

excerpt from a forthcoming novel

by Frank Hinton

The accident happened like a birth, so nothing came before. What came from it, what started then, was the cloth wrapped around my head. I was there and it was there. It made me see a darkness. Someone had doused the cloth in water and it clung to my face wet and warm, wreathing over fever. I tried to lift the cloth but someone stopped me as I reached. I tried to speak but couldn't. My mouth was dry and crusted. I wriggled in the bed and felt the sheets soaked with perspiration. My arms were lined with tape and tubing, needles pressed in veins. I reached for the cloth again and again, and every time they stopped me. The hands that came were cold and hard, urgent and ungentle. I was too weak to resist. I let myself be still.

There had been an accident.

I rolled to my side and felt a shooting pain. It seemed everywhere at once. Deep inside me bad things were happening, I heard it loud enough. The fever in me flared. My thoughts came out in black bursts, in voids, my head had been destroyed. Everything seemed a violation warding me away.

So I kept still and listened to the room. The place was full of sound. It seemed in violence all around me and not seeing made me scared. Nearby some device beeped irregularly in my ears. Its tubes were also mine, the beeping came from me. Doors opened and closed and men shouted things from time to time. People chattered amongst themselves and worked with small machines. At least a dozen people seemed to hover about, I felt them breathing overhead. I heard them bustling around the room, their clicking feet, their anxious shouts. The words they used were strange. Everything they said was foreign and nothing made any sense.

In some distance there were louder, muffled sounds. Small explosions seemed to burst and fade, bullets pattered through the air, the ceiling trickled stones.

The sounds became one sound that carried me to rest.

Unknowing and afraid and blind I closed my eyes and slept.

Later, half-awake I felt a needle pressing through my chest. The needle spread a paste inside there, crawling to a fill. The room was cold and silent now, with women that seemed to whisper. I felt a dullness all around as blades cut through my skin. Some surgery had begun. I didn't feel a thing then, my body and mind numbed. I seemed to slip forever and moved from dark to dream.

I woke and slept and went like this for days or maybe months.

Once in a dream I came upon a row of creatures that arched on two horizons- their line cut through darkness. I moved toward them without wanting. I moved toward their path. They moved in one direction. The creatures were faceless, limbless things; shanks of pulsating flesh. Their bodies were coated in veins and cysts, tumors and burns, rotted wounds that hadn't sealed. They bobbed to move and moved as a herd, a billion in the night. They didn't seem to mind me. At first I called out to them but they had no mouths to reply. They simply drifted through the dark on a trail made of themselves. I dreamed the creatures often and followed their direction.

Being awake was harder.

There was a day they removed the blindfold.

Before the light came a woman seemed to chant. She said something over and over, again in words I didn't know. A man responded to everything while some clicking noise perpetuated. I decided he was fiddling with some machine. I decided not to move. They thought I was asleep, I think. The chanting woman stroked my hair and spoke her foreign words. I felt fingers slip under the edge of my blindfold but they didn't lift the cloth. I felt the needle in my skin grow hot and my arm began to burn. I thought I'd sleep again but couldn't seem to close my eyes. I bit my lip and the woman stopped her chanting. The man asked a question, I think. They knew I was awake. I bit my lip harder. The clicking sound increased.

There was a moment of silence where I thought I should speak but didn't. The woman pulled the cloth from my eyes. Sudden.

I burned before I opened them. It came on bright, the light, a cutting white without shape. It filled my brain like boiled water and there was nothing to do but scream. The light cut deep and scarred things, it went to places I didn't know could pain. I begged to them as I burned. My mouth was filled with filth. My lips and tongue were bleeding, my eyes refused to close. Wave after wave of light came. I felt like I would die or catch fire or explode.

"Stop!" I shouted.

I couldn't hear a thing. The world was white pain and I twisted violently in my bed. For the first time I realized I was strapped down. Every muscle strained against the bracing. A woman tried to hold my head until I bit her forearm. She screamed and pulled and bled into me but I was too destroyed to notice. The only thing was the light that seemed to want to kill. Death felt close, sensible.

Someone slid the cloth back over my eyes but the light continued to persist. The pain refused to stop. Strong hands pressed my shoulders down and I heard the workers shouting. Another needle came filled me with a sleep drug. The woman I'd bit was crying in a corner somewhere and I fell asleep to that.

