

Praetorian
by Joshua Keller

Chief Inspector Jacob Bierson, newly retired, spent his afternoon dismantling the living room. Beginning with the bay window, he worked clockwise from wall to wall, half-listening to a recorded voice that carried out to him from the kitchen.

. . . I would like the two of you to correspond by writing. . .

He took down the sun-catchers that spread a wash of refracted light across his shirt, plucking them one by one like ornaments from a Christmas tree. He unhooked bouquets of silk flowers that left spidering silhouettes on the drywall, and lifted framed biblical proverbs from old nails that dotted the wall above the flat-screen TV.

. . . your situation is an unusual one. . .

He pulled down a still-ticking heirloom clock, stubbing a socked toe on a table leg. He cursed and rubbed his foot. A shudder of static echoed from the kitchen, sounding a little like laughter on the other side of the wall. Having spent years listening to taped voices—interviews, confessions, court testimonies—Bierson found something about this particular recording unnerving. The gravel of the monotone was faint and edged with noise, lending hisses to each sibilant as though the message were a copy of a copy. He couldn't honestly imagine himself holding a microphone and producing the kind of sounds that the machine had captured, and yet as Bierson crossed the entryway to the kitchen, he looked out to the table as if someone were actually sitting there, speaking to him from the other room.

. . . a package of whiteboards and a package of dry erase markers. Hang the boards like you would a painting—in a room for which you have little use. Remove all other furnishings. . .

Bierson stood before the last remaining piece of decoration on the south wall: his son Benjamin's adolescent attempt at Caravaggio's *Cardsharps*—not a bad duplication in Bierson's

opinion except that in Ben's version, the unfortunate gambler's one eye appeared half-opened as if he were in the midst of winking.

During his graduate coursework, long before he had become a police officer, Bierson often emphasized to would-be artists that even the smallest detail could change the entire thematic of a given piece. Art is a crime scene, he would say. The truth is in the details. In Ben's *Cardsharps*, for instance, the gambler's half-closed eye made the entire scene seem more like a bluff rather than a gullible rich boy's doomed game against a loaded hand.

. . . I would like the two of you to correspond by writing. . .

The painting hung in a swath of ripening sunlight. As Bierson gripped the edges of the frame and lifted, his outstretched arms spread a shadow across the wall that was not altogether unwelcoming. The recorder again cackled from the kitchen as the message ended and the front door opened.

Bierson did not go to the kitchen to meet his son. It had been six weeks since the riot, and another four weeks more since Ben had stormed out of the house in skinny jeans and a jacket full of patches, swinging an old army rucksack by the strap. Bierson wasn't sure if it was pride or that particular kind of resentment distilled from a parent's worry that kept him from going to the kitchen and meeting his son, politics be damned.

He heard a gasp of static and the click of the STOP button. Ben stepped into the living room. He wore creased trousers and an oxford shirt, not unlike Bierson's own favored button-downs, and penny loafers the color of a dirt road after a hard rain. He had discarded the punk rock jacket in favor of an ashen sport coat, appearing, overall, as though he were dressed for church, the only other time either Bierson or his wife had ever gotten Ben to wear what the boy

would call “bourgey designer bullcrap.” Bierson would have felt proud at how nicely his son had cleaned up, except for the Ray-Bans that hung hugely off of his face in which Bierson could see doubles of himself staring back at him.

“Dad,” Ben said.

“Yeah?” Bierson.

“I guess I’m home.”

“Well,” Bierson said. “Welcome home.”

Through the department, he had heard that Ben had been among the first of the protestors who decided to take up residence in the City Hall throughways, but by the time Bierson had gotten involved, there were 3,000 chanting picketers between his squad and the South Archway. It made him sick to remember that when he had burst through the mob to the subway escalator, he found nothing but a trail of blood leading under a padlocked door.

“You could take your glasses off. Have a seat. We could skip all this bullshit if we just sit down and talk like men.”

“I’m a little tired, Dad. I’m going upstairs.”

Ben shook his head from side to side, slowly, as though surveying the room. Bierson tried to follow his eyes, but could not. It seemed as though Ben was gauging the space between the coffee tables and the surrounding walls. “Benjamin,” Bierson said.

