

There are three of us sitting around the sycamore table. Witness to the stillness of the collective, the condiments bare worn labels. Movement is reflected on a patron's glass, between the collective assertion of presence lies the intricate imbalance of stance and soul. My woman, she sits to my left. Her face is painted white, her hand rests on our guests. It lingers there, as we are caught in this moment, she extrapolates her desire through their connection. She had brought me here with a hurried hand, I had followed without question. Little can stop me from being pushed, she is equally backbone and gust. Her friend sits there, he smiles. He is uncouth, ungroomed. His scent is strong, but not unpleasant. Like tobacco, only light, distant. Black ink covers his exposed wrist, it spirals upward into his overcoat. It was raining on the way here, perhaps that is what has dulled his scent.

"Have you brought it?" My woman asks, her extended hand lingering on his.

"I have it," he says, pulling back from her embrace. In his jacket's inner pocket there is a brown bag, its crumbled around some smaller container within it. I know what it contains. Its unexposed properties torment me, but I say nothing. It's not my place to, I was told not to speak to the man. I follow orders like an aged soldier, marching forward to wherever my commander wishes.

A waiter sees the transaction, she has stopped at our table, menus in arm. She is aged beyond her years; her yellowing skin betrays her anguish. Rough hands, she limps slightly. I had noticed in her approach, she keeps one hand resting on her hip, as if she were assuring the socket stuck. Behind her spotty makeup, there are obvious signs of bruising, her cheekbone has been roughed up. I wish to ask her about it, but I know not to. Our guest asks for a cup of coffee, unashamed to display the suspicious package. I think he has noticed it too; his gaze seems to harden; he watches her limp when she leaves. I've never seen either of them before, waiter or guest, but I feel as if they are related somehow. Everyone in this room seems connected. From the distant pair of old men, talking quietly over eggs, to the wench cleaning the floors in the corner, we are all witness to the centerpiece of the room. From each of our chests, a chord has been tethered to this small package. I know this from the way the old men's voices shifted in the presence of the bag, they have slid slightly forward, I can see how their drooping ears perk up. The wench too has been touched by this, her mop now pushes towards the opposite direction, her right ear is turned towards our table, desperate to pick up something.

"Should we open it up here, or wait till later? You're welcome at our place, there's plenty of room," she says, grabbing the package out of our guest's hands. He doesn't seem pleased at her possessiveness, he can feel the strings stretch, and finds it unpleasant.

"There's no reason to wait, feel free to check it. I guarantee you its quality is as described, if you haven't felt it already then you will once you see it. I've been growing it for years now. The price is worth it, that much I'm sure of. Don't think I've ever grown such a potent batch." His voice is slightly strained, it ruins his pitch. What I do know is that he isn't lying. I spent some time researching his goods, I cross referenced his most recent patrons. They all spoke happily about the product, of the five of them he had found, only one had refrained from planting it. I had spoken in length to her and had learned much more about her than the

seeds. She was new to the craft; it would be her first batch. Virginal, she was curious and asked me many questions. Once I had answered all of them, she had given me her address. In a few days, once I had followed through with my own plans, I would join her and lead her through the process. I was surprised she had purchased the product; her voice was kindly, and she seemed too pleasant for the profession.

My woman slapped the dealer's hand away, he had reached out to grab the bag back. I reclined further, sinking into my seat. We had been here before, with a different fellow, and he had done the same. We lived in a cyclic world; the waiter would arrive within the next two minutes. She would not remark on the package, she knew what it held. Her limp was proof of it, her injury had been earned upon her unwelcome transgression, all the way back on our first dealings. I had lied. I know her well. I enjoy play such games with myself. And there she was, three cups balanced precariously on a small platter. A small thimble of cream sat in the middle of the three cups. Her attention to detail was not missed, she had recreated the scene with some subconscious intent. I hoped that neither buyer nor partner would notice, else I feared I would be sent down again. Her voice was pleasant, to hear it twisted into screams and yelps was a travesty I had been subjected more often than I wished. It wasn't her fault; the content of the bag twisted all the minds it enveloped in strange and latent ways. If I were to check the table of the old men behind us, I reckoned I'd find similar imagery.

