



VINTAGE

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# PLOWING THE DARK

RICHARD POWERS

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## About the Book

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In a digital laboratory on the shores of Puget Sound, virtual reality researchers race to complete the Cavern, a bland white room that can become a jungle, a painting, or a vast Byzantine cathedral. In a war-torn city on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, an American is held hostage, chained to a radiator in an empty white room ...

Adie Klarpol, a disillusioned artist, is invigorated by the thrill of working with the Cavern's cutting-edge technology. As Cold War empires collapse and the Berlin Wall falls, she retreats into the cyber-realities she has been hired to create. In Beirut, English teacher Taimur Martin is held in solitary confinement by Islamic fundamentalists, where he must keep his mind whole by the force of his memory alone. What can possibly join two such remote places? Only the shared imagination, a room that these two people unwittingly build in common, where the strands of this wildly inventive novel coalesce into one.

## About the Author

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Richard Powers is the author of seven novels, including *Galatea 2.2* and *The Gold Bug Variations*, both of which were nominated for the US National Book Critics Circle Award, *Gain*, and *Operation Wandering Soul*, were nominated for the US National Book Award for Fiction.

ALSO BY RICHARD POWERS

*Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*

*Prisoner's Dilemma*

*The Gold Bug Variations*

*Operation Wandering Soul*

*Galatea 2.2*

*Gain*

# **PLOWING THE DARK**

Richard Powers

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For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its saying where executives  
Would never want to tamper; it flows south . . .  
— W. H. Auden, “In Memory of William Butler Yeats”

The first year of the war, Picasso and Eve, with whom he was living then, Gertrude Stein and myself, were walking down the boulevard Raspail a cold winter evening. There is nothing in the world colder than the Raspail on a cold winter evening, we used to call it the retreat from Moscow. All of a sudden down the street came some big cannon, the first any of us had seen painted, that is camouflaged. Pablo stopped, he was spell-bound. C'est nous qui avons fait ça, he said, it is we that have created that, he said. And he was right, he had. From Cézanne through him they had come to that. His foresight was justified.

—Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*



*This room is never anything o'clock.*

*Minutes slip through it like a thief in gloves. Hours fail even to raise the dust. Outside, deadlines expire. Buzzers erupt. Deals build to their frenzied conclusions. But in this chamber, now and forever combine.*

*This room lingers on the perpetual pitch of here. Its low local twilight outlasts the day's politics. It hangs fixed, between discovery and invention. It floats in pure potential, a strongbox in the inviolate vault.*

*Time does not keep to these parts, nor do these parts keep time. Time is too straight a line, too limiting. The comic tumbling act of causality never reaches this far. This room spreads under the stilled clock. Only when you step back into the corridor does now revive. Only escaped, beneath the failing sky.*

*Out in the template world, flowers still spill from the bud. Fruit runs from ripe to rot. Faces still recognize each other in surprise over a fire sale. Marriages go on reconciling and cracking up. Addicts swear never again. Children succumb in their beds after a long fever. But on this island, in this room: the faint rumble, the standing hum of a place that passes all understanding.*

# 1

Years later, when she surfaced again, Adie Klarpol couldn't say just how she'd pictured the place. Couldn't even begin to draw what she'd imagined. Some subterranean confection of dripped stone, swarming with blind cave newts. A spelunker's scale model Carlsbad. Summer dacha of the Mountain King.

*The Cavern*, Stevie had called it. Stevie Spiegel, phoning her up out of nowhere, in the middle of the night, after years of their thinking one another dead, when they thought of each other at all. The Cavern. A name that formed every shape in her mind except its own.

She had not placed him on the phone. *It's Steve*, he said. And still, she was anywhere.

Adie fumbled with the handset in the dark. She struggled backward, upstream, toward a year when an a capella *Steve* might have meant something. Steve. You know: the twelfth most common name for American males between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-eight?

*Steve Spiegel*, he repeated, hurt by her confusion. *Madison? Your housemate and collaborator? Mahler Haus? Don't tell me: you've torched your entire past.*

A vision of herself at twenty-one congealed in front of her, like the Virgin come to taunt Slavic schoolchildren. Recollection swamped her carefully packed sandbags. Steve Spiegel. The three of them had planned to live the rest of their lives together, once. He, she, and the man who'd live long enough to become Adie's ex-husband.

