

PERDITION PLAIN

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THERE WAS A MAN WHO SAID THAT AN IMMENSE VAULT OF gold was buried under a barren plain in the north. Then everything went to hell.

He was an albino man. He moved on the road in a hood, fists clenched in his jacket's front pockets when his gang was on the move. They moved from town to town, lurked in the wastes and fled to god-knows-where, a convoy of stolen motorbikes on wide dirt tracks. He was tall and scrawny, a white shape in a white landscape, the alkali flats. He stooped at the back of a truck. The paleness of his head was perceptible in the dark. Many said there was something grim and evil about his whiteness that struck the nerves of those who looked. They said this was why he killed. Something about the lifeless blank on his face and form was thought to have engraved in his mind a taste for burning and blood.

It was night. On the roadside he taught them how to use guns. They grilled and ate around the campfire. He told them stories from the Judges and of Job. They slept on the truck, under the tarp, which was their tent. He quoted from the psalms in half-sleep, a book clutched to his breast.

In the morning they fled north. He loved the flat land, the open sky. They drove on a straight asphalt road splitting a vast cornfield. The motorcycles jounced where potholes and cracks broke the smoothness of the asphalt. They passed by a field of grass with grazing cattle. There were dark patches creeping over the pasture, the slow-moving silhouette of clouds. The man

opened his palms to the sky. There was a streak of a plane across the air space. He prayed for rain. There was a row of electric transmission towers of steel lattice slanting from the highway to the rolling hills. The bright mass of clouds over the mountain range was like a violent swelling of waves breaking into foam. He said they were the souls of rocks.

There was no rain. They took a narrow path of dust and wild plants to avoid a checkpoint. They stopped beside a dry, ephemeral lakebed. The plain around them was a wasteland of gray sediments, and the leaves of trees lining a nearby road were covered with gray powder from the drilling of cement and blasting of old roads. Tomorrow they would loot a gas station, take barrels of diesel, some cash, water and tools for making improvised weapons. The doctor among them collected stones and twigs and stoked the fire. The albino stripped his jacket and was half-naked. There was a sleek, dismal grayness to his skin tone, like a thin storm cloud or wood ash. It was night again and the black sky was packed with stars.

They sat around the fire. The albino played the guitar, recited poems and taught them old love songs and how to make bombs.

His bones were big. His flesh was tough. In the following day at twelve there were pistol shots and bullet holes on glass and steel panels in the gas pump. But it was not his habit to use his pistol in operations like this. He liked to use whatever were on hand – fire extinguishers and empty bottles of Coke. He used the red canister to intimidate the station manager and personnel. As for the eight-ounce bottle, he sheathed it in the front pocket of his jacket, the neck of the glass to be gripped and drawn when needed. This way he could attack with the bottom's broken edge. If his victims lived, his white head would be the last thing they saw.

They killed no one. A barrel of fuel leaked inside the truck. The carpenter among them smiled and opened a jug and poured it on the bald head of the man with Down syndrome who was also part of the gang. Then there was exchange of blows and all of them under the tarp stank of gasoline and threatened each other to ignite a match. They were laughing. But the albino was facing them away. He sat on his crossed legs at the opening of the tarp. He watched the flow of cement under the tailing smoke, the dashes of paint bisecting the road. Others followed their truck on decrepit scooters. Then he opened his palms. The rest of the gang thought he was crazy. The doctor called him a lover of little boys. There was laughter and they openly scorned him because he could not hear them.

He only spoke. Night on the open plain was bleak. The wind howled in the trees and it was the only sound that accompanied a faint strumming of chords. The man plucked the strings and made songs he could not seem to hear. There was nothing in their plan that did not come from the albino's mouth. He did not -- could not -- listen to anyone's question, advice or objection. He spoke when he pleased and interrupted others talk. "Either he's deaf, or he's faking it to avoid any oral settlement," said the carpenter. No sound, and therefore no word of reason, could punch a hole into that hard globe of skull and stimulate a reaction.

They had not seen the albino respond to anything: hunger, pain, even the stroke of the sun, which could burn his weak skin. His jacket protected him from heat, but at times they saw him stripped by a water pump in the harshest light. He moved with a self-determined will that knew no hesitation, and when they followed him, they felt intoxicated in this blind determination.

There was no cluster of stars. The night was so deep the plain and meridian blended into a singular darkness. They played cards in the dying fire. The faint, small circle of illuminated earth was the only one that had form in the darkness of the playa.

