

A Season of Broken Dolls by Caitlin R Kiernan

Part I

August 14, 2027

Sabit's the one with a hard-on for stitchwork, not me. It is not exactly (or at all) my particular realm of expertise, not my cuppa, not my *scene*—as the beatniks used to say, back there in those happy Neolithic times. I mean the plethora of Lower Manhattan flesh-art dives like Guro/Guro or Twist or that pretentious little shitstain way down on Pearl—*Corpus Ex Machina*—the one that gets almost as much space in the police blotters as in the glossy snip-art rags.

Me, I'm still laboring alone or nearly so in the Dark Ages, and she never lets me forget it. My unfashionable and unprofitable preoccupation with mere canvas and paint, steel and plaster, all that which has been deemed *demodé*, *passé*, Post-Relevant, all that which is fit only to fill up musty old museum vaults and public galleries, gathering more dust even than my career.

You still write on a goddamn keyboard, for chris'sakes, she laughs. *You're the only woman I ever fucked made being a living fossil a goddamn point of pride*. And then Sabit checks for my pulse—two fingers pressed gently to a wrist or the side of my throat—because, hey, maybe I'm not a *living fossil* at all. Maybe I'm that *other* kind, like Pollack and Mondrian, Henry Moore and poor old Man Ray. *No, no, no, the blood's still flowing sluggishly along*, she smiles and lights a cigarette. *Too bad. Maybe there's hope for you yet, my love*.

Sabit likes to talk almost as much as she likes to watch. It's not as though the bitch has a mark on her hide anywhere, not as though she's anything but a tourist with a hard-on, a fetishist who can not ever get enough of her kink. Prick her for a crimson bead and the results would come back same as mine, 98% the same as any chimpanzee. She knows how much contempt is reserved in those quarters for tourists and trippers, but I think that only makes her more zealous. She exhales, and smoke lingers like a unearned halo about her face. I should have dumped her months ago, but I'm not as young as I used to be, and I'm just as addicted to sex as she is to nicotine and pills and stitchwork. She calls herself a poet, but she has never let me read a word she's written, if she's ever written a word.

I found her a year ago, almost a year ago, found her in a run-down titty bar getting fucked-up on vodka and laudanum and speed and the too-firm silicone breasts of women who might have been the real thing—even if their perfect boobs were not—or might only have been cheap japandroids. She followed me home, fifteen years my junior, and the more things change, the more things stay the way they were day before day before yesterday, day before I met Sabit and her slumberous Arabian eyes. My sloe-eyed stitch-fiend of a girlfriend, and I have her, and she has me, and we're as happy as happy can be, and I pretend it means something more than orgasms and not being alone, something more than me annoying her and her taunting and insulting me.

Now she's telling me there's a new line-up down @ *Corpus Ex Machina* (hereafter known simply as CeM), and we have to be there tomorrow night. *We have to be there*, she says. *The Trenton Group is showing, and last time the Trenton Group showed, there was almost a riot, so we have to be there*. I have deadlines that have nothing whatsoever to do with that constantly revolving meat-market spectacle, and in a moment I'll finish this entry & then I'll tell her that, and she'll tell me we have to be there, we have to be there, & there will be time to finish my articles later. There always is, & I'm never late. Never late enough to matter. I'll go with her, because I do not trust her to go alone—not go alone *and* come back here again—she'll tell me that, and she'll be right as fucking rain. Her smug triumph, well that's a given. Just as my obligatory refusal followed by inevitable, reluctant acquiescence is also a given. We

play by the same rules every time. Now she's on about some scandal @ Guro/Guro—chicanery and artifice, prosthetics, and she says, *They're all a bunch of gidding poseurs, the shitheels run that sorry dump. Someone ought to burn it to the ground for this.* You know how to light a match I reply, & she rolls her dark eyes @ me.

No rain today. No rain since...June. The sky at noon is the color of rust, and I wish it were winter. Enough for now. Maybe she'll shut up for 10 or 15 if I fuck her.