“Yeah, Dad?”

Bierson nodded several times, licking the backs of his teeth and struggling to remember what he had wanted to say. “Goodnight, Benjamin.”

“Goodnight, Dad,” Ben said as he backed toward the stairs, bumping into the banister.

“Well,” Bierson said, “you are wearing sunglasses in the dark.”

Bierson glared down at the *Cardsharps* with his hands on his hips. The winking eye of the dupe became more bothersome. Now the dupe seemed deranged rather than self-conscious, almost devilish, his expression shrouded in a tenebrism imposed upon a painting where none had been employed. In this light, the accomplice, the third man, was almost invisible, the tops of his signaling fingers barely sticking out of the shadow. Bierson picked up a red marker from the pack, sniffing at the chemical stench that met his nose when he uncapped it. He turned to the whiteboard by the bay window and wrote:

YOU COULD'VE HAD A SEAT.

I MEAN IF THE HIPPIES TAUGHT YOU ANYTHING AT ALL IT'S HOW TO
TAKE A SEAT AND KEEP IT. AM I RIGHT?

Bierson stretched out in an armchair, turned on the flat-screen and then turned it off again. Even now, over two months later, he still couldn't watch the news without some mention of the riots, grainy phone-footage of TAC-squads bursting in on the protestors at the front of City Hall, professors and politicians commenting on what happened and why and what it meant, and even experts isolating audio to figure out from where exactly the one and only shot had been fired. Even worse, he kept imagining that Ben slouched cross-legged in front of the TV the way he had as a child, the glare of the screen playing out doubly in his new sunglasses.

The red letters of his message cut into the stark white of the board, sharply pronounced in the light of a nearby lamp. He considered how the message would look to Ben through his Ray Bans, imagined the new layout of the room as half-forms of varying shadow. He groaned and heaved himself up from his chair. He placed the lights on the floor, one lamp between each pair of boards, creating a trio of spotlights.

After the riots, Rachel had spent most nights driving around downtown, looking for Ben. Then, when she came home without him, the two would spend hours standing on opposite sides of their bed, arguing about where he might have gone and what they should have done to keep him out of it, tracing each other's parental missteps all the way back to Ben's toddlerhood. Bierson never went with her on those drives. Instead, he'd spend a good part of his final days on the police force standing at City Hall and replaying the riot from memory. Wondering where Ben might have been and what part he might have played in the whole thing.

So Rachel thinks we can lure Ben home by giving him the Camaro. But no, Bierson thought, we'll never buy him back like that. And what scared him then was that his son, if nothing else, was a man of principles. If he had come home to be bought, the price would be much higher than therapy and a used car.

The next morning, Bierson woke to a quiet house. He climbed the stairs to his son's bedroom and, without thinking, made his empty bed. Posters hung, dog-eared on every wall: group photos of overly-earnest new-age rock bands standing aloof in city alleys, posters for sensitive art-house films complemented by framed philosophical aphorisms. He was about to pull the door shut when sunlight in the hall fell upon a legal sized piece of scratch paper covered in blocky capital letters:

RRRRRRR

RRRRRRR

CHKVSN?

RRRRRRR

RRRRRRR

Could it be code? Had his son been indoctrinated by some radical, leftist group? He stared at the letters and began to wonder whether it was album art for some new band, or perhaps fancy typography. As he walked away he noticed the blue marker standing erect on Ben's nightstand.

Bierson nearly tripped himself down the stairs. He wasn't sure what bothered him more—that Ben had sneaked away early in the morning or, worse, that during the night his son had stood over his sleeping body and written on a dry erase board with a squeaky felt-tipped marker. The response looked like an addendum to his blocky message, a disjointed wisp of blue letters in a mix of print and cursive, blocky and irregular like an old-fashioned ransom note.

Dad, dad, dad.

You said last night that we

could skip the bullshit, so let's let's skip it. I was going to

say that sitting down gets complicated when the hippies,

as you say,

teach you how to do it. Direct action, appealing to common

sympathy, all that jazz.