My woman waited for her to leave, pouring a bit of cream into her coffee. Lifting it to her nose, she inhaled deeply. Our guest was antsy, he wanted to leave. Somewhere like him, anxious and worried. Others were cocky, they'd flaunt their goods, twisting the poor patrons with no regard to their less immediate casualty. We never ordered from the same person twice, my woman liked to catalogue their progress. This package would be the last, following its growth and analysis we'd have covered all the known marketers. There were more out there, amateurs who worked without monitoring, but all were simple breeders of given stock. Like the girl I would visit.

"Open the package, and we can be done with this ordeal. I'm tired of waiting," she commanded. I followed her instruction and carefully extracted the small box from the bag. Compressed in white carbon-based plastic, I tested its weight. Finding it satisfactory, I withdrew my knife from my pocket. Flicking up the blade, ignoring the distant poorly hidden gasp of the snooping wench, the blade was pressed upon the plastic, severing it easily. No larger than the size of my palm, I exposed the small cubic container to light. Inside were the seeds, small little things, hardly recognizable. Little limbs were apparent, they had not been sealed properly. It was a shoddy job, but it wouldn't impair our own growths. It was no wonder the man was anxious, handiwork this shoddy could get someone killed. If he had waited any longer to euthanize them, his product would have been worthless.

"You expect us to pay full price for these?" She said, taking it from my hand. Lifting it up under the fluorescent light bulbs, the little buds began vibrating, their little bodies writhing in pain.

“No, of course not! I wanted to warn you, I was, just not here. I’ll take ten percent off, I’m terribly sorry.” His voice was panicked, the poor man must have done his research too. It was audacious of him to give us the runts of the pack. I wished I could have pulled him aside to question his motivation. It was of little importance. I was sure I’d be sent to meet him soon enough regardless of the products quality. Still, it surprised me, the others had found no issue in their own purchases.

Dolling out the cash, the man’s expression only grew more dreadful. Halfway through the allotment of her bills, he stopped her, this time grabbing onto her hand. “That’s more than enough, I won’t take any more. Consider it reparation for my insolence.” He was managing the pain well. I lifted my boot, and he let out a gasp.

She looked up at him. Her smile was harsh, I knew the look well. “Give him your hand. We need new blood anyways. It’s the least you can do, I’m sure. We wouldn’t want to have you leave on bad terms, it’s always tragic when we lose a respectable dealer. Our profession is small enough as it is, it’s such a tightknit community after all.” I loved her for that. From my bag, resting beside my damp boot, I withdrew a small plastic bag.

I handed the knife to her, taking care of the bag’s sterilization. We had never done this here, not in front of so many people. It was always my incisions, to stray from the formula would be unwise. She wouldn’t endanger the integrity of our own batches; it was a game she was playing. I still cleaned the bag, accordingly, taking the necessary chemicals from my bag, I prepared it as I would for myself.

“Please, there’s no need. I’ll draw it myself, please hand me the knife,” the dealer was saying. It was pointless, the whole ordeal was already finished. The other patrons had turned away, the link to the little box had been severed. They continued with their breakfast; the wench had returned to the backroom. Our waiter, knowing not to trespass on our business, was hidden away, waiting for us to leave. The fool kept repeating the settlement but didn’t try to pull away. My woman, her face expressionless, pressed the serrated edge against his hand. In response, I bridged my hands around the edge of the bag, holding it open under his hand. She cut deep, the dealer’s arm was shaking, the movement drawing more blood.

“Now turn your hand over.” He obliged. I watched the red liquid fall down the sides of the bag, distorted by their collision with the premade concoction. First red, it met then shifted into a dark purple, each drip drawing new pigment from its partnering element. For a few minutes, she held his arm there, her grasp around his wrist was impervious to movement, she was as still as a statue. Eventually the mixture had equalized, its color an oxidative blue. After pressing some napkins onto his bleeding hand, he pocketed the money and quickly left the restaurant. I allowed myself a glance at her, and was pleased in seeing her reanimated, downing the rest of her coffee.