They abandoned their hideout at daylight. On the highway, there was a worker casting chips out of the concrete with a drilling rig. Behind him a long line of blast holes had formed. There was a crane suspending a block of cement from the beam. There was an engineer in hard hat standing by a tent. The road was under renovation. They killed no one but they stole the construction workers' drills, mallets, sledgehammers and picks.

They fled. They arrived on a steel bridge over a stream with lilies and stopped for water. They sat on boulders and drank and cleaned their feet. Afterwards one of the boys in the gang had leeches on his legs. The albino removed them with a knife. "He looked like he was sleep-walking," the boy said to the others. Then they moved further north where the blue of the sky was blank and the plain was blank with the perpetual grayness of rocks. From atop, the highway was like a straight mark of lead on paper, and only the mountain range in the east could offer a consoling perimeter to this flat, immense gap of void.

They passed by a small desert waste full of sunbaked weeds. They were near the beach. There was a smell of rust in the air. Scraps of metal and remnants of engines were half-sunk in sand. Through a length of hexagonal

mesh, they saw a house and jeep and some spare parts for their motorbikes. They stopped and it was the first time in a week that the albino held a gun on the road. The gate was locked and the tenants were away. They broke the lock. Then the albino entered the kitchen and fried some eggs on the pan. The others grilled fish, fought for bed and blankets, bathed with soap, and collected supplies and tools -- pliers, steel wires, nails, lamps, flashlights. They left mud everywhere and they passed the night.

The moon was a white hole in the black sky. They drank alcohol until they were inebriated and fell asleep. At midnight the doctor woke up screaming at the green gecko crawling on his leg. The boy aimed his pistol. The bullet killed the gecko but it also pierced the doctor's leg. The others could not be alerted in their daze. The albino extracted the bullet with pliers and scissors and cleaned the wound with alcohol. He then went back writing on the margins of his book. He drew a blueprint of an apparatus for lifting things from a hole, like a tackle to hoist a pail from the shaft of a well. "I couldn't have done it myself," the doctor said in the morning, debilitated by the wound. "I've never seen such surgical precision and quickness with such crude tools." The large lizard's carcass dried away and was feasted by a ring of flies.

The light was sharp. Silence wrapped the air but there was a dissonant ring from a vehicle far away, the cry of an engine at decrescendo. They stole the jeep and moved out. They smelled the sea. The highway was beside the beach. There were electric posts along the footpath beside the dark blue asphalt. They stopped to pee. Above them the floating clouds were thick and heavy. The albino stood on a ledge of bricks bordering the beach and road. It began to rain. He faced the clouds. He opened his hands and caught some drops of drizzle. He gestured the others to hurry and said they were near.

The albino enumerated their advantages in the current weather: distraction, panic, the softening of mud, the muffling of pistol shots in the pounding rain, the veiling of blood. Some people's luck was a catastrophe for the rest. They doubled their speed. The albino's eyes were red and rapt. It was as if he had reckoned all their chances from the start and was now only validating their fulfillment. In the truck, they passed around a bowl of water and mirror and razor for cutting beard. They polished their guns. They combed their hair. Round the mountainside they arrived in a huge dust bowl.

It was empty. They pulled their brakes. The albino climbed the jeep's steel roof. From his position the panorama was striped by rainfall. There were barren hills in close distance. The field was a cake of dirt cracked by drought. The only thing that moved was a dog prowling at the edge of a tent. Beside that there was a crude gallows frame standing at twenty feet, a kind of crane with a pulley and cord used for hoisting something from a deep hole on the earth. Then there were natives coming out of the other tents to fetch a pail of tools and coil of rope. The rain damped their garments of rags. The natives saw the gang and the awful figure of the albino. The downpour washed the gang's smell of gasoline. The natives called out their companions in the shelters. They were composed of husbands, wives, and their children. The albino was half-naked and his skin was pale and stark.

For a moment between the quiet, tensed camps, there were only the pattering rain and the dog departing the scene. It was raining but there were holes in the heavens and shafts of light descending.

The albino squeezed the trigger and the gun brought the revolving chamber into alignment with the barrel, irreversible as the planet's turning. The bullet cut fifty meters of air and sunk in someone's flesh. To their sight it was invisible; there was only a flash of light on one end and the sudden spurting of blood on the other, as if there was no mediating line.