It's easier said than done because sometimes-----well, anyway.

Let's talk about what we remember. I think that's what he

wants us to do, the "doctor". . . or. . .

We all know this is about the protests, this whole story, so what do you

remember? Go ahead. Tell me.

-----Look, I was going to draw this out because I'm

tired. And bitter, too, but not that bitter. I want you to tell me what you remember about that day because

I'm trying to figure out if you're the one who blinded me.

Sorry, Dad.

Bierson rubbed at the blue ink with the sleeve of his shirt before he realized what he was doing, shouted "Just a minute!" when he heard Rachel call his name. He smeared away the last paragraph and pulled his shirt off, popping buttons off in the process.

Bierson watched Rachel as she stacked canned goods on the kitchen counter, grouped produce together by color—kale with collard greens, tomatoes with red bell peppers—and stacked frozen meats against the side of the refrigerator. She wore what he would call her power-clothes, a gray-toned pantsuit over a white blouse, presided over by a string of white pearls. She worked as a PR consultant at the local college where Ben would have been a senior. Whereas Bierson had taken an early retirement, before the riots Rachel often remarked to him that she might never retire. "I'm not tired," she would quip.

"What's with all the groceries?" Bierson said.

Rachel turned to him and glared over the rims of her glasses. He was always amazed at how inadequate she could make him feel without ever wasting any words to do so. She didn't speak to him at all until she was on her knees at the refrigerator, stacking old takeout boxes on the floor. "Ben needs to eat."

"Who's going to cook all of this?"

"He can cook. So can you."

"Your cooking is better. Maybe while he's home, you could—"

“—no,” she said. “We’re not playing family here.”

“I’ll sleep in the living room. That way I’ll be right by the boards in case inspiration strikes.”

“This isn’t a joke, Jacob. I’d be the last person to say that this is normal, but here we are.”

Bierson nodded and backed out of his wife’s way as she finished stowing the groceries. He imagined looking at Rachel through Ben’s glasses. “I really wish you’d stay.”

“This isn’t really about me,” she said. “None of this is about me.”

“He wears sunglasses in the house. Like a beatnik.”

“Not like a beatnik,” she said.

Bierson looked down at the smudges of blue ink on his hands. He nudged one of the to-go boxes with a socked toe. “There’s something wrong with his eyes.”

“Damage to the occipital lobe. They think it might be temporary, but they’re not sure,” Rachel said, turning to face him directly, “How’d it happen?”

Bierson lifted the lid on the garbage can and spat into it. He rushed past her to the sink and began washing his inky hands. “He didn’t say. He didn’t say anything to me. But it’s no wonder he bumped his head. It was a goddamned riot, wasn’t it? I’m just glad that he’s seeing a real doctor. Wish I could say the same about myself.”

“Speaking of which,” Rachel said, pulling another digital recorder from her purse.

“Rachel, there is absolutely no way that this is legit.”

“But it’s how it’s going to happen. Use the boards and we’ll see how things go from there. Okay?”

Bierson stared down at the new recorder. He imagined himself smashing the device with his baton and, for some reason beyond him, eating the pieces. “And you’re still going to give Benjamin the car.”

“This conversation is running long,” Rachel said and for a brief moment seemed to look at him with the barest hint of tenderness. “Just remember: this wouldn’t be happening if we didn’t still love you. Keep that in mind.”

Bierson watched Rachel back out of the driveway. He waved, but she didn’t seem to see him. The sun was bright enough in the tinted windshield that instead of his wife’s face he saw his own reflection which stretched and elongated as she backed away, pulling the image thin like stretched bubble gum.

The living room reeked of ink and dust, a sharp stink over top of something dry. He pressed PLAY on the digital recorder, flinching at the sudden eruption of static that rasped from the speaker. He shook it, but could only half-listen to the message that faded in and out like a radio broadcast just out of range.

. . .that I’m not your therapist, Mr. Bierson. I understand why you might see me that way. You wonder who recommended me, but you also have doubts as to. . .

