

# Fantasm

by J.A. Pak

## I

Nick confided, that night they were about to go and he was desperate for Sophy to believe, Nick confided he had a guiding angel. And that the angel was beautiful — he'd seen her one night — three or four o'clock so that it was really morning — not with wings, but with a light, a rainbow light which was scattered, maybe she herself was a scattering of light, an infinity of universes caught like the opening rays of sunlight.

("I've never told anyone — " He smiled, looking deep into Sophy so that she was like the light.)

Nick was an insomniac and rarely slept. Like Sophy.

(They'd find each other, in the early mornings, like two wanderers recognizing some common place in the other but wary and hesitant. Finally, curiosity — and loneliness — gave them a bridge. Usually just sitting quietly together for an hour or two as the morning opened her skirt.)

Nick didn't trust sleep.

"You miss so much."

He'd always felt, from birth, time spinning him, faster and faster. He could just harness that growing momentum, ride the chaotic stream, omnipotent.

"What's there to miss?"

Nick looked at Sophy, all exasperated — as if she knew and wouldn't admit it.

"All this!"

He spread out his arms and tilted his head and the universe popped open. The sun was just coming up, but low inside the horizon so you couldn't see any of it. Instead, there was a shimmer in the sky, silver before the yellows and the pinks.

Sophy remembered shrugging, going back into her trailer. She had the paperwork to finish, all the money to sort and count. And

permits to fill. Her cousin's carnival moved from town to town in a blissful haze, but she was the eye.

She'd fought him.

He was just nineteen.

Sophy was twenty-five.

He'd lost his mother at sixteen.

Sophy's mother had run away when Sophy was two. Sophy and her dad and the carnival — she could just be an eye. Her dad and his cousin Clam had been a clown act and everything else had accreted slowly, the magic acts, human rubber bands, amusement park rides, and doggy shows.

Nick's father had run away when Nick was six. A tot full of laughter. His mother had MS and it was just the two of them. And his aunt Emma who helped take care of them.

Sophy's dad had died when Sophy was fifteen. The collapse of a heart.

Neither comforted (confided) in the other. They didn't have long, intimate conversations, begging love and understanding. Nor was there a single epiphanic moment of cobbled commonality. The carnival was small and slips of information traveled to and fro in a circuit like inside the human body and what you knew you knew and were.

Nick was part of the entertainment. Most acts (people) came and went fairly quickly. Like newspaper stories, you didn't remember them from year to year (or, rather, they become the same, one story). Nick did card tricks. Using an ordinary deck of playing cards, he'd build castles in the air. So quickly, so gracefully, you didn't see his hands, only the cards coming to life. He called his act FANTASM. He'd begin by amusing the audience with familiar objects (houses, cars, elephants). He never spoke and the only music was the shuffling of cards. When he felt the audience was ready, he'd bring an audience member onto the stage, someone he liked the look of, usually a woman, elderly. While she sat, sometimes somewhat embarrassed, he'd play with the cards, with patterns, all the while looking into the woman's face, the cards arranging

themselves so quickly, so hypnotic, until there was a shape in the air — nothing extraordinary, again a house or car, but something familiar, so familiar, and the woman would suddenly laugh, or cry, because Nick had taken something from inside her, something she'd forgotten and it was too surprising, seeing it there, a thought, a memory, built out of cards.

It was rare for him to pick a man. Or even a young boy.

“Why women?” Sophy asked. “Old women?”

“It just seems to work better with them.”

“What works better?”

“Happiness.”

His act didn't impress Sophy. She'd seen many spectacles come and go. Winning hearts was part of the game. There was something about him, though, something that made her notice him at first sight. He was just nineteen, but he was much older, greying at the temples, the old soul in his eyes catching people: he was burning, faster and faster, and this heat made everybody around him glow, sparks flying.

In their carnival everyone did a little bit of everything. Sophy kept the books but she also sold tickets, helped fill out thin audiences, cooked, cleaned, looked after stage props, operated some of the rides, kept an eye on the carnival children. She was also the end-of-the-line problem solver. Disputes, even between married couples, ended with Sophy. She was the eye. And out of the eye, two ladies appeared — that is, the carousel broke down and she was fetched.

Ted, who kept all the mechanics going, figured it'd take several hours to get the old girl back on her feet. Nothing unusual. In such cases, the tickets were refunded and the disappointed customers redirected to other rides or discounted shows. But this evening, there was trouble: two elderly ladies were refusing to budge from their seats. That's when Nick was sent looking for Sophy.

