

FROST

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KING

I peer down into the dusty hole. It is full of dirty water and filthy crouched men snipping steel, forming cages. I look at the excavators, the ditches for pipes, trenches for cables, the concrete with puddles of water forming on it, the grimy half-sunken porta potty. A small wooden fence surrounds the enormous hole. A cloud hangs above.

That was when everything was shiny and new, when stuff was still being built and being made, and no one questioned that the insatiable appetite for these things may dry up or cease.

The shuttering is manhandled and hammered into place around the rusting steel cages and concrete is poured in. The building rises higher. The pace is quick because that is the mood of the time— a new building, new shops, a new gallery, new people, new business, and a new city, all appearing in the blink of an eye. As the building rises it gains a view over its neighbours to forests and mountains to the east and, to the west, the ocean.

Today I watched the crane lifting a sheet of glass up to the rising concrete skeleton. It reflected the waiting traffic at the nearby stop sign as it swung into place. I'm going to have a piece of that. That's my new life. The hole is where I am going to park my car. That mirrored glass will frame my view. The rain-filled sky is where I will sleep.

The city of progress and vision, an empty ruin before it even began.

The building has opened and I am first in, the first resident. My new key fob allows me full access—beep it goes on every door. It is perfect. Everything is beautiful and polished and joyous. The sun shines through the large glass panes as I wander about the corridors; and outside the wind passes through the firs and ornamental grasses. I eat a doughnut and drink some coffee.

Frost King is the building's name. Impressive. Huge squares of mirrored glass rising high above the pavement, held in place by a heavy frame. And at its centre an endless forest, where the reflections of Douglas Firs bounce backwards and forwards between the mirrored glazing.

The big, blank new gallery I was to run: What would I put there? Who would come? Culture for the boxed IT workers who were to live above.

Good morning, I said to my new neighbours in the elevator. I wondered who they were, what they did. I have met a Japanese man in pyjamas and an Indian couple who sometimes play pool in the residents' lounge. Last night a group of bachelors had a BBQ on the communal balcony. I peered down and smiled at them. Across the freeway is a new hospital, and I can see a man running to the back door of the Blood Centre carrying a box.

I stood looking out at the generous spacing and ample proportions of the streets and buildings: Did it ever have the makings of a fine city? Could it every have been a fine city if things hadn't gone the way they had? I had watched the new residents arrive, nodded to them as they peered into the still empty gallery space in expectation, nervous but eager. A girl with black hair, more intent than the rest, caught my eye. Neat and well groomed, her history was uncertain.

I watched my garbage bag hurtle down the chute towards the subterranean garage; I leant almost too far. I took a bath and washed my hair. I have many lighting combinations in my bathroom alone. The digital display on the microwave cast shadows in my apartment as I watch the freeway roar below, the headlights flashing past. I am in the future.

The firs in the endless forest have stopped growing. They had been brought in already mature from a tree nursery up the coast, their roots overly trimmed to fit within the shallow soil bed that allows for the garage below. No birds want to nest in them, they know it. The needles will stay attached to the branches, giving the impression of life for some time before they drop and gather in the aluminium corners of the planters and blow into the lobby. Already the burrowing insects are under the bark, the woodlice making tunnels through the dying timber. If someone walking in the garden was to stop and tear off the rough red bark they would see the weaving paths.

The initial wave of residents slowed more quickly than even I expected; the uptake of the retail units was not as good as was planned for. The gallery also remained empty. I was unsure about how to approach this place, about what could be done, by who and why. The windows onto the street became dirty with traffic grime and dust from far off, but no one came to clean them. The traffic continued on the freeway, but no one was on the streets. I did see the girl every once in a while, wearing a pressed white silk blouse and black skirt and walking through the gardens, sometimes late, heading out to somewhere else.

