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Honors Thesis

SONGS ON THE ROAD: A NOVEL

by

LANE WELCH

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of  
graduation requirements for University Honors



**Abstract**

*Songs on the Road: A Novel* reimagines the open road of mid-century American literature, a literary phenomenon that frequently imbued the mundane with a power bordering on the fantastic, as literally fantastic in a way that examines and deconstructs literary tropes from the mysterious hitchhiker to the film noir detective. This thesis includes excerpts from the novel and a critical introduction exploring the works of literature the novel draws from and engages in dialogue with.



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## Introduction

“You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to,” says Bilbo Baggins at the opening of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (83), one of the most iconic literary journeys of the twentieth century. Three years after *Fellowship*’s 1954 publication, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* echoes the sentiment of the road as its protagonist “get[s] the bug” for travel and plunges into his delirious cross-country journeys with cowboys and Beat poets (142)—journeys tied to the reality of contemporary America, but no less epic and fantastic than *The Lord of the Rings*.

In mid-century America, the road became a magical place, opened up to the masses by a new interstate system and thriving automotive industry and marketed as freedom, power, and the American way by that same industry. The open road captured the imagination of novelists, poets, and filmmakers. Contemporary to this moment, literary critic Leslie Fiedler derisively but not inaptly spoke of “a full-scale synthetic myth of an America of the Open Road [that has been created] to replace the defunct New England version of our country; but,” he declares, “this was born as unreal as its predecessor has become” (18). The unreality of the open road that Fiedler posits derives both from the limited perspective of the writers relative to the vastness of their subject matter, as well as the liminal affect of the road carried over from older journey epics, such as *The Odyssey*, *Journey to the West*, *The Divine Comedy* and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. As the writers’ lack of familiarity with and interest in the actual daily lives of the different groups they meet combines with the narrative sensibilities of these older epics, the culturally othered groups accessible only by highway—othered along axes of race,



profession, socioeconomic class, and even sexuality—become the mythical creatures of the American road. The novel *Songs on the Road* makes this mythical liminality and this “creaturing” literal, presenting an American highway populated by openly non-human creatures in a way that parallels the fantastic but still realistic highway of mid-century American writers and filmmakers’ imaginations.

The classical stories of epic journeys that are frequently identified as literary antecedents to the road trip genre—an extensive list, condensed in this essay to *The Odyssey*, *Journey to the West*, *The Divine Comedy*, and *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*—all present the world through which its protagonists wander as literally enchanted, the actual realm of the dangerous and divine. In his influential meta-analysis of quest narratives *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*—a work with a questionable methodology but an undeniable impact on the way these narratives are categorized and conceived by later authors and critics—Joseph Campbell refers to this realm as “a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where [the hero] must survive a succession of trials” (97). The ambiguity and fluidity of the “forms,” creatures, and structures found in this landscape vary from narrative to narrative, with some forms symbolizing real-world phenomena, some presenting a contemporary understanding of real-world phenomena, some literalizing psychological or otherwise non-tangible phenomena, and some intertextually invoking previous works of literature or mythology.

This notion of a landscape populated by more or less symbolic creatures forms the core of many classic journey-centered stories mentioned above. Although travel and displacement are a key part of many works of fiction, the four texts mentioned above have been chosen for closer analysis for their highly influential status in the canon of

world literature, for their limited and rarely divided central cast of travelers, and for their episodic structure, all of which feeds into the structure of many American road trip stories. These four works showcase different ways in which journey epics present their creatures:

In *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus leaves the literally historical reality of war (with some allowances made for the presence of deity, of course), he enters the unchartable realm of an enchantment-laden sea where he encounters and must overcome a succession of creatures and cultures, from the fully human and agentive Circe to Scylla and Charybdis, who are nothing more than phenomena of nature, to the sirens, somewhere in between.

*Journey to the West*, the sixteenth-century Chinese epic detailing a heavily fictionalized version of Tang dynasty monk Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India, has been, "from the moment of the work's public appearance, regarded as a work of profound allegory" by critics and editors (Yu 51). While many classical critics poured much energy into deciphering the precise meaning of this allegory, modern critics consider the work's allegorical portions to be inconsistent in their metaphors and interspersed with sections of pure fantasy.

Dante's *Commedia* literalizes the most non-literal religious concepts of justice, retribution, and divinity and guides the narrator on a journey through them, albeit a journey where the only conflict Dante has with the manifestations before him is spiritual. In the *Inferno* in particular, Dante witnesses human souls progressively transformed by punishments with each passing circle of Hell—watched over by creatures from Classical mythology such as Cerberus, Medusa, and Chiron, as well as sometimes literally

transformed into creatures such as those who died by suicide, changed into sentient trees. Though Dante passes among all these creatures and environments that transform one into a creature, he himself remains physically and spiritually unchanged, and eventually he passes from Hell to Purgatory all the way to Heaven, as safe as any tourist.

Finally, C. S. Lewis's *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*—a significantly more recent work, published 1952 to the *Commedia*'s 1321, but one that is in constant dialogue with its predecessors and that helped shape a huge number of subsequent works—compiles and pays homage to creatures from a wide variety of classical texts, from a human-cum-dragon transformed by greed just like Fafnir of *The Saga of the Volsungs* to monopods, creatures featured in Aristophanes's *The Birds*, to the final encounter with a redemptive, all-powerful lamb. All of these manifestations encountered by wandering heroes exist in a realm divorced from reality and understood to be non-literal, whether that “dream landscape” is presented as another world, another life, or simply the world beyond the safety of established borders.

Twentieth-century American road trip stories superimpose this idea of a “dream landscape” and the mundane-divine geographical dichotomy that supports it onto their contemporary world. The ordinary residents of communities that people with hegemonically normal lives can only reach this dream landscape by road trip, and the landscape and its residents are sometimes presented as dangerous, sometimes as divine, but always as of a literally other-worldly quality. Although American road trip story crystallized into its most iconic form in the 1950s with the Beat generation writings of Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg, among others, works such as Ida Lupino's *The Hitchhiker* (1953), Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), both films noir, and, earlier still, John

Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* all tell stories of manifestly ordinary Americans who take to the road in search of the opportunity, self-realization, and romance it offers, only to be forever changed by the heightened and almost dreamlike experiences they encounter. Even though Kerouac's *On the Road* frames the road as a realm of adventure and deep wisdom whereas *The Hitch-hiker* frames it as one of danger, these portrayals all maintain the claim that the people encountered along the highway are qualitatively and in essence as different from the average Americans who drive alongside them as Odysseus was from Circe.

In the dream-landscape that the American road becomes, many road narratives frame the people and communities the drivers encounter—often poor or racially othered communities—as simultaneously the true heart of America and as almost creature-like, not always in a directly dehumanizing sense but always presented through the lens of the fantastic, the bizarre, and as different from the hero as the monopods are from the heroes in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. This change in quality can represent danger, as in *The Hitch-hiker* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), films in which the characters encountered along the road appear to be ordinary, trustworthy middle-class white Americans, but prove instead to be the manifestation of the era's fears of senseless violence and of the perversion and humiliation of masculinity behind that normative mask. On the other hand, Beat writers were more likely to admire, identify with, and even fetishize these othered communities; as Katie Mills discusses in *The Road Story and the Rebel*, Kerouac and other Beats speak in admiring terms of the exotic simplicity of Mexican migratory workers, to the extent that, "through the mysterious transmutations of language and narrative, the Beats imagine themselves as Mexicans, Scottsboro boys, and

movie stars” (46-47). The racial and socioeconomic dimensions of this “creaturing” can be seen particularly prominently through parody in *Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004), a stoner buddy comedy that flips the script and frames white people as one-dimensional, unsympathetic others—ranging from bizarre and inscrutable to actively dangerous in the case of a Jesus-and-sex-obsessed “white trash” couple whose demeanor brings *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) to the audience’s and protagonists’ minds. Though subverted along the lines of race, the road-trip dichotomy is still present in *Harold & Kumar*: the characters in the car are the ordinary people leading safe and normative lives, and the ones viewed through the car window closer to the “true” spirit of America that has been watered down by suburban comfort, both admired by and dangerous to the protagonists, dreamlike and creature-like and disgusting in their strangeness. In these widely varied examples, the people who exist along the road live in a space of liminality materially and affectively separate from the world the protagonists come from and will eventually return to.

The affect, or emotional shape and impact, of the American open road as it appears in literature frames the concrete state-funded infrastructure system of the highway as a liminal space outside the settled mores of civilization, where a person can be remade or unmade. The road symbolizes freedom, in all its promise and danger. Many opportunities to better one’s life and reinvent oneself can be found along the road, but so can many dangers, and frequently the opportunities prove illusory while the dangers are real. Cut off from one’s community by the very freedom sought on the road, the unfortunate motorist must cope with these challenges alone. There is something epic and primeval about the American road of literature—see, for instance, *O Brother, Where Art*

*Thou?* (2000), a film that molds Homer to the shape of Steinbeck and presents gods and sirens in metaphor on the dusty state roads of Depression-era Tennessee—and the drifter, the permanent resident of the road who embodies and “confronts the malleability of postwar identity” (Mills 18), is simultaneously the most dangerous and the most wretchedly powerless figure in the mid-century American cast of stock characters. In a sense, the road almost a black box in which untraceable and uncontrollable transformations occur: in a film noir or a Flannery O’Connor story an ex-convict from Georgia can spend a month in the non-identity of a motorist before appearing in California as a respectable dentist from Virginia, and nothing but the narrative can disprove their claimed identity. Outside the safety of the white picket fence, people occupy a space between societal roles that even allows them to leave and re-enter the bounds of socially-constructed and -presented identity; this freedom the road offers, these works of literature claim, both morally and materially threaten the settled and safe appearance of the tenuously maturing American society.

*Songs on the Road* renders the “creatured” residents of the road literal creatures, presenting the figurative nonhumanity of the othered groups outside of the hegemonic norm as affectively similar literal nonhumanity. The novel follows an episodic structure, with every chapter named after and featuring a new creature in a specific location, which the protagonists interact with as they pass by. The primary protagonist themselves is also non-American, non-binary non-human, and their specific nonhumanity is similarly affectively similar to the role in the road narrative that they occupy: Thousand-Songs of the Ivory Spring, otherwise referred to as Songs, is a dragon, and, as a dragon, the affect of their creature archetype matches closely with that of the wanderer who bridges the gap

between the real and enchanted world through a pronounced ability to survive and to move on.

As in many works about dragons, from *Journey to the West* to *How to Train your Dragon* (2010), Songs comes from a separate realm set aside for dragons, which operates under different social rules and structures from that of the human world and through the lens of which they interact with the human world. Whereas the human world Songs enters is that of America in 1951, the social structure and customs of the realm of dragons is very similar to that of Ming Dynasty China; whereas dragons in this novel exist outside the gender binary—with no biological sex differences, no division of social roles along lines of gender, and very few dragons identifying as either male or female—the world into which Songs enters is dominated a newly reinforced social importance of gender after WWII. The gap between the two cultural frames of gender means that Americans observing Songs do not know how to interact with them, and Songs themselves struggles to correctly use gendered pronouns and social conventions with others. Songs travel through a world that operates within a very different framework from Songs's without becoming a part of it: their gender identity remains unchanged throughout the novel, and, although people and concepts from the world they move through become important to them, at the end of the novel it is still the future and values of their realm of origin that guides their actions.

Similarly, as Mills notes in *The Road Story and the Rebel*, the heroes of Beat novels may identify with the migrant workers and displaced laborers they encounter, but they themselves are “free to trade in their ‘grapes of wrath’ for a jug of wine at a poetry reading or jazz jam in Birdland” whenever they grow tired of life on this island of the

road (46-47). In more fantastic journey epics an Odysseus or a Dante or even a Frodo Baggins may carry deep impressions and strong lessons from the scenes they witness, but they must leave those scenes and places behind in the end. At the end of the day, the people the protagonists and audience witness alongside the road are creatures of the roadside while the people in the car are the journeying witnesses who touch their lives and move on.

Songs's relationship with the role of wanderer is complicated by the gap between the archetypal portrayal of dragons in the European tradition and in the Chinese tradition, particularly regarding wandering. In many instances, particularly more modern ones, of the European tradition of dragons, dragons' witnessing of a changing world without experiencing essential change themselves forms a key element of the way they are presented. "I laid low the warriors of old and their like is not in the world today," boasts Smaug in *The Hobbit* (287); in a similar sentiment albeit from a vastly different work, the aptly named Draco of *DragonHeart* (1996) speaks at length and with nostalgia of the role he played as advisor to kings of a bygone era, enlightening them on a moral code that is no longer remembered or obeyed. Many dragons are rendered rootless by changing times, with Draco and Falcor the Luck-dragon of *The NeverEnding Story* (1984) and others like them roaming the world and forming an intense bond with the stranger who wanders with them—just as, "not knowing whether they will ever see each other again, drivers and hitchhikers are free to develop relationships that are free of the restraints of everyday obligations" on the American road (Primeau 79). The dragons of this European-based paradigm are affectively perfectly suited to the life of the highway idolized by some and feared by others.



Although dragons of this paradigm do exist in the world of *Songs on the Road*, Songs is not one of them; Songs comes from a Chinese-inspired paradigm of dragons, where, like the dragons of *Journey to the West*, dragons rarely wander, but rather remain in the areas over which they bureaucratically administer. In response to a grave insult by *Journey to the West*'s protagonist, the Dragon Kings of the Four Oceans do not respond with the extreme and emotionally-motivated violence a Smaug or Fafnir might use, but rather “consulted together about filing a formal complaint” up the bureaucratic ladder (137). Songs, like the road trip hero, emerges from a stable world where their experiences are the norm and enters the very differently normed world of the highways of 1950s America. Before the road trip hero took to the road, he or she lived safely as a novelist, an insurance salesman, a housewife, or whatever other role they filled, but on the road they find themselves transformed into a traveler; similarly, Songs was once a scholar and assistant treasurer, but finds themselves transformed into a *dragon*, with that role pressed upon them both by others' perceptions of them and the standards of the narrative itself.

The entrance of the cautious scholar Songs into the world of the American road and their perceptions of what a dragon should be draws inspiration from the films *A Touch of Zen* (1973) and *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), in which likewise soft-spoken and inexperienced scholars find themselves drawn into heroic, chivalric roles and adventures vastly separated from the experiences typically associated with their character archetype. In these films and in this book, the external superimposition of the metaphorically and literally foreign new archetype onto the character both highlights the contours of the archetype being imposed and force the character to define their identity for themselves—in the case of the protagonist of *A Touch of Zen*, rejecting the role of

scheming court official at which he would manifestly succeed; in the case of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, accepting the life of wandering hero despite the great dangers it brings with it; and, in the case of *Songs*, embracing the rootless wanderings of the hero of the road even as they act in memory and service of the friends and family they have become separated from.

*Songs*, the dragon, both acts as and is made the wandering witness of the road trip journey, both resisting and expressing the “creaturing” of the road. This interaction with affect and creating is not limited to *Songs* alone; virtually every chapter in *Songs on the Road* presents a similar interaction with a different creature. While there is not enough space for a thorough examination of all these creatures, I will explore four instances below, with each introductory section followed by the chapter of the novel in which the creature appears and for which it is named: the vampires of Lifeblood, the hitchhiker of I-70, the werewolves of Albany, and the spider of Los Angeles.

## The Vampires of Lifeblood

In chapter six of *Songs on the Road*, Songs and their human traveling companion Danny stop for a meal in the small town of Lifeblood, Colorado. While there, they discover that virtually all people in this town are employed and otherwise fed off of by a family of vampires called the Overburys; the two travelers become ensnared by the vampires' alluring promises as well. In its presentation of its eponymous creatures, the chapter "The Vampires of Lifeblood" retains many elements of the vampire mythos—in particular, legal prowess and sexuality—but reframes them specifically through the lens of wealth, employment, and Anglophilia, forces both aspired to and resented in media of the early 1950s.

The archetypal vampire, as originated in the English literary tradition from John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* in 1819 and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in 1897, is suave, wealthy, and above all aristocratic. The titular character of Polidori's *The Vampyre*, as described in a literary genealogy traced in Elizabeth Miller's "Getting to Know the Undead: Bram Stoker, Vampires, and *Dracula*," coalesced the many different notions of vampirism previously scattered throughout the British literary scene into one pioneering being—a being directly and all-but-openly based on Polidori's former friend, the dashing, loved, hated poet Lord Byron. The relationship between the book's unassuming protagonist and the handsome and dangerous and despicable vampire "is similar to how [Polidori] would have perceived his relationship with Byron—that of domineering master and submissive slave" (6). This relationship template is also present in Bram Stoker's iconic *Dracula*, where a likewise meek and unassuming protagonist of little wealth and social standing finds himself cowed and bent to the will of a vampire by means of the

vampire's supernatural influence, and, relatedly and more poignantly, by means of the social, political, and economic power the vampire's aristocratic status bring with it. Even Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, a 2005 paradigm-defining revisionist vampire romance novel, gives its vampires an aristocratic sheen despite its early-2000s American setting, with their wealthy, reclusive family and "faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel" (19). As beloved as the affect of aristocracy is, both in the era of Queen Victoria and Princess Diana, and as horrifying as vampires are, the two are deeply intertwined.

Just like the wealthy and aristocratic, vampires frequently act in hedonistic and exploitative ways that the morality of a human protagonist prevents them from engaging in—and, just as a vampire's bite can compel an ordinary person to go against their most deeply-held morals and drink blood, a vampire's behavior can compel moral transgressions along other axes. Perhaps most obviously, vampires' open sexuality makes them an object of as much horror as envy, particularly to the Victorian audience of early vampire fiction, and in some instances induce similar sexuality in protagonists against the protagonists' wills. The most famous instance of this occurs in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, when eminently respectable and devotedly engaged protagonist Jonathan Harker encounters three "voluptuous" female vampires and, in their presence, is overcome with "some longing and at the same time some deadly fear... a wicked, burning desire that they should kiss me with those red lips" (35).

But it is not only sexuality that vampires frequently express openly and induce in others: of all monsters in popular fiction, they are among the most openly and proudly

monstrous, and, in works with non-human protagonists such as *Blade* (1998), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992), and even *Morbius* (2022), the vampires not only encourage but to a certain extent induce the protagonists to accept and express their monstrous nature at the cost of human well-being. To some extent, vampires' wealth, suaveness, and callous exploitation of the desperate harmonizes well with typical portrayals of lawyers (Sutherland 143), and with the well-trodden story of an idealistic young lawyer becoming corrupted by wealth and by a heartless mentor until he becomes something almost monstrous compared to his initial self. The horror of vampires derives not only from their monstrousness and proud exploitativeness but from their ability to induce similar actions in even morally pure victims if they so desire.

The vampires of *Songs on the Road* combine these elements of the vampire mythos and transpose them onto mid-century American high society. The family of vampires, the Overburys, originally came from England, and brought with them the affect of aristocracy so frequently seen in vampires. They are admired despite being openly non-human, aspired to by the *nouveau riche*, and loved by the citizens of the town of Lifeblood, whom they all but own. Vampires' horror derives from their being both foreign and at home in the most exclusive spheres of the domestic world, from being both repulsive and compulsively attractive, from being both dead and undeniably, intensely alive—in brief, they are horrific for being both that which one is bound to hate and that which one cannot help but love, admire, and even aspire to become. Such is the case with the Overburys. They hold power because they are ruthlessly exploitative behind their carefully constructed legal contracts; they behave with wealth and grace despite the brutal cannibalism at the core of their existence. And, just like the vampires examined above,

they induce victims to act against their principles. The dragon Vast-Force of Gooseneck River chooses to abandon their country and heritage to gain the wealth and power of being a vampire, and encourages Songs to do the same; although Songs does not ultimately become a vampire, they are induced to compromise their morals for the promise of wealth and knowledge. Although their New World setting is a departure from classic vampire fiction, the vampires of Lifeblood maintain a deep dialogue with that archetype and its affect.

***Songs on the Road* ch. 6: "The Vampires of Lifeblood"**

Danny slept late the next morning. Songs was glad. They needed time to themselves. After everything that had happened in that cold, cramped house a few hours before, they were not sure they could survive unnumbered hours in a hot, cramped car. But the dawn was paper-white through the gap in the curtains, and there was a radio in the room, and even though Songs kept the device as close to silent as they could for fear of disturbing Danny and beginning the day, they could feel the rippling of stringed instruments in their ear and against their jaw as they pressed the side of their head to its lattice speaker. With the nervous part of their mind occupied with dissecting and analyzing this strange gentle music, the rest of Songs was free to consider what had happened four hours ago.

