

## V2

This time, the illusion is visual as well as auditory. Images of myself leap out from the hedges, squatting around swords, triangular in shape. I step back, draw my own sword, ready to combat myself. One of the images creeps closer, scuttling on his legs while keeping his sword held aloft and straight. I step into enfilade, spring-locking a backward slash. The image strafes with me, his body a compact nugget of muscle. I wait for him to attack, at which time I'll pivot around him and slash into his back. He squints, draws breath. His body seems a rock charged with potential. Then he does advance, does attack, but instantly his form frays and dematerializes, like a tangerine skin, and what's left behind is the pulp beneath the sheen: a young boy with no sword, shivering and alone, his knees locked between his forearms.

I rub my palm furiously up and down the bridge of my nose, as Michelangelo taught me to do, and the images of myself dematerialize, are replaced by the robustness of the hedge in its natural state, and I see what I saw before the illusion overtook me: a corner of the hedge, and around it, the promising glow of the Throne, and the tail of the asian appointee, darting through the maze to get there before I do.

It was the asian appointee that would administer the illusion I now suffer, at least according to Michelangelo. He said the asian tribe had devised a drug that would secure their victory at the Melee, called V2, and that it was distributed through water. Said that it converted your experience of other to your experience of self, such that you would be raising your sword right over the melon-textured head of the asian appointee or whomever and abruptly it would resemble your own head, and you would recoil, become impotent for the fight. That's why when the asian and black and hispanic appointees and I were greeting one another in the locker room, before the Melee, and the asian appointee introduced himself and sought to shake my hand, I pulled my water bottle away, braced my forearm over my face, and vigorously shook my head 'no;' I forced him to bow and walk back to the others instead.

It was also the asian tribe who sent our tribe, the white tribe, a dispatch a few months before the Melee alleging that they'd made an important discovery. Said that they'd found two artifacts, the first of which was a map of the old U.S. that showed the

country hadn't always been divided according to the four tribes, white, black, asian, hispanic. But it was the second artifact that interested me more: it was a book, called the Bible, that the asians said showed the world as a whole in fact hadn't always been divided; instead, all people were one, and they were one because their petty differences dissolved before the cosmic difference of their creator, God. It was when I looked at the picture of this God which the asians had enclosed that I knew they were playing us: he was a white man with a white beard, which showed me the image and the story were meant to mollify the white tribe such that we didn't send anyone to the Melee.

Crafty asians. I follow after the appointee that I spotted a moment ago, my vision now clear, my sword again sheathed for mobility, but my hand at the ready. Above the peak of the hedges, I can make out the golden glow of the Throne, and above that, TV monitors that show the thousands—nay, millions—watching us from home.

I round another corner, and this time, I come upon the hispanic appointee, whose back is to me, his whole motion seemingly paused to get his bearings. He stands over what looks to be a map, which he either smuggled in or found scattered somewhere, and I can't tell whether he has a weapon. Seeing from above that one of the cameras has found me, I unsheathe my sword and sneak toward him.

But again the illusion overcomes me, the drug, and I step back: from the hunched back of the hispanic appointee emerges an image of myself, again the squatter in the warrior pose and with the sword. I do the rubbing thing with my hand and blink hard, but to no avail: still the image of myself, with others multiplying behind. Then the foremost warrior peels away, as he did before, and behind him, or within him, I see myself lying on my bed with Clarice a few weeks ago, the pointy object now my erection instead of the sword.

I recognize the moment: Clarice has just shared with me how scared she is of herself. Said that she's never trusted herself, not since she was a little girl, and how worried she is that this distrust will bleed into our relationship. She'll lie to me, grow resentful of me, fail to meet me. She's up against me, who's on his back, with her face in the crook of my shoulder to hide the tears, and she wipes her face with her hand and asks a question.

"Are you scared?" she says.

“Hm?” I say. “Of what?” I suppose she’s asking this only because I didn’t follow up sufficiently after her outpour, didn’t keep the focus on her.

“Of the Melee, say,” she proposes. “Are you scared you’ll get killed?”

“Why would I be scared of that?” I say. I’m not looking at her anymore, but at the far wall. “No one’s ever won the Melee but the whites. Every four years, we appoint a warrior, just like all the other tribes, and every four years, we win the Throne. Why should this time be any different?”

“I dunno,” she says. She moves away from me, wipes her face again, now angled toward the headboard. “It’s just a look you take on, sometimes. Something in your eyes. I get to thinking you might be scared.”

“You don’t see shit in my eyes,” I say, and I swivel, sit up from my hips, cradle my head in a net of my fingers. “You’re just projecting what you don’t like to see in yourself.”

Finally, the illusion dissipates, and I stagger forward, somehow having kept my feet this whole time. My sword is still in my hands, if wobbly, but the hispanic appointee, that had his back to me, unarmed, and that I was ready to kill... he’s gone.

Dirty spic. When we were in the locker room, he’d come up to me and given a speech about why it was futile to engage in the Melee, which is another thing Michelangelo had warned me to reject. The hispanic appointee had said that it was funny to him how much stock we all placed in the color of whoever sat in the Throne for the next four years, when in fact, that person’s color does nothing to affect the hispanic appointee’s life. When he already has his family, his community, and his traditions, and none of that’s going to change an ounce based on a person who doesn’t really do anything anyway, because the hispanic appointee is comfortable with himself. “It’s funny, isn’t it?” he’d recapitulated, his hand swinging wide to clap me on the shoulder when I agreed. But no, I didn’t think it was; out there on the other side of the TV screens are a million children eager to see who wins the Melee and thus the Throne, and I think it’s the most important thing in the world that that person look like them.