The gang crossed the wastes and loosed a shower of bullets in the astonished air. They swept the field like chess pieces. Their hands singed from the heat of their own guns. The men on motorbikes rounded the tents and shot the natives who hid behind sacks of rocks. The natives were armed with rifles. They shot their moving targets like children in country fairs aiming their toy guns at trinkets. Out of the smoke and rain and light the albino pounced upon the natives who were dumbstruck and mute in their cloth shelters, with his gang of crazies and criminals and the sick and paralytic, men who were banished in hospitals and prisons and alleys and whose humanity was defined by the tools they used. When the cartridges were empty, they were back to using bare hands and throwing large rocks. They stooped for anything they could find and fought like primates.

The motorcycle's gas tank was holed in the attack. One native threw a dynamite. The engine caught fire and the driver rolled in the mud to save his burning body. Nearby, the tent ropes were cut. The loose cloth flapped from the pole. The shelter contained several flasks of mercury. Someone crouched behind it but his skull was blasted by a descending canister of

cyanide. His body capsized the flasks and fell on a pool of quicksilver. The canisters and flasks rolled everywhere. The liquid metal dripped in the mud bespattered with blood and vomit. The white man ignited an LPG cylinder; he had done this before in another person's house. The tarp of the tent blazed in flames. Those who crawled groped for knives and splinters and shards of glass. The rain stopped. The killing continued. A man carrying a chest tried to escape. He was chased and strangled with rope. The chest was unlocked and contained high-grade ores of gold.

The sky cleared, but the noise did not end. The albino bore injuries on his arms. He tied the knot of a cord around the neck of the natives' chief. The cord passed around the rim of the pulley. "I curse that this ground will be the place of your perdition," said the chief. The albino pushed the chief out of the ground and suspended his body above the hole.

The light of day was leaving. They spared a native woman who was capable of appraising ores and discovering veins of mineral. The moon was bright and circular. The sky was loaded with fires. There were bats circling overhead. The men dug pockets of earth without repose. The bodies were covered in their own blankets. Beside the bodies there was a large campfire surrounded by a circle of stones. A helix of smoldering ash rose from the fire. The albino said prayers for the dead. He blessed their souls. "And forgave them the sin of having been born," said the native woman three years later when she recalled the violence in a radio interview. "At that time I couldn't understand what he meant. But I always knew that he was not crazy."

They cut the earth with spade until the holes were waist-deep. They dropped the bodies and mounded the backfill. There were no names. They marked the first graves with tools the dead left behind, their shovels and picks, with their hats hanging down from the handles. The wind blew and they felt the sharp pain of their injuries. The woman guided them to a water pump where they washed their wounds. They ate the dog.

It was morning. The albino sat on a boulder in his jacket. All over the ruined camp there were puddles of mercury reflecting the clouds and the blue sky. There was light fog on the hills. For one day those who belonged in this territory became no more than a specter. Last night a snake slithered under the blankets, between the sleeping bodies. It stirred. Then someone crushed it with a stone. It was no longer stirring. The boy forked the snake's cold carcass with a branch of tree and lanced the branch into the earth to mark the mining camp's entrance.

They gathered around the boulder. The albino stood on it. He breathed the cold air. He spread his arms, his palms facing the field. "This," he said, "is where God hid His secrets." In the next days they would take shifts in ravaging the deep, from early morning to three o'clock and from afternoon to midnight. He indicated the new place of the tents, how many of them would be built, and the area for vehicles. He discussed how the explosives must be handled, the reparation of the processing mills left behind by the natives, how the ores were to be delivered into the crushing cone, the details of the rotating rakes, the dimensions of the kiln, the procedure of refining the metal that would bleed from the rocks, the current market value of gold, the roles and duties of each man from chief to assayer to bookkeeper to the lowliest mucker and shoveler, the kinds of devices for transporting the materials, the shortest route to the nearby lake, the distribution of profit, and finally the albino talked of paving a road to the highway -- the first road of that nameless plot of land -- and how it was the beginning of everything that was to come.