*Jesus! Stevie.* Her voice skidded away from her, a gypsum imitation of pleasure's bronze. *Stevie. What on earth have you been doing with yourself?*

*Doing . . . ? Adie, my love. You still make life sound like a summer camp craft project.*

*It isn't?*

*No, you decorative little dauber. It is not. Life is a double-blind, controlled placebo experiment. Has middle age taught you nothing?*

*Hah. I knew that at twenty. You were the one in denial.*

Tag-team remembrance dissolved the years between them. OK, the gaps and rifts. OK, all the expended selves that would never again fit into the rag box of a single curriculum vitae.

*Adie. Ade. You busy these days? I thought we might be able to hook up.*

Outside her loft, the stink of singed oil and rotting vegetables settled. Car alarms clear down to the Battery sounded the predawn call to prayer. She cradled the phone under her chin, a fiddler between reels.

*Steve, it's kind of late . . .* She hoisted the guillotine window above her futon, its counterweights long ago lost at the bottom of the sash's well. She crawled out onto her fire hazard of a fire escape, adopting her favorite phone crouch, rocking on her haunches, her lumbar pressed to the rose brick.

*Jesus Christ, he said. I am so sorry. Entirely forgot the time difference. What is it out there: like after one?*

*I mean, it's a little late for reunions, isn't it?*

Missing the whole point, the sole purpose of reunions, their sad celebration of perpetual too-lateness, the basic one-step-behindhood of existence.

*Oh, I don't want a reunion, Ade. I just want you.*

She laughed him off and they pressed on. They made the obligatory exchange of hostages, each giving over the short versions of their overland passage across the intervening decade.

*Seattle, he told her. Can you believe it? Your doltish poet friend, the one who used to spout "Sunday Morning" until late Monday night. Supporting the computer industry's insidious plan for world domination.*

*Still lower Manhattan, she replied. Your washed-up watercolorist. Currently supporting the wall of my crumbling apartment building with the small of my back.*

*Surprised? he asked.*

*About . . . ?*

*About where we've landed?*

*Nobody lands, she said. So how is the world of software?*

*It's the oddest thing, Ade. Ade: as if they still knew each other. You know, I lied to get into this business in the first place. Told them I knew C++ when I didn't know it from B--. But it turns out, I know this stuff in my sleep. Born to it. Code is everything I thought poetry was, back when we were in school. Clean, expressive, urgent, all-encompassing. Fourteen lines can open up to fill the available universe.*

*Different kind of sonnet, though, right? Different rhyme scheme?*

*I don't know. Sometimes you gotta wonder.*

Wonder, in fact, was why he'd called. He'd come to rest in a moist den of pine on a twisty black macadam road looking out over Puget Sound. He was coding for a start-up called the Realization Lab, the latest tendril of that runaway high-tech success story TeraSys. But the RL was still experimental, more of a tax write-off than a source of any near-term revenue.

*TeraSys? You mean you work for that little Boy Billionaire?*

*Indirectly, he laughed. And they're all boy billionaires out here.*

*What does your building look like?*

*What do you mean? My building, building? What does that have to do with anything?*

*I'm trying to visualize where you are. You're calling from work, aren't you?*

*I . . . well, I guess I am.*

*William Butler Spiegel! The man who swore he'd never do anything more serious than wait on tables, so as not to*

*compromise his muse. Still in his office in the middle of the night.*

*Middle . . . ? Out here, we're usually just getting started around 10 p.m.*

*Just tell me where you are. OK, look: I'll start. I'm squatting in my undershirt out on a black wrought-iron grille about twenty feet above the exhaust fan of the kitchen of a pasta dive . . .*

*He played along, the stakes high. Khaki shorts and a green raglan T-shirt. Kicked back in a molded plastic office chair in the middle of a . . . well . . . redwood-and-cedar kind of thing. Lots of river stone. Local materials.*