What had happened four hours ago in that underground house in the American desert was that Songs doomed themselves to death. *They* had doomed *themselves*. This was the really significant part, and the really terrible part of the whole situation. Songs could simply have been content with the two wishes they had received already. They did not need a third, selfish wish. They could have simply spoken as the wish-giver wanted. If they had, they could have broken the oath those answers formed and only lost the ease of success they would have wished for. But Songs had tried to save their life and guaranteed that they would lose it. If they did not die by their own hand, they would die by Sister Sarah's, and the whole thing was their choice. Their end could be centuries away. It could happen that very week. They did not know how much time they had left, and so they could not even run away to enjoy the last dregs of that time in sunshine and shame. But, as distant as their death may be, there was no way out of this pretty trap they had woven for themselves. It was inevitable now that there would come a time when Songs would choose to end their life.

Songs was not necessarily a stranger to suicide. Now and again one of their fellow students would fail the exams one time too many and hang themselves in their rented room. It was a tragedy, and a tragedy persistent enough that Songs's younger parent had once drawn them aside to ask if continuing to take the exams would be harmful to their health. Songs had been taken aback at this show of care—their parents had always trusted them enough not to bother, or only bothered to trust them—but they had answered truthfully and said that suicide had never held any attraction for them. Songs smiled mechanically. Those three great milestones of life—romance, sex, and death—had never held any attraction for them, but one of the three had caught them at last. They only hoped the circumstances of their suicide would not be too troublesome for their family. They had caused enough embarrassment already. Boundless had said that this mission could be Songs's breakthrough, and now Songs hoped it was: they did not have much time left to make their life anything but a waste.

As Danny and Songs drove east late that morning, Danny asked once or twice if Songs was okay, and Songs answered with vagaries about tiredness and the abomination that passed for tea they had had that morning. Danny could not see the words on the scrap of paper Songs turned in their fingers. *I stand by—I will kill the knife. I am the knife—I will kill the hungry god. I am the hungry god—I will kill myself.* Songs wished they could forget all about it, but they knew they could not afford to lose a single syllable of their prophecy or oath or curse.

Because of how late their start was, it was not until the middle of the afternoon that the two needed to buy gas. The town they stopped in was called Lifeblood, a small place even by the standards of the towns Songs had seen in America, and it pooled like a



rainwater pond in the heights of the mountains Danny called the Rockies. As Danny paid for gas, Songs went into a nearby diner to order food for them both. Songs had hoped that this might distract them, provide them some stimulation after hours and hours living in their head, but it was just like the last diner they had eaten at, and the diner before. The road outside was just like the road they had driven on since Salinas. This was the new central realm: clean and greasy and so identical from town to town and time to time that Songs felt like a ghost in their own skin.

“Thanks,” Danny said, taking a bite of the burger Songs slid across the table to her as she dropped into her seat. “Just fries and a milkshake? Are you sure that’ll be enough?”

“It should be,” said Songs, who had no idea if it would.

Danny shrugged and reached for one of Songs’s milkshakes. They were the same milkshakes Songs had purchased at the last diner, a white one and a pink one, and Songs wanted to experience the combination of flavors again. They wondered why Danny looked surprised when they did not let her take one. “You didn’t get one for me?”

“You didn’t ask for one.”

“Fine,” Danny said with affected sourness. She glanced around. “This is really a cute little town, isn’t it? Bet it’s all owned by one family. My hometown was like that, too. New Munich, Minnesota, home of nothing in particular.” She looked around, this scion of the new central realm, then grinned as her eyes caught on something outside the diner window. “I bet they live in that house.” Songs followed her gaze. *There* was something unusual. The house in question was hardly visible, mostly shielded from the town by an outcropping of the mountain it clung to, but it seemed to be an imitation of a

European castle. Danny looked back at Songs and saw them drinking both milkshakes at once. This seemed to offend her even more than not being offered a milkshake. “Vinnie! Why the *hell* are you drinking it that way?” Songs glared back, and she held up her hands in laughing apology. “Alright, o Sacred Dragon of, of wherever you said. Outside the courthouse of heaven?”

Songs took a particularly vindictive pull of their milkshakes. “The Outer Court of the Court of Heaven.”

“Yeah! That. If that’s how they drink milkshakes there, then I’ll forgive you.”

“There are no milkshakes in the Outer Court. The surplus of good energy in that place sustains us completely. We have no need for either food or drink.”

Danny raised her eyebrows. “No kidding?” She considered for a moment. “Well, then,” she said, snatching the pink milkshake away from Songs and taking the end of the straw in her mouth, “you’ve got no excuse to drink it that way.”

“Hey!”

“Oh, eat up.”

Danny finished eating before Songs did, and took advantage of that time to call over a waiter. She gestured out the window with a stolen fry. “Who lives in that big castle up there?”

“That would be the Overburys,” said the waiter. Songs considered the waiter critically over their milkshake. They were well-composed and attractive, by human standards: their hair, made yellow-white with chemicals, was pinned up except for the fringe across their forehead, and their lips and eyelids were painted with bold but natural-looking makeup. They smiled broadly at Danny, and Danny relished the attention, and

there was something in that that Songs did not like. “They own L.B. Corp. The L.B. stands for Lifeblood,” the waiter added with a confidentiality that was almost flirtatious. “They own the silver mines up here. They also own this diner. Most of us work for them, actually.”

“I thought so! Didn’t I say so, Vinnie?”

“Did you really?” asked the waiter, laughing. As they did, the collar of their uniform pulled away from their neck, and Songs noticed a series of scars there. The waiter had tried to cover them with makeup, but over the course of their shift that makeup must have worn off. There were perhaps a dozen scars, of varying ages, but all healed puncture wounds, all paired, all the width of a human bite from its pair, and all located over her jugular.

As Danny and the waiter, who identified themselves as Mae Morrow, chatted about hometowns, Songs thought back to what they knew of the vampires of Europe. Ironically, their familiarity with that form of vampire was greater than their familiarity with the vampires of China. The vampires they had been lucky enough not to run into on their journey to Beijing were little more than diseased corpses, things with souls and bodies but no minds that hopped about hungrily until their flesh decayed and their bones could no longer cling together, or a talisman with the proper spell was stuck to their forehead. They hardly merited a day’s study at White-Gold Lake. But Songs’s tutor had taught them about the vampires that oiled their way out of the fogs of Europe for weeks. They were every bit as hungry as the vampires of China, but they used their intelligence, clarified by death the way tumbling clarifies a gemstone, to genteely satiate that hunger. A few decades ago, a group of vampires had visited the Duke. They were breathless

creatures, and so they had no trouble entering the Outer Court. They were wealthy creatures, and so they had no problem going wherever they wished. Songs remembered that the gift they left was particularly sumptuous. They remembered that their manners had been impeccable. They remembered that they would have stripped Pearl Mountain down to bedrock if they had persuaded the Duke to their will.

Danny sharply tapped the back of Songs's hand. "Hey, Vinnie. You all right?"

"What?" Songs blinked. "Oh. Just tired. Don't worry." She did not need to know that there were vampires in this town. The sooner they and Danny left, the better.

The waiter noticed a patron who had just entered the restaurant. "Oh! Mr. Overbury!" they said brightly. They put an apologetic hand on Danny's shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, Danny. I gotta leave you alone for a little bit. That's young Mr. Overbury there. His pa owns the whole place."

Danny put her hand on Mae's. "Oh, don't worry. Just promise you'll come back?"

"Promise." Mae winked at Danny as they left, and Danny smiled softly after.

That smile dropped from her face as she noticed Mr. Overbury. He was not a tall man, and his slender build made him seem almost childlike. His suit was without a doubt the most expensive thing in the diner. It clung to him in sharp angles of fine black wool. The black leather of his gloves and shoes gleamed, and the rakish angle of his black hat only made his entire demeanor seem finer. The black silk veil he wore under his hat when he entered the restaurant shielded all the skin of his face and neck from the sun. Once inside the diner's shade, he took the veil off and folded it precisely, tucking it into an inside pocket and producing a pair of dark-tinted glasses to wear instead. Songs was not very familiar with American human standards of beauty, but they suspected that Mr.

Overbury did not fit them. His milk-pale skin and pale, wide-spaced eyes and bread-colored hair cut round and short above his tall forehead made him look more like a painting of an ancient European than a modern human. He seemed to look at the other patrons of the diner as though they themselves were a painting for his viewing.

“Is that—is that a vampire?” asked Danny carefully.

Songs nodded. Mr. Overbury smiled at Mae, and a pair of yellow fangs long enough to scar his lower lip gleamed under the fluorescent lights of the diner.

After a moment’s consideration, Danny turned back to Songs. “Listen, Vinnie,” she said. “I get why you did that with the dragon yesterday. I really do. But don’t even think about trying that with this guy. He’s bad news. I can feel it.”

Songs nodded in wholehearted agreement. Any man who looked at his fellow citizens with that flavor of amusement would not have Songs’s trust.

“Hey! Good news, Danny!” It was Mae again, and Songs liked their flouncing ease even less this time. “I talked to Mr. Overbury, and he said I can take the rest of the day off. So how about it? You still want me to show you around town?”

Danny glanced at Songs, who shrugged. “All right,” she said. “Vinnie, I’ll meet you back at the car at, oh, five tonight?”

It was very likely that Mr. Overbury had orchestrated this as part of some plan. If he had not, then he had granted Mae’s request out of sheer philanthropy, and Songs would not even trust a fox’s philanthropy in a moment like this. But Danny looked so excited by the prospect. She had been so torn up by Dora. And she was wish-marked, after all, so Songs did not have to worry about her safety. “Don’t be late,” they said. “Otherwise we won’t get to Denver before night.”

“After the stunt you pulled last night you don’t get to say that,” said Danny with joking reproach, collecting her things and standing.

“I already said I’m sorry.”

“I know. Five tonight.”

Not a minute after Danny and Mae left the building, Mr. Overbury slid into the spot Danny had just vacated. With a long, pale tongue, he pulled the end of the milkshake straw into his mouth and finished the pink liquid in a pull. “Don’t worry about the bill, my draconic friend,” he said, his accent bizarrely suspended between American and British. “You can pay it just by telling me your name.”

“You may call me Lilian Vincent,” Songs said with stiff graciousness. Mr. Overbury knew that Songs was a dragon—Mae must have told him what they overheard Danny say—but Songs did not like indulging the closeness this vampire pretended.

Mr. Overbury laughed, and once again his crooked fangs gleamed. “I’m afraid that check will bounce. If it makes you more comfortable, my name is Marcus Overbury.”

“Thousand-Songs,” they admitted. But they would not bring their family name into it.

“Was that so hard?” asked Marcus Overbury with a patronizing grin. That smile had too many teeth, even for its width. “Come with me, Thousand-Songs. I have someone I think you will want to meet.”

Songs did not want to, of course, but Marcus Overbury amply possessed the most classic vampiric talent of always having one more thing that the person he spoke to wanted, and, when they heard whom it was that he wanted them to meet, Songs found

themselves following him to his family castle. If Marcus Overbury was not lying—and Songs's tutor had told them that vampires take pride in not lying if they can help it—then he was taking Songs to see Marquess Vast-Force of Gooseneck River, who had left the Outer Court two centuries before for unknown reasons and had not been heard from since. Many presumed them dead. If Songs did not speak to Vast-Force and get their account of their sudden departure, they would surely have failed in their duties as a person of courtesy. Beyond this, they themselves wanted to know why Vast-Force had left. Sister Sarah's words made this selfish curiosity smart a little, but not so much that refusing to follow was an option for Songs.

The Overbury castle was an exercise in excess, so fraught with gold it was almost cloying to be inside. Despite the many electric lights illuminating the place, the heavy curtains over each window made it feel as dark as a cave. It was cavernous in size, too: even with the dozens of servants scurrying around like canaries with clipped wings, the vast space seemed almost deserted. Songs could have walked in their true form eighty feet long and still have been comfortable in that place. But, as it was, Songs felt truly and deeply uncomfortable. The splendor of this place was not unlike the splendor of the Outer Court; and yet, juxtaposed with the cracked pavement and rotting clapboard of the town not a mile distant, all this golden glory seemed wrong.

"I've got a present for you, Marilyn," said Marcus Overbury. "I'd like you to meet the dragon Thousand-Songs. Thousand-Songs, the Marquess of Gooseneck River."

Vast-Force nodded politely without rising from the scarlet brocade couch where they sat. Songs bowed deeply. Vast-Force's velvet dress was dyed a slightly deeper red than the couch. Its cut seemed as expensive as the material: the skirt draped their lower

body and the sleeveless bodice clung to their upper body just like the evening gowns Songs had seen in that Hitchcock film. Songs did not doubt that the choker of diamonds and heavy pearls that gleamed around Vast-Force's throat cost more than Mae would ever make as a waiter. "A bit of a traditionalist, I see," said Vast-Force with an ironic smile, glancing up at Songs's topknot and touching a gloved hand to their own short-cut, curled hair. "How charming. Or—no, you wouldn't have left the ocean since the Ming Dynasty, would you? You must not have even known, poor thing."

Songs nodded, stiff and self-conscious. "Nonetheless, it is my choice."

"Oh, I'm sure, I'm sure. Sit, sit, sit. Marcus, be a dear and get us some wine." Marcus Overbury nodded and left at Vast-Force's command. "So, Thousand-Songs, darling, tell me what you're doing up here. Has the King finally stopped being so sore about that little armory accident? Do they even know that the empire that accused them has been dead for fifty years?"

"I do not know what Their Majesty knows of the political situation of China," Songs said. It felt odd to sit on a couch beside a marquess. It felt wrong to be taller than a marquess, but they had no other choice. "About fifty years ago, they allowed several dragons to enter the central realm to do good and advise the world as we did before the Outer Court was sealed."

Vast-Force laughed, tilting back their head to accommodate the force of the sound. "Oh, that petty little worm. I bet they gave the word the minute old Cixi kicked the bucket." They seemed to notice how uncomfortable Songs looked to hear the King spoken of this way and laughed yet again. "Forgive me for forgetting my manners. I've been a guest of the Overburys for centuries, and I must say I've gotten quite rusty on all



those little traditions you dragons love so much. But tell me, tell me, Thousand-Songs, why are you here? Are you doing good and advising the world? There's not much good that can be done in a place like this, I'm afraid, even though there *is* plenty of money to be made."

"I am here on an errand for the Duke of Pearl Mountain, whom I serve."

"And?"

Songs frowned. "And what?"

"Well, I knew the Duke a little, and I feel reasonably confident in saying they wouldn't risk so much as a horse on foreign travel if someone wasn't twisting their arm. So, who was it? Who's twisting the Duke's arm?"

"I resent your implications," Songs said, and they flattered themselves that it did not sound too false.

Vast-Force laughed, sweetly, insultingly. "Of course you do, dear child. Why, you're just a mook. Just a little guppy baiting someone's fishhook." They flicked the shoulder of Songs's suit as though Songs were nothing but recalcitrant fishbait and laughed again. "That rhymes in English. 'Mook' and 'hook.' Imagine—I spend centuries down there trying to become a poet, and then as soon as I leave for greener pastures the gift comes to me."

"Here, we are, darling," Marcus Overbury said as he returned to the room with a bottle of grape wine and a flat, velvet-covered box. "I understand how important gifts are to you dragons," he said, handing the box to Songs. "Hopefully this will be sufficient." Songs opened the box as Marcus Overbury poured three glasses of wine and sat next to Vast-Force. Once Songs opened the box, they simply stared at the necklace it contained

for a while. It was a sumptuous piece. The tangled and intertwining filigree of expensive materials would have been almost overbearing if not for its brilliant, sensitive craftsmanship. Its worth was inestimable. Even Songs, whose job it was to estimate the value of things like these, could not fully wrap their head around it. This was the kind of thing that should be a national treasure, not a private possession, and certainly not an individual gift.

*“I’m the one who should be providing you with a gift,”* Songs said, the only thing they could think to say. They were only glad they did not stammer the words. *“I am already indebted to you for your hospitality. And—and I’m only an assistant treasurer. I’ve done nothing to deserve a thing like this.”*

Marcus Overbury glanced at Vast-Force and raised an eyebrow as they sipped their wine. *“You didn’t tell them?”*

*“I was getting to it,”* Vast-Force said. They turned back to Songs. *“I’m sure you’re just wondering your little heart out about what happened to me. Well, I’ll tell you. The senior Mr. Overbury, who is unfortunately currently in London on business, offered me a place in his business, and, well, the prospects were better than they were in the Outer Court. We’ve done good business together these years,”* they said, putting a familiar hand on Marcus Overbury’s knee. *“You know, I’m the one who thought up buying up all the silver mines in this part of the world. From here down to Mexico we’ve got our hand on most of the world’s supply. And from there it was a simple matter of only releasing so much to the markets per year, with our own bag of tags so that none of our own silver will end up used against us, and now—well, if things go right, it won’t be long before silver is more expensive than gold. It’s a shame there are customers who still*

prefer gold, but sister Lila says she has a marketing campaign in the works that will fix all that for us. But that's not what you're here for. You're here because we've decided that it's finally time for me to become part of the family." Vast-Force's demeanor shifted from a languid debutante's to something more reminiscent of a schoolmaster. "This process has three parts. The first part is Marcus drinks my blood, the second part is I drink Marcus's blood, and the third part is a private matter. The problem is, even in this shape, you and I do not have blood and cannot consume blood. It kills us like water in the veins of a human. So we need you to dilute Marcus's blood with yours until I am enough of a vampire to safely consume his. The reward, as I'm sure you can see, is rich."

Songs blinked. There was so much to process here. They could hardly wrap their mind around it all. "You want to cease being a dragon?" they asked. "And you want me to help you?"

"Broadly, yes," Vast-Force said, shrugging.

"You'll never be able to return to the Outer Court—to your family."

They laughed dismissively. "Clearly you and I have different priorities."

Before Songs could argue further, they heard new voices down the corridor—familiar voices. Mae and Danny entered the parlor arm in arm. Danny seemed very surprised to see Songs there. Mae did not. Though it was no more than a suspicion, Songs began to suspect what the third step of the process of becoming a vampire was, and their mind's eye splashed Danny's blood across the rich woods and velvets around them, and they wondered why the wish-mark had allowed Danny to get this far.

"I *will* get the bonus, won't I, Mr. Overbury?" asked Mae with sudden and telling solemnity. "For bringing someone else."

“Of course. Let’s get the contracts signed.” Marcus Overbury stood and shepherded the two out of the room over Danny’s shouts of confusion. Mae must have told her that this was some short-term work opportunity. Well, it was, in a way.

“She’s my traveling companion,” Songs said. “I won’t let you touch her.”

Vast-Force frowned. “We’ll be compensating her perfectly well. We’re not thieves, you know. Everything we Overburys do is perfectly legitimate. Marcus even got written permission from sister Lila to use her donor if a dragon stopped by before his donor was back on her feet. We’re very particular about our donors, you know. I wouldn’t want to use a local as my temporary donor before we find a more permanent one. That would just be—” they giggled lightly— “wrong.”

“And the risk to her? This will be your first time. What if you take too much?”

“Her contract waives all liability on my part.”

“And if she doesn’t sign?”

“She will.”

“And if I don’t agree?”

Vast-Force smiled gently. Their meaning was clear: *You will*. But that was not what they said. What they said, in a voice that was kind and almost parental, was, “You’ve only just joined the dance, haven’t you? The grand dance of the court. You must not know any of the steps. But I’ve been in that dance longer than you’ve been alive. Even after I bowed out, they’re still trying to pull me back. I know every step there is, and, even if you don’t know why you’re here, I have a good idea.” Songs said nothing, but they must have allowed something onto their face, because Vast-Force smiled in private amusement and stood. They crossed the room and picked up a sheet of paper and

a fountain pen from a table. “Just sign,” they said, handing the contract and pen to Songs, “and I’ll tell you free of charge.”

They shouldn’t. They shouldn’t. To protect Danny, to honorably fulfill their mission, to keep their conscience clean, they should not. And yet... Songs needed to consider what shape the rest of their life would take now. Did they really want to spend the rest of their life as the ignorant plaything of Counselor True-Virtue? Songs considered the pen in their hand. They should not. But they signed the contract nonetheless.

“Are we ready, Vast-Force?” asked Marcus Overbury, leading Danny and Mae back into the room. Songs tried to exchange a look with Danny, and, although she would not meet their eyes, the look of shame on her face told Songs that the vampires had gotten the better of them both.

“We’re ready.”