The shadows of clouds slowly passed over the plain. They remade the crane to carry heavier things. On the boulder, a manuscript was laid down bearing the layout of their community, which was to consist of several sections: the mining proper where the ores were extracted from the veins, the adits, drifts and stopes; the processing plant consisting of gravity concentration unit, rod mill, cyanidation circuits and mercury amalgamation station; the tramline for ore transport; the water source, including a blueprint for the pipeline; the tents for the accommodation of workers; a warehouse for tools, equipment, supplies, weapons, food, cigarettes and alcohol; the place for discarded wastes; and the gravesite bearing the markers of the natives who got there first. "He had a plan," said the boy who once had leeches on his legs. "He knew what to do from the start. He knew everything while he himself remained impossible to know."

They only had to continue what the natives started. There was a ladder to the bottom of the shaft. The albino disappeared into the darkness of the deep and inspected and touched the veins of quartz. He came back to the surface and the real work started. The men wore boots and hats and descended by ladder. The albino walked them through the entire process like a supervisor explaining the details of a factory to students on tour. Their chisels and carbide lamps were conveyed in a box through the pulley. Wastes were dumped on the surface and ores were hoisted through

the same box. If ores were collected, they were delivered to the plant for grinding, sorting, sluicing, panning, and melting in crucibles to shape the gold into ingots. After that, they were ready for trade. But it would be weeks before they could produce anything substantial.

The day ended. A curtain of darkness descended over the plain. Their camp was cocooned in the coal-black air. There were no bats, but there were spirals of insects around. "Something about his color made his character impenetrable," said the carpenter. They could smell the effluvium from the dump. "I could not stand his sight. He's terrifying to behold. He's formidable beyond reckoning." Nearby there was still the dried carcass of a snake pierced by a branch of tree, its upturned visage facing the campfire.

One day there were people standing over the hills. What they saw could no longer be described by the modest word 'camp' -- it was a plant, a *compania* by the standards of other small-scale mining operations in the province. The newcomers had pistols. The albino hired them to dig the stopes in the steep bulge where another level of the vein structure was found. Then there was a mad surge of miners from other places months after their settlement. They came in separate groups. They came on foot and on motorbikes. They came with their wives, children, and cattle. Not all were accepted into the plant, but the numbers kept increasing during this period of migration. "It's a threat to our company," said a man in the gang with the amputated leg. "Their arrivals were unplanned, unorganized, uncontrollable, as if coming here was in their instinct."

The albino assigned newcomers, some of them already knowledgeable of the workflow, to perform a petrographic analysis for gold liberation in the processing section. The others brought more equipment and gas. At night they turned on the diesel generator to supply light and ventilation because there was no available electricity. In the dark the plant was lit for the first time without fire. "I was in a precinct when the albino came to me and told me to follow him to the path of gold," said the doctor to an inquiring newcomer. "You did not argue with him how he knew where it was hid. You just followed him. Maybe he was already prospecting for exposed quartz veins long before he gathered us. He had probably been collecting samples from outcrops long ago because he showed me a high-grade ore prior to our coming here."

In one year there were a hundred people in the plant. The men cleared shrubs and thickets to pave a dirt road connecting the pit to the lake behind

the hills. The field was full of black grime. Signs demarcated the sections of the plant. "There was a plan when we thought there was none," said the boy. "He made these empty acres of land into a town."

One day a priest arrived through the new road from the highway. He rode on a motorbike in the blinding heat, across a field that was like a sheet of ice. He stood at the edge of the town, on top of a hill. Out of the silent and immense flat earth, the albino and his band of bearded workmen blotted the landscape with their ape-like figures and, with shovels and picks, broke stones, plucked weeds and pierced the land. A scene from life out of paradise. He did not know that metallic ores were lying in the deep around this part of the valley, near the turbid lake. They tore the land in a round perimeter, ravaging the center, scraping with shovels. They cast a rampart of excavated spoil, the rim of the cut at the level of their waists. The basin deepened, steel against soil, until the sunbeam slanted at the wall of the shaft and could no longer give light to the bottom. They hit violently. The men grunted and gave off sweat and went on.

"His paleness was awful," said the priest to the others in the morning. "This enterprise is mad because the leader is mad. Did his color make him mad? Did people's reactions about his color make him mad? Or were people made mad by his color?"

The priest sat with the people at night. Lanterns lighted the gathering. Tables were set up in the common tent, which was the place of their meals. The priest did not preach just yet. He immersed himself in the flow of events and busied himself in building personal relations with the husbands and wives, the better to gain their trust. The albino stood up and spoke. He talked about subdividing tasks, unclogging the canals, the need for more tools. Then he talked about salvation, the nature of God, and man's place in the world.

"Not again," said the carpenter.