*Very tasteful, they declared in unison. Old shtick, recovered from a dozen lost lives ago.*

*Geez, I don't know. What does my building look like? I've never really thought about it, Adie.*

*Come on, poet. Look around you. Walk me through the front door.*

*Hmm. Let's see. Maybe 10,000 square feet of usable floor, all on a single story. Lots of brick and earth tones. A maze of little cubicles made out of those tan-fabric-lined divider things. There's a nice little sunken atrium and such. A ton of vegetation per cubic liter. Big panoramic expanse of passive-solar smart window looking out at Rainier, on the ventral side.*

*I see. Kind of a futuristic forest ranger's roost.*

*Sure. Why not? You'll love it.*

*Hang on. You? As in me . . . ?*

*He slowed and unfolded. We're putting together a prototype immersion environment we're calling the Cavern. Computer-Assisted Virtual Environ—Look, Adie. I'm not going to describe this thing to you over the phone. You just have to come see it.*

*Sure, Steve. I'll be out in an hour.*

*How about a week from next Tuesday? For a no-obligations site visit. All expenses paid.*

*Oh. Oh God. You told them I knew C++?*

*Worse. I told them I knew the greatest illustrator since representational art self-destructed.*

*Illustrator, Stevie? How tasteful. Haven't lost your knack for words, I see.*

Nothing had changed in him. He was still that kid of twenty, compelled to round up and protect everything he thought he loved. A mini-Moses, still shepherding around the dream of starting an artist's colony where he could gather all those who needed a hideout from the real world. His voice alone was proof, if Adie ever needed it: no one abandons his first survival kit. The most we ever do is upgrade the splints.

*You're exactly what the project is looking for, Adie. We can make these incredible digital circus animals, and we can get them to jump through any hoop imaginable. We just need someone who can draw the hoops.*

*I don't get it, Stevie. Don't get it at all.*

*We're all coders and chrome monkeys. A bunch of logic monsters, trying to make walk-in, graphical worlds. We need someone who can see.*

*Know how I picture it out there? Open-toe sandals made out of silicon. Fuzzy-faced, bicycling Boeing executives. Tofu-eating knowledge engineers and multiply-pierced, purple-frosted meth heads waiting next to each other on the curb for the Walk light.*

*See? You know what the place looks like before you've even seen it. I told the team how you used to do those Draw-the-Pirate tests as a kid and fix all the original's errors. I showed them that ARTFORUM sidebar. The reviews of your SoHo show in '79 . . .*

*Oh God, Stevie. That's ancient history.*

*Oh, I went further back than that. I showed them my color slide of your huge acrylic group portrait of us. The one that won the university painting prize . . . ?*

*How dare you. I hate you.*

*I told them about the award controversy. How one of the judges thought you were using projection? How he refused to believe that you'd actually freehanded . . .*

*Steven. We were children then. You don't have to fly a stranger across the continent just to find someone who can draw. Courtroom portraitists are a dollar ninety-eight a square yard. Besides, I already have a life.*

*You're not a stranger, Ade. He sounded hurt. That's what's so perfect about this. You don't have to stop painting. Just come out here and do what you—*

*Steve. You have the wrong person. I don't do . . . I'm not painting anymore.*

*Silence pinged off the far coast, full duplex.*

*Did something happen? he asked.*

*Tons happened. Oh, all my parts are still intact, if that's what you mean. It's just that painting's over. No great loss, I assure you.*

*Loss? Adie! How can you say that? What . . . what are you doing, then?*

*About what? Oh. You mean for work? I freelance. Commercial stuff. Fliers and the like. Book jackets.*

*You'll do a book jacket but you won't . . . ?*

*Won't do original work. I have no problem with designing for a living. Copy and paste. All the pastel coffee mugs and cartoon cars that you want. But Art's done.*

*Adie. If you can still make . . . Do you see? This would be a chance to do something completely . . .*

*Sounds like you're looking for somebody else, Stevie. For the greatest illustrator since representation self-destructed.*

*Well, have it your way. Something in his voice said: You always did. But do me a favor, Adie? Just make sure that you see this thing once before you die.*

*The sentence jumped out at her, from a place she could not make out. The sound of the words, their roll, their order.*

See this thing once, before you die. The strange familiarity of the invitation caught her ear, if not yet her eyes.