August 16, 2027

"You're into that whole *scene*, right?" Which only shows to go once again that my editor still has her head rammed so far up her ass that her farts smell like toothpaste. But I said yeah, sure, because she wanted someone with cred on the Guro/Guro story, the stitch chicanery, allegations of fraud among the freaks, & what else was I supposed to say? I can't remember the last time I had the nerve to turn down a paying assignment. Must have been years before I met Sabit, at least. So, yeah, I tagged along last night, just like she wanted—both of them wanted—she & she, but @ least I can say it's work, and Berlin picked up the tab.

Sabit's out, so I don't have her yammering in my goddamn ear, an hour to myself, perhaps, half an hour, however long it takes her to get back with dinner. I wanted to put something down, something that isn't in the notes and photos I've already filed with the pre-edit gleets. Fuck. I've been popping caps from Sabit's pharmacopoeia all goddamn day long, I don't even know what, the baby-blue ones she gets \$300/two dozen from Peru, the ones she says calm her down but they're not calming me down. They haven't even dulled the edge, so far as I can tell.

But, anyway, there we were @ CeM, in the crowded Pearl St. warehouse passing itself off as a slaughterhouse or a zoo or an exhibition or what the fuck ever, and there's this bird from Tokyo, and I never got her name, but she had eyes all the colors of peacock feathers, iridescent eyes, and she recognized me. Some monied bird with pretty peacock eyes. She'd read the series I wrote in '21 when the city finally gave up and let the sea have the subway. *I read a lot*, she said. *I might have been a journalist myself*, she said. That sort of shit. Thought she was going to ask me to sign a goddamn cocktail napkin. And I'm smiling & nodding yes, because that's agency policy, be nice to the readers, don't feed the pigeons, whatever. But I can't take my eyes off the walls. The walls are new. They were just walls last time Sabit dragged me down to one of her snip affairs. Now they're alive, every square inch, mottled shades of pink and gray and whatever you call that shade between pink and gray. Touch them (Sabit must have touched them a hundred times) and they twitch or sprout goosebumps. They sweat, those walls.

And the peacock girl was in one ear, and Sabit was in the other, the music so loud I was already getting a headache before my fourth drink, and I was trying to stop looking at those walls. *Pig*, Sabit told me later in the evening. *It's all just pig*, and she sounded disappointed. Most of this is in the notes, though I didn't say how unsettling I found those walls of skin. I save the revulsion for my own dime. Sabit says they're working on adding functional genitalia and...fuck. I hear her at the door. Later, then. She has to shut up and go to sleep eventually.

August 16, 2027 (later, 11:47 p.m.)

Sabit came back with a bag full of Indian takeaway, when she'd gone out for sushi. I really couldn't care less, one way or the other, these days food is only fucking food—curry or wasabi, but when I *asked* why she'd changed her mind, she just stared at me, eyes blank as a goddamn dead codfish, & shrugged. Then she was quiet all night long, & the last thing I need just now is Sabit Abbasi going all silent and creepy on me. She's asleep, snoring because her sinuses are bad because she smokes too much. & I'm losing the

momentum I needed to say *anything* more about what happened @ CeM on Sat. night. It's all fading, like a dream.

I've been reading one of Sabit's books, *The Breathing Composition* (Welleran Smith, 2025), something from those long-ago days when the *avant-garde* abomination of stitch & snip was still hardly more than nervous rumor & theory & the wishful thinking of a handful of East Coast art pervs. I don't know what I was looking for, if it was just research for the article, don't know what I thought I might find—or what any of this has to do with Sat. nite. Am I afraid to write it down? That's what Sabit would say. But I won't ask Sabit. What do *you* dream, Sabit, my dear sadistic plaything? Do you *dream* in installations, muscles and tendons, gallery walls of sweating pig flesh, living bone exposed for all to see, vivisection as not-quite still life, portrait of the artist as a young atrocity? Are your sweet dreams the same things keeping me awake, making me afraid to sleep?