She was sewing costumes for the poodle show. Tiny tuxedos and starched skirts with petticoats. Nick watched her hands, the beauty of their song, how the song brought happiness to the little work

dogs. Little soldiers of amusement. Trained to bark only on command, even their fluffed up tails bought for performances — their wet eyes shone with happiness.

Sophy's eyes, when they noticed Nick at the door, didn't have a song. They reminded Nick of why he was there.

Sophy followed Nick to the carousel. The two ladies were each in her own chariot. They did not know each other, and while there was a solidarity, neither spoke to the other.

Sophy could only repeat what the others had said. But she saw immediately how anxious they were, how the thought of stepping off the carousel panicked them.

"There isn't any harm if we sit here?" one of the ladies asked.

Sophy couldn't see any harm. It was just the engine that needed coaxing. The two women smiled. It was then that Sophy noticed how calm it was on the carousel. Quieter, even, as if the carousel were moving further and further away from the rest of the carnival, she and the two elderly ladies its only passengers.

The two ladies were as different as night and day. One was tall and muscular, the other pale, quiet, like a white shadow. Each was sitting in a cloud chariot, which seemed something more than coincidence.

Unicorns, mermaids, dragons, fairies — mythical creatures circled the carousel. Only three cloud chariots were left, harnessed to wind and flanked by angles. The times the carousel worked properly, dry ice floated up from in between the wooden slats of the platform, the carousel lifting its passengers into a mythic sky of dreams.

The tall, muscular lady was wearing the daintiest cotton dress. She had a thick pink ribbon around her hair like a little girl. She looked up at Sophy and said, "I'm here this time because I want to see the Queen of England."

No matter what people said, no matter what Sophy was thinking, feeling — Sophy's expression never changed. Her face was always calm, always open.

“Do you know what I mean?” the lady asked. “You must. It's your carousel. I come here every year and sit in this chariot. Look — I've marked it here so I'll always know this is the right chariot.”

She showed Sophy the squiggly “x” she'd once carved right underneath the left arm.

“And, to tell you the truth,” she continued, “I only half-believe it, each time, but each time, it works. The first time I wished for a new sewing machine — the old one kept eating the thread — and I got one. Just like that. One of my nieces wanted a newer model so she gave me hers — perfectly good machine — I still got it. The next year I wanted the stinker next door to move — and three weeks after I made the wish, the stinker moved in with his daughter clear across town. Now the nicest gentleman lives next door. Comes and cuts my grass. After he cuts his. So this year I'm wishing to see the Queen of England because I've always wanted to see the Queen of England since I was a little girl. I thought I'd make a big wish this time. You never know, and I thought I'd better make a really good wish in case I never see this chariot again. I have to say, this thing really does deliver.” She pointed to the inscription written on the eaves of the carousel: “Dream a Dream ... Make a Wish ... Dreams Come True ... Believe ...”

Was the other lady here for a wish too?

What could the lady say? How could she explain? She looked at Sophy's face. There was an expression in Sophy's eyes — those eyes looked directly at you, seemed to, but inside, deep in her eyes, she was turning away, as if she could barely stand to look at you. It was too painful. The lady looked away, away from Sophy's eyes, at Sophy's cheeks, down along the long thin scars that followed Sophy's jaw line, left and right like twins, beautiful in their symmetry. They were the scars her mother had given her, her last act before she'd disappeared.

The woman reached up with both her hands and tenderly fingered the scars. Atonement and confession. Her fingers pronouncing the scars. Reaffirming the knife in negative. In the touch, the same

offering. The child had stood so still because of the tenderness in the shape, the love in its intention, the warmth in the blood.

Sophy hated being touched, especially her face. Her scars had always been hidden in Sophy's remoteness. Now, there was this woman's offering. Trying to move away, without hurting the lady, Sophy turned.

"What's your wish?" Sophy asked.