We left a few minutes after, leaving the waiter a large tip. She had seen her; I would be returning to visit the poor girl once more by the end of the evening. Outside the rain falls softly. We both carry umbrellas, for our sake and the product’s. Any moisture can ruin it, our crop is a delicate one. Opening the door for her, I take her jacket from inside the car. The leather is

delicate too, we've paid fine money for it. Our once overpowering poverty is long since departed. For two years, we have researched, devouring all possible sources, there was no time for labor outside our craft. I like to think of our first day in our lab, how expressive her smile had been, the laughing tone behind her speech had lasted for a week. It's gone now, we've long since been consumed, hobby turned worship. I'll think of her smile tonight when I fulfil my part of the agreement.

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It's dark when I return. Our lab is small, but the largest in our field. Operating from her family home, we cleared most of their forested yard, hiring contractors to build the facility in the back. I am proud of it too; it was mostly my design. Where we could not use hired hands to finish the more intricate portions, I had been employed. Growing up in the shadow of my carpenter father, smaller elements were feasible. She's sitting in the front room, waiting for me. I give her the affirmation she desires; she rubs my bruised knuckles. It's a pleasant gesture, I pull her up and lead her into the decontamination room. Our operation is practiced, our dance is mechanical. Clothes discarded, we scrub ointment into our skins, wrapping our hair up in nets. We are thorough, as always, and it takes ten minutes for us to prepare. At the center of our cleaning is the seed, now transferred into an incubatory box. Finding ourselves ready, the fans start up, the room's air is filtered out, the gate unlocks, and we can enter our Eden.

There are eight beds of fluid, each separated by plastic barriers. Each is marked, none may encounter one another. Cross breeding them is fatal, each genome is genetically incompatible. Upon contact with another strain, they become aggressive, tearing into the other's makeup. It's a bloody affair; a Picasso and Monet realized, their subjects animated and pitted against one another- paint flowing from each other's severed veins. We learned this quickly, the results gifted us the opportunity to rebuild from scratch; the lab was compromised. Anguish, unlike anything imaginable, weeping over late children. The furthest bed is empty, the embryonic-esc fluids have not yet been introduced, they await the seed's preparation. Taking the box from me, she lays it down on a cart, grabbed from the side of the operative center. I've left the bag of blood back in the lobby, I take a fresh one from my suit's pocket, handing her a scalpel. Proceeding as we had earlier, my blood is drawn, filling the bag. The chemist of our duo, she doesn't waste time, mixing in the other components as I fill the bag. It's done, the seed sits at the bottom of the half foot deep trough.

When I was younger, I was fascinated with birth. It was a holy thing, something alien and yet intrinsically human. To witness life, that absurd thing, brought forth by mortal flesh, that was something preposterous. My mother was a farmer when she was a girl, through her grace we always had litters of critters. Rabbits, puppies, kittens, once even pigs. Our father never let us keep them. We lived in a rural area, but it was far from a farm; there was no space for mewing creatures. I would always tend to their birthing, assisting the yowling cats and whimpering dogs. A little boy veterinarian, they would call me, and I lapped it up; I was in the second year of vet school when I first found her. There is no way to describe the appearance of the seed, it is

impossible to depict the scene of its fertilization. But if I could, I would paint it so, the inversion of birth. There is a moment of stillness when the little creature is finally pushed out of the womb, when it first breaches the open air. A condition of life is met, it's a very religious moment. But when that first drop of nectar falls onto a seed, something breaks. Instead of a checkpoint being met, instead of some evolutionary crown being placed, its stripped away. Upon witnessing the shriveling inversion of mater that the seed presents, the magic is lost. Birth instead seems to be stealing away from the mother, a theft instead of a gift. For the seed takes from itself, from the cataclysm's event horizon, it negates rather than produces.

She had shown this to me a week after we met. Her friend was an amateur, through some unknown means she had received a handful of the seeds. With instructions scratched onto the back of her lab notebooks, I had opened my palm for the first time. Nothing was ever the same, not after watching that. It died, of course, moments after its creation, and I was stolen away with it. Together we had watched something divine, and we had been bound together ever since. This was our twentieth batch; it would be our last. We did not bother with jovial informalities, there was no speaking; speech expelled compromising microbes. Any contamination would set us back years, we danced upon a dangerously balanced beam.