I don't always sleep now. At night the streets are empty. I walk out across the bridge and look back at the building, which is almost dark, save for a few white lights on the top floor. Locating my apartment window, I imagine my own silhouette looking back down at me, my own ghost. The mountains are covered in snow and a cold wind pushes past the bridge. I feel swept along even as I stand and look down upon the cars racing beneath. I wonder about where they are going. They aren't stopping here. What do they know that I don't? As I return I meet a man carrying a box. Go and get what you want, he says. They are throwing it all away. The restaurant has closed and the residents have been stripping it bare. There is not much left; a box of napkins is all I take.

No one has ever emptied the rubbish. The large wheeled bins at the bottom of the garbage chute filled up quickly, and soon the garbage was rolling off the tops of them and into the room itself. Now the space is full, and the garbage is backing up the chutes, up towards the levels where the apartments are located. Down in the garbage room the waste is starting to rot and slip and fall and compact. There are no rats, as the room is a concrete cube set under the ground with a steel door that has never once been opened. But there are smaller creatures and microbes that have found their way down the chute along with the garbage, inside the food waste, and now they are setting to work. As the rotting begins, the room begins to warm and the bacteria and bugs multiply in this dark putrid pit. The concrete box gets hotter and hotter. Sometimes emissions of sulphurous methane form and bubble, travelling up the chute towards the other floors.

Yesterday my Indian neighbour said goodbye. He was going home. His contract had been cancelled. Alone in the gym I rowed, watching the view. I imagined I was rowing out across the ocean, going west towards a dying sun. On the freeway the traffic only goes south now, rarely north. I saw a man in the building next door. I waved, but he didn't wave back. That night I went out again to get away from a terrible smell that have entered my apartment. I walked farther across the bridge than before. A large SUV with black-tinted windows hurtled past me and onto the freeway ramp. It clipped a cat, caught out by the solitary vehicle. The SUV did not stop and joined the flow of traffic south. As I neared the cat's body it suddenly jerked, its spasms lifting it momentarily off the road. In the air it twisted around, pirouetting awkwardly. Two crows flew down to wait patiently on the metal barrier beside the road. I continued on past the hospital and was surprised to find a bar open in the empty city street. I drank a beer, then another. Later I had sex with a man I met in the bar, first in the filthy restroom and then in the elevator on the way up to my apartment. Bodies pressed the buttons and the doors slid open, ping, on empty corridors. This morning he was gone and I was bruised. I will go to the gym and run towards the mountains.

Some people came—just kids, I thought. They came from across the bridge, from the old city that sat far, far off on the other side. They peered through the filthy panes then came in through the fire escape from the street. They bounced around the large empty space, gauging it with their movements far better than I was ever able. They were jittery, with quick eyes, hands fast and shaking, their calls sharp and high. They saw me but didn't engage, a challenge or indifference? Later more came from across the bridge, agitated and hungry looking. I was wrong to think of them as kids. Some unknown circumstance had shaped them into very different creatures, instinctive and base. They ripped the insides from the empty restaurant next door and made a fire in the centre of the space. I was surprised that the building's sprinklers were still functioning. They didn't seem to mind, just built the fire higher, stripping off their wet clothes. That night the gallery filled with water, and their naked bodies moved knee high through the black pool. The boys, all tall and slender, their backs scratched and scarred, tugged at their long, narrow twitching cocks and spit on their hands for lubrication, circling around. The girls' naked bodies looked fragile and pale, breasts flat across empty chests, hips and buttocks like the boys. Despite their

brittle looks the girls moved with a confidence in and out of the boys, touching and grabbing. Sometimes the pace would quicken, the weaving movements of the bodies through the reflective pool would become faster, the boys would tug harder at their dicks and the girls would flick themselves more rapidly and more roughly, bodies congregating to focus their collective attentions upon an individual amongst them. They continued through the night. As first light came into the gallery through the dust and smoke and steam, I moved carefully to the exit and took the stairs to the floors above.