The room in which the contract was to be fulfilled was built specifically for the drinking of blood. Everything in that room was white ceramic: the floor, the walls, the ceiling, the smoothly curved bed built into the corner of the room. Hard fluorescent lights shone off the small stainless steel table in the corner and the stainless steel drain in the center of the slightly angled floor, and the room had no windows, except for a large one elaborately topped with stained glass that opened into an equally windowless room with an audience of comfortable chairs. It was in this room that Danny and Mae had been sat. Danny met neither Songs’s sympathetic nor Mae’s apologetic gaze, opting instead to fastidiously and laboriously retie her shoelaces. Songs tried to meet her eye from where they had been sat on the ceramic bed. Even as they did, though, they knew it was no

good, and after a minute or two they returned their attention to rolling up the sleeves of their shirt as they had been ordered. The contractors had arranged the contracted like bowls of fruit on a table. Songs smarted to be treated this way, but, despite this, they knew they had entered into this situation of their own free will. It could not be called anything but their own free will, no matter how much they would like it to be something else.

Marcus Overbury and Vast-Force did not seem to notice the three breathing props in their ceremony any more than they would bowls of fruit or flower arrangements. Songs looked on in curiosity, something the two did not seem to comprehend Songs was capable of doing. The vampire and the vampire-to-be stood face to face in the center of the room. After a moment of stillness, the two began to move. Vast-Force removed Marcus Overbury's dark glasses and Marcus Overbury removed Vast-Force's necklace, and both treasures clattered to the porcelain floor like rain on a rooftop. Marcus Overbury pushed Vast-Force's hair out of the way. Vast-Force tilted their head to expose their neck. Songs looked at their shoes as Marcus Overbury bit Vast-Force's skin. There was nothing about this situation they were comfortable with.

"Thousand-Songs, we need you now," said Marcus Overbury.

Bound by contract, Thousand-Songs stood. Opal-colored blood flowed freely from the precise puncture wounds in Vast-Force's neck, darkening the fine velvet of their dress, and a rough bite mark on Marcus Overbury's own neck bled all over his expensive suit. He took a scalpel from a stainless steel drawer and, carefully examining Songs's wrist, precisely nicked one of their veins. As pale blood oozed over Songs's skin, he handed their wrist to Vast-Force. Vast-Force let Songs's blood drip into their mouth, then

licked red blood from Marcus Overbury's neck, then drank more of Songs's blood. Songs did not watch much during this process, either. They glanced back at Danny and saw her studying her hands as though worried they might disappear if she looked away.

Vast-Force dropped Songs's wrist to concentrate entirely on Marcus Overbury's neck. When they stepped back, their face was bearded in red, and their canine teeth had already begun to lengthen into fangs. "Go take care of them, Marcus," they said, and, for all the potential for eroticism in what had just taken place, Songs could neither see nor hear much emotion in Vast-Force's words. Marcus Overbury nodded and took Songs to the stainless steel drawer, where he cleaned and bandaged Songs's wrist. "You've fulfilled your end of the agreement," Vast-Force said while he worked, wiping blood from their mouth with the back of their glove. "Now I'll fulfill mine. Ever since I came to this realm, I've been consistently pestered by spies. Some of them were hired by some illustrious figure of the Outer Court, and some came from the Outer Court independently—patriots, you might say—and some, like you, did not even know they were spies. But all of you came for the same reason: to procure evidence that the dragons in this realm are joining in rebellion against the Outer Court, and to frame their master's enemy as the leader of that rebellion. If you want a good position in the dance, figure out who your master's enemy is, and come up with some way to turn them into a rebel general. And say thank you to me." They grinned patronizingly, revealing ever-lengthening teeth. "You're the first dragon to get out of Lifeblood so easily."

Marcus Overbury gestured sharply with their chin, and Songs bowed stiffly to him and Vast-Force before leaving the room. Danny still did not meet their eye as she and Mae stood and entered. Songs felt disgustingly helpless as they rolled their sleeves

down and put their jacket back on. Signing that contract had been Danny's own choice, as signing Songs's had been theirs, and yet they still felt they had forced her into this situation. Through the window, they saw Marcus Overbury sanitize both donors's necks with alcohol pads. The Overburys must take pride in how orderly it all was. They must boast that everything was perfectly well compensated. They thought they could buy and sell and monopolize life just like they did silver. But, thought Songs dully as the memory of the necklace glinted in their mind, hadn't Songs been happy enough to sell theirs?

In the end, the wish-marked Danny remained unharmed. Marcus Overbury had already pierced through Mae's skin when Vast-Force groaned and hunched over. By the time Marcus Overbury looked up, Vast-Force had already left the room in a stumbling, desperate whirl of bloody skirts. Songs thought as they watched that Vast-Force was trying to run away. They were wrong. As Vast-Force's steps tangled and fell like buckling iron, scales slicing up through their skin and back lengthening horribly, they flung an arm out in an effort to get the claws piercing their fingertips into Songs's throat. They only managed to cut two skin-deep scratches into the side of Songs's neck before they collapsed to the floor entirely and began to vomit. After that, everything was a whirl. Human blood and dragon blood and wine and filth spilled out of Vast-Force's mouth like a vile, diseased fountain, and Songs's face was mild in their shock as they stepped back politely and pressed a hand to their bleeding neck. Amid the frantic cries for a doctor, Danny and Songs were told they could go. The two left, somewhat awkwardly, through a back door. Songs picked up a handkerchief for their throat, but did not bother searching for the necklace. It was the kind of treasure that would greatly increase their house's renown, it was true. But Danny had not given any of her blood despite presumably taking



her payment, and Songs did not want the Overburys to come after the two of them for an unfulfilled contract. Songs did not want to see or hear of this family and this place for the rest of their life. The gilded air of the castle seemed to cling to their shoulders like grime.

Neither Danny nor Songs spoke until they got back to the car.

When they got back to the car, Songs did speak, and what they said was: “It’s not even five o’clock yet. We’re early.”

They did not speak after that.

## The Hitchhiker of I-70

The eponymous creature at the heart of chapter eight of *Songs on the Road* explores the popular American myth of “the vanishing hitchhiker” as Songs and Danny welcome another person off the road into their car, not knowing that what they have invited in is not human. Described by folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand as “the most often collected and the most discussed contemporary legend of all” (463), the urban legend of the vanishing hitchhiker not only highlights the liminal, supernatural nature of the road and its inhabitants, but also carries at its heart the figure of the hitchhiker key to the cast of the open road—a figure with a dual connotation of the most powerless and dangerous, the most sympathetic and sadistic figure on the open road.

The oft-retold story of the vanishing hitchhiker is “an exception to the rule that urban legends do not deal with the supernatural” (Brunvand 463) and epitomizes the space of the road as one outside the ordinary rules and progression of society. As collected in *The Encyclopedia of Urban Legend*, the frequently-repeated and frequently-changing story features a traveler, often “a young woman in a light party dress” or otherwise inappropriately dressed for the night who hitches a ride to a stated location and vanishes from the moving vehicle before arriving; the traveler is later discovered to have died long ago at the location where they were picked up while on the way to their stated destination (463-65). Everything about this ghostly hitchhiker speaks of liminality: constantly journeying between location and destination, between life and death, and even, as interpreted by Gillian Bennet, “between youthful virginity and adult sexuality” (quoted in Brunvand 464-65), this ghost is eternally bound to the road. As both ghost and hitchhiker, existing (semi-)permanently in a place most others only temporarily pass

through both gives the figure power within the space of the road and powerlessness in any attempts to exist elsewhere.

The figure of the hitchhiker is as complex as it is key to stories about the open road. In many works of literature, the hitchhiker functions as an unsympathetically framed outsider and a figure of danger and senseless violence, embodying the risk of the road. Perhaps one of the most classic instances of this characterization occurs in *The Hitch-hiker* (1953), a film noir directed by Ida Lupino that was originally marketed with the tagline “Who’ll be his next victim... YOU?” In the film, a man hitches a ride from two male friends before pulling out a gun and forcing them to aid in his escape from justice; during the process, he humiliates the two men and revels in the power he holds over the two. Although the murderous hitchhiker is eventually brought to justice, the message is clear: permitting a stranger into the sovereign space of one’s car can completely and instantly counteract all the freedom and power of the road. This feared figure of the sadistic hitchhiker appears in many other works, including *Detour* (1945), *The Hitcher* (1986), and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), in all of which the hitchhiker turns the journeys of the protagonists to the hitchhiker’s own twisted purposes and brings violence into what is supposed to be an island of safety on the road.

By contrast, some works of literature sympathetically present the hitchhiker—usually a young woman—as likeable, self-empowered, and in need of saving. While *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* begins with a bizarre, threatening, and ultimately murderous hitchhiker, it ends with the protagonist, a sympathetic young woman whose situation the audience knows to be as desperate as it is bizarre, becoming a hitchhiker herself. The hitchhiker that opens the film is unknown, unlikeable, and brings destruction; the

hitchhiker that closes the film is well-known, well-liked, and seeks salvation. This alternate paradigm of hitchhikers forms the core of *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), in which a naïve film director and a spunky young woman seek, unexpectedly find, and eventually must be rescued from the adventurous life of a hobo. Finally, in a more complex take on the topic, Agnès Varda's *Vagabond* (1985) takes a nuanced and sympathetic look at a willful female drifter who despite the efforts others make to "save" her refuses to leave the road that eventually and inevitably kills her. This alternate paradigm of hitchhikers, flipping the script of gender and violence from the previous view, marks the other extreme of the affect of hitchhikers as both the most powerful and powerless people on the road.

The ghostly hitchhiker of *Songs on the Road* combines these two paradigms with the equivalent popular beliefs about ghosts. In various ghost stories and within the world of this novel, ghosts are both extremely powerful and extremely powerless, created as by violence and frequently, though not always, sustaining themselves through violence. Songs, a non-human from a world where ghosts are well cared-for, and Danny, a human veteran of a war that left many ghosts, grapple with which paradigm to trust: whether to seek escape from the hitchhiker-ghost as in *The Hitch-hiker* and *The Amityville Horror* (1979), or whether to attempt to save her as in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987). The question of whether to trust or fear fellow travelers on the road is one that is both potent and central to the literature of the American road, motivating its presence in the novel.

***Songs on the Road ch. 8: “The Hitchhiker of I-70”***

An unwakeful morning followed an unrestful night, and Songs stared out the window at the pale horizon with unblinking eyes. The sun had not yet risen. The radio seemed to rattle in Songs’s head. Their mind’s eye was so full of Silver-Sky and Boundless and Danny pushing them out of the way that they did not notice the hitchhiker until Danny slowed the car.

The hitchhiker walked beside the road with a weary step, the hem of their long white gown stained with mud, and it only took a moment’s shared glance for Songs and Danny to agree to take them. Danny rolled down her window of the car. “Hey!” Danny called. “Need a lift?”

As the car drew level with the hitchhiker and the hitchhiker looked up, Songs saw that they were even more wretched and travel-worn than Songs had initially thought. Their face was stained with tears, and those tears had washed down tracks of dark makeup from eyelash to jaw. Although their orange hair had been elaborately woven and pinned up, time and lack of care had sent curling strands peeling out of their careful arrangement. They simply stared at Danny for a moment, bewildered in their exhaustion, before wordlessly nodding and climbing into the backseat of the car.

“Just push that suitcase aside,” Danny said. “You’re heading this way?”

“To Goodland.” The hitchhiker’s voice was strangely high and fluting.

Danny frowned. “Goodland? That’s in Kansas, isn’t it?” She looked over at Songs, who was chiefly in charge of the maps. Songs consulted the maps and nodded. “Christ. Were you going to walk the whole way in your wedding dress?”

*So that’s what Americans wear to be married,* thought Songs mildly. They looked back at the hitchhiker. That explained why the fashion of their dress was so different

from the standard American style, and why they were so elaborately dressed yet so unkempt. They must have looked very fine before they set out on their long, bitter journey east.

The hitchhiker folded their hands precisely, like their hands were pieces of paper. “I am going to my mother’s house.”

“In your wedding dress?” prompted Danny.

The hitchhiker nodded and offered no explanation.

Danny shrugged and pulled back onto the highway. The sun had begun to rise, its colorless light stabbing through the dusty morning into Songs’s eyes and silhouetting the fields of grain on either side of the highway. With the light and the guest, Songs felt more awake, and they turned the radio off to make room in the car for light conversation. But the hitchhiker seemed unwilling or unable to speak at length on any one topic. If the conversation became too complex, they became confused and ceased speaking altogether. They must be ill, Songs realized. After walking all night, lonely and distraught on a cold highway margin, it would be surprising if they were not. It had been nearly an hour since the last town of any size. If they had continued on foot, who knew how long it would have been until they got the care they needed?

It took some coaxing before Danny and Songs learned any definite information about the hitchhiker. The sum of that information was their name: Caroline MacBane. They pronounced the surname with emphasis, adding insistently that “I won’t *ever* be Caroline Allen.”

“Is Allen the name of the man you were supposed to marry?” asked Danny.

“I won’t *ever* be Caroline Allen.”

Danny looked over at Songs with a look of concern that Songs matched. But more important than Caroline MacBane's history and name was their present well-being. "Are you cold?" Songs asked. They shrugged off their jacket and swung it into the backseat. "Here." Caroline MacBane took it gratefully and wrapped it around their bare shoulders.

Suddenly, the hitchhiker went rigid. "Oh, god," they said. "Oh, god."

"What is it?" asked Danny.

"Oh, god." With shaking fingers, Caroline MacBane pried a ring from the third finger of their left hand. They held it as though it were some diseased thing, as though it were the source of their disease. Songs took the ring from their wire-tight grasp, and Caroline MacBane relaxed all over. The ring was nothing special, just gilded brass with a small and rather poorly set diamond, and yet it seemed to have all the significance in the world for this strange, sickly hitchhiker. "I won't *ever* be Caroline Allen," they said to the glass of the window, their inflection and tone just the same as it had been each of the previous times.

Danny reached back and took one of Caroline MacBane's hands. "You won't be," she promised.

"This is the ring your suitor gave to you?" asked Songs. "To try to make you Caroline Allen?"

"I'm so cold," murmured Caroline MacBane.

"If you want, we can give it back to them."

Caroline MacBane looked up at Songs in a strange way, as though truly seeing them for the first time. "You would give it back?"

Danny nodded, picking up on the idea. “Yeah. We’ll take you to your mother, and then we’ll send the ring off to this Allen prick so he can’t ever tell people you’re his wife. Would you like that?”

“He can’t ever tell people I’m his wife...” Caroline MacBane shivered and pulled Songs’s jacket closer around them. “I’m so cold.” They looked up at Songs, and their face seemed paler than ever. “Take it back to him. Will you play me some songs on the radio?”

Songs nodded and turned on the radio. The music that played was gentle and lilting, and, for the first time since Songs and Danny met them, Caroline MacBane smiled.

Ten minutes later, they passed by a sign welcoming them to the next small town. With any luck, this place would have a doctor, and they would be able to take their guest in to be treated. Songs turned back to see how Caroline MacBane was. They did not mean to gasp, but they could not help it. Where not ten minutes before Caroline MacBane had sat, watching the window with stained eyes, now there was nothing but Songs’s crumpled jacket. Danny looked back, did a double take, and slammed the brakes on the car. She got out and shouted the vanished hitchhiker’s name to the empty highway, the force in her voice suggesting desperation or fury, but there was really no point. The car had not once stopped between the last time Songs had seen their guest and now. They could not have slipped out unnoticed. They could not have done anything but vanished into the early-morning air. Songs turned over the wedding ring they had left in their hand. They had made another oath, it seemed. They pulled their jacket back on and slipped Caroline MacBane’s ring into its breast pocket. It felt cold even through the cloth.



The town of Goodland was small enough that it did not take Songs and Danny long to find the house of the MacBane family. The person who answered the door was stooped and white-haired, their face so wrinkled and their eyes so squinted that their eyes were hardly more than black flashes amid their weathered skin. “Are you Caroline MacBane’s mother?” demanded Danny. “Are you Mrs. MacBane?” Songs looked at her, surprised. This was the first time they had heard her speak since the hitchhiker had vanished. She had been much more withdrawn, her face unchanging enough to have been carved from stone, for this half-hour, but they had attributed that to confusion. Songs had not expected to hear such accusatory hostility in her voice.

Nor had they expected the resigned sigh with which Mrs. MacBane’s body deflated. “You’d better come in,” they said. They turned into the house and called, “Davey, here’s another one.”

Davey, middle-aged and pale-haired with a spidery physique, began to make tea in the kitchen as their mother sat Danny and Songs down in the parlor. “You picked up Caroline on I-70, didn’t you? She wanted you to take her here?” Songs nodded, and Mrs. MacBane sighed once again. This was apparently a conversation they had had many times. “My daughter was killed on the side of that road five years ago.”

“And you just let her become a ghost?” The hostility in Danny’s voice almost made Songs flinch.

“We did everything we could,” said Mrs. MacBane. “When the first people like you came, Davey and I got in his car and we searched the highway until we found her body. She was—Callie’d been dead for a bit, but we buried her in consecrated ground anyway. And then the people just kept on coming. Every month or so, someone new

arrives with her wedding ring. We had Father Patrick bless her grave, we put salt on her tombstone, and..." Mrs. MacBane hesitated, as though unsure if they could bear to continue.

"I dug up and burned her body," Davey said as he entered with a tray of tea things. "We really did everything. She still won't rest. We sell the rings now. Some of the money we live off of, and the rest we give to St. Christopher's church."

Songs reached into their pocket and turned the ring over in their hand. Caroline MacBane—Callie's ghost—gave this token to every person she met. It had no meaning anymore, to anyone but her. They looked up at their host. "Mrs. MacBane, can you tell us about the Mr. Allen your daughter was to marry?"

"No," said Danny sharply. "We don't care, and we don't want to know. Come on, Vinnie. Give them the ring and let's get out of here."

Songs looked reproachfully at Danny. "We made her a promise."

Danny glared back hard enough to blister paint. "Listen, I know a thing or two about ghosts. Promises to ghosts don't mean jack shit. Okay? Doesn't matter what you said to it, done with it, whatever. You learn it's a ghost, you get the fuck out. You don't learn about it. You don't tell people about it. You do *not* care about it. Ghosts only come for the people who care about them." She stood and turned to Mrs. MacBane. "No offense, lady, but now that we know we had a ghost in our car, we are getting back *in* our car and driving *away*. Give them the ring, Vinnie. Let's get out of here."

For a moment, Songs considered doing as she suggested. It would be easy. They remembered how confused Callie had been, her memory slipping through her mind like grains of sand through open fingers. They had known ghosts like her. There was no

future for her, and the past was nothing more than a faded lump in her mind, like bad papier-mâché. The only thing she knew was the endless present, the endless miserable slog in worn-through satin shoes on the rough asphalt of the highway margin as she traveled from somewhere she hardly remembered to somewhere she could hardly conceive. A promise did not concern her. She could hardly understand what a promise was. If Songs left Mrs. MacBane the ring and carried on with their journey, the long-dead Callie would never know, never notice, never care. And Songs would be an oathbreaker twice over. Dammit. They stood and put a hand on Danny's shoulder. "Let's talk outside. Mrs. MacBane, will you give us a moment?"

Danny did not turn to Songs when the two stood by the car. She stood rigidly, immovably—a soldier's posture—and did not speak until Songs walked around to face her. "Are you giving her the ring or not?" Danny demanded.

"I don't think we should," said Songs. "Caroline MacBane's dying wish is clear, and to fulfill it is relatively simple. Besides, we promised."

Speaking clearly and distinctly as though to a greenhorn recruit, Danny said, "Promises made to ghosts don't mean jack shit." It was clear that this was a creed she had long lived by. But Songs had creeds of their own.

Songs straightened up and put on their most professorial bearing: Danny was not the only one who could condescend. "Danny," they said, "I was lucky enough to study under one of the finest tutors of the Outer Court of the Court of Heaven, and, though I trained primarily to be a scholar, my tutor did not neglect to teach me about dealings with lingering spirits." Before today, Songs had not personally dealt with any such spirits outside those lessons, but they did not allow that to shift their confidence. "Promises

made to ghosts are binding, and debts owed to spirits must be repaid, at risk of disastrous penalties to both one's honor and one's personal well-being. Further, the responsibility to grant a ghost's dying wish and liberate them for the good of all falls to anyone who is able. I am able, and therefore the—"

"Listen, Thousand-Songs," Danny said, rounding on them, "I'm sure you've learned a lot about ghosts in your little books, but I was there. A year and a half in Italy during the worst of it. There's a lot of unfinished business in a war. A lot of dying wishes, a lot of bad deaths, and you know what? *They* don't mean jack shit, either, because usually their dying wish is to kill you. And sure, a dead Fascist's bullet won't kill you like a live one's, but if he decides you're his unfinished business he'll make your life such a hell that your own bullet will do the trick. I lost buddies that way. Good buddies. And I learned. When the crackpot old ladies come to town, you buy as many charms off them as'll hang on your dog tags, and when you learn someone can embroider, you pay him whatever you can to sew a ward into your uniform, and when it's your time to serve night watch, you paint all the spells you can fit onto your skin, and if you see a Fascist who won't stay dead then you walk away, and if you see a buddy you buried last week you don't look her in the eye no matter what she says. And you *don't* listen to the ghost stories, and you *don't* say their names, and you *don't* care about them or remember their faces, because once you let them into your mind they're never going to get out. You get it? This isn't your little dragon-land. This is the real world, Vinnie. Their dying wishes kill you."