The first drop fell. There is an impossible to miss gravity of its absorption. The liquid is thick, the blood has been clotted by the mixture's induction. One expects it to splash off the little ball, to splatter a bit. No such thing happens, not one molecule is left unabsorbed. Around the edge of the seed is now an invisible void. Any organic matter that touches it will be taken, if I were to reach out to touch it, my finger would be consumed. A second drop falls, the void grows larger. Quickly, I pull a specialized plastic wrap from the side of the bed, spreading it over the top. Once the void encounters synthetic material its growth stops, it refuses to proceed where it is not fed. With the scalpel, she expertly cuts open a small hole. Looking at the pool, allowing the observation of the anomaly, is dangerous. Within it is a tide of irresistible dissonance, sloshing onto itself with the consistency of sickly mucus. It too consumes through observation.

We step back, running tests on our other batches. They've all passed their prime, their fertility has waned. Our fruit are not long for the world, they cannot be sustained, the entropic assertions are silenced by the dominate will of order. But they still are good for study, their bone's marrow has not yet rot. Dormant, she goes to our first tub, where the void has hardened, the plasma condensing into a solid state. Touching it with bare hands is not fatal, unlike the fresher batches, but the sensation is unpleasant and lingering. Taking a sterile scalpel from her bag, she scrapes some of the dark topsoil off, careful to not push hard enough to send bursts of it into the air. Seeing she's deposited some into a small container, I turn the fume vents on. At the end of the day, I'll take the filters and burn them. We move to the next bed and repeat the same process. On the eighth, we stop. Its consistency is not solid enough, we've yet to find safe ways to take samples of younger specimens.

In the properly allotted time, we return to the active bed. In under half an hour it too will expire, leaving us little time to work. Of all our previous grows, this one has been reported to have the shortest lifespan, but the highest potency.

“How are you today, dear?” She asks, bending over the edge of the bed. Her nude form comes to mind, summoned by her poise. “It’s been rather hectic recently, we’re so close to the end. I’m afraid that I won’t be strong enough to proceed. But after all that we’ve done, all these hours... I have doubts and I can’t rid myself of them. Its not that I worry about the contingencies. I don’t feel pity about that waiter, or the dealer. Or any of the other’s we’ve touched. They are the same as us, suffers. What concerns me is our children. We don’t deserve them, they’re pure. And we taint them with out blood, that’s always been my biggest worry. That they’re dying because we’re not good enough. And it would be your fault, mine too.”

“You fret too much. Life, death, a beginning, and an end. Our... our children. They don’t share our worries. They don’t know death or birth, and that’s why we’ve come to love them. Embrace each other. That’s what we’ll need to do, and then it will all be fine. We’ve come far too far, to waste the sacrifices of our little cherups is unthinkable, just like you said.” I say, resting my hand on her back. I am gentle, I approach slowly, she can’t be exposed yet. “In the end even the most stoic are prone to nostalgia and unease. Don’t think any more, my dearest, you’ve thought enough. We are to leave those silly things behind, what else would we be doing?”

She’s mumbling something to herself, I don’t care to ask what. I nudge her and let the last few milliliters of our mixture fall into the void. It devours them, an asteroid striking the open sea, they’re swallowed explosively. I watch her finish it; I see her step away from the table. She’s looking at me now, her face is soft. Sorrowful, her eyes reveal her realization. Mortality only appears itself at its conclusion. That violent passion has been subdued; her life’s end has stripped her of her dominative tendencies. I wish to take her now, to pass the great reckoning eclipse with her in my arms.

“Come here, we should leave it to finish.” I must tear us away from the child, else we might indulge the atmosphere’s fatalistic subliminals. Its not our time yet. “Dearest, we haven’t too long,” I quietly tell her, grabbing her wrist. I lead her like a child out of the room, stepping into the disinfectant chamber with her shortly behind. “Seal that door, please.” She does what I ask. A fierce woman, I embrace her unusual submission. The flare of the blade wielding amazon is gone now, she has given all her passion to the hardening crop behind us. A click sounds, the airlock has revolved twice, our impurity can no longer taint Eden. She feels the separation from her child, her eyes grow more downtrodden.