"I come every year. I've been coming a very long time," she said. "I was in love, with all my heart and soul, but he died. When I was very young. I fell in love again and married and had kids — but — One day the carnival came and I promised my daughter I'd take her. I only have my daughter. She was almost seven then and she wanted to ride that unicorn. So I sat on this chariot, so I could be close to her, make sure she stayed safe. I remember the music playing, the carousel slowly moving, the clouds all around me, the carousel going faster and faster and I felt this incredible joy. And I started dreaming — only it wasn't a dream — it was real. He hadn't died and we were married and had a child. And then I began to think it was a dream, that I'd fallen asleep on the carousel, only the next year, when the carousel returned, I came back and sat here again. And this time I had another three years with him. We had another child, a boy we named Christian. We bought a farm too, only things didn't go so well. We were badly in debt. We had two more children. And my life, this other life, goes on and on — only on this carousel. And it's wonderful. So wonderful."

Nick was leaning across the unicorn, caught by the music of the chariot, the woman's voice, the way it incanted and how Sophy seemed lifted out of herself by the summoned wind as the voice circled and circled, the chariot hinged forward.

Suddenly Sophy stood up. The lady shrank back in fright. Sophy jumped out of the chariot. She was frozen for a second, and then looking left and right, she tried to find herself. Nick put his hand on Sophy's shoulder. Sophy looked straight through him. And then there was a shout. Ted was getting hungry. He wanted Sophy to get him a sandwich. And some coffee.

Sophy yelled back and flew off the carousel.

Nick ran and caught Sophy.

He was walking very close to her. She wanted him to leave her alone. She felt so heavy, her body like milky sea water. She'd stopped walking. She turned to Nick and kissed him and everything inside was breaking open. She loved him and he loved her. And it was now the rest of their lives.

And dreams too, breaking open. Strange dreams. She often dreamt she was sleeping in Nick's arms. Not the way they did, briefly, in fits, conjured by insomnia, but whole nights at a time. Nick in Sophy's arms. Sophy in Nick's arms. Tangled together, unclear what is Sophy and what is Nick, Sophy surprised because their bodies had physically merged, their togetherness so heavy she cannot move and it is wonderful. Nick speaks and his voice is the blood in her veins.

Sometimes she dreamt they were kissing again, that first time, and she will say to him, "I love you, Nick" and Nick laughs joyously. Sometimes she waits for him to say it too.

One night, Nick couldn't find Sophy. By early morning he was distraught, and then he saw her, on the carousel, sitting in a cloud chariot. She seemed asleep, only her eyes were open.

He tapped her wrist. She looked at him, but he was only a part of her dream.

She reached up and touched his face. She looked surprised; she could feel his body, her own hand.

He put his head on her chest, and wanting more comfort, raised his lips to kiss her, first the milky smell of her neck, and then her tender cheek, until his lips were touching hers. He started to make love to her, unbuttoning her blouse without realizing what his fingers were touching.

"No." Sophy pushed him away. "Not here. I hate this thing."

Sophy ran off the carousel.

Nick had the strange sensation that the carousel was moving and that he could not. He held onto Sophy's warm blouse and closed his eyes. He slept for a long time.

He'd learnt card tricks to amuse his mother. Even before, there was such an expressiveness to his hands. His hands spoke before his mouth. Words came only because of his worried father, who wanted to tie Nick's arms to his body. Nick's first sentence was forced from him when he was four. He wasn't verbally fluent until he was eight. His father said he was stubborn and willful. It was just incomprehension. He understood the language of mouth and hands equally and since he understood, he didn't think to wonder if others could not. His father's insistence on the verbal seemed to him a bizarre, arbitrary preference.

With his mother, alone, he was free to speak with his hands. Like his mouth, his hands could shape air, manipulate sounds, translate desire, express astonishment, joy, sadness, envy, delight, fear. But his mouth was limited to words, and words were a poor cousin to hands. Words were easy. Easy to misplace. Easy to dismiss. Easy to forget. And what could you really understand from what people said? So much was ritual. Easy lies. Placeholders. You could clumsily travel the distance of a whole universe from one word to another. Whereas you could feel the whole being of a person with a hand. The touch of his mother's hands could tell him how much she loved him much better than words. And in return, he could take his hands and massage her temples and make her headache disappear. A simple touch was all it took to make his sad mother smile. And what was more, hands could take objects, ordinary, every day objects, and reshape them, remake them so that they were parts of him that did not disappear. He was afraid of disappearing.

He was almost ten when he realized hands could also amaze people. That astonishing speed of his hands as they manipulated the old deck of cards his parents used for games of pinochle, fanning them across the table, shooting them into the air, bringing them back into the palm of his hand, neat and obedient. He'd wink at a card and the card would jump three places behind, two places forward, dancing at command. Hands made people gasp.

