

Deliquescent

“Let’s take a look at the food,” Dunkirk said to the animals.

He turned over Daddy’s bag. Seven dented cans and a wet cardboard box tumbled onto the stones.

“Uh oh,” Dunkirk said. “No food.”

The animals examined him. Dunkirk had put them in a circle around the cans, and now their heads were slanted as though they were curious. All the animals that Daddy had got him. The fox with the yarny fur. The dragon breathing flames. The cyclops, grinning, with its single white eye hanging from its head.

The rain was starting to pour through the shafts of light that illuminated the sewer tunnel and it slapped its colorless drops on the floor. Froth rose and lowered. It carried droppings and puddles of urine and traced the rusty sewer bars.

“I wonder when Daddy will come back,” Dunkirk said to the fox.

The fox didn’t answer.

Dunkirk scratched his head and lumbered to the corner of the sewer room. He was a big boy, Daddy had said, bigger than he was supposed to be. He tried to remember what else Daddy had said. Daddy had told him that nobody could stop the waters from rising. The waters were there to clean the earth. A beehive or a cockroach nest didn’t like it when a farmer flushed it out, but the farmer liked the clean, pure space that the waters created.

It was a clean sewer room that Daddy had put him in. A floor with slimeless patches for the animals, a drip of rainwater from the ceiling. It had three walls and a sewer grate for a fourth at which to watch the passing debris. The grate had a bar that only Daddy could open. Daddy had explained why this was so.

“I can stop the waters rising, but only if you trust me,” Daddy had said, buckling the lock.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes, Daddy,” was Dunkirk’s instant, unquestioning response. Daddy smiled and gave him an animal—the black mustang with the missing leg.

Dunkirk’s auntie had a shrill voice like sugar syrup and an impotent way of throwing her arms up in an argument. “He’s a boy, Frank, he’s just a boy,” she had said to Daddy. Dunkirk wondered what that had to do with anything. Auntie was so shrill and threw her arms up so much that he and Daddy had had to crawl out the fire escape that night to hide him in the sewer, had to crawl like criminals. Daddy had given him an animal to reward him.

Now, Dunkirk looked up at the lines of light slanting through the storm drains and counted another day-night cycle. Daddy usually came every cycle, but Daddy hadn’t come the last five. When he did come, he was more agitated than usual. He sat on the floor one minute and the next flew, shrieking, to his feet. Hid his fingers in his pockets as though worried they would slide off. He read Genesis and Exodus and talked about sacrifice, a people’s guilt laid on one man. Every visit, he gave Dunkirk an animal. Daddy had given him animals before, but never every time.

No, thought Dunkirk. *Daddy’s coming, Daddy’s coming*. His breathing got faster and faster.

Dunkirk wanted a way to clear this new feeling of doubt from his head. He found one quickly. A people’s guilt on one man. He held the Black Mustang.

“I love you, Daddy.”

With a loud rip, Dunkirk tore the horse’s head from its body. He dropped the fragments through the bars and watched the foam pick them up.

He picked up the starfish and tore all five legs off its body.

Rip.

He imagined Daddy reading Bible verses.

Dunkirk ripped the flames from the dragon's mouth, pulled the eye off the cyclop's face and removed the last dangling bit of string.

"He's a boy, Frank, he's just a boy!"

Rip. Rip. Rip.

The sounds echoed through the sewer tunnels, surviving amid the tides, carrying their notes only faintly to those walking (or not walking) above.

They came apart so easy, Dunkirk thought. Why'd they come apart so easy?

Dunkirk finished off the other animals and dropped the parts into the water. The foam matted their fur and made it slick. It was slicker than it should have been. Dunkirk watched this and felt better.

Daddy will come for me, he thought.

The water had crossed into the sewer room, wetting the tips of Dunkirk's toes. As he watched, the waves raked foam over the stones and carried specks of plastic, wood, and sewage. Dunkirk felt happy at this sight, elated. It meant that the room would be submerged. Daddy would have to move him. Would they stay in Auntie's house or move somewhere else? Dunkirk was eager to find out. He watched the water to kill time. He felt a stinking chill touch his ankles, his knees, his waist. He watched the bits of the animals circling within.

I'll wait, Dunkirk thought. *I'll wait for Daddy to get me.*

Dunkirk occupied himself by keeping a log of the things floating by. A full box of fish tackle and live worms. A ziplock baggie of parsley—the herbs scattering into the water like an

oil spill. The last thing Dunkirk saw before the sunset vanished was a hammer floating on the ripples. How could that happen? he wondered. Metal was supposed to sink. But before he could re-examine it, complete darkness fell, and the only things he could see were his own fingers.

THE END