

Vanity

Short story / Literary speculative fiction

Complete story.

At the very first, it was not the sight, but the sound. A campus tour guide thought lightning had struck the bell tower. The chair of the peace studies department heard an army stomp across a battlefield of pearls. An aspiring medievalist later wrote in the school newspaper how he'd apprehended the swoop of a thousand faerie wings. The registrar was sure a bomb had exploded; a young librarian fainted. If you grew up in the mountains, it sounded like the crash of the spring ice floes and if you came from the plains, you heard the rush of a summer wind. A ten-car pileup, more tornadoes, the rapture. The second-string quarterback sang the Hallelujah Chorus as he sprinted across campus toward the spiraling steeple of the seminary chapel.

The entire campus unmoored. Boyfriends confessed infidelities to girlfriends. Graduate students streamed from basements clutching the disheveled pages of theses in arms and in teeth, chapters pinned between shoulder and chin. Food court employees swiped the till and ran; a barista later sued for psychological damages. The chair of the comparative religion department found, for the briefest of moments, her God; the chaplain felt the shiver of a faith unattended. One sorority housemother caterwauled through the quad in a furry bathrobe and

even the president was rumored to have called home to his wife.

After everyone was evacuated and campus security scoured about for intruders, after bomb-sniffing dogs followed their noses through dormitories and flowerbeds, after industrial-strength vacuum cleaners wailed for hours, sucking up little dunes of glass as fine as dust, then the questions began. In concert with the nightly news, a chorus of experts postulated about the causes, effects and motivations underlying it. No one knew what to call it. Certainly, "the tragedy" came off melodramatic, for no one had died. And since the cause remained utterly mysterious, neither "the attack" nor "the fluke" seemed to fit the bill. Civil disobedience? Freak accident? Terrorism? A little-known firebrand, K., appeared on air at a roundtable discussion and argued passionately - some said eloquently - that this shattering was an omen, a warning about who we were becoming. What better symbol for our complacency, our vanity, than the mirror? And what better way to evince displeasure than to shatter the source of our wicked delusions? K.'s argument was widely dismissed as zealotry, but the name he gave it - the shattering - stuck.

It soon became known that no one had been maimed or disfigured, although several freshmen were hospitalized for shock. The single laceration came when a 16th- century Venetian mirror in the library lobby rained

down onto a student napping below. It was the sharp- cornered frame, not the mirror, which gashed a cut two inches long and almost a quarter-inch deep. The forearm wound required a dozen butterfly sutures and a handful of self-medicated Vicodin. As the days wore on, the dean of the medical school issued a warning about the potential hazards of inhaling the billions of microscopic glass shards that were surely swirling about the campus. Nothing came of these fabled particulates, and so the final casualty turned out to be the university museum's curator: a month went by before he finally checked himself into University General, the victim of crippling, guilt-suffused depression over the destruction of a loaned exhibit of medieval Moorish looking glasses.

The day following the shattering a press conference was held. Four particle physicists stood in white lab coats behind a teak podium etched with the university's motto, *post tenebras lux*. After a brief, stern introduction from the president, the professors gave a jargoned explanation that detailed how an errant blast of high-frequency radio waves had almost certainly caused the shattering. Operating like so many opera singers, oscillations from the blast caused the mirrors' aluminum coatings to vibrate against their glass substrates with such violence that the mirrors simply dissolved. This was why the shattering affected only mirrors and not glass. This was why the shards were so small. Each scientist offered a sheepish

apology and answered all media questions. Yes, they said, the experiments that caused the blast would be suspended, pending investigation. No, there was no danger of radiation poisoning or fallout. Yes, this was the first known case of such a comprehensive shattering. No, such high-frequency blasts were not uncommon in their line of work. The president then quickly stepped forward and promised to provide counseling to any student who needed it and vouchers to any citizen or university employee whose side- or rear- view car mirrors had been damaged during the event. New mirrors for the rest of campus had already been ordered from the glassworks but, because of the size of the order, it would take a full six weeks for the replacements to arrive.

At first there were whispers of a cover-up - each member of the offending quartet was safely tenured, and why did the blast affect every corner of campus, but not an inch of the surrounding area? The local media did their best to flame the fires of conspiracy, but it was not long before our focus shifted to the quirks and hiccups of a life without mirrors.