There was so goddamn much @ CeM to turn my fucking stomach, but just this one thing has me jiggled and sleepless and popping your blue Peruvian bon bons. Just this one thing. I'm not the squeamish sort, and everyone knows it. That's one reason the agency tossed the Guro/Guro story at me. Gore & sex and mutilation? Give it to Schuler. She's seen the worst and keeps coming back for more. Wasn't she one of the first into Brooklyn after the bomb? & she did that crazy whick out on the Stuyvesant rat attacks. How many murders and suicides and serial killers does that make for Schuler now? 9? Fourteen? 38? That kid in the Bronx, the Puerto Rican bastard who sliced up his little sister & then fed her through a food processor, that was one of Schuler's, yeah? *Ad infinitum, ad nauseum*, hail Mary, full of beans. Cause they know I won't be on my knees puking up lunch when I should be making notes & getting the vid or asking questions.

But now, *now* Sabit, I'm dancing round this one thing. This one little thing. So, here there's a big ol' chink in these renowned nerves of steel. Maybe I've got a weak spot after fucking all. Rings of flesh, towers of iron—oh yeah, sure—fucking corpses heaped in dumpsters and rats eating fucking babies alive & winos & don't forget the kid with the Cuisinart—sure, fine—but that one labeled #17, oh, now *that's* another goddamn story. She *saw* something there, & ol' Brass-Balls Schuler was never quite the same again, isn't that the way it goes?

Are you laughing in your dreams, Sabit? Is that why you're smiling next to me in your goddamn sleep? I've dog-eared a page in your book, Sabit, a page with a poem written in a New Jersey loony bin by a woman, & Welleran Smith just calls her Jane Doe so I do not know her name. But Welleran Smith & that mangy bunch of stitch prophets called her a visionary, & I'm writing it down here, while I try to find the nerve to say whatever it is I'd wanted to say about #17:

spines and bellies knitted & proud and all open

all watching spines and bellies and the three;

triptych & buckled, ragdoll fusion

3 of you so conjoined, my eyes from yours,

arterial hallways knitted red proud flesh

Healing and straining for cartilage & epidermis

Not taking, we cannot imagine

So many wet lips, your sky Raggedy alchemy

And all expecting Jerusalem

And Welleran Smith, he proclaims Jane Doe a “hyperlucid transcendent schizo-oracle,” a “visionary calling into the maelstrom.” & turns out, here in the footnotes, they put the bitch away because she’d drugged her lover—she was a lesbian; of course, she had to be a lesbian—she drugged her lover and used surgical thread to sew the woman’s lips & nostrils closed, *after* performing a crude tracheotomy so she wouldn’t suffocate. Jane Doe sewed her own vagina shut, and she removed her own nipples & then tried grafting them onto her gf’s belly. She kept the woman (not named, sorry, lost to anonymity) cuffed to a bed for almost 6 weeks before someone finally came poking around & Jesus fucking Christ, Sabit, this is the sort of sick bullshit set it all in motion. Jane Doe’s still locked away in her padded cell, I’m guessing—*hyperlucid* & worshipped by the snips—& maybe the woman she mutilated is alive somewhere, trying to forget. Maybe the doctors even patched her up (ha ha fucking ha) made her good as new again, but I doubt it.

I need to sleep. I need to lie down & close my eyes & not see #17 and sweating walls and Sabit ready to fucking cum because she can never, ever get enough. It’s half an hour after midnight, & they expect copy from me tomorrow night, eight sharp, when I haven’t written a goddamn word about the phony stitchwork @ Guro/Guro. Fuck you, Sabit, and fuck Jane Doe & that jackoff Welleran Smith and the girl with peacock eyes that I should have screwed just to piss you off. I should have brought her back here and fucked her in our bed, & maybe you’d have found some other snip tourist & even now I could be basking in the sanguine cherry glow of happily ever fucking after.