So they were at an impasse. Songs studied Danny's face and saw that she would not be moved. No—that was not right. They saw that she was resolute, and that meant

that she *would* move, she would make a martyr's move, and she would leave Songs immobile and incapable of acting as they wanted. They knew that about Danny, so they had no choice but to move first. Songs opened the car door, but, instead of getting in, they pulled out their bundle of possessions and swung it over their shoulder. "The car is yours," they said, turning back toward the house. "If you go on to Boston after all, maybe I'll see you there."

"Wait!" Danny grabbed Songs by the arm. "Wait, is this it? You're just gonna leave? Over a ghost?"

Songs turned back and, with as pleasant a smile as they could manage, removed Danny's hand from their arm. "I have enjoyed traveling with you, but my life is my own to risk, and yours is not." They were not certain if "sad" was the word to describe their emotions, but they had been through quite a lot with Danny, and it was a shame for their association to end so soon. "Goodbye, Danny. I hope you find happiness."

They went back inside the MacBane house and, apologizing for Danny's rudeness and not explaining her absence, accepted their hospitality. Mrs. MacBane explained how her daughter had moved out to find work at the same time as her son, and had taken a job in a Denver brewery as Davey continued west. He spoke up at this point to say that he could have worked at that same brewery in Denver, but he was not satisfied with the wages they offered. The regret he spoke with was as old and worn as driftwood. In Denver, Mrs. MacBane explained, a fellow resident of Callie's boarding house became obsessed with her. His name was Eddie Allen. As chronicled in Callie's letters home, she had rebuffed his advances as politely as she could, but he refused to accept her refusal. He followed her to work, to the store, to any place she went. He told others that the two

were man and wife, and that she was simply too shy to admit to it. One night—Mrs. MacBane’s voice broke, and Davey continued on her behalf—Eddie Allen entered her room and had his way with her. His violence left her pregnant. All the while claiming to be chivalrously saving her name, Eddie Allen set a date for their wedding. Mrs. MacBane weakly added that she had not known until it was all over. Caroline MacBane ran from the altar and left for her mother’s home with nothing but the clothes on her back; the next time she was seen, she was dead by the roadside with her throat crushed. The police would not touch a case involving a ghost, and Eddie Allen, proud widower, freely walked the Denver streets.

“I see,” said Songs. “Thank you for your honesty with me. It must be very difficult.” Mrs. MacBane and her son nodded vaguely. They had suffered five years of unhealing grief, the memory of their dead loved one reopened with every identical wedding ring they received. Five years was a long time in a human life. Songs lowered their cup of tea and shook their head. Five years of that terrible cycle must be torture. “Do you mind if I retain the ring?”

Mrs. MacBane shook her head. “No, go ahead, go ahead. If you can do anything for Callie, we’ll be so grateful.”

Even though they suspected the action was not appropriate in this context, Songs bowed. It was what they would have done were they living their ordinary life. “Mrs. MacBane, Davey MacBane, until we see each other again.”

Neither Danny nor the car was outside when Songs left. This was as they expected. It was a brief walk from the town to the cornfields, and, once they were sufficiently far from human view, they let go of their human shape. It would be a

dangerous journey, of course, but they knew no other way to make it. With all their possessions tied in a light bundle to their arm, they took to the skies.

Songs kept their body small and their altitude high as they flew west. With any luck, they would be invisible from the ground. It was not difficult to find Denver. Denver was the last thing that was easy to find. They did not know what Eddie Allen looked like, where he lived today, or how to get to the boarding house where Callie had lived. If Boundless were here with them, they thought ruefully, Boundless would have already supplied some clever suggestion and the two would be on their way over to the killer's location now. But, then again, Boundless would never have approved of traveling this way, and Songs still felt too sore with guilt at the memory of Silver-Sky to have asked for Boundless's help. They were not here, in any case. Songs was on their own. The only thing they knew for certain was that the boarding house had white shingles. So that was where they went: to the first Denver building they could find with a white-shingled roof. Songs perched on the peak of the rooftop, overlooking the busy street below, and considered their next move.

With Eddie Allen's name, Songs could probably create a finding spell. But it would be weak without human blood, and, with so many humans crowded into this town, Songs suspected the spell would only draw its subject if he was already within a few hundred yards of Songs. But they would try it. Songs pulled a tile from the roof and spent several minutes composing the spell in their mind. It was a shame no one would appreciate the sheer skill that went into the spell they scratched into the roof tile with the tip of a claw. Even the Master of White-Gold Lake would likely have nodded in closed-mouthed approval if they had seen it. Perhaps that was Songs flattering themselves. Well,

they were dizzy with concentration, and the magic in the spell fizzed flawlessly. They deserved a little flattery.

By now, Songs had been noticed. A small crowd had begun to gather on the street in front of the building. But the finding spell reacted to none of them, so Songs simply folded their forelegs beneath them, the spell resting in one hand and the ring in the other, and let the crowd shout. What was the worst these humans could do to them?

A bullet close enough to scratch one of their scales and a demand to get off of private property answered that question. Songs flinched. If *those* were the stakes, it seemed staying here could be considered suicidal. The armed crowd below were debating whether to call animal control or the police, and Songs was not strong in martial arts. They doubted they would win if the situation came to combat. Staying here meant courting death, and, unlike their brush with the elf tree the night before, Songs and Danny now clearly played the parts of the betrayer and the betrayed.

“What the *hell* is this thing?” asked a new, good-natured voice.

“Officer Allen, thank god you’re here,” said a gingham-clad spectator, and the shingle in Songs’s hand heated up and crumbled to ash. “This thing just landed on the roof, and it’s too big to get down with ladders, and we don’t—”

Songs brushed the ash off their hand and nodded. At last things were easy again. They glided off the roof and landed heavily enough in front of Eddie Allen to crack the pavement. At over six feet tall, the red-cheeked policeman was not a small human, but Songs stood eye-to-eye with him, and their body, thirty feet long, coiled through the bulk of the open space on the street. Dragons knew things. Songs knew that humans knew this. Even the forked-tongued dragons of Europe, who never contributed anything to their



society but an enemy, were known to know things humans could not, and with luck Songs's pronouncement could outweigh Eddie Allen's self-written myth. "Officer Eddie Allen," they said, their audibly non-human voice as disinterested and godlike as a high court judge, "are you married?"

Eddie Allen blinked. A look of worry slicked its way onto his naturally good-natured face like oil onto water. "Widowed, actually. She died on our very wedding night."

"Did she?"

He nodded, and his sweating face glistened. "She did."

"Officer Eddie Allen, tell me how Caroline MacBane died."

"She—it was an accident. A terrible accident on the highway. An accident."

Songs stepped forward. Eddie Allen stepped back. He did not know how much Songs knew. He was afraid of what Songs knew. Songs knew all of this, and this knowledge rested in their chest with the satisfying stability of a gyroscope. Out of the corner of their eye, Songs saw a new, white-clad figure among the bystanders, and they knew that Callie MacBane was relishing this just as much as they. "An accident, Officer Eddie Allen? An accident that strangles the woman you raped, just after she refused to marry you? That kind of an accident?" They raised a foreleg and, opening Eddie Allen's hand with irresistible force, pressed the ring into his palm. He stared at it with the same horror as his victim. He had thought he was all-powerful. He had thought he could make his word the truth just by speaking it. He had thought no one knew, and no one cared to know, but Callie MacBane's years of speaking to closed ears were over. Songs would speak for her today. "You are no widower, Officer Eddie Allen. You have never had a

wife. How dare you claim to be an officer of justice? You know nothing but depravity.” Songs leapt into the air and over the boarding house, picking up their belongings on the way, and left Denver for the second time. They left Denver alone, and they would continue alone because of the way they had returned. That was the choice they had made. That was the life they would live. But, as they swam higher into the air, they saw a young woman with a white dress and disheveled orange hair fade from the crowd like a healing afterimage, and they knew that their promise to Callie MacBane was well and truly fulfilled.

## The Werewolves of Albany

Chapter seventeen of *Songs on the Road* brings Songs and their expanded group of traveling companions, including Danny, the fox spirit journalist Cecilia, the nine-headed mafia-raised Italian dragon Fish, and Songs's ambitious childhood friend Boundless, to a house of werewolves on the night of the full moon. Werewolves may be considered to form a third point of the trifecta of "classic spooks" with vampires and ghosts, and *Songs on the Road* applies a new lens to these creatures by framing them through Luis Buñuel's style of surrealism, which centers on isolation, claustrophobia, and scrupulosity, with particular interest in religion and the bourgeoisie.

There is no shortage of revisionist werewolves, from the Native American love interests of *Twilight* to the alien parasites of *Doctor Who*, but the iconic werewolf is characterized by their uncontrollable violence and the horror they feel at their transformation into something not human. *The Wolf Man* (1941), Universal Studios' paradigm-defining werewolf film starring Lon Chaney and Bela Lugosi as two werewolves, glosses lycanthropy as "an explanation of the dual personality in each of us" (12:17). Even as humans, both werewolves are condemned to the life of an outsider through no fault of their own—Lugosi's character is an itinerant Roma fortune-teller who meets with racism, suspicion, and ridicule wherever he goes, and Chaney's is the younger son of an English noble family, whose parental neglect caused him to move to America at a young age and who has only just returned to a home that is no longer really his; both cases of exteriority and helplessness in the face of their inherent situation are exacerbated by their lycanthropy. Unlike Lugosi's role as Dracula in the 1931 film of his name, his character in this film finds no pleasure and feels no power in his supernatural nature, and

seeks only to suppress the irradicable violence that has been foisted upon him, and Lon Chaney's character descends into wretchedness throughout the film as he tries and fails to quash the violence he has recently discovered within himself.

Spanish Surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel never made a film about werewolves, but many of his films deal with similar uncontrollable and detested bursts of animalistic behavior, made all the more out-of-place by the ostensibly self-disciplined and devoutly religious spaces of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie in which they occur. While the shame and horror around a person's inherent impulses to violence and sexuality form the focus of such shorter works as *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), *L'Age D'Or* (1930), and *Simon of the Desert* (1962), Buñuel's feature film *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) looks at how little is needed to bring out those impulses, employing a motif of domestic animals incongruously wandering a large, expensive house to parallel and lampoon the rapid descent of its well-bred characters into barbarism. These two threads are combined in *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955), a film in which a wealthy man's intrusive thoughts about killing cause him to descend into the same self-indulgent disgust and isolation as the central character of *The Wolf Man*, despite never actually committing murder—for him and his well-bred image, merely possessing the impulse is shame enough. The affect of many of Buñuel's prim, religious, bourgeois characters bears marked similarities to those of werewolves, dually possessing impulses to animalistic destruction and identity-defining shame at those same impulses, prompting their juxtaposition in *Songs on the Road*.

The werewolves of *Songs on the Road* draw affective inspiration from Buñuel. Rather than being isolated figures suddenly cast out from their community, the

werewolves are a *nouveau riche* family attempting to integrate into the community of established wealth, including the family of vampires appearing earlier in the book. Where the vampire family, the Overburys, imitates Bela Lugosi's Dracula in their confidence in their power and indulgence in their hedonism, the members of this novel's werewolf family, the Thatchers, are ruled by their insecurities just like the characters of Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1973). The chapter borrows the indoor animal motif of *The Exterminating Angel* as an already-transformed werewolf wanders the expensive, isolated Thatcher house in order to highlight the gulf between the two natures—domestic and animalistic—central to most werewolf stories. The Thatchers express the obsessive and hollow religiosity of *Viridiana* (1961), and to the same effect: in the end, after making many sacrifices to control their unwanted nature, they inevitably succumb, consoling themselves the next morning with a refusal to admit to the things they did and will undoubtedly do again, just as *The Exterminating Angel* ends. By combining elements from werewolf stories with motifs from Buñuel's films, *Songs on the Road* seeks to interpret the familiar creature of the werewolf in a new and interesting way.

***Songs on the Road* ch. 17: “The Werewolves of Albany”**

The land they drove through that afternoon was lake-pocked, though none of the lakes came close in scope to the ocean-like body of water whose shore they had followed from just past Columbus up to Buffalo. Songs had wondered aloud who the patron of that lake was, and had been surprised to hear that it did not have one. Having come directly from a world where every trickle of water had a dozen young officials fighting for appointment to its patronage, the idea of such a vast freshwater sea being ungoverned struck Songs as a terrible waste. They did understand, of course, that the situation was different in this part of the world, and that it was of no more use to covet Lake Erie than it was to covet the Mississippi, but Songs had coveted the Mississippi, and, as they stared out the window in private envy, they wondered what their life would be like if they could govern just one of this place’s countless sticky-watered lakes.

The summer daylight had not yet waned that evening as they passed through the grand city of Albany. “We should find a place to sleep,” Cecilia said, though the sky barely showed signs of nighttime.

Danny nodded agreement, but with a concession: “Do we really want to spend money on a hotel? We could just sleep outside again.”

Boundless opened his mouth to protest this, but Songs, having caught Danny’s eye and meaning, shrugged and voiced their support for her plan. “Come on, Bounds,” they said: they and Boundless were close enough that they could afford to antagonize him a little to help Danny get closer to Cecilia. “I thought you were the tough messenger and I was the soft-handed scholar. Don’t tell me you’re afraid of a couple mosquitos.”

“No,” Boundless said, outmaneuvered by this brilliant play. He made certain Songs saw how disappointed he was, and Songs made certain he saw how little this moved them.

After driving through Albany and following the highway for half a radio drama after—one of Cecilia’s favorites, a crime adventure called *The Green Hornet*—Danny pulled the car over onto a gravel road and, from there, onto a grassy patch in the woods. “This okay?” she asked.

“Will you be able to back us out tomorrow?” asked Cecilia.

“Of course I will.”

“Because this ground feels pretty soft.”

“Come *on*, Ceece. I drove trucks in the Alps for three years. You got kicked out of a marching band. Which of us is better qualified here, hm?”

Cecilia shrugged and opened her door. “Well, don’t ask for my help when we’re stuck here tomorrow morning.”

“Not a bad place to be stuck,” Boundless said, clambering out of his own door. He was right: the greenery was lush almost to the point of oppressiveness, and, down rocky banks, a small river tumbled and foamed. Fish did not seem disappointed at all to learn that they would be spending a night outdoors; on the contrary, as soon as Songs helped them out of the trailer they spread their wings and swooped a quarter mile down the river and back, staying low enough to the water to trace a wake in the surface with their claws. Songs waited for Fish to return, and Danny and Cecilia continued affectionately bickering about career paths, and Boundless walked into the greenery to explore.

“Hey, Thousand-Songs,” Fish said, perching on a half-submerged boulder and letting the flow of the stream wrap around their ankles, “do you want to ride on my back?”

This took Songs aback. “Ride on your *back*?” They could hardly imagine any dragon willingly submitting himself to such humiliation.

Songs knew they had made a mistake when nearly all of Fish’s heads cringed away in embarrassment. “I’m sorry, Thousand-Songs,” they said. They clutched the rock miserably, their voice falling haphazardly from one mouth after another as they almost gave up on the sentence with every word. “I thought—I thought you would like it. Angelo liked it, or, or, I think he liked it. I’m not sure now, I guess.”

“I’m sorry, Fish,” Songs said lamely. “If you want me to, I’ll ride on your back.”

Fish’s heads turned back to Songs like a blooming flower. “You will?”

Songs nodded. “Of course I will. Here, get out of the water. I don’t want to get my socks wet.”

Songs’s socks did end up getting wet with spray from the river, and their dress rode up immodestly as they positioned themselves behind Fish’s bundle of necks like a rider on horseback, and the cut on their chest ached as they gasped air into their lungs, and they had to clutch their hat in one hand to keep it from falling off as their hair streamed out behind, and they were aware at every moment of all the danger this position represented, and yet for all this danger and indignity they had never found such a giddy thrill in all their years of flying for themselves. It was like flying for the first time. To fly from Pearl Mountain to their family home took them through dangerous territory, complex to navigate and difficult to fly through, but that was never anything more than a



journey for them. Compared to this, clinging to Fish's back as they swung between tree branches, feeling Fish's wings trembling over the wind like billowing sails, Songs could hardly call the journey home *flight* at all. No wonder Danny had been so eager to request to fly on Songs's back.

When the two returned to the clearing, Cecilia and Danny were still speaking beside the car, but the tone of their conversation had changed. Songs, still dizzy and giddy with adrenaline, decided to act more like Boundless than herself and hissed to Fish to approach the car on foot, wading quietly through the water and seeing how long they could keep Danny and Cecilia from noticing the two of them. Songs nearly slipped on the slick rocks multiple times, and Fish's stealthy slither twice set off a minor landslide of river stones. Songs doubted they would even be able to get close unheard, but, to their surprise, the two were able to draw level with Danny and Cecilia and poke their heads over the riverbank without being noticed.

"No, I do need to apologize," Cecilia was saying. "I do. I should not have sabotaged your car and threatened you. I—" She seemed to flounder for words for a moment. "I hope you can forgive me. Someday."

Danny frowned. "Why do you think I haven't, Ceece?"

"I needed to apologize for the wrongs I have done you, nonetheless."

"Well, I accept your apology."

"Thank you."

The two hesitated for a moment, clearly stranded between things that needed saying, and, had Songs misplaced even a scrap more of their dignity, they would have exchanged a look with Fish and giggled like a schoolchild.

“Danny,” Cecilia said carefully, “your company is valuable to me. If you...”

Danny smiled without malice as Cecilia’s hesitation dragged on. “If I what?”

The moment Cecilia spent composing herself came undone in a flash as she froze and wheeled around. Songs ducked beneath the riverbank and tugged Fish down with them. Embarrassment rubbed them raw as they did so. Peering around corners and spying on others’ private conversations for their own entertainment was the kind of thing Catkin was publicly shamed for by their tutor, not the kind of thing the diligent model student Thousand-Songs did—or, at least, not the thing the diligent model student Thousand-Songs was caught doing. And they no longer had the excuse of youth to shield them. As Cecilia shouted, “Come on out, you two,” Songs was about ready to crumple like abused paper with humiliation and self-directed fury. But, to their surprise, Cecilia continued: “What is that, Daniel?”

“Ladies, this is Elsie Thatcher,” said Boundless, his voice as suave as coffee. “She lives in the house just down the street. Elsie, this is Cecilia and Danny. We’re going to Boston together and decided to stop for the night here. I don’t know where Fish and Songs got off to. They’ll be back in a minute, though.”

“Daniel,” Cecilia said, “*what—*”

“A *friend*, Cecilia.”

Songs began to creep beneath the level of the riverbank back in the direction they had come from, motioning for Fish to do the same. As they walked, they heard a new voice, so carefully refined in its pitch that it almost sounded like a song at a recital: “I will be glad to meet your other friends, Daniel. Their names are Fish and... Song?”

“Songs, with an S,” Boundless corrected easily, “but they go by Lilian too if that’s easier.”

“And are Lilian and Fish... like you?”

Songs tucked their hat back onto their head and climbed up the bank. “You were talking about me?” they said. They straightened their dress and pushed their hair off of their shoulder. “I apologize for appearing like this. Fish and I were exploring the river and got a bit carried away.”

Elsie Thatcher nodded politely, but went rigid when Fish followed Songs up the bank. Just as her voice had suggested, everything about Elsie Thatcher’s dress and bearing bespoke refinement. Her dark hair was combed into a careful twist on top of her head with soft and precisely placed ringlets falling onto her shoulders, and her face was carefully made up, with the deep red painted onto her full lips matching the deep red of her tailored dress. The Christian symbol hanging from her neck was made of cleverly worked gold and could not have been cheap. Next to Elsie Thatcher, with her pearls glistening on her wrists and ears and her soft dark eyes widening in genteel astonishment at the dragon shaking water off of their scales, Songs felt hopelessly unrefined. But even at this distance Songs could tell that the large, cameo-carved bloodstone of the brooch on her shoulder was false, and, with all of Elsie Thatcher’s portrait-perfect refinement, they did not doubt this falsehood could be valuable to them, so it was without a trace of insecurity that they said, “This is my traveling companion, Fish. Fish, please meet Elsie Thatcher.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” Fish said at an encouraging flick of Songs’s eyebrows.