Bierson cleared the piles from the coffee tables and picked up the marker. He knelt down by a glass tabletop and sketched a rough, red blueprint of City Hall, the intersecting streets that wove around it, and the barricade that separated it from the main street. He squiggled in the stoplights, the names of shops a block in each direction beyond the throughways, and even filled in the bushes that grew in the interior of the building where the throughways met in a

cobblestone courtyard. The drag and squeak of the felt tip over the glass sounded like the constant honking of midday traffic if it had been recorded and then replayed at a higher speed.

. . .yourself. This is about communication first and responsibility second and then. . .My one and only goal is to put the two of you in such a situation that. . .

When he heard the front door, he wasn't sure if it was Ben or not. As a child, Ben often sneaked away from the house at night and when Bierson would sit in the living room awaiting the inevitable confrontation, he would always know when his son entered the house by the muted squeak of the screen door and the silence that followed as Ben caught it on its way shut, keeping it from making its syncopated thump, thump-thump as it closed.

. . .your son has come home and you need to consider what that means to you. . .

He knew it was Ben and felt himself fidget. Along with the squeaking of shoes over tile, he heard the occasional screech of a bumped chair and the slap of a palm on the wall as Ben stumbled. Bierson raised his head from his work and took a breath. What happened—he began to say, meaning to say, What happened to your eyes? As he listened to Ben's awkward footsteps stomping from the kitchen to the stairs, Bierson almost spoke again. He looked at the spotlighted text on the walls, the ink-stained dress shirt crumpled on the floor, and the question continued to shrivel in his mouth becoming What-huh! and eventually just What? until Ben had crested the stairs and Bierson sat by himself making odd huffing noises. "Take the damned glasses off," he finally said. "You look like a beatnik."

Bierson elaborated on his blueprint. He sketched out the masses of tents running along the walls of the throughway, tents that he had helped junior officers to stuff into dumpsters. He drew looping sets of handcuffs around the front of the barricade where some of the protestors had shackled themselves. He charted out exactly where he had been when the shot was fired. He

drew arrows along the barricade to represent the path of his TAC-squad as it had escorted the DA and other public officials along the picket lines, shielding them from a hail of eggs and lettuce with their riot shields. With one stroke of his hand, he slashed a line into the crowd, representing the point at which they broke through, a cluster of helmets and Kevlar pushing toward the South Archway.

“I wasn’t there,” he said. “I wasn’t anywhere near!”

Upstairs he could hear Ben moving to and from the bathroom, the flushing of the toilet drowned out by the clattering of falling photographs that Ben dragged off of the walls as he walked too close to them. Occipital lobe, Bierson thought. Blindness. Hallucination. Distortion of light and shape. “I wasn’t even there,” he said to the empty room.

He grabbed the red marker and hobbled back to the boards, scribbling first on top of the blue smears and then onto the next two boards:

YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT I REMEMBER? NO, YOU WANT TO KNOW
WHAT I KNOW? I WASN’T EVEN NEAR THE SOUTH ARCH. I WASN’T
ANYWHERE CLOSE!

YOU KNOW WHAT BOTHERS ME ABOUT YOU BENJAMIN IS THAT YOU ARE
NOT THE MASSES THAT CLOGGED UP CENTER SQUARE.

AND YOU REALLY THINK THAT SITTING IN THE MIDDLE OF CITY HALL
WAS ACTUALLY HELPING THEM. YOU THINK THAT SAYS A DAMNED
THING TO ANYONE AT ALL EXCEPT THAT YOU’RE. NOT. HAPPY.

I AM NOT SOME LUDDITE YOKEL CHEWING STRAW. I GOT INVOLVED WITH
THE SQUADS TO KEEP THE PEACE. AND YOU TALK TO ME ABOUT
DIRECTION ACTION? I GREW UP WONDERING WHY SOME PEOPLE HAD TO

SIT IN CERTAIN SEATS. CLASS RACE OPPRESSION WHATEVER. DO YOU THINK THAT APPLIES TO YOU? SITTING OUT THERE SHOOTING SELFIES PLAYING PUPPET TO THE MEDIA. YOU'RE DAMNED RIGHT TO BE WONDERING WHO BLINDED YOU BUT YOU SHOULDN'T BE ASKING ME.