August 18, 2027

I’m off the Guro/Guro story. Missed the extended DL tonight, no copy, never even made it down to the gallery. Just my notes and photos from CeM for someone else to pick up where I left off. Lucky the agency didn’t let me go. Lucky or unlucky. But they can’t can me, not for missing a deadline or two. I have rep, I have creds, I have awards & experience & loyal goddamn readers. Hell, I still get a byline on this thing; it’s in my contract. Fuck it. Fuck it all.

August 19, 2027

Welleran Smith’s “Jane Doe” died about six months ago, back in March. I asked some questions, said it was work for the magazine, tagged some people who know people who could get to the files. It was a suicide—oh, and never you mind that she’d been on suicide watch for years. This one was a certified trooper, a bona-fide martyr in the service of her own undoing. She chewed her tongue in half & choked herself on it. She had a name, too. Don’t know if Smith knew it & simply withheld it, or if he never looked that far. Maybe he only priggged the bits he needed to put the snips in orbit & disregarded the rest.

“Jane Doe” was Judith Louise Darger, born 1992, Ph. D. in Anthropology from Yale, specialized in urban neomythology, syncretism, etc. & did a book with HarperC back in ‘21—*Bloody Mary, La Llorona, and the Blue Lady: Feminine Icons in a Child’s Apocalypse*. Sold for shit, out of print by 2023. But found a battered copy cheap uptown. Darger’s gf and victim, she’s dead, too. Another suicide, not long after they put Darger away. Turns out, she had a history of neurosis and self-mutilation going back to high school, & there was all sorts of shit there I’m not going to get into, but she told the courts that what Darger did to her, and to herself, they’d planned the whole thing for months. So, why the fuck did good old Welleran Smith leave *that* part out? It was in the goddamn press, no secret. I have a photograph of Judith Darger, right here on the dj of her book. She could not look less remarkable.

Sabit says there’s another Trenton Group show this weekend & don’t I wanna to go? She’s hardly said three words to me the last couple of days, but she told me this. Get another look at #17, she said, & I

almost fucking hit her. No more pills, Schuler. No more pills.

August 20, 2027

No sleep last night. Today, I filed for my next assignment, but so far the green bin's still empty. Maybe I'm being punished for blowing the DL on Weds. night, some sort of pass-ag bullshit because that's the best those weasels in senior edit can ever seem to manage. Or maybe it's only a sloooowwww week. I am having a hard time caring, either way.

No sleep last night. No, I said that already. Time on my hands and that's never a good thing. Insomnia and coffee and gin, takeaway and Pop-Tarts and a faint throb that wants to be a headache (how long since one of those?), me locked in my office last night reading a few chapters of Darger's grand flop, but there's nothing in there—fascinating and I don't know why it wasn't better received, but still leading me nowhere, nowhere at all (where did I *think* it would lead?). This bit re: La Llorona (“Bloody Mary”) from Ch. 3—“Some girls with no home feel claws scratching under the skin on their arms. Their hand [sic] looks like red fire.” And this one, from a *Miami New Times* article: “When a child says he got the story from the spirit world, as homeless children do, you’ve hit the ultimate *non sequitur*.” Homeless kids and demons and angels, street gangs, drugs, the socioeconomic calamities of thirty goddamn years ago. News articles from 1997. None of this is gonna answer any of my questions, if I truly have questions to be answered. But this is “Jane Doe’s” magnum opus, and there is some grim fascination I can’t shake—How did she get from *there* to *there*, from diy street myths to sewing her gf’s mouth shut?

Maybe it wasn’t such a short goddamn walk. Maybe, one night, she stood before a dark mirror in a darkened room, the mirror coated with dried saltwater—going native or just too fucking curious, whatever—and maybe she stood there chanting *Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary*, over and over and over and La Llorona scratched her way out through the looking glass, scarring the anthropologist’s soul with her rosary beads. Maybe that’s where this began, the snips and stitches, #17. Maybe it all goes back to those homeless kids in Miami, back before the flood, before the W. Antarctic ice sheet melted and Dade County FL sank like a stone, and all along it was the late Dr. J. L. Darger let this djinn out of its bottle in ways people like Sabit have not yet begun to suspect and never will. I’m babbling, and if that’s the best I can do, I’m going to stop keeping a damned journal.