“I—Likewise,” said Elsie Thatcher in slightly bewildered Italian. When Boundless remarked genially on her knowledge of that language, she turned to them—turned away from Fish—and said, “I speak English, French, Italian, German, Latin, and Greek. Classical Greek, of course. I couldn’t even order a coffee when I visited Greece.” She laughed like an opera singer, and Boundless laughed like a movie star, and Cecilia scoffed. “What is it, Miss Cecilia?” asked Elsie Thatcher with mild reproach.

Cecilia shrugged in a way that made it clear that her disdain was a joke. “I feel so left out. I’m the only one here who can’t speak Italian.”

Danny laughed and said in her rough soldier’s Italian, “Yeah, serves you fucking right, you eagle.”

Elsie Thatcher cringed to hear this, but Cecilia responded to Danny as though the newcomer were not even there: “I’ll have you know that I speak English, Japanese, three Chinese languages, Korean, *and* French, but I see now that because I never learned the language of some obscure Mediterranean peninsula—” she switched to heavily accented French— “I will never be good enough for you.”

“Would you,” interrupted Elsie Thatcher, looking nervously from Boundless up to the darkening sky and down to Songs, “would you do us the honor of visiting us in our home? It is late, but we must show you some hospitality.”

“I would love to,” Boundless said without consulting the others.

Elsie Thatcher smiled gratefully at Boundless. He was the only one present who matched her in refinement and finery. It was no wonder she did not even look at the other four as, holding Boundless’s arm like the refined lady-and-gentleman pair from the film Songs had seen, the two walked down the gravel road toward her house. Songs did not

envy Boundless this refinement, necessarily. Boundless had always oozed careless and flawless charm and grace, even in the days when he was nothing more than a day-wage messenger spying on Catkin at White-Gold Lake. No matter how carefully Songs styled their mane and polished their horns, they had always been and would always be a little strange. They did not envy Boundless's refinement, but they did slightly envy that Boundless had so effortlessly attracted the attentions and affections of Elsie Thatcher, and that between themselves Danny and Cecilia were all attention and attraction, and that as the group walked down the gravel road to the Thatcher family home, Songs was the only one who walked alone.

Fish nudged Songs in the arm with a nose, and Songs glanced back. They smiled. No, they were not walking alone. As their parents' last child, they had many times meditated on the detriments of being a younger sibling. They realized now that they had never quite considered the benefits of being an elder sibling. They patted Fish's nearest head and, side-by-side with Fish, followed Danny between the trees.

The Thatcher family home did not deserve so low a title. It should be called the Thatcher mansion. If, in the future, the building passed from its owners into public possession, Songs did not doubt that it would house visiting government officials or fine works of art. The house rose and rambled, its front made lacy with two stories of porches and balconies, an angular tower rising at the adjacent corner of the house, windows tall and regular and blue-grey clapboard clothing the walls like dragon's scales. It must have been here by the river long, long before the highway crashed through like a flood and made this place a margin of land.

“Mother,” Elsie Thatcher said, opening the front doors and walking through, “I brought guests.” The double front doors and connecting hallway were wide and tall enough that, if they were careful with their heads, Fish could enter, and Elsie gestured at them to do so.

A person—presumably Elsie Thatcher’s mother—entered the hallway and went rigid precisely as Elsie had. She and her mother looked almost exactly alike, except that the skirt of her mother’s blue dress reached the floor, and her mother’s hair had begun to shimmer silver, and her mother’s discomfort showed no sign of fading as they introduced themselves as Florence Thatcher and asked Elsie in a polite steel-wool voice where she had found these people.

“They are traveling to Boston and decided to spend the night under the stars by the river,” said Elsie Thatcher, now openly hanging onto Boundless’s arm.

Florence Thatcher’s voice was only strained to a skilled ear as they said, “How quaint. And they own a dragon, too.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, Madam,” Fish said helpfully. To this, Florence Thatcher only nodded. Songs guessed from their expression that they had a brutal headache.

A dog padded into the atrium. It had to be a dog. There was no way a family as refined as the Thatchers would not remark on a wolf freely roaming their home. Songs realized that they were lying to themselves. There was no way this creature was a dog. Whatever it was, it was handsome: sandy-furred and long-limbed, its shoulder level with Songs’s chest, with pale markings on its face and a lean, stringy build. Its eyes seemed

too thoughtful to be animal eyes, but it had a smile that had not forgotten the feel of living flesh.

Elsie Thatcher looked at the wolf with surprise. “Kenneth,” she said to it, and Songs wondered if it was a dog after all, “why are you—” Then, with a sudden start and an apologetic honey-sweet smile at Boundless, she fell silent.

“Elsie, take our guests somewhere where they can clean up. I’ll see what food I can get for them,” Florence Thatcher said. “Most of the servants have gone, but I think Claude is still here. Kenneth, come with me.”

“Claude is our butler,” explained Elsie Thatcher as she led the group up the sweeping staircase. Fish hesitated a bit at the bottom, but Elsie Thatcher did not even look around at them, so after a second’s pause Fish began the awkward climb, bracing their lower body with their tail as they dragged their upper body up a step with their two legs. With each step, the rough scales of their body smeared river mud over the staircase carpet, and they were unable to prevent a grunt of effort from escaping at least one of their throats. After a few steps like this Songs and Cecilia each took Fish under a chin and Danny took them under the tail, and, with the combined efforts of the four, they were able to get Fish to the top of the stairs.

The hallway at the top of the stairs was narrower than the atrium, narrow enough that Danny could not get around Fish to rejoin Cecilia, and the two met eyes through Fish’s necks with a look that was partly joking longing, partly concern. Neither Boundless nor Elsie Thatcher looked back. “Tell me, Miss Thatcher,” Boundless was saying, “has your family always lived here?”

Elsie Thatcher smiled with careful grace. “Oh, yes—at least, at least for as long as we’ve lived in New York. Papa’s an oil man, you know.”

“Is he?”

“Oh, yes. If you’ll come in here, you can freshen up a little.” Elsie Thatcher and Boundless walked through the door of what Songs supposed was her room. The two of them passed through easily enough; Cecilia followed a few steps behind, and Songs after her, and, with seven expressions of profound regret, Fish began the arduous work of fitting himself through the door. With all seven heads snaked through, they turned awkwardly on their side and tried to squirm through, worm-like. Songs and Danny did what they could; as they did, they heard Boundless and Elsie Thatcher speaking and rustling:

“Oh, Dan, your hair’s all mussed!”

“Don’t comb it out! I like it mussed.”

“You do? Well, so do I. I’ll muss it again.”

Songs turned and peered around the two to catch a glimpse of themselves in Elsie Thatcher’s large mirror. After shifting to and from their natural shape so often, the makeup they had gotten from Cecilia had more or less entirely faded, but at least it had not warped. Their hair was still disordered from the flight over the river, and they raked their fingers through it in an attempt to set it right. The green dress still looked fine, at least. It could do with being pressed, but that could not be helped.

“Oh! Dan.”

Songs shifted their eyes over to Elsie Thatcher and Boundless and saw Elsie Thatcher clutching the symbol around her neck. Boundless stood with his hand



suspended in midair, frozen in his apparent intention of touching the side of Elsie Thatcher's face. "I'm sorry," he said.

Elsie Thatcher cleared her throat and reordered her ringlets. "Let's go down," she said. "The food must nearly be ready by now."

Cecilia, Songs, and Fish exchanged a glance, and, from between Fish's necks, Danny extended a glance as well, but as always Elsie Thatcher either did not see or refused to acknowledge these and shooed the group briskly out of her room.

There was not enough room for Fish to turn around in the hallway, so they needed to scramble their way backwards with their two limbs, more than half-pulled by Danny, their necks tangling as they craned back for a glimpse of where they were going. They managed to turn the right way around on the staircase, but the motion cost them their stability on the tight-piled carpet, and they could not disguise their descent as anything but an undignified tumble. Songs winced as they landed in a pile of necks and wings at the foot of the stairs, not far from where another member of the Thatcher household—tall, clad in black and white, with a receding hairline clearing more room on their face to express disdain—looked down at the ball of scales and humiliation at their feet and said in a stiff voice, "Miss Thatcher, if you would come to the dining room."

"Of course, Claude," Elsie Thatcher said. She descended the stairs without Boundless, who looked at Songs with profound confusion as he followed her. Songs had not seen exactly what happened before Elsie Thatcher turned cold, but they had never known Boundless to force another. They would not have kept Boundless's friendship if he had. But Elsie Thatcher seemed shyer of being touched than most, and Songs warned

Boundless with a glance that, no matter how interested he was in her, it would be best for him if he respected that.

Altogether, nine sat at the dining room table. Danny and Cecilia sat together and Songs sat across from them; next to Songs, most of the chairs on that side of the table had been cleared away to seat Fish. Boundless sat next to Cecilia, and Elsie Thatcher next to Boundless, still sneaking glances at Boundless that suggested that her attraction to him had not been too damaged by whatever had happened in front of the mirror. Florence Thatcher sat next to their daughter, and the mustachioed family patriarch Harold Thatcher filled the head of the table, and on Harold Thatcher's other side sat a round-cheeked and wild-haired child introduced as Theodore Thatcher. Theodore Thatcher stared at Fish with open-mouthed awe, as though looking at a creature in a menagerie, and Fish turned to Songs for help with one face while smiling encouragingly at Theodore Thatcher with several others. A ripple of fur brushed against Songs's leg, and they, a dragon, had to tightly suppress a shudder as Kenneth the wolf-dog smiled up at them from under the table.

"Claude will be out with the food soon," Florence Thatcher said, their voice stiff and pleasant. "Until then, let's pray. Do you know how to pray?" Before any of them could answer, Florence Thatcher continued, brightly and forcefully: "We'll teach you! Just hold hands with the person next to you, and bow your head and close your eyes." Elsie Thatcher and Boundless quickly joined hands, and Danny and Cecilia just as eagerly followed suit. Songs reached across the table for Danny's hand and rested their other hand somewhat awkwardly on the back of one of Fish's necks. Florence Thatcher looked up at their husband. "Dearest, would you?"

Harold Thatcher's eyes darted around the table for a fraction of a second before they said in an oddly snuffling voice, "Of course. Of course, my dear." They cleared their throat. "Lord, we thank thee for uniting us with new friends on this day. We thank thee for the strength thou hast given us. We pray for strength. We thank thee for framing the world according to thy wisdom, for framing us in thine infinite knowledge, for the strength thou hast granted us." Songs felt Fish's neck pushed against their hand and opened their eyes to see the four Thatchers rhythmically swaying back and forth, pushing and pulling the rest at the table with the force of their devotion. Danny met Songs's eyes, and Songs could see deep distress in them. "We thank thee for the clothes thou hast given us. Lord, give us strength. We thank thee for the strong doors of this house. Lord, give us strength. We thank thee for the meat in the pantry. Lord, give us strength. We thank thee for bringing us into the light, Lord, and we pray for the strength to remain there. Lord—"

A sudden clattering snapped off the prayer. Songs wheeled around to see Claude scrambling to their feet from where they had fallen to the floor. The tray they had been carrying had skidded some feet away, leaving cold chicken scattered across the marble tiles. For just a moment, the Thatchers sat as rigid as statues. Their sculpted propriety trickled away the slightest bit, like makeup running under a single bead of sweat.

Then Kenneth snatched a piece of chicken.

All at once, the Thatchers leapt from their seats, knocking over chairs, crawling over tables, surging from where they had been so perfectly ensconced to devour the meat scattered across the floor. Their bones shifted as they did as though settling more comfortably into position, and their hair turned sandy brown around the roots, and Songs, imitating the wish-marked Danny, sat perfectly still and silent.

When every scrap of meat was gone, the four Thatchers returned to their seats, although Kenneth remained where it had sat before, licking its mouth with satisfaction.

“Thank you for joining us,” said Florence Thatcher, their voice precisely pleasant.

Elsie Thatcher looked from the Christian symbol around her neck to Boundless, and then up at Florence Thatcher. “Mother, may we be excused?” she asked.

The group split up so quickly once permission was granted that Songs almost believed the others had discussed the matter beforehand. Elsie Thatcher led Boundless by the hand out of the dining room and Cecilia followed Danny out in another direction. Florence, Harold, and Theodore Thatcher all went their separate ways, and within only seconds Songs and Fish were the only ones left in the room. After a silent moment, Songs turned to Fish and said, “Do you want me to find you something to eat?” After a brief hesitation, Fish nodded, and Songs smiled. “Okay. I’ll be back in a minute.” And they left too.

Songs did feel a bit guilty for having deceived Fish, but they had left primarily to find out what was going on. The doors of this house were strong indeed. Songs refused to remain here until they knew exactly why the Thatchers were grateful for them. It was the work of a moment to find the pantry, but they did not find Claude on the way there. That was unfortunate. They had hoped to have learned something of value from the butler, but the very fact that Claude was making themselves scarce told Songs something. Songs took a few parsnips and started back, but before they got out a hand swung from the shadows and caught them on the arm.

“Vinnie,” Danny hissed, and continued in hushed Italian. “Do you think Cecilia, do you think she likes women?”

So Danny had finally caught on. “She does, and you in particular. Why do you ask?”

“She just kissed me!”

Songs raised their eyebrows. “Then what are you asking me for?”

“I don’t know. What if—”

“I get hurt when you’re hurt. I wouldn’t lie to you. Oh, get back there,” Songs said, and gently pushed Danny back in the direction she had come from. They could hear her and Cecilia busying themselves with each other in the darkness of the Thatchers’ pantry, and Songs smiled to themselves as they left. They hoped they had done right. They had likely held the power to end any association between Danny and Cecilia in that moment, and they had chosen to abdicate that role. Part of them wished they had held onto that power, and they could barely pretend it was out of knowledge of the ill effects that sometimes arose from human-fox relationships. They knew why they wanted that power, and Sister Sarah knew why they wanted that power, and that knowledge had guided their decision to give it up.

Songs did not return directly to the dining room after leaving the pantry. They followed a wood-floored corridor and turned a corner into a hallway so dark they could not proceed without running a hand along the wall. They did not like this darkness. Every window was heavily curtained, like in the Overburys’ castle; unlike the Overburys’ castle, however, not a single electric light or even a lighting spell offset the blackness. If it were any darker, they would have to return to their natural form to use their far more sensitive real eyes. But it did not get darker. At the end of the hallway, a scattering of candles was lit behind a set of glass-paned doors. The candles were not bright, but they

allowed Songs to look in unobserved and see Boundless and Elsie Thatcher sitting on a couch together. Boundless was holding one of Elsie Thatcher's hands in both of his, and something was strange about that hand. It was not a hand. Elsie Thatcher's right hand was a sandy-furred paw, delicate and sharp-clawed just like Kenneth's, and Boundless cradled it like a treasure as he assured her that it was beautiful, she was beautiful, she was the most perfect creature he had ever seen. She put her other hand, almost a paw, on Boundless's shoulder, and as they kissed her teeth and face lengthened and Boundless ran a hand through the soft fur covering her jaw and neck and body.

Songs nodded, satisfied at the solution to the mystery of the Thatchers' strangeness. They were werewolves, involuntary shape-changers who were ashamed of their other selves. Boundless would never change, of course, but he was good-hearted enough, so long as he wasn't breaking his own heart. Songs trusted him to keep himself safe. They turned and almost jumped: Harold Thatcher was standing behind them, with Florence Thatcher a few steps farther back. Both wore dark looks in that dark hallway, and, as Florence Thatcher opened their mouth to speak, Songs saw their teeth shuddering against the impulse to lengthen. Songs knew the situation now, and they knew that they were in great danger—they were in great danger, and so were Fish and Danny and Cecilia and Boundless, who Songs no longer trusted to keep himself safe—but they also finally had something to work with. They spoke before Florence Thatcher had a chance, arranging their face into their look of greatest respect as they did: "Harold Thatcher. I deeply regret not being able to speak to you earlier. Your name has preceded you, you see. I had heard all about your dignity and your astuteness in business, but I had not yet been told of your generous hospitality."

“My daughter—” began Harold Thatcher with a raised lip, but Songs was already too settled into their part to be phased.

“Are you by chance acquainted with the Overburys?” they asked. “I am not a man of commerce myself, so I do not know what associations an oil man like you would have with silver miners like the Overburys—but, as fellow successful non-humans, I suspect you must have some acquaintance? Am I wrong?”

They knew they were right, because both Harold and Florence Thatcher had recoiled. Songs shifted their weight forward. It wasn’t a true step, just a slight casual motion to test the waters of their control over the situation, but Florence Thatcher shrank away and Harold Thatcher took a full step back. If the situation had been different, Songs would have clicked their tongue in satisfaction. Shame was a powerful thing. It was a useful thing. The Thatchers believed they were monsters, and the Overburys never would, and that was the difference between how Songs could speak with them. “What do you want?” Harold Thatcher asked, apparently scraping up all their courage to do so. They had prayed so desperately for strength, so they were clearly at the end of it. These Thatchers had balked at the thought of the slightest breach of propriety, so they clearly were depending on it. Songs took a true step forward now, easy, casual, friendly, and Florence and Harold Thatcher retreated like cornered animals.

“I don’t want anything,” Songs said smoothly, as smooth as a flaying knife beneath skin. “But I am friends with Marilyn Overbury, and I thought that you might have some information on her well-being.”

“We don’t—we don’t know the Overburys,” Harold Thatcher said, their voice almost a whine. “They don’t know us.”

Florence Thatcher's low-heeled shoe clacked on the stone of the dining room floor, and they startled at the sound. "Don't tell them—don't tell them." Their voice was eggshell fragile. "Do you want money? Do you want money? We have money."

Songs considered for a fraction, then made a controlled show of consideration. "I don't want anything you don't also want." By now, both Florence and Harold Thatcher were in the dining room, and a flick of Songs's eyes brought Fish's hot and looming presence right behind them with a silky rush of scale over stone. The patriarch and matriarch of this sharp-toothed home stood before Songs, rigid and cowed in their velvet and silk. Songs smiled. "I want all of us to forget about this night. I want you to extend your hitherto perfect hospitality until morning tomorrow, and I want us all to keep quiet on what we may or may not have seen tonight, including," they added on a quickly calculated whim, "in the parlor back there. Your daughter won't know what you've seen, and the Overburys don't have to know what I've seen, and no one has to know what we may or may not have spoken of here. Isn't that what you want?"

Harold and Florence Thatcher readily agreed that this is what they wanted, but Songs suspected the two would have readily agreed to almost anything. They decided to press just a bit further on their luck: "I want two more things."

The two assured Songs that they could have anything, anything at all. Anything. Their bones were shifting with stress. Songs wondered how much longer the two would be capable of human speech.

"I want your word, for yourself *and* on behalf of your three children."

Song's slight risk of counting the wolf Kenneth as a part of the Thatcher family paid off when Florence and Harold Thatcher wildly and eagerly complied, piling oaths



over oaths like coins spilling from a desperate man's purse. Songs had never heard anyone swear on the throne of God and the fangs of their parents before, but their oaths seemed genuine, and they seemed not to care when Songs declined to offer an oath of their own. "What—" The visibly shrinking Florence Thatcher had to navigate their lengthening tongue around their teeth as they spoke. "What is the second thing?"

Songs smiled and held up the parsnips. "I am afraid that Fish did not get much to eat. If you would be so generous as to allow them to have these...?"

Florence and Harold Thatcher nodded, gratitude oozing from their shuddering and shifting bodies. Songs smiled a gentle release at them. The two all but scampered away; indeed, Harold Thatcher's forefeet hit the floor before the two left the room. Songs sighed. They had shielded their friends from the danger that Boundless's amorous exploits—Songs heard furniture shifting in the parlor and ignored it the way they had ignored it many times over the centuries—had gotten them into, but they could hardly take satisfaction in the act. The Thatchers lived in so much fear. They lived in so much fear, and that very fear made that fear justified. The Thatchers were not a match for Songs. *Pride*, thought Songs. They had to check their pride. Any child could have turned the Thatchers' spun-glass self-image against them. Especially now, so close to speaking to Cloud-Crane on the Duke's behalf, Songs could not allow themselves the luxury of pride.

"Thousand-Songs?"

Songs looked up at Fish. All fourteen of their eyes were fixed on Songs with open awe. They were proud of Songs. They were *amazed* by them. Songs did not know what

they were supposed to do in such a situation, so they tossed the parsnips at Fish and said, “Here. I hope these are all right.”

Fish caught the parsnips with several of their mouths, but kept looking at Songs with the rest of their heads, their expression turning complex on a few of their faces.

“What?” Songs asked.

“I—I’m going to miss you.”

Fish was going to miss them. Songs was going to miss Fish, too. Songs was going to miss them keenly, but they could not find the most correct words for the situation.