Bierson backed away from the board and snatched his shirt off the floor. The recorder screeched and came to a stop. He spent the rest of the evening in the driveway, rubbing wax along the sleek black paint of his Mustang. He ducked into the car, turned the key down in the ignition, and listened to the radio which had been tuned between stations; the sound of classical strings occasionally washed over fragmentary political discussions—waves of one overtaking the other, again and again.

It had been a week since Bierson's self-admitted tirade on the board, but still Benjamin scrawled no reply. Most of the time, he wasn't even home, and when he was, he shuffled from room to room all day long. "You'll make a lousy ghost," Bierson had called up the stairs.

Bierson hid in the kitchen where the noise was fainter and cooked breakfast. While the eggs were frying, he plucked the miniature white board off of the refrigerator and stared down at Rachel's handwriting. When the hell was she here? he thought. With a green marker, his wife had written to him with her trademark brevity:

Jake,

Please take to DMV by noon. →

Love,

Rachel

To the right of the board she had stuck the title to her Camaro and the transfer-of-title form. He stared at his wife's signature on the dotted line next to Ben's unsteady scribble. This deal is rotten, he thought. Now he's got a way out of all of this...and what about me?

Bierson set the table for two and spooned scrambled eggs onto each plate. "Breakfast!" he said.

When as usual Benjamin did not appear, Bierson walked back into the living room, careful to avoid looking at the angry red mess he had written. He picked up *Cardsharps* and brought it back with him to the kitchen, propping it sideways against the refrigerator. He absent-mindedly forked eggs into his mouth, smearing ketchup on his lips, as he tilted his head every so often to look at the sideways painting.

From this angle, the painting reminded him of a twisted version of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*, the painting that had inspired him to study art history. Rather than an image of God reaching out, the cheating card player seemed to gaze down on the dupe whose winking eye at this angle gave the impression of a squint. The accomplice jutted out from the table on the right—the bottom margin of the painting—and seemed to lie next to the dupe, whispering into his ear rather than signaling the cheater. Likewise, the dagger at the cheater's waist looked as if it had narrowly missed piercing the dishonest boy's hip, as though he had fallen upon it and had barely avoided death by impalement. Art is a crime scene, Bierson said to himself, repeating his mantra. He wiped the crumbs from his mouth and stood up.

Bierson's exhaustion began to weigh upon him as he drove downtown. He braked late at the many lights that ran up the main street and almost reached for a siren switch that wasn't there so he could speed through the intersections. The blocks surrounding City Hall took on a doubled

quality as if he were looking at a photograph with its negative placed over it, resulting in a sickly Technicolor. Sunlight filtered down between the buildings and broke away into rolling fog. The passersby strolling along the main avenue oscillated between their casual gait and postures of rage—fists pumping, standing on their toes—every time he blinked.

As he parked the car, he looked out his back windshield and watched the wavering specter of his own TAC-squad hopping the barricade in a tight phalanx formation, pushing into a phantom rabble. A honk from the car behind reminded him of what he had been doing. As it passed, he heard the radio through the car's open windows, the sound of a voice: "This is SPQR radio. . ." dopplering away from him. "It's SPRQ, you fuck!" Bierson shouted out his window as he backed into the spot.

He waded through the psychedelia of Center Square. Pushing through the revolving doors of the DMV, he stepped up to an automated kiosk, jamming his finger against the screen when it asked him the nature of his visit. Without thinking, he almost selected "Driver's License / Vision Test." Instead, he pressed "Other" and plucked the ticket out of the machine. The dancing colors of the room settled; the edges of the world re-hardened.

The benches in the office felt like church pews, the way they curved up and under his legs. He caught a young woman at one of the many counters eyeing him from across the room, leaning out from beneath a vision chart that hung above her. She squinted and tilted her head as if she recognized him.

Bierson heard the kiosk's polite monotone, followed by squeaking and unsteady footsteps. He felt the weight of a hand on the edge of the bench and looked over as Ben sat down next to him. "Good morning, Benjamin," Bierson said.

"Hey, Dad," Ben said. "Look, would you switch me tickets?"