I visited the eleventh floor. Most of the apartment doors were open, water everywhere. One was empty, stripped completely, even the bath gone. In another my Japanese neighbour lay in his pyjamas on the sofa, not moving, the TV on. I met a couple on the stairs—it was dark and slippery—and they were pulling a heavy bag from the floors above. They screamed when they saw me and ran, leaving the bag behind. Mostly there were just clothes inside. Then I tried the twelfth floor and I found my man from the bar. He was alone. We fucked on the balcony and I screamed at the dark sky and the wind whipped around my naked bony arse, freezing the wetness of my lips. You'll wake the dead, he said. Later I rowed for miles. My body is stringy and battered. The rain lashes against the windows, but the mountains are still white. I press my face against the cold glass, no one to wave at now.

Water trickles down the walls of the empty apartments. Expensive furniture sits drenched and heavy in the middle of open living spaces. Extra king-sized beds slump as they slowly absorb the puddles that have gathered in their centres. Algae, too, begins to colonise the large pools that cover the floors and the folds of damp bedding. Small mosses find a footing in the corners of the rooms and the crevices of sofas. Decay spreads from out of the garbage chute, coming up from the warm rotting heart in the basement, creeping down corridors and into the apartments. Moulds the colours of blooming bruises spread up the walls, across surfaces, finding purchase and fuel on the food left in designer kitchen cupboards.

I was living in one of the empty flats, sheltered from the slow drips beneath a plastic sheet strung between ruined furniture and door handles, my mattress raised off the floor by rotting pallets found in an empty retail unit. The heady smell of decomposition that pervaded the air, along with the dusty mildew that rose up every time I moved, left me hazy and weak. At night I thought I could hear people moving around the building. I didn't know if the kids were still in the gallery below or if they have moved on. I saw the girl with the dark hair from the apartment window very early one morning. She was moving slowly and unsteadily back towards the building. She looked wan, her hair no longer glossy, her clothes ruined, her eyes hollow. One night a thin and broken dog crept into the apartment. It circled around my pallet island whilst I lay still, watching, until finally it settled on the mattress at my feet. In the morning it was dead.

My body is becoming emaciated and numb. I hardly recognise the person I was. Now I am empty, vacant, open to all who want to enter. I walk back at dawn from the bar. At this time of the day the vacant streets don't seem so strange. I can convince myself that as the sun rises higher, people will begin to go about their business like before. I know that is not true, for even the freeway is quiet now. From beside the hospital I see someone leap off a balcony of my building into the ornamental pond below. The geese honk and scatter. I am blank to it. The body rises to the surface. The birds don't return. Moss is growing on the walls of the reception. The seals between the glass panes have rotted and water pours in across the floor every time it rains. I think my building is empty now, save for the rot that is spreading across it. I am unwilling to leave. It was my future. The building and I share our sadness, we are both falling apart. We are frail and have been passed by.

A vivid emerald sheet has stretched itself across the rectangle of water that covers the polished concrete of the gallery floor. The algae flourish in the still pool, warmed gently from beneath, through the concrete, by the basement. Black charred timbers, now islands of microscopic life, float completely still upon the surface. The light shines jade as it passes through the plant-covered windowpanes along one long side of the space. Huge ferns grow down through the suspended ceiling, finding footing in the lighting tracks, dropping their spores onto the lake below. The gallery is transformed into something far more beautiful and complex than anything that ever could have been envisaged for it.

The dog had begun to stink, its carcass slowly caving in as it dissolved from the inside. I kicked it off the mattress with my feet but its stomach split apart as it rolled to the floor. The sight of its unravelling pearlescent intestines made me sick. I raised myself up slowly for the first time in days, lifted the dog by its hind legs over to the broken window, and threw it out. I saw it splash into the pond below, slowly rising to float besides another rotting body. Why am I waiting here I asked myself.