I’ve agreed to be @ CeM tomorrow night with Sabit. I’m a big girl. I can sip my shitty Merlot and nibble greasy orange cheese and stale crackers with the best of them. I can bear the soulless conversation and the sweating porcine walls. I can look at #17 and see nothing there but bad art, fucked-up artless crap, pretentious carnage and willful suffering. Maybe then I can put *all* this shit behind me. Who knows, maybe I can even put Sabit behind me, too.

August 20, 2027 (later, p.m.)

Sabit says the surgeon on #17 will be at the show t’orrow night. I think maybe it’s someone Sabit was screwing before she started screwing me. Oh, & this, from *The Breathing Composition*, which I’ve started reading again & frankly wish I had not. Seems Welleran Smith somehow got his paws on Darger’s diary, or *one* of her diaries, & he quotes it at length (& no doubt there are contextual issues; don’t know the fate of the original text):

“We are all alone on a darkling plain, precisely as Matt. Arnold said. We are so very alone here, and we yearn each day for the reunification promised by priests and gurus and by some ancient animal instinct. We are evolution’s grand degenerates, locked away forever in the consummate prison cells of our conscious minds, each divided always from the other. I met a man from Spain, and he gave me a note card with the number seventeen written on it seventeen times. He thought that surely I would understand right away, and he was heartbroken when I did not. When I asked, he would not explain. I’ve kept the

card in my files, and sometimes I take it out and stare at it, hoping that I will at last discern its message. But it remains perfectly opaque, because my eyes are the eyes of the damned.”

& I'm looking thru the program for the Trenton Show on the 15th, last Sun., & only one piece is *numbered*, only 1 piece w/a # for a title—#17. Yes, I know. I'm going in circles here. Chasing my own ass. Toys in the attic. Nutters as the goddamn snips if I don't watch myself. If I don't get some sleep. I haven't seen Sabit all evening, just a call this afternoon.

August 21, 2027 (Saturday, 10:12 a.m.)

Four whole hours sleep last night. & the hangover is not so bad that old-fash blek coffee and aspirin isn't helping. My head feels clearer than it has in days. Sabit came home sometime after I nodded off & I woke with her snoring next to me. When I asked if maybe she wanted breakfast, she smiled, so I made eggs & cut a grapefruit in half. Perhaps I can persuade her to stay home tonight, that we should *both* stay home tonight. There is nothing down there I need to see again.

Part II

August 21, 2027 (2:18 p.m.)

No, she says. *We are expected*, she says, & what the fuck is that supposed to mean, anyway? So there was a fight, because there always has to be a fight with Sabit, a real screamer this time, & I have no idea where she's run off to but she swore she'd be back by *five* & I better be sober, she said, & I better be dressed & ready for the show. So, yeah, fuck it. I'll go to the damn show with her. I'll rub shoulders with the stitch freaks this one last time. Maybe I'll even have a good long look at #17 (tho' now, I should add, now Sabit says the surgeon won't be there after all). Maybe I'll stand & stare until it's only flesh & wires & hooks & fancy lighting.

Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette wrote somewhere, “Look for a long time at what pleases you, and for a longer time at what pains you.” Maybe I'll shame them all with my staring. They only feel as much pain as they *want* to feel—isn't that what Sabit is always telling me? The stitchworks, they get all the best painkillers, ever since the Feds decided this sick shit constitutes Art—so long as certain lines are not crossed. They bask in glassy-eyed morphine hazes, shocked cold orange on neuroblocks & Fibrodene & Elyzzium, exotic transdermals & maybe all that shit's legal & maybe it ain't, but 2380 no one's asking too many questions as the City of NY has enough on its great collective plate these days w/out stitch-friendly lawyers raising a holy funk about censorship and freedom of expression and 1st Amendment violations. The cops hate the fuckers, but none of the arrests have had jack to do with drugs, just disorderly conduct, riots after shows, shit like that. But yeah, t'morrow night I'll go back to CeM with Sabit, my heart's damned desire, my cunt's lazy love, & I will look until they want to fucking charge me extra.