They did not, in the end. They merely walked forward and embraced one of Fish’s necks.

Fish hesitantly wrapped the rest of their necks around Songs’s body. In less than a day,

Fish would be gone. Songs had less than a day left with Fish, so they had to make sure

Fish knew just how much that day meant to them.

## The Spider of Los Angeles

In chapters twenty-seven and twenty-eight, “The Spider of Los Angeles” and “The Killer in the Photograph,” the characters of *Songs on the Road* pass through the final spaces of their journey: the mean streets of Los Angeles and the manors of the American coastal aristocracy. As they do, the story takes a detour into the deeply American genre of film noir, exploring, like many other entries in the genre, the feelings of isolation, alienation, and helplessness against one’s situation and nature experienced by the criminal, the victim, and even the detective-protagonist—in this case, Songs himself.

The genre and technique of film noir arose in America in the first half of the twentieth century as the German Expressionist techniques of filmmakers such as Fritz Lang combined with the hard-boiled stories of writers such as Raymond Chandler, but precisely categorizing the genre is a challenge, as noted by James Naremore. There is no scholarly consensus for the inception of film noir—whether it begins in 1941 with *The Maltese Falcon*, or in 1937 with *You Only Live Once*, or in 1931 with *Little Caesar*, or even, as posited by *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, in 1927 with the silent film *Underworld*. The point of transition between noir and neo-noir is likewise slippery, placed somewhere between 1950 and 1960; and in terms of actual style, “nothing links together all things discussed as noir—not the theme of crime, not the cinematographic technique, not even a resistance to Aristotelian narratives or happy endings” (Naremore 12). A genre that by even the most conservative definitions includes such disparate films as *Laura* (1944) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) (and, by looser definitions, expands as far as *Fallen Angels* (1995) and *The Matrix* (1999))

does not have many clear constants; one frequent motif, however, is the juxtaposition of the power a character's social position would seem to grant them over their life with the helplessness they actually feel.

This helplessness takes many forms and takes hold of characters in many situations. In some films, such as *The Killers* (1946) and Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once*, that helplessness derives from external or social factors: the doomed protagonist of *The Killers* enters the world of organized crime out of economic necessity, only to be killed by his and his compatriots' selfishness and greed; *You Only Live Once*'s protagonist, an ex-convict, sincerely and good-heartedly wishes to reintegrate into society, but his criminal record causes people to exclude him, persecute him, and eventually force him back into an ultimately fatal life of crime. Meanwhile, in other films, such as Lang's *M* (1931) or Edward Dmytryk's *The Sniper* (1952), this helplessness comes from an internal compulsion. In one of *M*'s most iconic scenes, the child murderer Beckert, played by Peter Lorre, delivers his "final defense" against the mob that has formed into a mockery of a courtroom, claiming that he is compelled to kill by some tormenting psychological force. "Don't I have this cursed thing inside me? This fire, this voice, this agony?" he demands, framed as small and cornered, played as helpless and pathetic not just under the force of the mob but against his own ghosts (1:42:00). While the exact source of the demons that compel Lorre's character to kill are not explained, *The Sniper* is much more explicit: it was its protagonist's experience in World War II that left him unable to process his traumas except through violence. The nation taught him nothing but how to kill, opines one of the film's psychologist characters, so it should not be surprised when he continued to kill on his return.

The compulsion to destroy the lives of others exhibited in the crime investigated in “The Spider of Los Angeles” and its subsequent chapter, “The Killer in the Photograph,” is the same model of internal compulsion born of the traumas of WWII service and filtered through preexisting biases presented in *The Sniper*; whether Songs’s own at-times-uncontrollable destruction of others—the very monstrosity that the vampires of *Lifeblood* encouraged—is born of an internal corruption or an external compulsion forms the axis of their crisis in the work. Both Songs and Bradford Guthrie, the eponymous killer in the photograph, fall into the noir archetype James Naremore describes as “angelic killers [and] neurotics” (19). Bradford and his *femme fatale* older sister Marjorie derive from the Sternwoods of Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* as callous Los Angeles elites who get themselves into trouble out of boredom and in rebellion against their contentious sibling bond. Songs, on the other hand, draws as much from Walter Neff of *Double Indemnity* (1944) as *A Touch of Zen* (1971)’s Gu Shengzhai: despite initially being well-established in an unambitious position, they discover that they have the ability to plan and cause great destruction, and regret this ability as much as they benefit from it. Whether that destructive capacity arises from the situation and can be avoided by removing themselves from that situation, as in the case of Gu Shengzhai, or whether like *M*’s Beckert it is something corrupt rising up from within themselves, Songs feels intense and despairing helplessness when confronted with this element of themselves, in accordance with the key themes of the noir genre.

***Songs on the Road ch. 27: “The Spider of Los Angeles”***

Los Angeles, a city by the sea, was so large that Songs would never have known it *was* a city by the sea if Cecilia had not told them. It reeked and hummed with life. The driver dropped the five off outside the building where Cecilia lived, a building constructed from sunbleached wooden planks with Chinese architectural sensibilities. It hunched around a small courtyard as though to protect the yard from the heat and noise of the grand train station just behind it, and, entering that courtyard, Songs found dust and valiantly tended plants and the cohort of neighbors who kept the plants away from the brink of death. From their dress and appearance and the games they stood up from to greet Cecilia, Songs guessed that her neighbors were all of Chinese extraction; from a few, subtler hints—an unhidden fox tail here, a discreetly bandaged cut throat there—Songs supposed that most if not all of them were non-human as well.

The neighbors welcomed Cecilia back in a flurry of questions about if she had eaten and if her travels were safe. She assured them, untruthfully but with unwavering sincerity, that she had and they were. When she introduced Danny, Songs, and Fish as her friends, the three were swept up into the flurry as well. Songs kept an eye on the way Cecilia’s neighbors regarded Fish, their conversation with that Salinas shopkeeper still clear in their mind, but if anything Fish seemed to be the most popular one there even despite their language barrier. That did not surprise Songs. Fish was difficult not to like.

After a few minutes, Cecilia nodded and smiled her way through the crowd of well-wishers up to her apartment, and Songs and the others followed behind. Fish was too small to even fit through the doorway, but they were happy lifting children up on their heads until the children’s parents said they were too high, then setting them down. Songs could still see them working like some living fairground ride from the window of

Cecilia's small apartment. The blue typewriter she had just bought from Sears Roebuck gleamed in the light of the window on the kitchen table. Cecilia threw her carpetbag on the bed and tilted her head to give the others permission to do the same with their luggage. "We should do a tour," she said, filling her kettle and setting it to boil on the old spell-powered stove. "The five of us. That would be a fun thing to do, wouldn't it?"

"Songs would have a blast looking at all the *genuine historical artifacts*," Boundless said with a grin, peering into Cecilia's mirror to restyle his hair with his comb.

Danny glanced away from the printed painting of cranes on Cecilia's wall she had been admiring. "Is it really like in the movies?"

"It's better than the movies." Cecilia hovered a hand next to the metal of the kettle to check if it was heating up, then, frowning, checked the stove's spell. Even from the distance Songs stood at, they could see that it was chipped and needed replacing. The whole apartment building was full of things that needed replacing, but, despite this, the place was so lovingly cared for that Songs could not imagine proposing a change. She flicked at the spell until the kettle began to warm, then took a black wooden box from under her bed—her own invention for developing pictures, she casually explained—and placed the roll of film from her camera inside. "How about this," Cecilia said. "Daniel, you start the tour. I need to call my office—make sure I still have a job. I'll meet up with you at, at the Golden Dragon, okay?"

"Oh, come on. I don't want to go to the Golden Dragon. So crowded."

"But Henry loves you. You bat your eyes at him right and you can probably get a free meal for all of us."

"How about the Phoenix Bakery? I haven't been in ages."

“You haven’t been in the central realm in ages.”

“Six months is not *ages*. Do... they’re still open, right? They still serve that strawberry whipped cream cake?”

“They’re still open,” Cecilia conceded, but it was clear this would not affect her opposition to the prospect.

Songs came to Boundless’s defense: “I would love to try strawberry whipped cream cake before I leave the central realm.” They glanced conspiratorial encouragement at Danny, who added that she thought strawberry whipped cream cake sounded delicious. With Danny asking, Cecilia could not say no, and they all knew it. Cecilia made sure to glare especially hard at Songs as she said that fine, they could go to the Phoenix Bakery, but only if Daniel paid for every cent of food they ate, and the other three shared the most innocent looks their faces could manage.

Boundless pocketed his comb and walked smartly out of the apartment, loudly telling Cecilia he couldn’t wait to see her at the Phoenix Bakery and smiling over his shoulder when she rolled her eyes. Songs already knew that Boundless was an excellent tour guide. His career as a messenger and guide had well prepared him for the task, and Songs, whom he had guided around the New Capital when they first moved there, was looking forward to receiving his tour. They coaxed Fish away from the children in the courtyard and set off down the busy street. Boundless assured Fish that they would be far from the strangest thing the people of Los Angeles would see that day, and the presence of a bipedal bull walking down the street in a lavender dress confirmed that impression. This city was even more rich with life and diversity than the New Capital. Songs shared



an excited look with Danny and the already-starstruck Fish. This tour would be a magnificent way to end their adventure.

But Boundless had hardly even glossed the history of Cecilia's building, one of the last remnants of a venerable neighborhood razed to build Union Station, when Songs realized that they had forgotten their hat. It was a silly thing to stop a tour for. They knew it before they mentioned it to Boundless, and they could see from Boundless's expression that he thought it was a silly thing too. But Songs had not been able to wear their hat since the morning before, and they really did feel more secure with it. "I'll just run back and get it, and then I'll run back to you," they said. "You keep on going. You're just going down this street?"

"Oh, come on, Songs," Boundless said.

"Let him go," said Danny. "We *are* just going down this street?"

Boundless sighed. "Down this street and left at Bamboo Lane. I swear, they're the fanciest dragon I've ever met," he added to Fish. Songs heard him talking about their mane-styling habits as they left, but they decided to let Boundless have his fun rather than stay and argue. They would always have more time to tell Boundless his mane looked like an old feather duster and hear Boundless say, "Better an old feather duster than a box of bananas."

Cecilia was sitting on the bed with her telephone in her lap and a cup of hot water in her hand when Songs entered. As she spoke to the telephone, she glanced up at Songs with a quizzical look. Songs shook their head to assure her that everything was fine, and she shrugged and gestured for them to help themselves to some water from the kettle. Songs thanked her silently for her generosity and took her up on it, eavesdropping on her one-

sided conversation the whole time they looked for where she kept her cups: “Don’t apologize, Marybel. I know how busy things are on Thursdays. I just wanted to let you know I am back and will be at the office tomorrow. Yes, my honorable grandmother is recovered from her illness. Thank you. You received the article I sent? Yesterday’s paper? Thank you. Tell Mr. Rix thank you. Yes, of course I do. You know I never come back from vacation without new stories. Have you heard of a man by the name of Saxton? A doctor of magic named Maxwell Saxton? He was arrested yesterday morning on the train from Houston for kidnapping people and transforming them into livestock. Yes. I was there, on the train. I took statements and photographs. Do you—yes. Yes. If you could find out if he has been charged, I can have the article and the photographs to you in time for the morning paper. Thank you. Tell Mr. Rix thank you. Thank you.” She hung up the phone and let out a breath. “What do you want?” she asked in Shanghaiese.

“My hat,” Songs said, a bit defensively. “What was that with the honorable grandmother?”

Cecilia shuffled to the edge of the bed and reached to the dresser to pull a sheet of paper from the top drawer. “I can’t exactly tell the paper I need a week off to do Don Bergamo’s bidding. So Hollywood filial piety it is.” She stood on her good leg without putting weight on her bad one and lowered herself into the chair at the kitchen table. Something seemed to occur to her, and a brief sour expression flashed across her face. “Hey, Lilian, will you grab my notebook from my bag?”

“Sure.” Songs fetched her notebook as she cranked the sheet of paper into her blue typewriter. “Is your grandmother still...”

“Never knew her.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

Cecilia did not look up from her notebook as she shrugged. “It happens. Her bastard of a landlord found out he was renting to a family of foxes and torched the place. My mother was already off married and pregnant, but she avenged her family.” She considered her keyboard a moment and began to type. “She was more filial than I am. At least it got done.”

“Does your—does your grandmother have a grave I could...”

“Not since a warlord shelled the place in ‘21. That’s life.” She glanced over her shoulder at Songs. “Are you going to catch up with the tour?”

“Right.” Songs rooted through the burlap sack for their hat. Thankfully, it was not misshapen at all. They pressed it firmly into place and checked their reflection in the mirror. They were a far cry from the scholar they had appeared as in Beijing, or even the refined citizen they had appeared as in Salinas, but they did not look bad. They turned for the door. “I’ll see you at the Phoenix Bakery, then.”

“See you then.”

The doorknob twisted under Songs’s hand before they could take hold of it. They hardly had time to register this before the door flew open, hitting them, and a child of eight rushed in, hitting Songs again. The child hardly seemed to be aware they had fallen at all as they picked themselves up; to judge by their two scraped knees beneath their short trousers, they had fallen many times before, and, to judge by the speed at which they spoke in half-shouted Cantonese, they were too full of adrenaline to notice a blow from a mallet. “Miss Hu,” they said, “Miss Hu, you have to come quick to Bertie Lam’s garage! You have to come quick, come on!”

Cecilia turned from her typewriter with a frown. “Slow down, Walter,” she said, speaking accented Cantonese. “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know. Mrs. Lam wouldn’t let me see. But it’s something bad, something bad happened to Mr. Huang, and she said to me to get you and get Detective Tian and go fast!”

“Gordon Huang?” Cecilia had stood and grabbed her cane before she even finished the question, and was fumbling for her camera as Walter said that it was, and she was out the door before Walter could remind her again that she needed to hurry. Songs glanced at Walter, grabbed the not-corn, and rushed after Cecilia.

“What are you doing here?” Cecilia asked as Songs caught up with her.

Songs was there because they could not leave a mystery unwitnessed, and because they could not let a friend go into danger without being there with her. “I want to help,” they said.

“It’s none of your business.” She turned a corner and flagged down a rickshaw puller by name. Songs got into the rickshaw with her. Cecilia sighed and rolled her eyes, but she did not kick Songs out. “Okay,” she said. “Stay *out* of the way. And don’t use *that*—” She indicated the not-corn— “unless you have to.” She hesitated a moment. “Gordon is... everyone knows Gordon. He’s been here since the beginning. Almost a hundred years.”

“Non-human?”

She nodded. “He’s a spider. He’s also the grocer’s husband, he organizes activities for the youth, he cleans the Taoist temple. I can’t imagine...”

“And Detective Tian?” Songs prompted after a minute.

“Probably also non-human. I know he’s older than Gordon, but he’s a private person. I don’t think anyone knows what kind of non-human he is, or where he’s from. Or his given name. But he’s a good private eye. Cops don’t do any damn thing in Chinatown except drag some elder from his home when they decide the gardener did it, so we ask Detective Tian to solve problems for us. I help him out sometimes. I don’t always have the time, but he likes having someone to bounce ideas off of, and I sometimes get good stories for the paper out of it, and—if it’s for Gordon...”

The rickshaw came to a stop in front of the wooden door of a garage. From behind the planks, Songs heard one voice weeping, one voice comforting, and one voice making sounds no human throat should be able to produce. They exchanged a horrified look with Cecilia. Once inside the garage, however, they realized they had looked horrified too soon.

Gordon Huang lay among the clutter of the garage on what had once been his back. His clothing, a scrupulously neat blue cotton suit, was stretched and torn; the skin underneath it was stretched and torn even more grotesquely. Four enormous chitinous limbs erupted from his mouth, splitting the skin of his face with their bulk. His four flesh-clad limbs arced up in the same spider-leg shape, horribly twisted, hideously stretched. His skeleton had fused and warped as it tried to return to a spidery shape beneath his skin: the skin of his hands and feet was stretched and limp like a glove with a tent pole inside, and his belly stretched out into the shape of a spider’s abdomen, with first the fabric of his shirt and then his skin splitting open to accommodate the swelling. His internal organs pulsed agonizingly as the bulk of his spider abdomen pressed them close beneath his thin-stretched skin. His eyes rolled as his warped skull pushed them to

opposite sides of his head, and the wailing person Songs had heard knelt by his side, stroking his hair and feeding a cup of medicine into the mouth that had opened vertically in that sweat-slick mass of hair.

“Mrs. Huang!” Cecilia said to the wailing person; then, to the person who almost managed to keep panic out of their voice as they comforted both Mrs. and Mr. Huang, “Mrs. Lam, what happened?”

Mrs. Lam shook their head. “I was playing mahjong at the Suens’s, so there was no one home, no one was here, and when I came back I heard... I heard Mr. Huang. I called Ah Young—” They laid a comforting hand on the trembling Mrs. Huang’s shoulder, even though they were trembling themselves— “and I sent Walter to get you and Detective Tian. Who is this?” they asked with half-panicked hostility, addressing Songs as though noticing them for the first time.

Songs took their thumb, already dented with tooth marks, out of their mouth to say, “My name is Vincent. I am here to assist Miss Hu and Detective Tian in any way I can.”

“Then I will welcome the help,” said a voice from the entrance to the garage. Even before Songs turned to face the speaker, there was no doubt in their mind that he was Detective Tian. Although the day was warm, he wore a slouching hat and a raincoat; the end of a cigarette glowed orange beneath the brim of the hat, illuminating a gaunt face and a small beard and mustache that seemed more the result of neglect than cultivation. He greeted the five in the room individually with weary courtesy. With less courtesy and significantly more weariness, he regarded what had happened to Gordon Huang. He walked forward a few steps and prodded at the splintered edges of a nearby

wooden crate that had been torn open so that the golden-faced image of the god Guan Yu stored inside looked down over Gordon Huang's fate. Detective Tian raised an eyebrow and looked at Mrs. Lam. "From the temple?"

Mrs. Lam nodded hesitantly. "When the Kong Chow Temple was destroyed, my husband took in some of its utensils until the Kong Chow Benevolent Association has enough funds to build a new temple."

"And the temple was mostly attended by people from Sunwui, isn't it?" Detective Tian flicked a splinter off the crate. "Mr. Huang is a Northerner. Could there have been... tensions?"

"No! No, everyone—all of us liked him very much." Mrs. Lam's voice did not reveal much desperation, but it was obvious that she saw how this situation would look to a casual eye. Songs did not doubt that the police, once called, would not devote more time to researching the case than it took to proclaim that Gordon Huang had been killed for inscrutable religious reasons and to drag off some innocent attendee of the destroyed temple. "You know it wasn't us," she said. "Please, you have to find the person who did."

Detective Tian nodded and gestured for Cecilia to photograph the torn-open crate. "I'll find them."

Songs cleared their throat. While Detective Tian pored over the crate and interrogated Mrs. Lam, Songs had knelt beside Gordon Huang and, after receiving permission in a glance from Mrs. Huang, had tried to find a pulse on Gordon Huang's wrist. It was a difficult task. Gordon Huang no longer had anything resembling veins. But at last they were able to speak up with reasonable confidence: "This was a botched exorcism. Whoever did it had access to some pretty confidential texts, but no actual

training. If they were a real priest or monk, they would know how to get him out of this state, or at least end his misery.”

At these words, Mrs. Huang whimpered, and Songs feared they had spoken too roughly. “Can he not be cured?”

They turned from Detective Tian to Gordon Huang’s not-quite-widow. Could Gordon Huang, nearly but not fully ripped from the state he had trained for centuries to achieve, be returned to anything like what he was before? Songs had heard stories of success in less severe cases than this. They looked back to Detective Tian for some guidance. Detective Tian only shrugged. “I am not qualified in this field,” Songs said at last, as kindly as they could. “I know that there is some precedent for healing from a state such as this, but it was hard-won, and I cannot tell you any more than that.” Detective Tian nodded as Songs said this, and Songs felt relieved that they had spoken well.

“Mrs. Huang,” Detective Tian said, gesturing for Cecilia to take a picture of Gordon Huang, “would you happen to know where it was your husband was before this happened?”

At this, Mrs. Huang froze. They looked at Mrs. Lam, then at Detective Tian, then down at their husband, and sighed. “He must have been at his hotel room,” she said. “Last week, he came home, and he told me he was going to be staying in a hotel in town for a little while. He didn’t tell me why. He just left. I don’t know why—I always tried to be a good wife—he would always, he always cooked a little lunch for me and brought it to me at the store, even when he was staying at the hotel—that was why I knew something was wrong today—”

“And do you remember anything unusual on the day your husband moved out?”