I was not alone. I was sitting in my slowly metamorphosing apartment, listening to the tiniest crackling minutiae of the spreading, colonising decay and hearing beneath it the deep sad calls of my building—I was sole witness to its slowing, trembling heart. A shot rang out from somewhere below. Absent and drifting for so long now, I was suddenly present and alert. In time more sounds came: another shot, muffled, crashing; high pitched shouts and hoots that made their way through the crumbling floors of the building, up the stinking, slippery stairwells; and then screaming, for a long time, the sound of a single voice. I sat willing it to stop, pleading for it to end, to pass into a dream I could tell myself never happened. But the cry filled each room of the building and soaked into the walls deeper than the streaming water ever could. It ricocheted up and down the foul corridors, and slowly it drew me to its source.

In the lobby the kids are returning, pushing in again from outside. They look hungrier now, wolf like, evolution's next step: quick hands, eyes knife sharp, their bodies lithe, welted and tagged, moving smoothly, unstoppably flowing through the spaces as they look for their quarry. Some glance around to appreciate the transformation of the place, a natural world of unworldly plants and colours held in place by a decomposing modernist grid. However, none stop. They move swiftly past the lost gallery, up staircases, up to the room the dog had fallen from. Within seconds the apartment is full. One fires a gun, but the slumped figure on the rotting pallets barely moves. Ripping down the plastic sheeting, some cut it into long blue strips. Another shot. The destitute figure is tipped from the mattress, screaming, clutching his wounded shin; the pallets are thrown aside. Hands grab at the wound, pulling it wide. Others scratch at his body, ripping the rags from his withered torso and revealing livid areas of colour where the buildings rot had begun to set in. He continues to scream. His hands and feet are pulled behind his back and tied with the strips of the blue tarpaulin. His body is hoisted up and suspended from the collapsing ceiling. His body hangs arched and taut, face down, at the edge of breaking. They descend upon him and he screams. The longer he screams the calmer the kids become. In time their movements slow, their attention drifts to one another and they reach for comfort in each others genitals until they become quiet, weaving in and out of each other as they unhurriedly circle the gently spinning body at their centre.

I saw what they did to him. I realised who the man was—the man from the gallery. I crouched back in the shadows of the corridor for hours, watching, rubbing at myself through my soiled knickers. I left before they stopped and lay still listening to his screams in my apartment. We are all vessels, all used for other people's wants at some time. I tell myself I will go back and help him, when I can.

A violent storm is rolling in across the mountains. The building senses its approach but knows it is too weak to defend itself. When the squall arrives, great panes of glass are ripped from their frames and fly through the air colliding with ornamental marble tiles flipped up from crumbling floors. It sounds tremendous, magnificent, orchestral. The dankness is sucked from the building as piles of rotting furniture and slow death fly out through the empty window frames. Old lives and past events move on with the storm as it turns and heads south down the coast, following the rank scent left by the departing populations.

I cling to an exposed concrete pillar while sprays of glass pincushion the air.

When I awoke I was alone. I was on a dry mattress, a mottled pink blanket over me, but still in the apartment. It seemed lighter with the glass in the window gone and a cool breeze passing through. A new clear sheet of plastic was suspended over me like a simple tent. My body had been washed and my wounds cleaned. I didn't remember too much of what happened to me and never tried to. Rusty tins of what later turned out to be some kind of hashed meat sat lined up beside me, a plastic container of reasonably clean water besides them. My body felt like death, and I was being given the chance to heal.