Nick's swift hands were for ever transporting cards too. The Queen of Hearts were now for Sophy. She'd find a queen leafed in a



book. Underneath her pillow. Inside a shoe. With a stack of dollar bills she'd been counting. It was absurdly romantic. But she liked it and she secretly saved each card, hiding them in the old tin biscuit box where her other curiosities and mementos were, until, with a start, she realized it was always the same queen, the same worn card, and that no matter how carefully she hid that card, it'd always reappear afresh when she'd least expect it.

It was natural, with Sophy. Since his mother's death, Nick had kept his hands in a box, for tricks and games, a way to ease his way with people, even to earn money (that had surprised him most). But with Sophy, his hands were natural again. His hands could speak again. Teasing her hair. Taking just the very tip of his finger and gently wiping a speck of grime from underneath her eye. Sending the skirt of her flimsy cotton dress in a spiral. Walking his fingers across her naked back and then laying his palm above her tailbone. He told her what he wanted, what he felt with the slight degrees of pressure, his hand in hers. And she'd do the same, and for the first time he understood. He saw why his father was so angry, what the true objection had always been. He had been alone. Hands had made him an alien. His mother had understood his hands, but she'd only had words. Her hands had been only mother's love. For the first time, another was speaking to him in hands, so naturally, he hadn't realized she wasn't using words.

They had so much to say to one another — it astonished them. And the ways they found of speaking. It wasn't hands, mouth, but their entire being, bodies, consciousness, charged into a new state of being. They were now inseparable. There was no coming or going, no division, no night and day. No doubts. No questions.

Just life. And Nick had to choose. He wasn't an ambitious person. But since his mother's death, he'd become restless. He'd liked the carnival at first because it was all movement, spinning from town to town in benevolent chaos. But after a couple of months, this too was routine. So when an impresario demanded that Nick follow him to the Big City where the spotlight was gold and life champagne, Nick said yes.

And Sophy suddenly remembered, with a pain, how regularly people come and go through the carnival, the flow like the Nile, keeping things fresh and fertile. And lonely.

After all, no promises had ever been made. Because it was always the present in the world they had created, time threaded to their desires. She felt clumsy. And angry. No world can exist without a future, and the future was a bully, stepping on their toes, tripping them, bloody noses all around. Sophy retreated back into the self she knew better. Only, now, she was two selves because the other self had no where else to go. And each self looked at Nick a different way, wanting such different things. She finally understood how a heart could collapse.

Nick found everything easy.

Nick reached for her hand; Sophy wouldn't touch his.

So he spoke: "Marry me."

He was surprised at the strength of his voice. The change which was his becoming. He was giddy and invincible and he was going to change Sophy too.

Sophy shook her head, not even looking at him. She'd never stopped counting the money, putting the bills and dirty coins into rigid columns, counting in tens. Her head had never been so clear, her focus never so sharp.

"Why not?"

"If you want to go, just go."

He was a tall, strong boy. He lifted her over his shoulders and went.

## II

"So. It looks like we are at the end of the road." Nick looks neither at her nor away from her. In the hotel lobby, with its brown and yellow hues, it all seems to make sense.

Sophy's breath catches the hem of her soul.

It's like a routine and they're finishing up. Nick stands, picks up his suitcase and it's adios. The final frames of the picture as he walks away.

She touches her wedding ring with her thumb, checking to see if it's still there, the wedding ring Nick had made with the Queen of Hearts, his the King. She checks, a habit she's had all her married life, checking, almost as if she knows the ring isn't really there, and that the Queen is in another world.

The problem with expecting something is that what you expect comes at you inside out. Or maybe it's you that's inside out so that what's at the right angle is at the wrong angle so how you see it coming isn't how it's coming at all and you're unaware even as you watch it coming, guarding your heart against the impact even as you give it to your eventual destroyer. Nick.

Sitting in the lobby, the lights dim, she realizes it's been like this for weeks, the world drenched in an amber hue, honied and rich, with everything massive, so massive, and two-dimensional, shadows heavy and arced, a treacle brown that weighs the earth with such sadness.

This is not what usually happens when you follow a magician. Theirs, the one who had led them deftly down this hole, was the rabbit and hat kind, a friend of a friend — they were all staying with friends staying with friends, squatting in basements, vacated buildings, places without sunlight. The magician said he was going South, to the sunny resorts where all the work was — Nick and Sophy should come too. Nick stole some money for their train fares, the magician's too, — he'd been pick-pocketing, but with so many people out of work, who was there to steal from anymore? All the rich were down South, we're all heading down South, where the golden resorts are, where all the jobs are, where there really is an Easy Street, adjacent to Fortune, five blocks north.