*Put it that way, she heard herself mouth, I wouldn't mind.*

*Sure, he said. He'd never asked for anything but the chance to save her. Whenever you like. Preferably after 10 p.m.*

The hard rose building brick pressed up against the small of her back. From a flight and a half up above night's fire escape where she sat, she watched herself say, *How about a week from next Tuesday, then? On you.*



## 2

He gave her an address: a foothill road, twisting above the suburbs of that boomtown port built to service a forgotten gold rush. In her mind's eye, Adie pictured the Cavern, lying beached like art's ark, perched on a leeward Cascade slope greened by rains that forever returned yesterday's soaked breeze to the Pacific.

Spiegel expressed her the promotional brochures. In them, glossy images traced the Cavern back to the underground grottos of paint's nativity. In faded watermark beneath the tables of hardware specs, she could make out the faint traces of those Paleolithic herds, stained into stone thirty millennia before art even gave itself a name. Spectral digits, stenciled to the rock—outlines of the same phantom fingers that applied the rouge—waved at her from out of the world's original apse. And across the folds of the glossy brochure, from three hundred centuries on, 3-D, multiplanar, true-color, walk-around holograms waved back.

Adie arrived that first evening, after six hours trapped in the sealed hold of a 737. Stevie was there at the airport to Virgil her back to the Realization Lab. A dozen years. More. They hugged briefly at the arrival gate, laughed, started to falter over the baggage carousel, and drove straight out to his lair in the silence of small talk.

The RL baffled her. It resembled Stevie's description even less than he resembled the Wisconsin boy she'd gone to college with. It smelled faintly of ammonia and fake chemical lemon, the spoor of the late-night cleaning crew. She lingered in the central atrium, rubbing her hands along the redwood walls, trying to bring her image of the place into line with its real layout. She wanted to see the office he'd been sitting in when he'd called her. Steve gave her an impatient tour of the facility, under the compact fluorescent lights. Then he hurried her down the maze of runways, back

into a room that opened onto a stalagmite-strewn pitch-blackness.

She knew black. Her friends in the downtown demimonde never deserted it, save for the sporadic bout of unavoidable nakedness. She did well around black. She understood it: one of the big two, not a true color, yet fraternizing with the deepest maroons, hoping to smuggle itself back over hue's closely guarded border.

But this ebony spooked her: the black of elaborate plans.

Gloom unfolded to her adjusting eyes. Stray, chaotic caches of chrome appeared on all sides of her, evil little Duchamp originals. Banks of lights blinked out of the pitch, like the beady red eyes of robotic rats. Connectors and controllers littered the floor, the metallic droppings of those circuit creatures.

She bobbed in a sea of digital serpents. VCRs on steroids, microwaves pumped up on growth hormone murmured at her. She wanted to hack at the silicon swarms—Michael driving off the fallen angels. Who had let these devices into the world? Who could possibly hope to track their various agendas? Adie, whose eidetic eye once re-created the putti, garlands, and cornucopias of a garish Baroque communion rail from memory, could not have sketched these consoles, even as they hissed at her.

If this was the fabled Cavern, then no. Absolutely not. She couldn't work here. Not in this room. No matter what these people hoped to make. No matter what they needed from her.

*This is it?* she said. *This is it?*

Stevie chuckled. *Almost there.* He pointed toward a luminous opening, a glowing white shoebox, shining like a lit stage set in the general dark.

*That? The Cavern?* No room ever less resembled its name.

A hardware guy, Spider Lim, ran the tour for them that first night. *The room's been crashing a lot for the last*

*several days, Lim apologized. Remember, it's just a prototype.*

*Yeah. Steve smirked at her in the glow of the projectors. You'll have to use your imagination. You know how to do that, don't you, Ade?*

The two men led her through the mess of electronic umbilical cords. Spiegel touched her arm in the darkness. Adie flinched, despite herself, despite years of unlearning. But he only meant to steer her through the nested clutter on to the Cavern's mouth.