“I don’t want you now. We don’t have time for this,” she says, her voice soft. Anguished. A more accurate description. I am insatiable. “Do you remember when we first met?” When I don’t respond, fearing the tone of my voice, she continues. “Back then, well only two years ago... I don’t think we’ve changed at all. I want to. Desperately, I want to believe that I’m different from them, that all we’ve accomplished has changed something, but I can’t. I just can’t, and I don’t know why. What, what’s the point of any of this? Darling, I never thought I would actually finish it, our plans...” I look in her eyes, daring her to continue. This weakness of hers is expected. To parade with consumptive pride, only to find blood on the long-fated napkin, she knew to expect her failures. We had planned around them; I will not forget my promise to her. “I don’t think I want to continue. This process, it was supposed to save us. I felt passionate about

something, finally. And you were there with me all along, everything was as it should be. I grew brazen, I've done terrible things. And enjoyed doing them, in telling you to do them. I thought that was growth. But it's not, and I see that." She's grown quieter as she's gone on, her voice is so soft I've been forced to draw closer to her. I don't wish to touch her empathetically, I station myself so I may be approaching her, but not touching. It is cruel, but I have made her a promise.

"What point is there to dying if I'm still the same as I was before? I wanted an end point; I wanted a journey. It was so dull, so awfully terrible to be alive. But being with you, doing what we have, that was supposed to fix that. And I thought it did..."

I take her hand and rub the back of it lightly. She wants consul, this is all I am willing to give. Wrapping my fingers around her wrist, I place my not yet scabbed palm on her hand, forcing her to see the white lines that accompany it. "This is proof of our commitment. You've bled for them too. You have changed, you've been a wonderful mother to them." She tries to speak, I squeeze her hand hard, rupturing the cut. My spilt blood silences her once again. I show her my other hand, exposing bruised knuckles. "Others have suffered too. But they don't have any hold on us. You're thinking of all we've done. You're trying to hide behind our actions, claiming you haven't changed. You don't fool me. We've lived, we've changed, far more than anyone else. How many times have you witness the birth of a child, only something far more profound? A creation that ascends us, born and buried under our guidance, our flesh, and you claim you haven't changed, you haven't lived." My voice is becoming too loud. I don't care for its aggressive quality. I proceed carefully, tenderly. "We've lived twenty lives at least. You're scared because of how much you've felt. Our silly bodies don't understand what we've seen, and you wish to keep living just to attempt the analysis of an impossible task. One thing that hasn't changed is that you always had to test everything..."

My words have had no effect on her. But my presence has, the removed closeness, the touch of my flesh, the warmth of my blood. I could have blathered, spoken foreign languages, it wouldn't matter. For it was all in her head, just as it was in mine. She knows this, she's far brighter than I. Her doubts were my own, we had predetermined this encounter, our dance had long since been planned out. She was to stand up now, we'd keep chaste. Standing, waiting in the sealed off room, we will wait for the child's expiration. And that what we do, we off each other no more words. Time passes irregularly, there are no clocks, no sunlight. Just us, our bodies, our breaths. And the illusion of the finish line, the great feast awaiting us. I like to imagine it as a halo, only instead of resting upon my crown, it'll enrapture the world. Every entity will be wrapped in golden light, we'll be unified in our shared heaven. Purity of action, divinity would promise respite from the weight of the end. I want to tell her about this dream, she'd laugh at me, and we would find our own halos in our cheery dissonance.

I reckon its time.

We don't bother washing again, we leave our clothing behind. We are not the first to attempt this, there have been a multitude of attempts in the past. They end violently. Our dear friend, we had witnessed her attempt at it a year prior. She had grown her own strain, and seeing it harden, she had harvested it. From a good distance, not knowing what was to come from it, we

had watched her consume it. Her flesh had been inverted. When pulling back the skin on an old man's flabby neck, his face will tighten, it will regain some of its tight youthfulness. Then you'll release it, and he'll return to his vulture-esc appearance, the trick will be over. For her, the trick had no conclusion. In every direction, mimicking the congestion of digital noise, her skin was pulled, with each extrusion another spot was forced into ingestion. A ferrofluid's exposed to magnets, she pulsated, the void-like properties of the live body had been transferred. It was silent and instant, her implosion. Her own makeshift laboratory, a small R.V she lived in, was struck by the singed remains of her clothing. There was no blood, no remnants of her other than the torn clothing. My girl still has them. Her sense of irony can be frightening.