“Nothing unusual! Nothing unusual at all!” Mrs. Huang’s voice was almost a wail at this point, and Mrs. Lam fretted over them, trying to coax them back from the brink of panic. “He was just out photographing!”

Detective Tian exchanged a look with Cecilia, and Cecilia exchanged a look with Songs. “Photographing where, exactly?” he asked.

“The train station, I think.” Their voice sounded broken. “He liked the station.”

Detective Tian nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Huang. Now, would you be good enough to tell me where your husband’s hotel room was?” As Detective Tian wrote down the address Mrs. Huang numbly shared, Songs could see Gordon Huang fight to change his expression. His head was no longer human enough to manage it. Songs sighed. It was very likely that he knew the answer to every question Songs or Detective Tian or Mrs. Huang could ask about the case. He already knew, and he would never be able to speak it. Gordon Huang thrashed his legs with the effort of communication, shaking the limb that had once been his right leg with almost enough ferocity to strike Songs, but Songs could not understand anything other than the quiverings of an arachnid in distress. It was very likely, Songs thought with regret, that Gordon Huang would never speak the language of humans again in this lifetime.

Songs, Cecilia, and Detective Tian left the Lams’ garage and, at Detective Tian’s invitation, got into his car. It was an old, scratched red thing with several bullet holes in the metal of the body, but Detective Tian did not seem ashamed of it. Indeed, Songs felt they were in his realm. When the three were on the main road toward Gordon Huang’s former hotel room, Detective Tian looked back at Songs and said, “I don’t mean to pry, kid, but...” He spoke in the Hakka dialect, and Songs realized that he must have heard all

of Songs's words in that language even as the others in the garage responded to them as though they spoke Cantonese or Shanghainese. They sighed.

"Thousand-Songs of the Ivory Spring is my real name," they said.

Detective Tian nodded. "You still want me to call you Vincent?"

"Vinnie is good."

"Okay, Vinnie. How's the Outer Court doing these days?"

"They're managing."

Detective Tian laughed monosyllabically and flicked his cigarette out the window. "You've got that on the real deal, then. Hey, Yingning," he said, switching to Mandarin and looking at Cecilia in the rearview mirror. "That was a keen article you wrote about—about Kansas, wasn't it? I'm guessing that's where Vinnie's fancy stick came from. *Times* still paying you half what you're worth, I take it?"

Cecilia shrugged. "It beats being paid a quarter of what I'm worth in a laundry."

"We all have to choose the parts of us we're gonna sell," Detective Tian said with a sagely cynical nod, and lit another cigarette.

Gordon Huang's room in the hotel labeled "Royal Blue" by its feeble daytime neon sign was almost monastic in its plainness. The only personal possessions in the cheap rented room were a spare suit in a drawer, a worn picture of Mrs. Huang under the pillow, and a scrap of paper on the floor. "The top of an envelope," Detective Tian said, picking it up.

"Sized for photographs," Cecilia said.

"He was put in this state for something he photographed?" Songs asked.

Detective Tian sighed. “There’s lots of pictures people would kill to get. Or destroy. Too bad whoever it was got to it first.”

“Wait.” Cecilia had opened the small room’s smaller closet. Inside were several stacked bins, some bottles of chemicals, a coiled rope, and other supplies for an art Songs was unfamiliar with. But Cecilia was familiar: “These are all for developing photographs. He must have gone here to do it himself instead of taking them to a developer. That means he might still have the negatives.”

Detective Tian’s face lit up at this, and, once Cecilia explained to Songs what photographic negatives were, their face lit up as well; however, an exhaustive search of the room did not reveal the negatives or anything else but dust. Whoever had stolen the photographs must have stolen the negatives as well. “The neighbors may have seen,” Songs suggested.

But the neighbors proved unhelpful. The resident of the room to Gordon Huang’s right was absent; the resident in the room to Gordon’s left shouted words that made Cecilia cringe through a barely opened door; and the resident in the room across the hall mentioned that a blonde had been there, a bottle blonde wearing this knockout red dress, you should have seen her, but stopped their speech as soon as they learned that Detective Tian and the others were not cops. A bottle blonde had stolen the photographs Gordon Huang had taken, and Gordon Huang had met a terrible demise.

“But even if it was this blonde, we don’t know how she’d know about the Guan Yu statue in the Lams’ garage,” Detective Tian said back in the car, screwing open a thermos flask and taking a swig of the hot, fragrant, definitely alcoholic liquid inside. He offered some to Songs, who declined. “I’ve got a buddy down at the police laboratory

who can try to pull some fingerprints off this envelope, but I bet she was too careful for that. In the meantime, I'm guessing I'll just have to wait."

"Wait?" Songs asked.

Detective Tian shrugged. "Wait here. See if something turns up. It generally does." He looked back at Cecilia. "I won't make you two wait with me," he said.

"You've got better things to be doing. Just run those photos you took down to me once you've got them developed, yeah? Now, where can I drop you two off?"

"The Phoenix Bakery," Cecilia said, before Songs could object.

None of them spoke on the drive to the Phoenix Bakery. Detective Tian seemed like the kind of person who did not talk much in most circumstances, and Songs was deliberately refraining from speaking to communicate to Cecilia that they had wanted to stay on the case with Detective Tian, but Cecilia seemed not to notice. They wished she would. It would at least be nice for her to acknowledge that there was something important, something noble in the work Detective Tian was doing for Gordon Huang and his wife and his community, and that this was not just another unwanted assignment to slough off as soon as possible. But no one spoke in the car until they passed Boundless, Fish, and Danny sitting on a curb eating cake out of a cardboard box, and Cecilia said, "You can drop us off here."

Detective Tian stopped the car so quickly Songs nearly lost their hat. "See you around, Yingning," he said. "And Vinnie—nice meeting you." Cecilia got out of the car, and Songs got out of the car, and that was that.

"Where were you two?" Danny asked, handing Cecilia her fork as Cecilia sat on the curb next to her.

Boundless offered Songs his fork as they sat and said, “You had me really worried there, Songs.”

“It’s nothing,” Cecilia said. “Detective Tian—you remember him, Daniel?—he tried to sucker me into playing Watson to his Holmes again, and Lilian insisted on coming along. But we got out of it.” Cecilia began talking about a different case Detective Tian had asked her to accompany him on, the case of a stolen necklace that turned out to be a blackmail case, which ended with Cecilia and Detective Tian narrowly avoiding arrest. Boundless translated for Fish so that Songs could eat while she spoke. This cake was easily the best food they had tasted in their travels in America. It was the best food they had tasted in America, and their friends were chatting and laughing around them, and Songs knew that this would be the last, lovely oasis of peace in their life before they willingly made their life hell. They should be enjoying it for all it was worth. They should be soaking up every bit of joy in this parking lot like a sponge. But, the same way that their mind had slid back to the dragons of Luna Crescente Island on the train, their mind kept on slipping back to Gordon Huang, the way he flailed his limbs, the expression on his face.

Danny reached up to wipe a fleck of whipped cream off of Cecilia’s face and said, “Glad you got out of it this time.” She sucked the whipped cream off her thumb. “What did you say the case was this time?”

“I didn’t,” Cecilia said.

“Don’t want me to scoop the story, huh? You’re a regular Citizen Kane.”

“Citizen who?” Boundless asked.

“You know—Rosebud.”

Cecilia frowned. “What do rosebuds have to do with anything?”

Danny laughed ironically. “None of you smart cookies have seen that film? Well, you weren’t missing much. It’s about this newspaperman, see, and his, his descent into moral corruption, or something like that. Very artsy.”

“You’re calling me corrupt?” Cecilia asked, swinging a playful fist for Danny’s shoulder and missing. Songs winced as they accidentally stabbed the roof of their mouth with their fork.

“Hey, hey, hang on.” Danny struggled at her trousers pocket from her seated position. “If you’ll just—hang on—just let me get at my pocket, I’ve got something I picked up that can maybe buy your love back after that nasty insult, my dear little rosebud. *Don’t* hit me, you’ll just hurt Vinnie again.”

Danny eventually freed a carved wooden comb from her pocket, and, even though Cecilia’s hair was far too short for it to be of much use to her, she received it with delight, and, even though Songs joined Boundless in congratulating Danny on a gift well chosen, their mind had slipped from the present moment again. Something trapped in a trouser pocket... a message the messenger could not produce...

“Where are you going, Thousand-Songs?”

At Fish’s question, Songs froze in their steps and tried to come up with an answer. They had already made it halfway across the parking lot without even realizing they had stood. Turning with a deliberate motion, they walked back to the others and handed their fork back to Boundless. “There’s something I just realized,” they said. “I need to tell Detective Tian. I’ll be back soon. If you aren’t here when I get back, I’ll meet you at Cecilia’s apartment. Don’t worry about me. Don’t worry, Fish.” Before Fish or any of the

others could express that they were, indeed, worried, Songs picked up the not-corn and left a second time.

Corrupt. Corruption. Danny and Cecilia had joked about it, but that word was already as painful as a salted cut in their mind. Don Bergamo had said they were an idealist, and perhaps in an ideal world they would be, but really they were as corrupt as a plant with rotten roots. How could they know they would save the innocents of Luna Crescente Island without the haunted house's curse cutting off their other ways out? How could they know they would not bolt for the nearest exit? They knew what would happen if they did. They knew they would win power, and they would abuse it. They could not control themselves. Even when there was nothing controlling them, they could not control themselves. Songs ran through the heavy air of Los Angeles, frightened and unsure and alone. They yearned for the safety of soul they had known just eight days before. They would not lie to themselves and make themselves believe that it was the soil and hunger of this land that had made them like this. But they had not known that they were like this, and they wished desperately for that safety of ignorance again.

"Hey there, kiddo. What are you doing here?"

Songs blinked. They were back in front of the Royal Blue Hotel, where Detective Tian still sat in his car, nursing his cigarette and his thermos flask. "I just remembered something," Songs said.

"Okay. Shoot."

"Did you see the way Gordon Huang shook his leg as we were leaving? It seemed like he was trying to communicate something. I think he had something in his pocket that would give us a clue."

Detective Tian took a thoughtful drag on his cigarette. “You know, kiddo, you might be onto something.” He tapped the ash off the end of his cigarette and gestured with a jerk of his head. “Hop in.”

In the Lams’ garage, someone else had taken Mrs. Lam’s place comforting Mrs. Huang, and several other members of the community were working together to repair the torn-open crate and hide the increasingly mundane garage from Guan Yu’s fierce-eyed gaze. One of the repairers indicated that Mrs. Lam, Mr. Lam, and several important community figures were inside discussing what could be done with Gordon Huang, but Detective Tian waved them off. He addressed Mrs. Huang and explained to them why he and Songs were there. Mrs. Huang seemed to have already receded into a deep numbness and gave consent to check their husband’s pockets without much thought. Detective Tian thanked her as though nothing were wrong. Crouching beside Gordon Huang, he used the end of a ballpoint pen to check Gordon Huang’s poorly fitting pocket. Sure enough, it contained something. Detective Tian tossed the crumbled, soot-blackened, ornately cast piece of plaster to Songs with a raised eyebrow. “Not bad, kiddo.”

“I’m not a kid, you know,” Songs said when the two were back in Detective Tian’s car. Although the chunk of plaster meant nothing to Songs, it apparently had a wealth of meaning to Detective Tian, and he seemed to know exactly where they were going. Songs cleared their throat. “I’m probably older than you.”

“Uh-huh. And how old are you?”

“Seven hundred and thirty-three.”

A brief smile twitched between Detective Tian’s mustache and his cigarette. “You’re still small fry, kiddo.”



“Well, how old are you?”

“Old enough to be sick of it all. I’ve been meaning to outlive my enemies, but I never can seem to go a decade without making some more, and so—” He took his cigarette in his fingers and blew a stream of smoke toward the windshield. “We persist.”

Songs did not have an answer for this, and, before they could come up with one they liked enough to give, Detective Tian stopped the car in front of an old, burned-out building. The plasterwork matched the design on the piece of plaster in Gordon Huang’s pocket. As the two climbed out of the car and began the work of picking through the rubble for clues, Detective Tian explained that the place had been the set of a Hollywood movie set in China, which had been purchased by a socialite and moved here to be the heart of a new Chinatown after that same socialite arranged for the destruction of much of the old one. Her project had burned down not long after. Many of the burned-out lots had already been sold, but a few stubborn ghosts living on this one kept the property value pinned down far below what the socialite was willing to sell it for. Detective Tian shared this last piece of information with a streak of good-natured viciousness clearly intended to spook Songs or at least get a rise out of them, but Songs hardly noticed his words. Their mind was already skidding helplessly forward at the mention of the socialite’s corruption, even as their body tugged robotically at a fallen roof beam.

“Kiddo. Kid!” Detective Tian spoke with sharpness, but under his hat his face bore something like care. “What’s eating you, huh? You’ll break an arm that way!”

Songs looked down at the beam. They dropped it. “I’m in a situation.”

“Well, I’m five bucks a day plus expenses.”

It took Songs a moment to parse his meaning. “Oh. No,” they said, “no, I didn’t mean to ask for your help. It’s not the kind of situation others can fix, anyway.” Detective Tian took a drag on his cigarette and raised his eyebrows. Songs sighed. They may as well confess to someone. “The problem isn’t the situation, really. The problem is me. I have a choice to make. I know the kind of hero I should be, but I also know the kind of mean, manipulative creature I am.”

Detective Tian’s loud guffaw cut off anything else Songs would have ended up saying. “You—let me get this straight. You’re worried about not being a hero in *this* city?” He laughed again. “Take it from an old man, kiddo. I’ve seen a lot of heroes. I even was one once or twice. No one likes a hero, and no one needs one, and anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to sucker you. What people need is doctors who can pull bullets out of you, and deli men whose tuna sandwiches won’t give you the shits, and tax auditors who show up at the right doors, and reasonably honest private dicks. You get done what you need to get done, and the rest is all historians. Worried about being a hero. Hah. And at your age, too.” He turned back to his section of the rubble and resumed searching.

“And if I can’t?” Songs asked. They shouldn’t have spoken, but they spoke nonetheless. “If I can’t do it?”

Detective Tian shrugged. “Then don’t go home. Worked out fine for me.”

“Even if it hurts people?”

“Listen, kiddo, I don’t know what you want from me. You’re just some guy I met forty minutes ago, and I’m the same to you. Do you want me to be an old wise sage for you? Tough nuts. I’ve got a business to run. If you buy me a coffee I could pull out the

sage voice, but—hang on.” Detective Tian scooped a white envelope up from the dust and investigated its contents with a carelessly expert flick of his fingers. He laughed in two syllables. He pocketed the envelope and set off for the car.

Songs had to run to catch up with him before he left. “What is it?” they asked.

“You’re a terrible hero, kiddo,” he said, tossing Gordon Huang’s hidden envelope of film negatives into Songs’s lap and lighting a cigarette, “but you’d make a fine private dick.”

## The Killer in the Photograph

Songs had expected Detective Tian to return to his vigil outside the Royal Blue Hotel after making this discovery. However, it seemed that this package of film negatives changed his plans. He drove back to the Phoenix Bakery; Cecilia and the others were no longer there, but Fish was easy to spot a few hundred yards down the street. “Hey, Yingning,” Detective Tian called out the window, “can I use your developer?”

“Not for free,” Cecilia called back.

“I’m not asking to use it for free, I’m asking to use it today. Are you in or are you out?”

Cecilia glanced at Danny, who shrugged, and shrugged at Detective Tian in return. “All right. But this had better have something to do with Gordon’s case. If you’re wasting my time for another reel of dirty pictures, I’ll have your license, just you wait.”

“Hey, I had it on good information that that film had pictures of incriminating documents,” Detective Tian said as Cecilia, Danny, and Boundless climbed into the backseat.

“Well,” Danny said, settling herself next to Cecilia, “it’s not like you were lied to. Those photos *were* incriminating—they were incriminating you.”

As Boundless joined Cecilia and Danny in joking and Detective Tian tried to stop it, Songs cleared their throat and leaned out the window. “Fish, do you mind walking? You know the way?”

“Oh, I know the way. And I can keep up, too.”

“You’re sure?”

Fish grinned from a few cream-flecked faces. “Trust me, Thousand-Songs.”

In the end, Fish got back to Cecilia's apartment before the others. They could slither incredibly quickly for a creature so large, and passers-by were quick to clear out of their way, a privilege Detective Tian's car did not have. As the group waited for the thousandth time for a pedestrian to cross in front of them, Danny asked if the car was all-mechanical and Detective Tian confirmed that it was, and Danny scoffed toward the window and said it was no wonder the thing was so slow starting up. That was her defense when they met Fish at Cecilia's apartment and Fish began laughing at the others for being so slow. "I could probably go around Union Station twice in the time it takes you to get down the block," they said with a playfully triumphant thrust of a chin.

"But don't," Danny said, her voice suddenly cooled by somberness if not disapproval. By now they were inside the apartment and speaking to Fish through the window, and Danny sorted through the photographs developed from Cecilia's camera as Songs slotted the film negatives from the rubble of the film set into the black box of the developer. "There are many people there who might not like you, and also you could make a..." She hesitated, sifting through her limited vocabulary. "Hey, Vinnie, how would you say 'you could knock some poor old lady down'?"

Songs translated, and Fish nodded solemnly. "You're right. I'll have to find some place with fewer people to find out how fast I really am."

"What are you three talking about?" Cecilia asked from her typewriter. Songs did not know when she needed her article for the *Los Angeles Times* written, but, from the way she beleaguered the keyboard, Songs would not be surprised if she only had a matter of minutes remaining. She absorbed Songs's gloss of the conversation without looking up from her typing, and Songs could not say for certain whether she was paying attention to

their words or not. A few minutes after nodding her acknowledgement of the fact that Songs had spoken, she looked up with a frown as though an idea had suddenly struck her. “About payment,” she said to Detective Tian. “If you would mind giving me a lift down to the office, I’d be willing to call it even.”

This time, it was Detective Tian who seemed not to hear. He was absorbed in the first of the photographs from his film to be developed.

“Hey,” Cecilia said. “I said—”

“A ride? Hm. Sure. I’ll take you. I’ll be headed that way anyway.”

“You’re headed that way on your way to...?”

He tossed the photograph to Cecilia. “See for yourself.”

Cecilia’s eyes widened as she looked at the photograph. She handed it to Danny, who whistled in surprise; Boundless swore under his breath when he saw it. Even Fish converged several pairs of eyes on the image, looking up with another head to ask, “Is that...?” Songs was, it seemed, the only one who needed the significance of the picture explained to them. It showed an alleyway scene, apparently photographed from around the corner of a building. In the alleyway, an expensively but carelessly dressed person with hard muscles and hard facial features performed a crude exorcism on a stooped but clear-eyed elder, warping the elder’s human shape with their bat shape and trapping them in a magic bowl. The exorcist’s white cheeks were flushed, although whether from exertion, excitement, or drink Songs could not tell, and their eyes faced the camera. The exorcized was a local tamale vendor named Julio Moreno, and the exorcist was Bradford Guthrie, one of the darlings of American tennis.

“If this were a detective novel, this would be when you’d get in touch with the cops,” Boundless said, flipping through the next few developed photographs. They showed Bradford Guthrie crudely and violently exorcizing three other non-humans, with the same giddy flushing of his cheeks in every one. The victims seemed random except for their location and non-human origins. The only thing that brought them to this end was Bradford Guthrie’s desire. If Songs had seen the photographs in the order they were taken, then Bradford Guthrie looking directly at Gordon Huang in the final image would have been a shock; as it was, it was merely a tragedy.

Detective Tian laughed and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. “It would, wouldn’t it. Shame I’m not Philip Marlowe.” His cigarette ignited without a match. “No, I call the cops now and I’m just going to get told to lay off. Every copper’s wife wants to sleep with Brad Guthrie, and every copper wants to sleep with his older sister. Not to mention that gala their papa throws for the fine police of Los Angeles every year.” He took a drag on his cigarette. “All those detective novels spend pages and pages talking about the secret to the perfect crime, but the real secret is just—be born someone like that, and kill people like these. But, you know. I probably should call, for procedure’s sake. Could I use your phone?”

“Why not,” Cecilia said, handing him her telephone.

He tucked his cigarette behind his ear and dialed. “Hello?” he said into the machine. “Hello, Lieutenant Nickles. This is Detective Tian. The—yes. Private eye. I would like to inform you of some recent killings near Union Station. Four non-humans in the past...” He squinted at the oldest exorcism photograph, apparently looking at the newspaper stand in the background. “The past three weeks that I know about. Yes. And it

looks like the person who did it is Bradford Guthrie. I'm serious. Yes. The evidence all points to—" He went silent for a moment, then pointed at the phone and mouthed the words "lay off" to Cecilia. "Lieutenant, this is a pretty serious matter. Four—oh. It's not? I am? I see. And shove it where, Lieutenant? I understand. Yes. Yes. We have a saying in my country: up yours *and* the commissioner's, with no lube." He spoke this so-called saying in his mother tongue and glanced at Songs with a half-smile before speaking in English as though translating: "'Wise branch bends before strong wind.' Yes. Thank you, Lieutenant. Thank you." He ended the call and leaned back on his elbows. "Told you."