The albino gestured like a preacher. "A poet reminds us that our time on earth is merely the shadowy preface of our reality."

"Spare us of your lunacy," another man said.

"They think he's a madman," whispered the native woman to the priest. "But he's an eloquent madman who is followed by everyone."

"Speech is the deputy of evil," said the priest. The woman was astonished. "I know that something foul happened in this place. There used to be other people digging this mine. I don't believe that they all died

because of an accident in the pit, as the others tell me.”

The woman told the priest about the massacre. Then there was storm that night and the downpour ravaged the windblown tents.

The next day, no memory of the storm could be discerned. The town felt the fullness of the sun. The cloudless air brought an infernal breath and sucked the wetness out of the soil. The vicissitudes of weather made them mad. Beyond the town, there was a vast bare ground crisscrossed by old roads. It was grassless. There were a few wild plants and lizards basking in the sun. There was a broken tire near the lake. The albino sat on a stump. He was sharpening a rake. A mother brought her newly born child to him. Other people remained behind her. The infant’s scream echoed in the open terrain. The man laid his palm on the child’s head. He closed his eyes. Then he named the child.

He breathed so deeply they saw his chest expand. He made them sit around him and he taught them the basic composition of a man. “He is made of things which could make other things. Even arsenic which could kill him exists in his own guts.” The albino smiled. “You could buy the entire mass of man in separate flasks -- phosphorus, sulfur, elements that I could also use to make gunpowder. They are bought cheaply in the market. But rejoice, my friends. Rejoice. We are made priceless because of these four words: God was made man.”

The priest wondered how the albino commanded loyalty. He did not know how the people could put up with a preacher who contradicted himself every time he spoke. “God is the only thing that exists,” the albino had said. “There is no act of creation.” The following night the albino preached something that was in direct conflict to the preceding one. “The maker threw himself into his own creation and died.” The priest realized that the content of the albino’s teaching was not important. What commanded the people’s attention was his grand figure, his enchanting certainty in every contradiction.

“Why did you allow him to baptize your child?” asked the priest to the mother. “What is in this person that has authority over the soul of your child?” The mother with the baby told him that the albino understood a lot of things. Unfortunately, the most dangerous people on earth were those who understood life more clearly, the priest thought. His characterless character, his consistent inconsistency -- didn’t this define the albino’s whole person? Even lawless people followed a law -- their very own. But this man would

not follow his own law. He didn't have one. Inside his head there were no rules, no balancing of equations, no capacity for reflection. He lived with no apprehension for the past or future. He was present time incarnate.

All the rumors about the albino's person could not be verified because no one really knew about his identity and origin. Still, the priest thought, wouldn't this strategic veil of secrecy preclude madness? What was it about the skin's sheer lack of pigment that could take hold of a person's mind? What was in the nature of white, the subtle variations in saturation, the gradation of brightness, the degrees in intensity, the infinite modifications of the light spectrum -- what was in this thin ethereal layer of superficiality wrapping his nature that could give away the secret center of his character?

The fog veiled the mountain range in the east. The radio mast gleamed from afar. The priest officiated the Eucharist in the community tent. It was Sunday. The chairs were full and men lined along the canvas. The crowd reeked of sulfur. A sacristan held a bowl of holy water. The priest preached before them. The floorboard creaked beneath his feet. There was a stranger who arrived in town. His car halted outside the tent and interrupted the proceedings. He carried a suitcase and wore a hat. He was an officer of the Geosciences Bureau. After the final blessing and before the crowd dispersed into the field, the officer stood on the floorboard and said, "I came here because this town is not safe. The water you drink is contaminated with a high level of mercury."

Someone asked if this was fatal. "Sometimes, yes. In most cases, it could damage your minds," the officer said. "Paralysis, blindness, and sterility are some of its effects." He proposed that the town be included in the government registry. He suggested that the mining operations should be licensed with local and national authorities. He said that it was the only way his bureau could intervene to remove the hazards. He said the government would not be hostile to their operations, provided they complied with legal papers and a few taxes.

That night, someone drilled through his head. The officer's corpse lay on the town entrance, beside the hanging carcass of the snake. Written on the dust were the words, "No thanks". At sunrise, a crowd gathered around the body. Flies were already feasting on it. They covered it with old newspapers. Then the men heard a person working in one of the mining shafts. The droning sound echoed in the quiet dawn. They wondered

who was already working at the mines this early. It was the albino. He was holding the drilling rig. He was making holes in the ground.