“Why?”

“They send you to certain counters for certain things. I think they’ll send me over there,” Ben said, nodding toward the leaning, squinting woman. She seemed to be about Ben’s age and at Ben’s nod, she smiled. “I know that girl. Her name’s Abigail.”

“Take her for a drive,” Bierson said, handing Ben the ticket. “Girls like Camaros.”

“We could go sightseeing.”

“I’m sure you’re eager to get out of here. Maybe get the movement going again in another city while the news is still talking about it. Stick it to the man, whoever that is.”

“No,” Ben said, taking his sunglasses off.

“I’m sorry about my little message. I didn’t mean it.”

“You meant some of it,” Ben said. “And in some ways, you’re right. Believe me, I know where I come from. You remember that vanitas I painted right before I left?”

“Not sure I’d call that a vanitas,” Bierson said. “A vanitas is about accumulation and futility, not entrapment and delusion. It was just a poor guy in a tangle of screens and wires. Reminded me of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*.”

“Well,” Ben said, “trust me, Dad. I know all about accumulation and futility. That’s why I picked up on the Baroques to begin with. They made me realize what you can do with light and shadow, but the clearest picture in the world is surrounded by ambiguity.”

“And here I thought you were just following in my footsteps.”

“I never meant to, but it’s what always seems to happen.”

Bierson’s number flashed across an overhead screen. He approached a counter, several down from the smiling young woman, and handed over the forms. He paused as he approached the exit, looking back at Ben who squinted up past the girl at the counter, reciting the letters he

had memorized from the scrap paper on his bedroom wall: “C-H-K-V-S-N. . .I?” Bierson considered waiting for him for a moment to convince him to ride with him. They could pick up the Camaro, his new used car, call Rachel and tell her when they had arrived home together. Instead he pushed through the doors and walked out before he could hear if the letter Ben had stumbled on was correct.

In the living room, Bierson found all of Ben’s paintings stacked along the walls. The tables had been cleared off and over Bierson’s hand-drawn battle-plan, Ben had laid out Bierson’s gun and holster, his baton, his aviators, and his handcuffs. On the remaining boards, Ben had left a response to Bierson’s last message in a blue script so neat that it seemed to have been stenciled:

More than anything, Dad, I remember waiting for something to happen, half-impatient for it, half-afraid. For the news to make us look bad, for the rain to stop, then the heat, then the cold. Pacing out toward the barricade, looking for you, looking up at the top of City Hall. You know they say that if you look at it from a certain angle, Ben Franklin looks like he’s jacking off? I was there so long that I think I definitely found the angle. I think I found several.

I’m in full agreement with you in some ways. What do I know of strife? Maybe that’s why I was so determined to be there. Be there and be useful. Either that, or, you’re right, I’d just end up taking selfies of myself, showing off my eyes after they got maced, or my fat lip. Not all of us do that, you know, but you have to understand that the pictures people take are all there is sometimes. When the rumor came around that they were going to take out the leaders, we all looked at each other because who the fuck were the

leaders? Who the hell were “they?” The government wouldn’t dare give us so much leverage, right? And that’s when I figured it out. I’ll look back on that moment to assure myself that, at one point in my life, I had an idea.

I convinced Abigail to stand with me in the center of the arch. I got people to clear away from us without letting them know why. I just started talking really, really loud and then someone handed me a megaphone. I told them to get the cameras ready—just in case. Part of me still thinks that the shot was some misfired gun, or a warning shot gone off course. Maybe a cop or maybe someone waving a pistol in the air. Why else would they only fire once? They missed.

I saw the hole in the brick and turned to Abigail. I held the megaphone up to her and she yelled, “Officer down! Officer down!” She knew that’d get you. She’s a genius.

You know, I really am sorry because the rest of this is going to bother you for a long time. But the truth is—you were there. I remember the phalanx breaking into the crowd. One of several, but by far the best formation: that’s how I knew that either you were there, or that these—these were your guys. I tried to look through the shields and visors to see if I recognized anyone—people from summer barbeques, the community pool, Sunday school—but I couldn’t see faces, just breath-steamed helmets and aviator sunglasses.