August 21, 2027

So Sabit shows up an hour or so after dark. . .she's gone now, gone again because I suppose I have chased her away, again. That's what she would say, I am sure. I have chased her away again. But, as I was saying, she shows up, & I can tell she's been drinking because she has that smirk and that swagger she gets when she's been drinking, & I can tell she's still pissed. I'm waiting for the other shoe. I'm waiting, because I fucking know whatever's coming next is for my benefit. & I'm thinking, screw it, get it over with, don't let her have the satisfaction of getting in the first blow. I'm thinking, this is where it ends. Tonight. No more of her bullshit. It's been a grandiose act of reciprocal masochism, Sabit, & it's been raw & all, but enough's enough. @ least the sex was good, so let's remember that & move on.

& that's when I notice the gauze patch taped to her back, centered between her shoulder blades just so, placed *just so* there between her scapulae, centered on the smooth brown plain of her trapezius (let me write this the way a goddamn snip would write it, cluttered with an anatomist's Latin). & when I ask her what the fuck, she just shrugs, & that swatch of gauze goes up & then down again. But I know. I know whatever it is she's done, whatever comes next, this is it. This is her preemptive volley, so I can just forget all about landing the first punch this time, baby. Sabit knows revenge like a drunk knows an empty bottle, & I should have given up while I was ahead.

I've been wanting some new ink, she says. *You helped me to finally make up my mind, that's all.* & before she can say anything else, I rip away the bandage. She does not even fucking flinch, even though the tattoo can't be more than a couple hrs old, still seeping & puffy and red, & all I can hear is her laughing. Bcuse there on her back is the Roman numeral XVII, & when she asks for the bandage back, I slap her.

I slapped her.

This use of present tense, what's that but keeping the wound open & fresh, keeping the scabs at bay just like some goddamn pathetic stitchwork would do. I slapped her. The sound of my hand against her cheek was so loud, crack like a goddamn firecracker, & in the silence afterwards (just as fucking loud) she just smiled & smiled & smiled for me. & then I started yelling—I don't know exactly what—accusations that couldn't possibly have made sense, slurs and insinuation, and truthfully I knew even then none of it was anything but bitterness & disappointment that she'd not only managed to draw first blood (hahaha) this round, she'd finally pushed me far enough to hit her. I'd never hit her before. I had never hit *anyone* before, not since some bullshit high-school fights, & at last, she did not even need to raise her voice. & then she just smiled @ me, & I think I must have finally told her to say something, because I was puking sick to death of that smug smile.

I'm glad you approve, she said. Or maybe she said, *I'm glad you understand*. In this instance, the meanings would be the same somehow. Somehow interchangeable. But I did not apologize. That's the sort of prick I am. I sat down on the kitchen floor & stared @ linoleum patterns & when I looked up again she was gone. I don't know if she's gone gone, or if Sabit has merely retreated until she decides it's time for another blitz. Rethinking her maneuvers, the ins & outs of this campaign, logistics and field tactics & what the fuck ever. Cards must be played properly. I know Sabit, & she will never settle for Pyrrhic victory, no wars of attrition, no winner's curse. I sat on the floor until I heard the door shut & so knew I was alone again. I would say at least this gets me out of CeM on Sun. night, but I may go alone. Even though I know she'll be there. Clearly, I can hurt some more. Tonight I will get drunk, & that is all.

August 22, 2027 (2:56 a.m.)