Some people did not ask who killed the officer. The others, with a false sense of tact, still asked the question because they did not know how to handle the tension of knowing. The question grew cold on their tongues. Everyone knew the truth, but no one spoke about it, because they knew that speaking it out in public could unleash unimaginable horrors. They had to ask, "Who killed the officer?" in order to hide the fact that they knew the answer.

They dug a new hole in the grave of the natives, placed the body in a makeshift coffin and marked the grave with his hat. "They'll know about this," the boy told the albino. "Any time now, the big guys will come." The albino grinned in his tent. He said, "I will keep things this way."

That night, the boy talked to the doctor. "He said he would keep things this way." The drunken doctor loaded his pistol. When everyone was asleep, he entered the albino's tent, determined to do the impossible. The albino was asleep. He slept without a blanket and shirt. Nearby, the doctor saw a Polaroid of a young man in crisp coat and tie. Behind him stood a couple in elegant attire. It was a family picture. The young man's skin had the color of ash and his lips were pale. The doctor cocked his pistol and aimed at the albino's head. He tried to pull the trigger. He stole a glance at the albino's family picture. What on earth was capable of tearing a person so violently from this old, blissful way of life? he thought. His fingers were tremulous. His hand was paralyzed in nervousness. Then he hesitated and walked away back to his own tent.

"There is something unutterably sublime and evil about his visage that makes me unable to do the act," wrote the doctor on his diary, which was later found in the rubble days after the destruction of the town. "The horror of his color was not an objective thing of nature. His whiteness was a creation of our own minds. A victim's memory, preserving a mental copy of the man's actual color in a state of shock, with his mind still vulnerable to inexactitude and exaggeration, would impair the accuracy of his own senses, so much so that when the victim saw the albino again, he could not see the man as he really was, but saw his own dread -- a white that was whiter than reality. To be fair there was nothing special about the man's condition. He had an ordinary congenital disorder. But the fear that accompanied his figure was the reason why the kind of white that was reported by the victims seemed to be more pure, more dazzling, more intense than his actual color."

In the morning, the doctor's body was rotting at the entrance of the town, where the officer previously lay. His skull was shot. The style of the injury revealed that the gun's tip came in contact with his head. The enraged priest condemned the deaths. He spoke during the mass attended by half of the community. "Truly, murder is nothing compared to the formation of a whole town," he said.

The shadows of clouds stained the barren plain. There were no trees. Brown weeds and grass waved in the thick air. A group of men was sharpening their blades in the tents. The noon was solemn. There were ripples of heat over the cornfield where a row of transmission towers disappeared into the distance. The clouds in the mountains were globed and godlike and appeared to throw their immense weight on the rolling hills. Tobacco smoke roiled in the big canvas tent among the crowded congregation. The tent was swollen with people. The priest said that the murderer should confess his sins. "And as for you, chief of this town, tread the earth softly if you do not want to awaken the wrath of God."

The wind blew over the vast arid region. The sacristan tolled the bell. It was dusk. A blue bolt of lightning zigzagged between the interminable air and the level ground. Someone found a dead serpent in one of the tents and hung its carcass at the town entrance. The albino sat on a boulder near the graves, showing two young men the blueprint of a tramline. There was no sound around them except that of an old woman praying the novena in one of the tents. The two young men sat before the albino and listened.

A figure stirred in the darkness. It was singing. The figure sat on the grave, leaning on the shovel, which marked the native chief's grave. It had a rope around its neck. Its hair was long and disheveled. The skin was pale and ghostly. The two young men ran screaming to the tent of the elders. The albino talked to the figure in rags, who was neither man nor woman in appearance. It was sitting with folded legs, the knees touching the chest. It was holding a pinwheel. The colored veins slowly twirled in the air.

"Poor creature of earth," it sang. Its gaze was directed at the empty space while holding the pinwheel to the level of its head. "His rise is as quick as his fall. Better that he had never been born." It laughed. Its voice was neither man nor woman. It laughed at the top of its lungs. It laughed beyond its human capacity to laugh. Its hand held the pinwheel firmly, like a child holding the string of a balloon. "Behold the man." The pinwheel

continued to turn. "His rise, as quick as his fall. Better that he had never been born."

"Are you really prophesying?" said the albino. Then he mocked the figure and asked it to predict the future.