The dining hall reported a spike in corn dog consumption and had to double its orders of creamsicles and nutty butties. Without the wall-length weight room mirror to intimidate them, pale poets and plump engineers now pumped iron alongside the chiseled gym rats. An art major joined the ROTC; a budding economist

took up the cello. In the faculty club enthusiastic professors traded anecdotes about vibrant class discussions and punctual students; a gender studies scholar felt that male attendance at her lectures had perhaps tripled. Waves of unwashed French Braids appeared. Battered sneakers replaced Italian leather boots. Sweatpants overtook miniskirts. At their weekly bowling night, a municipal engineer remarked to the head campus custodian that the school's hot water consumption was down eight points, to which the custodian replied that on three separate nights he'd caught couples going at it by the lily pond. Drum circles and whiffle ball games now dotted the quads. No one could remember a time when the blossoming of the school's namesake dogwood trees was enjoyed by so many.

But the halo that succeeded the shattering was not without its darker edge. Two students were suspended for crawling through the doggie-hatch of a nearby house and preening in front of the hall mirror. Blind shaving brought nicked necks and scored chins flecked with toilet paper. A small black market of pocket mirrors emerged. One sixth-year senior who lived in an unscathed apartment a block off-campus posted fliers advertising pay-by-the-minute use of his body-length closet mirror. "Clean, cheap, convenient!!" read the advertisement. "All shapes and sizes welcome!!" By the afternoon a line of nervous students curled down into the apartment building's front alcove. Some left in tears, others with their faces smattered anew in rouge

and foundation, or with dark rings of mascara caked around their eyes like bruises. The makeshift business collapsed when, following shouted accusations of mirror hogging, a scrum broke out two rival fraternities. The would-be rentier's prized possession was shattered in the brawl.

Two weeks before the mirrors' scheduled return, the school newspaper began a front-page countdown. When the number blared six, a horde of students and faculty and private citizens, led by the suddenly trendy firebrand K., marched upon the president's office. Armed with signs and chants and petitions, they demanded the mirrors banished forever. Too much is never enough! they shouted. Ignorance is bliss! Minutes passed. A helicopter traversed the length of the sky. The crowd began to scatter. Then, to nearly everyone's surprise, the president strode out onto his private balcony and announced that he had already made his decision. For the remainder of the year, there would be no mirrors. A meeting of the board of trustees would convene over the summer to determine the efficacy and future of the experiment. At graduation the school would provide off-campus rental trailers equipped with mirrors for students who wished to see themselves adorned in cap- and-gown; the observatory's telescope would be rearmed with a dielectric reflector for the benefit of the fledgling astronomy department. These, he vowed, would be the only replacements.

The president's announcement was met with applause across the campus. Even those who had marked on their calendars the day of the mirrors' return seemed to exhale. It was as if, by the force of some collective memory, everyone understood just how harried life with mirrors had been. The story was picked up nationally and a well-known television personality visited the school to chronicle the transformation. The episode, entitled, "Through With The Looking Glass," took a decidedly positive

approach. In her interview with the president, the personality lavished praise upon the president's courage, his foresight, his ingenuity. The president smiled with embarrassment and said that necessity was the mother of invention.

In the wake of the show's airing, glory reflected off the university and onto our little city. We were elated. A parade was held; the mayor declared a Day of the Shattering; the president received the key to the city. There was even discussion of naming a street after the four physicists who started it all. Then, at the peak of the honeymoon, just as local primary season was set to begin, the firebrand K. grasped the momentum and broadened the movement.

K. wrote an editorial. If the shattering worked so splendidly at the university, why not apply its lessons in our city? Brothers, sisters, weren't we hypocrites, Pharisees, to celebrate the shattering and then refuse to enact it ourselves? K. declared himself a third-

party candidate for city council and announced the establishment of the Seven Years Movement. The party platform was simple: create our own permanent shattering. After the editorial, K. disappeared. He was not seen in public until his election night party, when he ceremoniously broke a long, slender mirror over his knee. In the aftermath of K.'s victory, the city's politicians organized themselves into two groups. There were those who fell in with the Seven Years Movement, and those who did not. The opposition was branded Magpies, named, K. explained, for the only bird that could recognize its reflection. Old party politics gave way to a tenacious new statecraft. Accusations of zealotry and cowardice flew across the aisle like panicked birds, grinding city business to a halt. The standstill could not be broken and so the mayor declared he would take the issue to the people. When the Magpie-dominated council countered by refusing even to finance a plebiscite, the mayor joined the president and the firebrand K. in soliciting private donations. It took an afternoon to fund the vote.