Always have I been a sober drunk. I've finished the gin & started on an old bottle of rye whisky—gift from some former lover I won't name here—bcuse I didn't feel like walking through the muggy, dusty evening, risking life and limb & lung for another pretty blue bottle of Bombay. A sober & lazy drunk, adverse to taking *unnecessary* risks. Sabit has not yet reappeared, likely she will not. I suspect she believes she has won not only the battle, but the war, as well. Good for her. May she go haunt some other sad fuck's life. Of course, the apt. is still awash in her junk, her clothes, her stitch lit, the hc zines and discs & her txtbooks filled with diagrams, schematics of skeletons & musculature, neuroanatomy, surgical technique, organic chem and pharmacology, immunology, all that crap. Snip porn. I should dump it all. I should call someone 2830 to cart it all away so I don't have to fucking look at it anymore. The clothes, her lucite ashtrays, the smoky, musky, spicy smell of her, bottles of perfume, cosmetics, music, jewelry, deodorant, jasmine soap, & jesus all the CRAP she's left behind to keep me company. I don't know if I'll sleep tonight. I don't want to. I don't want to be awake anymore ever again. Why did she

want to rub my nose in #17? Just that she's finally found a flaw, a goddamn weakness, & she has to make the most of it?

A talkative, sober drunk. But wait—there is something. There is something else I found in Welleran Smith, & I'm gonna write it down. Something more from the diary/ies of Dr. Judith Darger, unless it's only something Smith concocted to suit his own ends. More & more I consider that likelihood, that Darger is only some lunatic just happened to be where these people needed her to be, but isn't that how it always is with saints and martyrs? Questions of victimhood arise. Who's exploiting who? Whose exploiting whom? Christ I get lost in all these words. I don't *need* words. I'm strangling on words. I need to see Sabit & end this mess & be done with her. According to Welleran Smith, Darger writes (none of the "entries" are dated):

"I would not tell a child that it isn't going to hurt. I wouldn't lie. It is going to hurt, and it is going to hurt forever or as long as human consciousness may endure. It is going to hurt until it doesn't hurt anymore. That is what I would tell a child. That is what I tell myself, and what am I but my own child? So, I will not lie to any of you. Yes, there will be pain, and at times the pain will seem unbearable. But the pain will open doorways. The pain *is* a doorway, as is the scalpel and as are the sutures and each and every incision. Pain is to be thrown open wide that all may gaze at the wonders which lie beyond. Why is it assumed this flesh must not be cut? Why is it assumed this is my final corporeal form? What is it we cannot yet see for all our fear of pain and ugliness and disfiguration? I would not tell a child that it isn't going to hurt. I would teach a child to live in pain."

Is that what I am learning from you, Sabit? Is that the lesson of #17 and the glassy stare of those six eyes? Would you, all of you, teach me to live with pain?

August 23, 2027

It's almost dawn, that first false dawn & just a bit of hesitant purple where the sky isn't quite night anymore. As much as I have ever seen false dawn in the city, where we try so hard to keep the night away forever. If I had a son, or a daughter, I would tell them a story, how people are @ war with night, & the city—like all cities—is only a fortress built to hold back the night, even though all the world is just a bit of grit floating in a sea of night that might go on almost forever. I'm on the roof. I've never been up here before. Sabit & I never came up here. Maybe another three hours left before it's too hot & bright to sit up here, only 95F now if my watch is telling me the truth. My face & hair are slick with sweat, sweating out the booze & pills, sweating out the sour memory of Sabit. It feels good to sweat.

I went to Pearl St. & the Trenton reveal @ *Corpus ex Machina*, but apparently she did not. Maybe she had something better to do & someone better to be doing it with. I flashed my press tag @ the door, so at least I didn't have to pay the \$47 cover. I was not the only pundit in attendance. I saw Kline, who's over @ the Voice these days (that venerable old whore) & I saw Garrison, too. Buzzards w/their beaks sharp, stomach's empty, mouth's watering. No, I do not know if birds salivate, but reporters fucking do. None of them spoke to me, & I exchanged the favor.

