you waved. “Hey, I’ve found some uranium back here; it gives you a kind of tingling sensation that’s really fun.” The foragers didn’t seem to hear you, either because they ignored you or because the white noise of their suits drowned out all external stimuli. Then they reared back their helmets as though to force a headbutt, and before your cries of warning could reach them—or maybe in spite of those cries—they hurtled their necks forward, smashed the glass.

Your girlfriend had said your problem was that you didn’t trust yourself, that this was why you worked on the maintenance staff of the company that manufactured the suit. Had said that your father was all to blame in this equation.

You’d hated it when she said things like that, hated it all the more so when she touched you while saying them. She hadn’t known. You’d been a pig, are one. You’d prove it to her.

Another time you caught a forager playing dangerously was about a week after the headbutt incident, or at least about seven cycles of sleep since then; who knows anything about actual time anymore. You were looking for another spot of uranium, scrambling up a hill in search of it, and from the top of the hill you saw a guy lying on his back, looking like a cornered turtle, using his four paws to tear at the lining of his suit. This time, you didn’t say anything. The voice of your father snarled itself into your ear, a tentacle or a tongue that licked the dirtiest part of you. You remembered the two men who’d broken the glass of their masks, the tears and the kiss that had followed, their

bearded, mangy selves, and then the shrieks as the toxic air had begun to scorch at their skin. You watched as the man now before you unraveled his suit in tatters and leapt up naked to dance.

Watching TV in the weeks leading up to the bombing, your girlfriend had described the world's leaders as a group of men who just lacked the experience of genuine love. They experience warmth as encroachment and a touch as a scrape, she'd said. If they could just one of them be loved and seen for who they are and that love seep inside, they'd lift their fingers from their red buttons in a daze.

You'd smiled at her in appreciation of this idea, but you'd also known something she hadn't: that you'd been cheating on her for months now. It was a girl from the local movie theater with whom you'd been doing it: you'd traded her your number for a ticket, met her for a drink, fucked her, and gone on doing it and lying to them both, relishing the fact that this surrogate girl, unlike your girlfriend, matched the ugliness you felt inside.

Your geiger counter's average begins to escalate, knocking against the 10 millirad limit. You intuit that this means the hill to your left obscures something good, and begin trooping up it, a faceless man in a faceless time, a figment within a dream.

It's a shame, but the tingle of uranium is the only thing you've found since the bombing that feels any good. You can eat, but only through a tray that's around your helmet, sanitizing and aerating the food one morsel at a time, and eating it like a prisoner, all of it cold from a can. You can sleep, but only bleary-eyed and half-realized, never confident that you've woken to reality instead of to a worse dream. You can't speak to anyone or see their faces. You can shit, but only through a parallel version of the mouth tray, dropping samples untended behind you like a dog.

When you'd finally told your girlfriend what you'd been up to, it had been the day before the bombing, and she'd been leaning forward to kiss you.

"I've been cheating on you," you'd said.

"Oh, come on," she'd said. Her eyes had still been closed, her weight tilting her toward you.

"No, I'm serious," you'd said. You could feel yourself smiling. "With one of the ticket takers from the movie theater. About twice a week."

"What?" she'd said. "I..." She'd retreated to a separate room and sat in a chair, but you'd followed her.

"Aren't I a monster?" you'd said. "Aren't I horrible?" You'd stood over her, looming as your father had over you in light of your acts. You'd lifted the sleeve of your shirt up to illuminate the scars, which her eyes had shifted over to take in. "Do you see these? Do you see them?"

She hadn't said anything, just looked at the far wall and rocked back and forth, so you'd laughed to yourself and left. For no reason you can discern, you'd taken the spacesuit with you.

Which brings you to where you are now, trooping up this hill, geiger counter in hand. Wandering the land for the fixes that you get from a spot of uranium. Watching those for whom this is not enough, who try to touch each other, or reveal themselves—watching them literally burn up in smoke and carbon, their eyes little coals beside their heads.

When you cup the uranium in your hands, it's the best sensation you've ever felt in your life. A bristling begins in your fingertips, creeps up to your knuckles, your wrists,

your forearms. It comes from inside you, but also feels like it comes from without, the deliciousness of a brush from another soul. You lick your lips. The tingle turns to a burn where your hands still grip the material, but you wait, letting the gentler sensation dance its way up your arms and to your face and chest. Your heart starts to gallop. There are none of your father's words in your head now. There is none of him telling you in the same breath that you're beautiful, and ugly; or good, and sinful; or stupid, and yet oh so clever, oh so talented at what you do. There is only you and the tingle, a kind of buzzing of the epidermis that makes you feel for just a moment you're really alive.

You come to the top of the hill, and you see that your geiger counter will no longer prove useful to you: you're faced with a swale of uranium that's more like a pit, an immense scraggle of green in the valley of this hill and others, one into which you could rip off your suit and nestle your entire body. You smile. The tears that escape your eyes and skate down your cheeks provide you with the faintest taste of salt.