Songs nodded and began translating what had just happened for Fish. They suspected that there was little more they could do to help Detective Tian in this drama, but they were glad for what they had managed to do.

After a minute or so, Detective Tian seemed to get an idea. He stood, walked over to Cecilia's stove, traced a spell onto his palm with a finger, and pressed that hand against the stove's old and abused spell. The spell glistened with renewed power as he took his hand away. Songs hesitated in their translation and glanced at Boundless with raised eyebrows: the amount of power needed to do something like that was far greater than someone in a five dollar suit who had tried to bum a coffee off of Songs ought to possess. "What was that for?" Cecilia asked.

"That's for taking these negatives to the *Times*," said Detective Tian.

"Oh, no. No. That's the kind of story that could lose me my job. I don't even know if I can get *this* story published, and it's about some weirdo magician no one cares about. This is *Bradford Guthrie*, son of *Judge Guthrie* we're talking about."

"This is Gordon that we're talking about, Cecilia."



For a very long time, Cecilia hesitated. She looked over at Danny for help. Danny considered a moment, then nodded. Cecilia sighed. "Okay," she said. "Okay, fine. But I'm coming with you to the Guthries' house. I want photos, quotes, everything. And you'll tell me everything Lieutenant Nickles said to you, too. If I'm doing this, I will do it properly."

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

The five hardly even discussed the fact that all of them would be going to the Guthries' together. What discussion they had centered around whether it would be safe for Fish to fly in the open behind the car; to this, Detective Tian assured them that as long as he was in the car, anyone who wanted to harm Fish would wish they had never been born before they even touched the gun's trigger. Because the Guthries lived on the coast, Boundless suggested that he and Songs could leave directly from there to the Outer Court. Danny's expression stilled and Cecilia sighed and Fish turned a head to spit a brief, bitter gout of fire into the yard as the same revelation that had weighed on Songs all day struck them: all of this is almost over. "I'll make some more prints of that picture of us," Cecilia said, "so that you can take them home with you. If you want."

"I would like that," said Songs.

Songs studied the picture as they sat in the backseat of Detective Tian's car, rolling down the California highway with Boundless on one side and Danny on the other and Fish's shadow rolling by overhead. The not-corn rested on their lap, and the Golden Flower Sword rested at their feet, and, aside from the photograph in their hands and the hat on their head, they did not have anything else in America. They wondered why they felt that they were leaving everything they owned behind.

“Not to alarm you,” Detective Tian was saying, “but we are facing down a little problem, and that problem is named Marjorie Guthrie. I’ve heard Judge Guthrie has spent the past few months more dead than not, and barging in on Bradford will get us an exorcism and maybe a bullet, so that means we’re going to have to go through his dear elder sister, Marjorie. And better men than I have tried and failed to get something out of that ice queen. So ten bucks to one we leave that place with nothing.”

Boundless laughed. “Twenty bucks to one Songs can get what we need out of her.” Detective Tian raised an eyebrow at him in the car’s rear view mirror, and Boundless nodded emphatically while Songs shook their head. “You haven’t seen what they can do. They’re the best dragon I know for getting someone all twisted up.”

“I don’t think I—I’m not sure I should,” Songs said, but, before they could find the words to convey how dangerous and corrupt a creature they had learned they were, Cecilia leaned back to smack them playfully on the knee.

“Have a little faith in yourself,” she said. To Detective Tian, she added, “If anyone can do it, she can.”

“You should have seen him talking to Don Bergamo that first night,” Danny added.

“With the Ming vase, right?”

“And you two weren’t there when they were talking to Dr. Saxton, but he looked ready to cry. They’d never even seen him before, and he was ready to cry!”

Prince Appraisal had been ready to cry, too. They had been ready to cry, and they had been ready to kill, all because of the words that had tasted so sweet on Songs’s tongue. None of them had seen that. They had not heard the guqins fall silent and Songs’s

speech begin. They did not know the sportsman's boredom Songs had felt after undoing the Thatchers. They did not know how Songs smiled as Eddie Allen quailed under the serpent's coils of Song's slithering words. They did not know that Songs was headed for death, and they did not know that Songs deserved it.

Detective Tian met Songs's eyes in the rear view mirror. "Sounds like you could pull it off, kiddo," he said. "Are you scared?"

After a very long hesitation, Songs gave a very small and very honest nod.

With a wry smile, Detective Tian shrugged. In the Hakka dialect, he said, "Scared of the darkness growing inside, hero? I know that look. You have any idea how many times I've seen it before? And let me tell you, kiddo, it's never on the people who really should be wearing it. If you had the first clue how much darkness I've got growing inside, you'd wonder why I don't swallow this cigarette whole to lighten things up in there. But it's a damn useful darkness I've got, so I'll be keeping my cigarette in my mouth." He took the cigarette in his fingers and blew a stream of smoke over the dashboard. "Once you're home safe you can mope around sad that you're not a born hero, but right now you're on my case, and you're going to get done what you need to get done. Understand?" He turned with this last word to look at Songs directly. He did not turn when Songs did not respond. For nearly half a minute, Songs tried to outwait Detective Tian, and, for nearly half a minute, he drove with his back turned to the road. Eventually, Songs nodded. "I knew you'd come around," he said in English, turning back to the windshield.

They were doing this, then. They were going to twist Marjorie Guthrie up. If they were going to do it, then they had no choice but to do it properly, and, for the rest of the

drive to the Guthrie house, they had the others tell them everything they knew about Marjorie Guthrie. Collectively, they explained to Songs that she had once been Los Angeles's most darling debutante, a charming socialite whose simultaneous innocence and wildness Cecilia's colleagues had loved to wax eloquent about. Cecilia even shared a few of the expensive and scandalous names she had been associated with, and Songs gasped with the rest of the car once she explained to them who they were. This "ice queen" persona developed after her younger brother returned from the war. As he returned to the promising tennis career he had put on hold for military service, Bradford Guthrie began to act out, doing strange things, worrying things, things that Cecilia and Detective Tian heard whispers of before Marjorie Guthrie, now her brother's full-time keeper, snuffed them out. The Guthrie family name could not afford two wild children. Almost overnight, Marjorie Guthrie dropped out of the Los Angeles party circuit, gave up her rumored ambitions of Hollywood stardom, and met reporters with cold abuse rather than flirtation. If anything, Boundless confided, this made her a more pursued prize, rather than less, since she insisted on remaining so untouchable even as her brother's fame and antics kept their family securely in the limelight. The ice queen of Los Angeles, the cold and peerless older sister of America's little brother, the girl who had become a woman as a political decision—this was the person whom Songs was to undo.

In the gravel front drive of the salmon brick castle the Guthries reigned over, the group split up. Boundless and Fish went around the side of the house to try to find servants to speak to, the former keeping his eyes trained carefully on the latter as they disappeared from view. Detective Tian, Cecilia, and Songs—made a bit more presentable

in Boundless's suit jacket—went to the front of the house to confront the Guthries directly, with Danny tagging along to serve as a witness for the courts.

The white-haired steward who opened the door looked with disdain at the small piece of paper Detective Tian handed them, and, as Detective Tian explained that he was a private investigator hoping to speak to Miss Guthrie about a matter with some relevance to her family, they looked at him with enough skepticism to strip the flesh off the bones of a lesser man. “Is that so.” The steward's voice positively dripped poison.

“I've got a copy of my license right here,” Detective Tian said, pulling some folded papers out of his jacket pocket and handing them to the steward. “Will you let me do my job now?”

“Who is it, Arnold?” asked an alto-pitched voice from inside the house.

Arnold turned to address the unseen speaker. “Some... people here to see you, Miss Guthrie. They say they're private detectives.”

Marjorie Guthrie hesitated a moment. When she spoke, Songs guessed from her tone that she had just shrugged. “Let them in. I'll see them in the living room.”

After nodding to their employer with perfect solemnity, Arnold turned back to Detective Tian and the others with an even bitterer look before pronouncing a few curt words to invite them in. Arnold's stiff open-palmed gesture pointed the four to a parlor, where Marjorie Guthrie sat in an expensive dress on an expensive couch, perfectly composed in her posture, and Songs composed their mind for the task of unraveling her.

“You're private investigators?” she asked. She seemed thoroughly unimpressed, though, unlike Arnold, her tone seemed to suggest a general ennui that Detective Tian and the others had failed to shake, rather than a targeted disappointment. After Boundless

had explained to Songs what a bombshell blonde in a bottle was, they could see that Marjorie Guthrie fit that description. She also seemed to fully fit the moniker “ice queen”: the hooded expression she fixed on Songs as they stepped forward seemed to suggest that the very knowledge of Songs’s existence was an unpleasant bore that could not be over soon enough. It was obvious from everything she showed Songs and everything Songs saw that this was a situation she had been in countless times, and there was no trick or shock or novelty Songs could throw at her that would disquiet her. Well, let her be quiet. Let her be comfortable in her palace of ice. Songs would shake it soon enough. “Is it something my brother did?”

Songs smiled gently. “How patient you must be, as an elder sibling, when that is the first question you must ask when investigators come to your door.”

“Cut the crap. Is he or isn’t he in trouble?”

“I am afraid the situation is not so simple. May I sit?”

Marjorie Guthrie looked suspiciously at the other members of Songs’s party before her expression cooled and she shrugged once again. “Arnold, bring in some tea.” Everything about her was so perfectly composed, every gesture, every prop. Unlike Don Bergamo, who had surrounded himself with glittering cut-price grandeur, Marjorie Guthrie was haloed in muted finery. The couch Songs sat on adjacent to her was satin-woven fairy-hair; the armrests were polished purpleheart wood; the tiles of the fireplace behind her were etched dragon scale—Songs touched their own arm, with scales folded away deep beneath the skin, in slight discomfort at the sight—and the necklace draped over her collarbones was beaded with delicate pearls of jadeite. “You like the necklace?” she asked, her smile not flattered at all. “It’s fei tsui jade.”

“Very valuable,” Songs said. Perhaps this place was not flashy, but under a trained eye it was clear that a ring from her finger or a stone from the floor could buy off a general. Perhaps it already had. “Might I ask if it was purchased locally, in Chinatown, or if you acquired it abroad?”

Marjorie Guthrie’s voice did not sharpen at this. Her smile did, though, as she said with even greater coldness, “Our agent in the East sent it to us. I don’t like Chinatown.” She could tell that Songs was testing her, and she wanted Songs to see that she was not amused by it. Songs nodded graciously. “You said the situation wasn’t that simple. Well, tell me what it is.”

“Of course. Of course. There have been several strange occurrences around Union Station these weeks. Non-humans have gone missing without a trace. There seems to be no pattern to these vanishing non-humans, except in that they had no reason to leave town, and they were near Union Station when they disappeared.”

“Oh, who knows what a non-human will do,” Marjorie Guthrie said languidly. “It’s like talking about the psychology of a rat—and just as worthwhile. Did you really drive all the way up here to talk about a few missing non-humans?”

“The situation is more complicated than that, I’m afraid. A hobby photographer witnessed what happened to several of these non-humans and began recording the crimes. Fearing for his life, he secluded himself away from his family until he had compiled sufficient evidence to bring the murderer to justice.”

“And do you have any of this so-called evidence?”

Songs shook their head humbly. This place was Marjorie Guthrie’s domain, and they did nothing to dislodge her comfort. “I am afraid that neither his photographs nor the

negatives were present in his hotel room or on his person. But the situation is more complicated still. This photographer was found this morning in a temple in Chinatown, horribly maimed and unable to speak. It is very likely that this is the work of the very murderer whose crimes he was recording, who stole the photographs he had given up his life to compile and left him in a state worse than death.”

“Well,” Marjorie Guthrie said with cold triumph, “I believe that wraps your case up right there. The fanatics at that temple have been sacrificing non-humans to their god, and, when one of the non-humans wised up, they nabbed him and decided to make his sacrifice a little more painful for their pains. Unless you’re not telling me something, I really don’t see what this has to do with my brother.”

Songs hesitated. They tilted their head, birdlike, in confusion. “Your brother?”

There it was. Marjorie Guthrie froze. For just a second, a fraction of a second, her expression fluttered with confusion and calculation and, yes, fear. She was afraid of what Songs knew that she did not. It only took a heartbeat for her to regain control over her face and, with a far more innocent confusion than Songs’s, say, “That is what you’re here about, isn’t it?” But it was good that Songs had never lost control over their face, because otherwise their eyes would be narrowed in a satisfied smile. They had a hold now. All they needed was not to lose it.

“I am afraid you have me mistaken, Miss Guthrie. Unless there is something *you* are not telling me, there is nothing to connect your brother to the case. I am afraid there is no tactful way to say this, Miss Guthrie. The one connected is you.”

“You—you must be joking.”

“I would not joke about such a thing.”



With a conscientious smile far more charming than anything Songs had seen among her previous expressions, Marjorie Guthrie spread her arms, bare above her dress, to emphasize how willow-slender and willow-pale they were. “Do you really think *I* could kill anyone?”

“The non-humans were killed by exorcism. You are intimately acquainted with a Mr. Sidney Lawrence, are you not? Renowned dealer in East and Southeast Asian curios, specializing in religious texts and artifacts. Through him, you easily could have acquired the texts and tools necessary.”

“*I could* have.” Her voice was defensive in its disdain. “Where is your proof that I did?”

“You were witnessed stealing the photographs Gordon Huang took of your crime. And, furthermore...” Songs hesitated a delicate moment. “Miss Guthrie, how exactly did you know that the murdered photographer was a non-human?”

Marjorie Guthrie’s eyes flashed, but not the way they had flashed before. “If he weren’t non-human, why would he have cared? Huh? Why would he have cared about a couple non-humans getting exorcized? They’re vermin, that’s all they are, vermin pretending to be human so that they can take our jobs and poison our American culture. So what if a few of them get exorcized? It’s just showing what they are deep down.” She stood suddenly, her smile vicious and violent. “You know why you aren’t police? You know why the police aren’t here? Because no one cares. Because it doesn’t matter. Because you can *fuck* right off, or I’ll call the real police on you.”

Songs stood, slowly, softly, and walked in a gentle arc around Marjorie Guthrie. Her sharp words did nothing to lessen the mildness of their step. “I understand why you

did it,” they said, their voice soft and caring. “I really do. I think everyone will. You had such a beautiful life, after all. A beautiful girl with a beautiful life, going to beautiful parties until dawn. And then your dear little brother came home from war, and suddenly you didn’t have a life anymore. You had to be the ice queen of Los Angeles, always taking care of your little brother, always cleaning up his messes. So of course you would go out from time to time, in your beautiful dress, in your beautiful car, and you would do something that you felt no one would notice and no one would care about, something that could be entirely yours. It’s a shame you had to go with murder. But there’s nothing the people love more than a beautiful tragedy.” They nodded toward the door, where Arnold stood stock-still with a tray of tea, Detective Tian leaned against the doorframe sipping a cup, and Cecilia sat coolly in a straight-backed chair. Marjorie Guthrie’s darting black eyes followed Song’s and fixed on the notepad in Cecilia’s hands. “From Los Angeles’s ice queen to its gilded killer. At least it was your own choice and not your brother’s that brought this end.”

When Marjorie Guthrie sat, she let her limbs hang in whatever order they landed as her body fell. “My brother,” she said. She looked straight ahead. Her voice was as limp as a diseased plant, although, like a diseased plant, the edges of her words curled with sick amusement. “He wasn’t a sweet kid before the war, but neither was I. And he goes off and kills people for four years, and they pat him on the head for it, and then they send him home and tell him he can’t kill anymore. Four years in hell and he’s back to tennis championships. God knows where he got that bowl. Somewhere over there, Burma, I think. God knows where he learned to use it. At least he wasn’t killing real people. Hah.” She closed her eyes and rolled her head in a heavy circle. “Me and Brad,

we'd pull the wings off flies when we were kids. Never thought we'd be brought down by a spider."

Songs nodded understandingly. Then, softly, they said, "The Lams' garage. How did you two find out about it?"

"I paid a guy. Some kid, Leong, from Sidney's shop. It was a headache." She pinched the bridge of her nose, rubbed the heel of her hand across her forehead, and sat up in an imitation of her prior composure. "And now I'll pay you. What's your price?"

Songs laughed carefully. "Let me be clear: your younger brother has killed multiple people, and maimed Gordon Huang so severely that death would be preferable, and *you*, Miss Guthrie, covered these murders up in such a way as to frame innocent men, and you wish to purchase absolution?"

"Sure. Call it what you want. What's your price?"

Were they to appraise themselves? Songs looked back at Detective Tian, who gestured with a turn of his head that Songs should leave. They nodded. This was Detective Tian's case, after all, and they had committed themselves to being nothing but a tool in his hand. They had been a tool in the Bergamos' hands, and in Johnny van Brunt's, and Marilyn Overbury's, and Counselor True-Virtue's. What a hero they were, they thought with tired irony as they left with Cecilia. Perhaps it mattered if someone like Don Bergamo was idealistic and if he was corrupt, but, in a position like Songs's, was there really a difference? They got done what needed to get done.

"Thousand-Songs! What happened?"

Songs looked up at Fish slithering toward them, and a smile swelled on their face before they even felt their emotions change. “We got them,” they said. “Bradford Guthrie and Marjorie Guthrie—both of them.”

“And it was you who did it?”

Songs hesitated a moment. They could take credit, of course. They could take credit, and they could glory and gloat in how glibly they undid Marjorie Guthrie. But they did not want to.

Boundless ran up behind Fish. “Well? Was Songs the one to do it?”

“Of course she was,” Cecilia said.

Boundless laughed and clapped Songs on the shoulder. “I knew it. And how long did it take them? I’ll bet ten bucks on ten minutes.”

“Well,” said Fish, determined not to be outdone, “I bet on seven minutes.”

“Do you even have money?” Danny asked.

Fish shrugged with their wings. “I’ll borrow some.”

“It was actually closer to five,” said Cecilia. As Boundless and Fish congratulated Songs and mourned their failed bets, Cecilia waved her notepad triumphantly. “And I have every word of it written down, and every word of it is going to the *Times*. You know what Lilian said in there? She said, ‘There’s nothing the people love more than a beautiful tragedy.’ And you know what? That’s absolutely right. I’m going to get people to love this.” She tapped the side of Danny’s foot with her cane. “I won’t be able to give you that magnificent breakup I promised you quite yet. I’ll need you to stay as my muse for the exposé.”

“Is she mean enough to be your muse?” Boundless asked.

Cecilia scoffed. “You want to be my muse instead? Going to conveniently break all the buttons on your shirt? Show off that flashy little necklace of yours? Go find someone who *wants* to see all that.”

As the conversation continued around Songs, they noticed Danny looking at them strangely. “What is it?” they asked.

She hesitated in framing her question. After a few seconds, she put a hand on Songs’s arm. With even more warmth in her voice and eyes than in the June air around them, she asked “Are you okay, Vinnie?”

Songs nodded, but they were crying before they realized they felt anything but numb. Danny embraced them, and they felt Cecilia’s hand on their shoulder and Boundless’s hand on their back and the end of Fish’s tail curled around their heels. Why were they crying? Why wouldn’t they be crying, with all they had done and all this coming to an end? “Don’t worry about me,” they said, supported between the hands of their friends. “I’m just going to miss this. I’m going to miss this.”

## Conclusion

The road in American film and literature houses and creates many creatures, and American film and literature presents many creatures both literal and metaphorical. From vampires that express and induce monstrosity and the respectably wealthy who use their power to corrupt, to obsessive and pathetic ghosts and dangerous and endangered hitchhikers, to werewolves disgusted with their fundamental monstrosity and members of the bourgeoisie disgusted with their fundamental humanity, to wandering dragons and writers on the road: *Songs on the Road* collates and combines many of these creatures to literalize the mythical American open road. That open road is a promise and a paradox, both separating the protagonist from the world they know and presenting them with a far truer and more compelling world, providing a home at the cost of permanent homelessness, containing monstrous humans and fundamentally human monsters. More than that, the open road promises to change those who journey on it, whether they ultimately return to their original home or whether they never can. The characters of *Songs on the Road* make that paradoxical space their home. Both because their world is mythical and because it is enclosed by the American open road, these creatures and creatured people navigate their complex identities—always searching for a destination, and never quite finding an exit more appealing to them than the open road.

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