They stepped together through the missing rear wall, into the glowing room. Just like that: the audience, walking through an invisible proscenium, onto a floor-level stage. Adie found herself standing in an empty space, six by eight by ten feet, made from five large rectangles of white sandpaper. Even the floor and ceiling were movie screens.

*This? You're joking. This is nothing but a glorified walk-in closet.*

*Put these on,* Spider Lim answered. Plastic glasses: lightweight, tinted, wraparound. A high Hollywood fashion statement teetering between fabulously futuristic and ridiculously retro.

*But they have wires coming out of them,* She tweezed them at arm's length, between thumb and pinky.

Spider's face crimped. *So?* Years later, she would sketch him like that: the young Rembrandt scrunching up, incredulous, in the light of the mirror's report.

*So I don't want wires anywhere near my head.*

*You're kidding me.* Spider laughed. *Get out of my life.*

*Doesn't . . . don't wires make a magnetic field or something?*

Stevie reasoned with her. *You've used a Walkman, haven't you?*

*I've never let my head anywhere near a Walkman. I don't even like saying the word.*

Spider answered with a marvelous sound: a rapid click of the tongue against hard palate. The sound the neighborhood boys' baseball cards made once, rubber-banded to bicycle spokes. The noise of the industrious world engine, impatient for its next run.

She put the glasses on and waited for the view, like a Louisville deb holding tight after her first hit of acid, her virgin sight about to be forever despoiled. Her eyes looked through the tinted lenses, not knowing what to expect. And they saw nothing at all.

*Hold it. Hang on.* Spider stood between her and Spiegel, sporting his own set of glasses. He swayed, waving and clicking a thing that looked like a TV remote. *We're snagged on something.*

The trio stood staring at a blank wall. Spider Lim made the ratchet noise. Adie had to keep from slugging him with pleasure. *Do that again!*

*What? Do what? Nothing's started yet.*

*That thing with your tongue.*

Spider, lost to the problem, ignored her. His life's work: already to be someplace else by the time anyone else got there.

He temporized. *We've gone over to a new configuration. Just this week. A separate graphics engine for each wall. It's causing us some sync problems.*

*The white is pretty,* Adie offered.

*Here we are. Here goes.*

They gaped at the blank walls. Then the expanse of emptiness cleared. Up from a hidden seam in the whiteness, a stone slab emerged: a chunk of burnished marble chiseled with text, something Herod would have slapped up on an imperial stele to appall the natives, as deep into rebellious Judaea as he could get away with. The plaque twirled about in space before settling back down in midair, to be read.

That spinning stone even cast real shadows. No sooner did Spider land the first slab than he hooked another. The

second plaque flopped out of the wall and pirouetted in space in front of Adie. She fought the urge to reach out and pinch it.

More stone tablets materialized from on high. They fell into formation alongside one another, forming the beveled buttons of a menu. A floating finger moved upon this list, a disembodied digit that tracked the waves of Spider's wand.

From the several choices, he selected a slab labeled Crayon World. *Here we go*, he said. *Hold on now*. He clicked, and the floating finger riffled. The marble button receded, as if really pressed. The menu beeped and dissolved. For a moment, the walls went dark. When they lit again, they were no longer walls.

A hailstorm of aquamarines filled Adie's vision, a shower of silver-blue shards, as if the air had just shattered. Then the shards condensed, reassembling into a blue ceiling. The three of them stood in their own bodies, under a blazing sky. Yet they floated above the scene they looked at, canted at an impossible angle. Adie's knees buckled. She pitched forward, compensating for this snub to gravity. When she righted herself, so did the Crayon World below.

Another cloudburst of topazes and Adie began to make out the place where they'd landed. Her gaze zoomed and panned, as dazed as an infant's eyes sifting their first light. No sooner did she right herself than nausea upended her again. She felt as she always had, on those five-thousand-mile childhood flights around the world to yet another new home, airsick for days at a pop. But this was the very opposite of motion sickness: still-illness, frozen in a yawning landscape that bobbed all around her.