The figure laughed. It laughed so hysterically it dropped its pinwheel and pounded on the earth with its hand. "Truly, the hereafter is deeper than the infernal regions." It laughed and pounded on the earth. "Don't concern yourself with 'after', fool. Now is the moment. The wise merely reads what is already in the heart of people. Don't you hear yet the sound of knives being sharpened? Someone is already plotting your fall. The guns are keen to make noise. All knives want to spill blood. Bombs dream of nothing else but explosion. But man, that fickle-minded wretch – he tosses and turns in bed at night, unable to act on his dark purpose."

There was a gathering in the community tent that night. The priest was preaching from a lectern. He told them about the doctrine of salvation, the need for confession, and the importance of examining one's conscience.

The albino entered, accompanied by the boy and the carpenter. There were murmurs, and then silence. The chairs were occupied so they stood along the canvas wall with the others.

The boy poked the carpenter with a branch of tree. A fight ensued. One scratched with his nails, the other bit with his teeth. It was staged to deliberately create a commotion. During the brawl, someone was spilling fuel on the ground from a jug. The priest got off from the lectern. The albino was loading his pistol. The other men tried to stop the brawl. The albino said, "All the dead must be grinning now."

The oil spilled all over the ground. Someone threw a cigarette. There was sudden hissing and bursting into flame before it hit the floor. The people ran -- husbands, wives, old women, and children ran with their burning skirts and pants. The flame fed on the floorboard and plastic chairs. The canopy and tarpaulin walls of the tent cupped the fire like a hand. They battled the blaze with blankets. They screamed and coughed in black smoke. No one saw the light across the hills. No one heard the town. The people fetched pails of water from the well, from the pump, from the lake. The albino fired from his pistol. The people spread in all directions, uncoordinated and confused. The albino sought the priest's head, but the priest disappeared into the crowd. The others shoveled dirt and sand into the fire. The surrounding field was quiet and undisturbed. The gentle

air stirred the grass. The albino -- he looked for the priest, firing his gun every now and then. The people screamed and coughed. They spread in all directions. The albino chased the priest. The priest ran. The albino fired from his pistol. The bullet missed. The albino fired again. The priest crouched and the bullet hit someone else.

The blaze was bright. The community tent burned the other surrounding tents. The albino looked for the priest in the crowd. The other members of the gang fired bullets in the air. They said traitors would be killed. The native woman, crouching behind the carpenter, swung her blade and wounded the carpenter. He fell and his wristwatch clinked against the rock. Still unable to comprehend the suddenness of the attack, still unable to feel the pain of the fatal injury, the carpenter's other hand proceeded to check the wristwatch if it was broken, even though he was already panting for his final breath. He remembered that it was worth three thousand pesos and that he was in love with the lady who sold it to him from a pawnshop. Then death veiled his eyes.

The albino looked for the priest. The priest hid in one of the tents. Meanwhile, more tents were caught in the spreading fire. An old man retrieved a box of high-grade ores and bills under his bed, and then his grandchildren never saw him again. Amidst the fury, there were men wielding knives and guns. One of them shot a member of the gang named John. In the neighboring village, John's mother was preparing for his bed sheet and was expecting her son to visit tonight after receiving a letter from him last week. John's mother would never know why her son did not come home, would never know that a bullet pierced his heart. Death veiled his eyes.

The boy among the gang wielded a pistol and shot a man in the neck. The man was named Gideon. He fell on the dust and his knife clinked against a stone. He was abandoned on the spot as the others ran. A female stranger tried to nurse him. Gideon held her face and pulled it close to him. He looked at her and imagined it was the face of his wife, who left him a long time ago, saying in his mind what he could not say now because the bullet was in his throat, that he was sorry he could not save their daughter when she drowned. The stranger pulled herself away from his gaze. Then death veiled his eyes.