It was true — there was the sun, which made everything so golden. But too, there were the deserted hotels and the millionaires jumping out of buildings. The wrong kind of gold. The magician disappeared.

They didn't eat. Walking all day, walking all night, suitcases in hand, the only rooms occupied park benches and bus stops.

And then a small miracle, grains of delirium: a piece of paper — money —floating down the street, Nick catching it in midair. Enough to keep them alive, if they were very careful, for a full two weeks.

They ate their first real meal. Their shriveled stomachs grumbled in protest. They laughed. They'd grown so thin, they could see where the muscles were parting from the bones, even their noses filling with holes. And Sophy's scars — Sophy's scars were now so prominent — it hurt Nick too much to look at her.

Inside the diner the world was warm and friendly, the food oh-so good. And what was more, the menu was all-you-can-eat. Sophy cried because she couldn't even finish what was on her plate. Neither could Nick. Their stomachs had shrunk too much.

"He'll take good care of you," Clam had said.

Life after the carnival was like a piece of music which was more static than song. The impresario led them this way and that. In that last stop, Nick became part of a large touring show, his name barely noticeable on the poster bills. They couldn't live on what Nick made so Sophy earned money sewing costumes. She was always sewing, her hands so busy, even as she watched Nick perform. He performed for ten minutes at a time. Just filler at first. Which didn't matter. That is, time didn't matter. It was pouring out of him. Power. Stupefying. His hands effectively unnecessary, his ability to plunder people's memories frightening. He felt glorious, so incredibly invincible. He was God.

And then it happened, in the middle of a performance, what he'd somehow anticipated, and suppressed, deep in his subconscious: the cards opened their eyes and awoke. And with a surge Nick understood what this power really was.

The Cards. The moment he was on stage, the moment he touched the Cards, Nick now disappeared. He said himself, he seemed to be watching the Cards from deep in another place. And he saw how the Cards lived and fed from the collective breath of the audience.

Word got around. People became mad with Fantasm.

## ***FANTASM***

It knew each body and each life, churning, plundering, building towards a completeness. All his life he'd felt himself spinning faster and faster and now he knew why: all this heat, the surging momentum, to Fantasm, the air It breathed, his life like fuel, giving birth to this, Complete Beauty.

One moment of complete, inexorable beauty.

An achingly slow, magnificent burst of beauty, life and death in one.

And it finished him. Complete Beauty was now Nick as ash. The cards were dead, his hands were dead: he was left performing sleight-of-hand tricks.

He wondered if she knew. He was afraid to look at her, afraid to touch her, afraid of being touched. She watched him.

Sewing costumes, cooking meals, hands so busy, Sophy watched him. He was so old now, the air around him stale, his hair, his skin, ash. He could barely control his hands.

He knew she was hiding money. He'd always given her all his money, because she'd been so good at keeping track of that sort of thing and knew what it was to buy things and he himself only thought of money as paper. Until now. There was nothing more to give her. He needed the money.

One day he ransacked the room. No money. Just the Queen of Hearts. It was all wrong. The Queen of Hearts should not come to him. Everything was all wrong. Fantasm had switched worlds on him. Thrown him with a kick into this sick, desperate world where he wasn't him but Sophy was a constant.

When Sophy came back, she found Nick sitting on the edge of the bed, bent forward, throwing cards on the floor, slowly, methodically. So lost in the act, he didn't know she'd returned.

The room looked strangely tidy.

In the end, their life with the Impresario did not last very long. He was like Sophy, an eye, only his eye saw the future. Picking his cues very wisely, he disappeared one day, taking all the money.

When she'd told Clam she was leaving with Nick, Clam said, "I like him. I really do. He'll take care of you. In the City. He'll take care of you."

The City was night time, cold and hard, all lights and glamour, tuxedo jackets and martini glasses. The Impresario had Nick perform in elegant nightclubs, some as big as theaters, with their own competing bands and dance floors. There was a constant din of clinking glasses, waiters moving, low-buzz chatter, stiletto heels on parquet floors. The women were beautiful and their clapping polite. The men were drunk, on perfume or alcohol. Together, their speech was mannered, their laughter rehearsed, the way they interacted, choreographed. Nothing they said must be taken seriously. There are no promises in style.