The last thing I remember is being pushed aside by a particularly good shield-bump. Then BANG! It felt like part of my skull got knocked off, a chip off the old block.

I'm pretty sure that it wasn't you, but I wake up each morning and I feel like it was. That's why I wanted to see what you remembered—who did it or doing it yourself. I thought we could lay all this out and deal with it. That's how honesty works, right? So, honestly, I guess I can't ever be sure. You're pretty sure that you didn't, and I have no reason to doubt that, but I do. That's just how I feel.

Bierson heard Rachel's voice from the kitchen. "I thought you were the UPS man," Bierson said, reaching over to coffee table and pressing the STOP button on a digital recorder.

"No," Rachel said as she pointed, "Where'd that one come from?"

Bierson didn't answer her. He moved from wall to wall at random, adjusting the many whiteboards that hung amidst Ben's paintings. The original whiteboards remained in their places, the red and blue ink no longer spotlighted by the trio of lamps. Instead Bierson had placed several industrial lights around the room, their beams shining at odd angles and illuminating the entire space. Bierson had drawn and redrawn his maps over every tabletop and chair-back. Step ladders had been placed in each corner of the room so Bierson could reach the ceiling with his illegible red scrawl. "I'm out of boards. I'm out of markers," Bierson said, kneeling down over the hardwood floor at which point he resumed scraping the same script into the parquetry with a hunting knife. "Had to order more," he said.

. . . Bierson spent the rest of his life revising the outcome of one particular day. . .

"No shit," Bierson said to the recorder. "He thinks he's an expert. He's not even a doctor!"

. . . shit," Bierson said to the recorder. . .

When Rachel knelt down next to him, he flinched as if he had forgotten that she was in the room. As he pulled away from her outstretched hand, the recorder coughed static. “I can’t read any of this,” Rachel said. “I can’t read any of it.”

“Then just *listen*,” Bierson said, throwing his head back at the recorder.

. . . just listen,” Bierson said, throwing his head back. . .

Bierson scanned his script, his own history of the day on which his son had been blinded. Damage to the occipital lobe. Permanent as of a few days ago with the potential to worsen over time. Sections closest to the original boards were written in broken English. The bay window had been covered over in red streaks of Latin that slowly mutated into Italian as they worked clockwise around the room over the faces of photographs, the heirloom clock, framed biblical proverbs on old nails that dotted the wall above the flat-screen TV. The TV scrolled snow and static in waves of red, blue, green. “Then just listen,” Bierson repeated as if Rachel had repeated herself. “I’m running out of time here. Won’t you help?”

“This isn’t about me,” she said, digging a manicured fingernail into the grooves of the ruined floor. “Told you that.”

Chief Inspector Jacob Bierson spent the rest of his life. . .

Bierson pointed his finger, bouncing it up and down as if counting his deeds. As the letters approached the eastern wall, thinning out above the kitchen entryway, they slid uneasily into an elegantly barbed gibberish. Seraphs hooked down over swooping letters, some recognizable, others pictorial, hieroglyphic.

Chief Inspector Jacob Bierson spent the rest of his life. . .

“Say something useful for once,” Bierson said. He noticed Rachel picking up his aviators from the map, wiping at the twin Xs that had been drawn over their lenses. “Put those down.”

. . . *Jacob Bierson, newly retired, spent the rest of his life. . .*

“Turn it off,” Rachel said, holding her ears. “I don’t want to hear it anymore. Turn the damned thing off.”

Bierson snatched it out of her hands and pressed the STOP button, but as soon as he had stopped the recording, it hiccupped and started up again. Bierson turned to the table, bending down and reaching underneath of it, looking for his baton. He felt Rachel’s hand on his back as she knelt down next to him. He threw the recorder against the southern wall where the scrawled hieroglyphs mutated into sketches that grew more and more detailed as they went along: a young boy with a bullet wound through his forehead—crossed out. Next to it was a young boy with an eye dangling grotesquely from its socket—crossed out. The last image depicted the young boy holding a dagger inward at his stomach, awaiting a man with a large, ornate shield—crossed out.