There was a man who tried to save as many people as he could, but he was hit on the chest by a stray bullet from the gun of one of those who

rebelled against the gang. He slumped on a boulder, saying the name of his wife who was in another country, where it was morning, and who did not know that her husband was dying on a rock while she lied down on a bed with another man. Death veiled his eyes. A young girl of eleven tried to look for her mother in the crowd. Then a male figure took her hand and forced her to come with him on a motorcycle. She bit his hand and he strangled her. Then death veiled her eyes. An old woman thought she saw her husband re-enter the burning tents. For one moment, she forgot that her husband had died long ago. Everyday she would tell herself that her dead husband would eventually come home, and now her self-deception materialized. She jumped into the fire, thinking she was following him, and then death veiled her eyes. A man from the gang tried to escape with the truck. He turned the vehicle on, but someone was already hiding behind the driver's seat, waiting for him to come, and cut his throat with a knife. The last thing he saw was the town burning through the windshield, the wipers swinging left and right. Then death veiled his eyes. Nearby, another man was pointing a knife to a member of the gang. He was about to swing the blade when a figure -- either man or woman wearing a garment of rags, a rope tied to its neck -- appeared at his peripheral vision. He turned his gaze and saw that it was holding a pinwheel. The figure gave out a loud laugh. He looked back at his enemy, but it was too late, because a steel rod had pierced his belly. He fell down and death veiled his eyes.

The albino checked every tent. He no longer knew why it was so important to shoot the priest with his gun amidst all the panic, but he still pursued this objective. It was true that killing the priest now would no longer count in the scale of damage that was wrought. But as a captain blinded with rage would prefer to harpoon the most insolent fish in the sea than save himself from the sinking ship, so did the albino proceed to this end. This town was his ship, and now that it was subsiding back to the ground, he would just do what was still within his grasp.

"I guess we just have to accept the fact that this man could never be grasped," one of the men who once lived in the town said in the radio, many days later, during the investigation and manhunt. The optic paradox of colorlessness itself being a color, its instantiation as an apotheosis on the body of a man, embodied the enigma of the albino's personality. "When you looked at him, you only saw his appearance. Try to see into his soul and you will fail. Was he a drug addict? No. Did political enemies of the

provincial governor and his allies sponsor his actions? No. He upset everyone indiscriminately. Was he a religious fanatic? He believed in God but also seemed to have the conviction that actions, including his own and the founding of that town, were without meaning and were not part of some grand design. Was he blinded by gold and money? I shouldn't think so. He looked like he was not greedy for anything. He looked like he was doing it for a pure and obscene enjoyment, a horrifying and primitive enjoyment that superseded all categories of what an ordinary man could enjoy in civic life."

The town continued to burn. The stock of explosives ignited, claiming with it their supply of alcohol and food. Ashes rained down upon the scattering crowd. The manuscripts containing the blueprint for improvements in the mining plant burned. The family picture in the albino's tent burned. Some men ravaged the processing mill to look for ores of gold. Then they ran across the field carrying the ores and a few possessions. The fire reached the cranes. The structures of timber collapsed and jammed the shafts. Someone was asphyxiated in the fumes. Tons of waste stank of heated metal and acid. The rope and pulley lifting the pail from the shaft burned. The supply of tobacco, which the keeper tried to ration for the entire community, burned. The sacks of corn and rice, which were holed all over by mice, burned. A chair rocked back and forth in the wind, as it usually did at this hour when the owner was alive, and burned. The beds, still hollow with the weight of bodies now absent, burned.

It was daybreak. The fire died down. There was gradual brightening on the field. The albino said he would keep things this way. The boy said they were coming, the big guys with guns and tanks. The plain was deserted, save by members of the gang. It was morning. The mining pit stank. The boy said they were coming, the big guys with guns and tanks. They would exact their warrant, forfeit what they did not own. Far away, in other villages, schools were beginning to raise their flags for the morning ceremony. The boy cried and deep in his heart he knew that all societies were founded in blood. The albino said he would keep things this way. Outside the town, a lizard feasted on the dried carcass of the snake, its calm visage appeared to watch the burning. The town sunk in horror. The albino grinned. He said he would keep things this way. The boy said they were coming.

Years later, the priest stood on a pulpit. It was the anniversary of a bombing that happened in the city business district. The provincial

governor, mayor and their officials were present in the front rows. The culprit had not been caught and identified. "Our misfortunes are neither punishment nor a message from the Lord. The meaninglessness of our catastrophes -- isn't this what the Book of Job is all about?" The people in the church were suddenly rapt. "*There was a man--*" he started. The people looked. He paused, hesitating to recall. Then he shook off his train of thought. Through all these years, the tongue could still not limn the edges of terror. He had seen things that were beyond comprehension. How could he, with mortal knowledge, be permitted in homily to say that there was no sin in man's heart except the sin of having been born? He wept -- wept for the uttermost degradation of all that was good. He lingered in doubt, and lulled the crowd with a more comforting anecdote.