The place was *replete*, as the dollymops are wont to say, chock-full, standing room only. I sipped dirty martinis and licorice shides & looked no one in the eye, no one who was not on exhibit. #17 was near the back, not as well lit as some of the others, & I stood there & stared, because that is what I'd come for. Sometimes it gazed back me, or *they* gazed @ me—I am uncertain of the proper idiom or parlance or phrase. Is *it* One or are *they* 3? I stared & stared & stared, like any good voyeur would do, any dedicated peeper, because no clips are allowed, so you stand & drink it all in there the same way the Neanderthals did it or pony up the fat spool of cash for one of the Trenton chips or mnemonic lozenges ("all proceeds for R&D, promo, & ongoing medical expenses," of course). I looked until all I saw was all I was *meant* to see—the sculpted body(ies), living & breathing & conscious—the perpetually hurting

realization of all Darger's nightmares. If I saw *beauty* there, it was no different from the beauty I saw in Brooklyn after the New Konsojaya Trading Co. popped their mini-nuke over on Tillary St. No different from a hundred lingering deaths I've witnessed.

Welleran Smith said this was to be "the soul's terrorism against the tyranny of genes & phenotype." I stood there & I saw everything there was to see. Maybe Sabit would have been proud. Maybe she would have been disappointed @ my resolve. It hardly matters, either way. A drop of sweat dissolving on my tongue & I wonder if that's the way the ocean used to taste, when it wasn't suicide to taste the ocean?

When I had seen all I had come to see, my communion w/#17, I found an empty stool @ the bar. I thought you might still put in an appearance, Sabit, so I got drunker & waited for a glimpse of you in the crowd. & there was a man sitting next to me, Harvey somebody or another from Chicago, gray-haired with a mustache, & he talked & I listened, as best I could hear him over the music. I think the music was suffocating me. He said, *That's my granddaughter over there, what's left of her*, & he pointed thru the crush of bodies toward a stitchwork hanging from the warehouse ceiling, a dim chandelier of circuitry & bone & muscles flayed & rearranged. I'd looked at the piece on the way in—*The Lighthouse of Francis Bacon*, it was called. The old man told me he'd been following the show for months, but now he was almost broke & would have to head back to Chicago soon. He was only drinking ginger ale. I bought him a ginger ale & listened, leaning close so he didn't have to shout to be heard. The chandelier had once been a student @ the Pritzker School of Medicine, but then, he said, "something happened." I did not ask what. I decided if he wanted me to know, he would tell me. He didn't. Didn't tell me, I mean. He tried to buy me a drink, but I wouldn't let him.

The grandfather of the Lighthouse of Francis Bacon tried to buy me a drink, & I realized I was thinking like a journalist again, *thinking you dumb fucks—here's your goddamn story—not some bullshit hearsay about chicanery among the snips, no, this old man's your goddamn story, this poor guy probably born way the fuck back before man even walked on the goddamn moon & now he's sitting here at the end of the world, this anonymous old man rubbing his bony shoulders with the tourists and art critics & stitch fiends and freaks because his granddaughter decided she'd rather be a fucking chandelier than a gynecologist*. Oh god, Sabit. If you could have shown him your brand-new tattoo.

I left the place before midnight, paid the hack extra to go farther south, to get me as near the ruins as he dared. I needed to see them, that's all. Rings of flesh & towers of iron, right, rust-stained granite and the empty eye sockets where once were windows. The skyscraper stubs of Old Downtown, Wall St. and Battery Park City, all of it inundated by the rising waters there @ the confluence of the Hudson & the E. River. And then I came home, & now I am sitting here on the roof, getting less & less drunk, sweating & listening to traffic & the city waking up around me—the living fossil with her antique keyboard. If you do come back here, Sabit, if *that's* whatever happens next, you will not find me intimidated by your XVII or by #17, either, but I don't think you ever will. You've moved on. & if you send someone to pack up your shit, I'll probably already be in Bratislava by then. After CeM, there were 2 good assigns waiting for me in the green bin, & I'm taking the one that gets me far, far away from here for 3 weeks in Slovakia. But right now I'm just gonna sit here on the roof & watch the sun come up all swollen & lobster red over this rotten, drowning city, over this rotten fucking world. I think the pigeons are waking up.