The Magpies' concerns were well-founded: the referendum passed by a two-to-one margin. After a raucous celebration party, the Seven Years Movement set to work, hammering out details and handing out dispensations. Everyone agreed that harboring mirrors would only be a civil offense, no matter how many times repeated - the Seven Years Movement knew better than to

create martyrs. Car mirrors were to remain intact, as was all equipment used for dental, medical or scientific purposes. The police could continue spying through the half-silvered mirrors of their interrogation rooms. A date was set: the Second Shattering would coincide with the last night of the county fair. There would be fireworks, another parade, free cotton candy. A final concession was made when the Movement allowed disgruntled residents to store mirrors in a secluded warehouse, a clapboard concoction whose gates the Movement garlanded with tendrils of barbed wire. We attacked the public sphere first, planting a dogwood tree in the park where the celebrated mirror sculpture had stood. Denuded cinder block soon lorded above sinks in public lavatories, while rawboned boys and chunky girls sighed with relief when they saw the bare walls of the stripped high school locker rooms. The district attorney gazed up at the courthouse's vaulted ceiling and decided that she could not brook the

apple-cheeked cherubs their spangled halos; nor did the appeals court spare the community theatre's lone dressing room.

Already the fever bucked within us, sharp and outsized as an orphan's fantasy of love. Municipal employees began arriving to work on time and the teachers' union at last negotiated with the school board. A tow-truck driver stopped taking bribes; the head of the riverside waste treatment facility donned a tie for the first time since his divorce. The fire chief buried the

hatchet with the police commissioner and together cops and firefighters pried and smashed like old friends. The mayor made the most of the publicity, winking at the cameras as he hopped twice on his wife's inlaid china cabinet and blowtorched her dressing table. And yet it quickly became clear that, despite a raft of donations and bouts of manic energy, our city hadn't the funds or the manpower to tackle the private sector, to rifle through the countless basements and cubbyholes, the many changing rooms, trophy rooms and storerooms where the bulk of the mirrors sat, smug as barons in a bull market.

And so in the weeks before the Shattering, crews of polite volunteers pinned nametags to lapels and went to work. They extracted mirrors from closet doors, from bathroom medicine cabinets, from the inner sanctums of grandfather clocks. Those they were unable to remove they sprayed with cellulose acetate until a reflection could no longer be discerned. Our legions climbed stepladders to unhinge disco balls from the ceilings of dance clubs and, amid prophecies of divine retribution, they snatched crystal balls from the slender hands of scryers. Predictable but benign opposition came from vested commercial interests: tailors and department store makeup artists fussed vociferously, but, when the time finally came they stood aside, they folded their arms and smirked. Nor did the manager of the amusement park protest as his fisheye mirrors were hauled away from the funhouse. The single altercation occurred at a gentlemen's club near the highway, where three dancers threatened a crew with their spiked stiletto heels if the volunteers dared to dismantle the murky stage.

The day of the Second Shattering arrived. Giant black thunderclouds hovered in the low, roiling sky, swirling like gunsmoke in the strobed light of a fireworks display more elaborate than anyone could remember. The firebrand K. appeared on stage in a spotless white tuxedo and led the crowd in countdown as a wrecking ball swayed ominously over the spotlight pyramid of mirrors.

Five...Four...Three...Two... If they remembered the sound of the first Shattering, it was the sight that defined the second. Teeth clenched and bones stiffened. Like slicing diamonds, like welding steel, a blazing coruscation that etched itself onto our minds with the breathless awe and impossibility of a first kiss. Children would claim it as their first memory and, years later, grandmothers told bedtime stories about how it was brighter than a midday sun, that the pyramid exploded with the ferocity of a million camera bulbs. The ball struck and the mirrors sparkled, sizzled, and evaporated against the muddy night sky, returning, like magic, as a mound of glass slivers so finely extruded that two teenagers raced up the sides and somersaulted back down, unscratched, into the swaying arms of the delirious crowd.

Even the Magpies who attended were forced to concede the grandeur of the spectacle. Those who did not attend

endured fawning accounts for months. In what would later be understood as an act of foreshadowing, K. banned all video and recording devices from the fairgrounds. Only if you were there could you begin to assess the startling magnificence of the Second Shattering. That the event lived solely in our memory served to heighten our delight, and it was this frothy excitement that carried the movement forward on a wave of optimism. We celebrated the renewal of ourselves. We decried the blindness of our past. With pride and daring, we strutted out onto the path we had chosen, settlers of a brave new world.