The Impresario schooled him in panache. The act became entertaining tricks and elegant gestures. No more dangerous than bubbles spraying in a glass of champagne. The Impresario insisted on accompanying music.

"A pity about your scars," the Impresario said to her. "We could have dressed you up. Nice silk evening gown, your hair swept up. Earrings flickering in the light. You could have been the Girl. Just what an act always wants. A Beautiful Girl."

The Impresario smiled. And his smile was like a snake to their frozen bird.

Shivering, Nick held Sophy's hand; Sophy squeezed back in terror.

They didn't go to the City straight away. There was too much carnival world about him, the Impresario said. He needed polish.

There was a resort in the mountains where Nick could develop his act, get a feel for the right kind of audience, upper middle-class, affluent, a little jaded but wanting nothing truly extraordinary, nothing outside their comfort zone. He'd have to wait a month though, when the summer resort season kicked in. But just outside

the resort, there was a small farm that needed looking after. Nick's impresario sent Sophy and Nick to the farm.

It was a real farm, with chickens and cows. A nice big house with gingham curtains and a red barn. Nick and Sophy laughed when they first saw it — how could it be so story-book? A farm hand came every day and showed Nick and Sophy how to take care of the animals. There was even a kitchen garden for Sophy, peas, tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, bushy dill and thyme.

It was all so strange, their life, play-acting. Early every morning Sophy fried up bacon and eggs, boiled the coffee, toasted bread, which she even learned to bake. The stove had to be fed with wood and she grew expert at tending flames — every part of this life made her feel so proud. Nick looking after the cows, mending fences. Sophy feeding the chickens and collecting eggs. She fretted over the garden, killing snails at night, pulling weeds during the day. They watched the tall grass grow golden, almost ready to be stored as straw, anxious like all the other farmers that the rain keep itself amused with sweet bursts and nothing more.

In the late evenings, after dinner, Nick tried to teach Sophy how to play the ancient spinet. She could eventually finger a few notes, but she would much rather watch and listen to Nick play. Sometimes when he was playing, she wondered if Nick wasn't thinking about his mother. The whole room, the lace on the spinet, the small porcelain figurines, seemed like the essence of mother, from what she knew, from the touch and smell of Nick when he thought about his mother. And she tried to connect this with the scars on her face.

Sunday roasts and picnics on the meadow. A life that fitted them more and more, a part of them like skin. They breathed and slept. Like any other married couple, lying entwined, resting away from life the whole night through. Like any other married couple. That too sounded make-believe.

“We're married. “

“My husband.”

“My wife.”

It seemed so unreal, so ridiculous, they couldn't help giggling. After all, they were just Nick and Sophy, Sophy and Nick.

Watching the sun set, the molten pinks and amber hues, they knew what marriage was.

"Do you think you'll have a baby?" Nick asked.

"Do you want a baby?" Sophy asked.

"Yes." He hadn't thought about it before, but now, of course. Of course! "Do you?"

"Yes." She was so happy.

The horizon was a rich, hot amber now. In the sun's steep angle, everything was burning, breathing, even the rocks and stones along the uneven road alive.

Nick took her hands and kissed them, their soft, fragrant palms.

He laughed.

"Your hands — what's on your hand? What is it that they smell of?"

Sophy smelled her hands.

"Oh, it's thyme. I like the smell so I rubbed it into my fingers. When I was weeding. Out in the garden."

Nick took her hands again, rubbing his face and neck, all over with thyme's oil.

"I feel reborn," he said, laughing.

Outside the hotel, remembering this, Nick's voice and words and promises are the tears Sophy can't shed. She reaches up with her hands, up to that setting sun, up into the hot amber, up inside Nick, Nick smelling magical thyme, Nick rubbing her hands with a thick incantation:

"This is our life. Everything else, before and after, was a dream. We're awake now. And we'll have children. Lots of children. Boys and girls. Enough to fill the whole house. Everything except now — it doesn't matter, Sophy. It didn't exist. It was just a dream. We've always been here. And we'll stay here. Always. Right here on this farm. This is our life. I love you, Sophy. I've always loved you. I'll always love you."



In the sun's steep angle, everything burns, breathes, even the rocks and stones along the uneven road alive.

"Look," Sophy says, looking down at her arms, Nick's face. "Look at us."

They are gold and brown, red and blazing. Immortal beings. Fantasm.