We are looking down upon the expired bed. She takes her scalpel, and we obtain our sample. To the very back of the room, to our tabernacle, we take it. Waiting, sealed in small plastic vials, are the remnants of the other twenty. At the center is a sterile metal bowl. While I was out taking care of the waitress the night before, she had been tending to this display. It was almost reverent; she had done a fine job. Her hands don't tremble, they're steady. I let her empty the fine powder into the bowl. This is her job, her part of the ritual. To trespass upon her now would be to defile her very essence. We now exist only in this moment, the pitch-black dust gathering at the bottom of the bowl has stripped away all senses of past and future projections. I see her empty the last vial, it is my turn now. She steps to the side. In this flash of time, she does not exist. Only the bowl. I stir it gently, rocking the sides of the dish. One final time, I gesture her closer. She presses the cool blade onto my left palm. I shiver. Twenty drops fall, each's descent strikes a chord in my heart. I lust for the sound of their descent, for the violent silence of their consumption by the dormant beast below. At last, the final one falls. We have finished our work. The body has been prepared, the family gathered, the drink drunk. All that is left is execution, the conclusion of our great venture. The final act has come.

We are allowed one final moment of humanity. I can turn away from our creation only because I know it will be consumed shortly. She's gorgeous, the ecstatic sorrow has turned her beauty into godliness. Her face radiates, her bosom enthralls, her waist beguiles. I feel strong, I feel alive. My body has been sculpted; my mind is on fire. I know myself to be grand too, I can feel my divine appeal. A sharp static sensation lies between us. The air is heavy, lighting wishes to strike. Our eyes are met, but neither of us are looking at one another. We are too perfect, too purely human, to care for one another. Instead, our child consumes us, giving us more as it takes all. Pushing, inverting, exhausting, producing, I can almost feel my body revert. She reaches out her hand. I take it. I am alive. She is alive. We will perish soon. And this is good.

Together, we shove our conjoined hands into the bowl. Dosage matters not, we separate inside of it, shoveling it into our mouths. We are without grace, our humanity beams far too strongly to convolute itself. Taking something ethereal, our souls attempt osmosis, but succumb to the extremity of our differences. I am not dying yet, I take her, and she takes me. We are on the ground, throwing each about violently. My leg strikes a bed, upturning it. Like sand, our child drains onto the ground. We bathe in it, it fills our orifices, invigorating our tussling. One by one we topple them, maddened. We are covered black and are beautiful for it. It clings to my bleeding palm, liquidizing upon its contact. She has cut her wrists, her heel, all along her body

she has torn into herself. I rush to clean her wounds, to taste more of our crop's ambrosia. With equal zest, she tears into my skin. We feed the laboratory; we give our flesh to our children with inhuman pleasure. This is not how it was supposed to go, but I no longer care to think about the consequence. All that matters is her and I, through our extension we are birthing something far greater than ourselves, we are evolving, we are becoming.

I wonder if she screams, if she's thinking of me too. I've lost sight of her. Its all black now, everything has been muted. I believe myself to be dead. I suspect she is too. I wish to see her again, to have her in my arms once more. We died artistically, just as we had wished. But I still feel unfulfilled, I still desire her, I desire more. It wasn't enough, the conclusion had not the flare I wished it to. I want to see the ending, what our mangled bodies look like, if anything remains. I am certain something lives on in that room. The human body is more than blood and flesh, the soul, those damning electric impulses, that grand machine, must also be consumed. I wonder if we've been conjoined, or if our souls have been taken together. If our child, just now waking, is truly a reflection of us. I think that would make me happy. I only wish I could do it again. There is something I wanted to tell her, as we stood next to each other, moments before our conclusion. I am unsure of what it is, but I am certain if I could do it again, I would know. If given another chance, she'd still be waiting for me. Sitting at that little desk, her eyes bored, her face titled down. I wonder if she can see our child. I always loved children. I wanted one for myself for the longest time. I think she did too.