Having righted my balance and clarified my vision, I once again sheathe my sword and break into a run. This is taking longer than I’d expected, no doubt because the asian appointee somehow hit me with that drug. Still, I also have no doubt that I’ll win: the glow of the Throne seems brighter at my every turn, and I’ll bet I’m the only

appointee who will kill for it.

I burst onto a clearing that features the black appointee, and instantly, I plummet my nose into my elbow and squint my eyes. It's not the drug, V2, that I'm worried about here: it's a virus intrinsic to blacks that Michelangelo told me you can catch just by breathing the air they breathe, that turns you into one of them. He said you'd be ready to vanquish one of the fuckers, and out of nowhere, your throat will squawk, your lips will inflate, your eyes will bulge; your brain will shrink and your cock will grow; a bone will split through your nose and there will be two of you where there was one, with your black opponent having done no labor to effect the change. The black guy on whom I advance seems to be in an altered state, with his eyes glassed over, his hands out wandering, having dropped the ax he was carrying. "That ain't true, that ain't true," he keeps muttering. No problem, though: Michelangelo told me of all the tribes, I should never take morality as an excuse not to kill a nigger.

I hold my breath, free my arm from my face, and grip his throat, but before I can follow through with my sword, the drug takes hold of me once again: the black man's eyes swivel to lock with mine, and in them, I see my own, my blue floating forth through his brown, the pupil the center that links us.

I'm standing in a row of other white warriors, on the training mat, with our wooden practice swords braced in formation. Michelangelo stands before us, lecturing. This is before I'm picked as the sole appointee for this year for the white tribe, about ten years ago. I'm twelve years old, still competing.

Michelangelo's discussing the superior beauty of blue eyes, which all of us have. He's adding to their intrinsic superiority the fact that their gene allele is recessive, which makes them also rare, something to fight for.

I ask Michelangelo whether you can have blue eyes if both your parents have brown eyes, as mine do.

He explains that so long as each of your parents carries a blue gene allele, then of course you can; the trait will travel unseen through your parents' generation and become manifest in yours.

I say nothing; the rest of the formation has turned to look at me.

Does each of my parents carry a blue gene allele?

I still say nothing; I don't want to be here.

If I could, I would break away from this memory—slash my way out, if need be—but I can't: the asian drug has made it so that my every flight brings me into closer contact with myself, has vanished the black whose neck I held.

I am adopted.

I can still see my parents—or whom I'd thought to be my parents—looking down when I asked them about the gene, hiding their own eyes from the truth: that my biological parents fled to another country, maybe one with practices less violent than our recurrent Melee.

If they loved me, why didn't they bring me with them?

If they could stand the sight of me, why didn't they look on me as their own?

I see what lies beneath the years of hard-boiling that I did, the mental and physical training, the performance with which I bested my peers and secured Michelangelo for myself. I see the yolk that is my self, the shell now cracked, the white run off.

I am a shriveled, forsaken thing, shrieking to the heavens for a sentence without crime.

I am drowning in a puddle of tears that the eyes that made me will not cry.

And I wish I could look away—oh, how I wish that—but again, I cannot. I lash out with my sword and slash only into myself, slicing yet deeper, revealing yet more.

What I see next seems to have little to do with me, or it seems to have to do with some 'me' that is greater than my body, that surges up from beneath me, dirt and root: I see a flood of milk that rushes over and around a mottled globe, swaddling it white. Beyond that, or behind it, I see a man in a soldier's suit marching along a plank with a musket by his side. His eyes are the blue of steel, and his mouth is so flat you could use it as a ruler. And behind him, in the sky, a white man in rags stands with the posture of disappointment, his back turned also.

I see a vision of myself ten times my actual size, my comportment a diamond edifice whose back descends into a steep and jagged slope, a mountain which Clarice climbs.

I see that all turning away, all shutting out, all abandonment, is mutual,

metastasizes, as all violence is and does. I see that if I could only reach out to and embrace myself, I could do the same with Clarice and with a lot more than that.

The vision whooshes away, and I'm left as I was beforehand, with my hand around the black man's throat, he now on the ground, on his back, his eyes careering back and forth.

"Don't fuck me, don't fuck me," he says.

"What?" I say. I shake my own head.

"I ain't no faggot, I ain't no faggot," he says.

From around us, a cheer surges, bursts into a roar. I look over my shoulder and find one of the TV screens and take in its image: it seems that the asian appointee has made it to the Throne. Asian appointees, in fact: either I'm still feeling the drug, or they've multiplied, as there are no fewer than five now standing on the ramp leading up to the Throne. One by one, they shrug their shoulders and run in, up the ramp and under the gazebo that houses the Throne; that's what people are cheering about.

I turn back to my black opponent, who's stopped his trail of incoherence. Instead of speaking, he's tracking me with his eyes, catching his breath. He'd earlier seemed focused on something entirely beyond me, but now he's coming back to the moment.

"Time to get what's coming to you, nigger," I say, and prepare to lunge my sword through him, but the words and the motion feel suddenly foreign, impeding. Especially the last word, 'nigger.'

What am I doing?

Without really being able to answer my own question, I undo my grip from the man's throat, and I bring my knuckles around, with the same radial swoop by which you unlock a door, to form an open palm that offers to help him up.