I rarely leave the building now. I feel I need to be with it, that I am part of it. I want to care for it, along with the man on the fifth floor. I think perhaps I sense an end approaching. Occasionally I may venture out to the nearest street corner to hear the tweet-tweeting of the pedestrian crossing. It sounds like birdcall to me, and now that the birds have gone I miss their presence. A lot of my time is spent up on the windswept roof, looking out at the other empty buildings. The hospital has also lost its windows; but there is no way to approach it because the bridge is just a pile of steel and rubble lying across the freeway. The storm did this, marooning us. Standing up at the railing I imagine the building as a grand old ship carrying me forward to new lands, more ghost ship than pleasure liner. It is a building stripped of its function and I am, too. Everything was torn from us, battered, soiled, stolen, and left to slowly petrify in the drying wind. I look beyond the hospital, over the devastated urban sprawl, out to the mountains where the storm has flattened great swathes of the forests that covered their sides. The wind that the storm brought has abated somewhat, but continues, carrying with it a fine white sand that accumulates amongst the fallen trees. Dunes gradually form, moving along empty streets into the city, filling sheltered corners and coming in through open frames. Out beyond the mountains, in the direction of the old city, smoke has been rising for days now, more each day. The wind pulls it towards us, turning the sky grey. Whatever is happening there is coming our way.

A clear mucous began leaking from between my legs. It left my withered buttocks feeling greasy—not nice like spunk, more like axel grease and sand. I found a fragment of mirror, leant it up against the skirting of the bathroom, and carefully bent over, looking between my trembling legs, pulling aside the yellow and black skin of my crushed balls and cock. My anus was swollen, large and bruised. A dark red that was almost black, it reminded me of a rose, its bloom nearly over, petals wide open and ready to fall at the slightest touch—not like the tight spring bud I remembered. It rested there sweating its grease, panting and gasping as the oily fluid slowly pushed its way from between its creases and across its petals. I touched it with the index finger of my right hand, the sickly grey-green mucous forming viscous bridges as I opened and closed finger to thumb. Its taste was salty and slightly fizzy. I vomited over and over, collapsing onto the cold tiled floor, a blood tinged pool creeping out from me. As I lay there, nights becoming days, vomiting each time I drifted into consciousness, the oily mucous began to seep from my armpits, from behind my knees, from around my eyes, and in a stinking film across my back. Slowly my body became covered with the discharge that oozed from my pores and the bloody bile of my vomit. My eyes became congested with it until finally I could open them no longer. My hair was plastered flat and buried beneath it and my body became glued and fixed in the foetus

position in which I lay. The sticky layer thickened and began to gently dry in the breeze that passed through the building, hardening slowly into a rigid shell. Within this bottle green cocoon my body churned and boiled, remaking itself anew.

The fires have begun in the city. More and more buildings are burning, flames reaching up the towers, columns of smoke rising to join one another high above. I notice an order and a logic to the burning of the buildings. From the rooftop I see a group of figures moving quickly down the street. I recognised their sharp calls. It'll be us soon, I tell the building. We'll be next.

The fires begin in the glassless gallery, in the lobby near the broken lifts, and where the customers once sat in the now gutted restaurant. Bits of timber, a couple tyres, and a few splashes of gasoline are enough to start it off. The breeze from the mountains that has been blowing for so many days has dried the building out and now it fans the flames that catch the tinder like mosses, ferns and algae. The blaze spreads up through rotten ceilings, smoke spirals up stairwells, walls blister quickly, the heat pushing deep into the heavy frame of the building. The building is weak, its facades are frail and easily lost to the heat; but its structure is strong and it holds on, letting the flames finally rid it of all past encumbrances, leaving only what's essential.

As the flames move up towards me, I move down. My thought is to get to my apartment, from where I first looked out upon the future. But my body is so thin now, so slow, that even with the greatest will I find it hard to move down the smoke-filled stairwell with any speed. My lungs scream from the fumes and the strain. When I see the flames close below I push through the nearest side door to evade them, but more flames have filled the corridor beyond. With nowhere else to go, I open the small metal hatch to my right and force my wasted body feet first into the chute. The built-up garbage inside has become spongy as the fungal rot has spread up through it from the basement, and I am able to force my way in through its softness. With the hatch pulled shut the smoke cannot enter and, although the reek of decay is overwhelming, I can at least breathe better. The webs of the mould begin to give way one by one and slowly I move downwards, as if being passed microscopic hand to microscopic hand, down through the centre of the building within this protected channel, through the fire all around, to the black garbage room below. As I sink lower the texture of the matter around me changes, becoming moist and slippery, a tangled amniotic fluid. The smell gets worse as I move through pockets of putrid air. The heat increases and my mind drifts until finally I arrive within the building's waiting concrete womb.