Adie, now a cartoon of herself, stood treading on an invisible magic carpet. She, Steve, and Spider walked the plank above a seething grass sea. Only there was no plank, and the grass was no more than scribbles of crayon.

She looked up. The teal tent above them now billowed with cloud. She looked down at her shoes. They skimmed

over the tops of trees, trees rooted well beneath the floor that projected them. Each crayon image slid seamlessly over the room's corners, erasing all sense of the cubicle that they inhabited. A few trillion bits of math, to fool a few billion years of ocular evolution: after a few seconds, Adie stopped noticing the conjuring act and began to believe.

*Here, Spider said. You drive.* And he thrust the wand into her hands.

*Where's the clutch on this thing?* She never could drive a stick. Adie bobbled the wand, jabbing at the buttons with her thumbs. The world's RPMs raced, and a burp rippled through its crayon portrait. The stand of would-be blue spruce they threaded went masts down and keel to heaven. She swung the wand hard to the right. She and the men banked back in the opposite direction.

*What's that?* she whispered, afraid the thing might bolt. *That. There. It just moved.*

*God only knows,* Steve whined. *That's our problem. Millions of dollars of funding, and nobody around this dump can draw worth squat.*

His voice seemed to come from just to her left, though Adie would never again trust her sense of distance. As she turned to look at him, the Crayon World wrapped around her, tracking her head. Spiegel's grin leaked out from under his own pair of wraparound glasses. *Go on and follow it, if you like.*

Adie squeezed the wand and steered away. In three short bursts, she put half a moraine between herself and where Steve stood. Yet he stayed right next to her, meadow for meadow, bog for bog.

*What are those things supposed to be: cattails? bulrushes? What in the world is that Douglas fir doing over there, all by itself?*

Stevie threw back his head and snickered. *Some chassis-jockey must have drawn that one. They have all the visual*

*intelligence of a myopic, right-hemisphere-damaged eight-year-old loose with his first sixty-four-color box.*

Spider Lim just smiled at the coder's taunt. *Like software knows how to draw any better?*

*But it's fantastic, Adie demurred. Change one . . . one mark on it and I'll kill you in your sleep.*

*Pixel, Spider corrected. Change one pixel. And you'll kill us.*

*Voxel, Spiegel overtrumped him. Keep current, will you, Lim? Voxel or boxel. A 3-D pixel.*

*How come you didn't paint the backs of anything? I mean, look at this stump. A very funky mahogany, although I do like the Cubist growth rings. But if we go around to the other side? Nothing but white.*

*That's the paper, Spider apologized.*

*The paper?*

*The paper we drew them on.*

*Yeah. We were too bloody lazy to . . .*

*Hardware elbowed software in the floating rib. This particular world is not really about painting the stump, you know. It's about getting the head-position tracking to work . . .*

*With the Kalman filtering . . .*

*Not to mention the human head . . .*

*While doing these massive bit-blits from one graphics array area to another at sufficiently high speeds and resolutions to—*

*Look, look! A house. Did you know there was a little house out there? Don't you boys snort at me. Can we walk behind it? Does the world go back that far? Look! Flowers. What—? Tul—, no iri—*

*How many times we gotta tell you? You're not dealing with bloody Pick-ax-o here . . .*

*Oh God! Adie shouted. Little bees. And they're buzzing!*

*Crude black-and-golden scraps with loops of straightened paper-clip wings jittered about in organized confusion.*

Something turned over in her, as small, as social, as buzzing and robotic as the living original.

*They like it around the flowers.* Steve pointed off into a glade. *Try waving the wand over there.*

She did. The magic scraps of would-be bees swarmed after every trail of digital scent she laid down willy-nilly.

Adie soared and looped and rolled. Each time she cocked her head, the trailing wires that tracked her goggles pulled the whole landscape along in her sight's wake. She waved the magic wand through ever more elaborate wingovers and Immelmanns. She skimmed above the trees and plowed through furrows between the grass blades. She navigated out to the farthest walls of this confinement and jiggled the ground beneath her feet with her giggling.