Flames burn blue against the surface of the glass-green cocoon. Its surface begins to glow red, then yellow, then white; but inside the man is protected. The extraordinary brightness all around becomes a psychedelic pattern behind his closed and dreaming eyes. In his mind he sees huge geometric forms moving around him, the flames making them bright pinks, turquoises, and pulsing golds as they pass above his head. At his feet the ground is moving, constantly falling away from him. He reaches up to grab hold of one of the moving shapes but they are too far off. He looks around for help and reassurance, but he is all alone.

The woman floats free, held up by the warm living solution around her. It soaks deep into her skin and moves through her blood. Within the absolute blackness of this protective chamber her mind is released from bodily thoughts and she dreams it is night, that she is flying—she is a child again, her hair a smooth black sheet blowing behind her in the wind. Her arms are spread wide and they look translucent against the ground below. There is no past or future, only this moment; and as she breaks through the heavy cloud a new young sun momentarily dazzles her. She rises higher, with nothing to stop her.

Walls fall away; excess material is shed; plant life blisters black against the structural frame; the heat distorts the rigid form of the building and planes shift. Irregular facets are formed, turning to accept the wind; lines slip and twist. The structure remodels itself into a more dynamic form, ready for the future.

As the flames begin to abate and the temperature drops, the building loosens its protective embrace from around its two passengers; the cocoon cracks and rolls from its ledge, the steel door opens.

I landed in the lagoon, the muddy waters breaking my fall. The encrusted shell that had covered me fell away at the impact, but saved me I think. Looking up at the precarious leaning frame I understood how my curled form could have tipped off the sloping exposed beams. As I lay at the edge of this silted pond, half in and half out of the rank waters amongst the corpses of dogs and men, my body felt heavy beyond compare. My mass had been multiplied during the fire; the weight of the building had been transferred to me as I had dreamt. I was now grounded, rooted, unable to rise above the ruined earth.

As I drift into consciousness my hand comes to rest upon the handle of a door. Pulling my feet to the ground, I push it down. The door that has never once been opened opens now with a swift, smooth action as if this was the moment it had been waiting for. I spill out upon the wave of viscous fluid. I am in what was the basement, but now is just a fire scoured pit. Above me the building is a blackened, leaning network of lines. Its surface is deeply charred, reptile like, embers glowing in the breeze. My hand blackens when I touch what's left. The wind dries me, takes the moisture from my skin, draws the fluid from my cells, and lifts the weight from my bones. I feel so light now, lacking any corporeal presence. I move upwards, lifting myself up between sooty posts and beams. The wind builds as I move higher. My skin is dry like parchment; the building's frame is thin and weightless. The wind howls and then screams. I cling to the frame.

As the wind builds it moves through the reconfigured elements of the building finding uplift upon the tilted and twisted elements. The wind strains hard, catching hold of every available surface of this remade, blackened form and slowly it pulls it into the air. The distorted boards form aerofoils and the leaning facades, wings. The burnt building lifts from the ground.

I see her there now, high up within the dark framework, as I feel my body sink away from the building. She appears as a ghost, looking down from the place it once lived. The beautiful skeletal form of the building rises up above me and I know they have left me behind and I am forsaken.

I look down upon the burnt black city as we rise higher into the air. Other buildings begin to catch the wind, to sway and leave the ground. The entire city is lifted from the earth, the buildings now giant dark kites rising with the breeze, moving out towards the ocean. Beneath me the dust and sand blows in from across the mountains and fills in the scars the buildings have left behind. The wind will bring more sand and dunes will form where a city once stood, covering everything that lies there.

The city lifts still higher, through the clouds, the trace of a woman
with it, blackened bones flitting on the wind.