*You like it, then?* Steve demanded. *You really like it?*

*I never dreamed . . . I've never seen anything like it.*

Outside the Cavern, beyond the enveloping lab, past the research park's camouflaging cedar shingles, out on the fringe of the coastal forest, the hurt of a screech owl skipped like a stone across the night's glassy surface. Long-haul commerce whipped its errand trucks up and down the evacuated coast road, hard as scythes. But inside this womb of cool engineering, ingenuity schooled its batchlings by moonlight.

*You'll come in with us, then?* Steve asked Adie. *You want to play?*

Some part of her had never wanted anything else. Had never hoped for more than to play in such a place, or even in its ugly machine imposture.

The three of them strolled out of the paper meadows and walked back into real weather. They left the high-tech monastery, stepping out into the actual night. It seemed to be seedtime, early in the curve of the world's regeneration. Say it was raining. A wrap of mist condensed on their clothing, coating them in a fine glaze. A few scared birds clicked and whistled in the night, to find themselves out.



They stood together in the dark parking lot, next to the rental car that was to take Adie back to her tepee-shaped theme hotel down along the old state highway. Lim toyed with a geode key ring. Spiegel leaned on the rental, awaiting her answer. Klarpol, for her part, could not stop laughing, shaking her head side to side in disbelief at what she'd just seen. Images built and broke inside her. For the first time in as long as she cared to remember, the future held more pictures than the past.

*Stevie, it's amazing. But I can't. I really can't.*

*What does that mean, exactly?*

What, indeed? The very weather, that first night, interrogated her, dared her to say exactly what she had sworn off. And the wider box of evening—the scrim of midnight—mocked all her available replies.

*It's not paint, he said. No paint involved at all. No original expression required, Ade. It's all drawing by numbers, out here. Don't think of it as art. Think of it as a massive data structure. What SoHo doesn't know won't hurt it.*

She laid out all her objections, lined them up in a mental pull-down menu. None held water except the last: a general hatred for all things that the cabled world hoped to become. Yet something tugged at her. Something darting and striped and buzzing.

*Those bees, she answered him. How do they know how to find those flowers? How do you get them to fly like that?*

Something in those jittery black-and-golden scraps recalled her sight's desire. So it always went, with life and its paler imitations. The things that needed renouncing—our little acts of abdication, our desperate Lents—finally caved in. They slunk off, subdued by hair of the dog, their only cure. The abandoned palette returned to press its suit, sue for time, advocate.

All Adie had ever wanted was to people this place with gentian and tree rings and hidden houses folded from out of cardstock, to raise stalks under an animated sky, a sky

calling out for glade-crazed, pollinating paper honeybees that followed every trail of scent that the wave of thought's wand laid down.

*You bastards*, she said. *You filthy bitheads*. She looked up, helpless, ready, her wet eyes seeing everything.

### 3

In the Crayon Room, all strokes are broad.

Wax goes on nubby. It clumps and gaps. Your main repertoire here is the happy smear. Leaving an edge is hard. Any two colors mix to make coffee. From faint to heavy, from dawn to dusk, the crayon sea and the crayon causeway stay chirpy, pert monotones.

The grain beneath the page seeps up to enter any scene you draw. Spread your newsprint on the sidewalk and make a fish; your fish comes into the Crayon World already fossilized. Rub a stick of brown lengthwise against a nude page; the plank behind the paper clones its own knots and whorls, returning the pulp to its woody matrix.

Every crayon furnishing is a flat façade. The sun's disk serves as its own nametag. Head-on, distant hills flatten to platters. From the visitor's floating crow's nest, scarecrows deployed in this ripening grain have no more width than the paper they're scrawled on.

Signs of human life abound. A bitten apple hides amid the pile rotting at the foot of a tree. An abandoned bucket, half full, slops its squiggles of water. A bent rag doll sits compliant on a bench. A kite tied to a picket fence floats ripe for unleashing.

But this world leaves no trace of its makers. No people populate the Crayon Room. It is a simple place, pristine, prelapsarian. Curls of smoke craze up from the crippled chimney of one little summer cottage, too cozy for habitation. Behind gapped, sashed windows, a crayon cat purrs, fixed on a goldfish that darts against its rough-hewn bowl.

The Crayon World is a proud mother's gallery, the first retrospective refrigerator-magnet show of a budding child genius. But nothing here looks much like what it stands for. Only the conventions of a house, the insanely pitched roof,

the burnt sienna front door lolling on its hinge. The code for cat and apple and bucket and tree and abandoned doll.

Visitors here face down their own ghostliness. The casual walker collides against nothing. Try to climb a hill, and you pass right through it. Hedgerows serve as mere suggestions. Approached, their bushes swell in detail, swimming toward the eye until they fill it. Then, with an optical pop, they vanish, freeing the scrawled grazing lands beyond them.

Now and then, an eagle shrills, invisible. Otherwise, silence, save for the gurgle of a hidden stream and, down in the gardens, the drone of the loosened hive. Circlets of scissored medallions buzz freely, in skittish digital trajectories, each striped with the icon for honeybee. Their randomly cycled rasp, the sound of fidget flight, stands in for the beating of insect wings.

A wheelbarrow in scarlet wax sits tilted on a path somewhere down a projected dell. The pasture is plain and the woods a welcoming cartoon. This mad perspective, drifting between dimensions, is perfect for getting lost in.

The Crayon World feels bigger than it is. Its space is curved. It wraps back onto itself. Hikers strike out to the southwest, into a weald of clumsy flowering horse chestnuts. The stroll unrolls, always a new copse in front of you. The hike moseys on, furlong stretching into mile, mile into league, for crayon measures conform to the lost imperial units of bedtime enchantment.

Sky blue drops to Prussian, then to a darker cobalt. And still, ever more southwest stretches out in front of you. More than when you started. Your walk in the woods threatens to turn into a panicked sprint. Then the crayon receptors at the edge of your retina say *wait*: that tree is wrong. That tree shouldn't be here. And in that mental crossing where scribbles synapse against words, you wonder: *Where have I seen that thing before?*

Sure enough, in a ridiculously few steps, the tree returns. It looms up from the same speck on the same compass

point, without your shifting tack. It zooms to the same height as you draw close. It bares the same rift down the middle of its data. Even before you can wonder how you missed it, the trail loops and the whole scene recycles.

The wand you use to wend through this wilderness has a knob for leaving breadcrumbs. But as in all such worlds, the crumbs attract a murder of crayon crows that devour your trail markers the moment you lay them down. All your wax signs will not guide you for more than a virtual minute. The path is past preserving, and the crayon adventure knows no goal except itself. The Crayon World is just a broad-stroked test. The test of how to enter it, and walk back out intact.

# 4

When rage reprised itself, when you fell back again on the old bitter tit for tat, when the need to escape finally left you throwing darts at the world map, at last it hit you. Simple choice: replay the old routine, the self-triggering cycle of accusations, the verbal razor cuts daubed in love's alcohol. Traipse down the path of tender sadomasochism yet one more soul-shredding time. Or turn around and walk. Escape down the path that must still lie somewhere to the south, the way you walked in.

One more tearful reconciliation would only further demean you both. The place you pushed for—the tumbledown house in the country, your dream of intimacy that always made her bite in fear—vanishes now into fantasy. It gives way to that darker late-night venue, where hisses of desire shade off into abuse, abuse feeding back into desire.

You've been each other's shared addiction, slinking back repeatedly to the nightmare rush that you've both fought to be rid of. You've come back from the dead a dozen times, only to spin out again, worse, for whole weeks at a time. You've suffered the delirium of total withdrawal: one month, two, without so much as a word. Then, clean, virginal, at peace, calling again, just to see if you can. Just to see who's in charge. Just a quick little needle slipped into one another's waiting veins.

All that changes forever, this Friday. You're off to a place where you can't ask her to hurt you again, where neither of you can backslide into care. Where you can no longer reach one another, however much mutual tenderness revives. It rocks you, just to imagine.

Among your friends, the plan produces only stunned hilarity. "You're going *where*? Don't they shoot people in the street there, without even asking whose side they're on?"

"No," you shit them back. "You're thinking of D.C."