As in the aftermath of the first Shattering, beards came into fashion and nearly everyone plumped up. Flip-flops usurped loafers, jeans took the place of pantsuits, while hot water use and shampoo sales plummeted. The sound of our laughter bounced off sidewalks, echoing across the green parks where we drank in the beauty of what seemed an especially lush spring. And there were other offspring, too, changes to our city that hadn't been witnessed at the university. Our economy boomed. Restaurants packed to the hilt with customers who didn't hesitate to order a second bottle of wine. Cats tapping toes at new jazz clubs, the belly-up drive-in returned to profit. The philharmonic's director sang Ave Maria as he slid the letters S-R-O into the symphony hall's crumbling marquee. Street performers breathed fire and swallowed swords on our corners, and always we filled their hats

to the brim. There was talk of reviving the boarded-up city market, of planting yellow poplars along the weedy walkways that girded downtown's long-deserted boulevards, of finally cleaning up the river. Several prominent Magpies published a joint apology and declared allegiance to the Seven Years Movement. When a beautiful young woman went streaking through the infield at the minor-league baseball stadium, she received a two-minute standing ovation. Security refused to chase her down and so, with a bow and a wave, she disappeared up the steps of the bullpen.

K. vanished again a few months after the Second Shattering, and again his absence bolstered his stature. For without his guidance, we became feckless. Women began to apply lipstick in front of rearview mirrors. A Magpie-owned radio station started a weekly segment on useful ersatz mirrors: a bowl of water, a darkened television screen, the backside of a polished spoon. Photographs surfaced of an orthodontist staring into a mouth mirror to mousse his thinning hair just days before a cop was brought up on a corruption charge after she'd used the interrogation room's one-way mirror to seduce a date. Shacks equipped with mirrors - lookeasies, they were called - sprang up along the southern border of the city limits, and word soon spread that the mayor himself had been spotted at one, tweezing his nose hairs. So many of the initial gains had been lost. In the midst of our glorious rebirth, we were reverting back to form.

The firebrand K. reappeared without warning, armed with a clear message. In a stentorian speech on the steps of city hall, dressed again in that impossibly white tuxedo, our firebrand took responsibility for the wavering of the Seven Years Movement. It had become all too clear to him during his sabbatical that our

problem was not that we had gone too far, but that we hadn't gone far enough. Brothers, sisters, how could we purge our vanity with half-measures? We'd only romanticized the mirrors, hadn't we? We were hopelessly entranced - no, we were physically addicted to our own image. Did we give the junkie a half-filled syringe and consider him cured? Of course not! And yet we - no, he, K., hadn't possessed the courage to lead us forward, to quit once and for all, cold turkey. Well, no longer. The days of compromise and concession, of peering into the refracted light of a computer screen, of angling a watch's face to capture our own - those days were over.

We saw then an irrevocable kernel of truth: the source of our trouble was never so simple a mirror - it was our very reflection. With K.'s words still ringing in our ears, we began to brainstorm. The exceptions were addressed first. Swiftly the half-silvered mirrors came down from the police station. Swiftly dentists and doctors forfeited their specula amid bromides that any good physician goes not by the sight, but by the touch. Swiftly firemen exchanged glinting axe heads for sturdy plastic hatchets and slathered their gleaming red

trucks in coats of beige and khaki. The next evening, K. reminded us of the secluded warehouse and we sliced through the darkness with gasoline torches in hand. Entranced, we listened to the pop of chiffoniers burning, the slurring of melted glass. In the blackened silence of night the crunch and echo of the fire could be heard for miles. A bitter taste of burning lay upon our tongues like white medicine and the columns of smoke seemed to hang past sunrise. We returned to town ragged and absorbed, discolored tramps set free by our poverty. Renewed, we moved on the final dispensation. Our rear- and side view mirrors stumped us for days, until a reformed Magpie suggested that we simply change the way we drive: two honks for a right turn, three for a left, U-eyes a thing of the past. All at once expressways were barricaded, speed limits cut in half and, in a bill K. wrote himself, the city council criminalized lane changing. The district attorney did her part, pledging to prosecute tailgating as a felony, while our judges assured us they would throw the book at reckless drivers.

It took only a moment to understand the breadth and depth of our charge. Reflections were everywhere, creeping about like so many insects, crouching in dark corners to leap out and rob us of our newfound innocence, waiting to drag us back down into the folly of our past. They were on us, hidden in sequined prom dresses and brilliantine pinafores. They loitered in

swimming pools, hid in the protractors and compasses and scissors of our children's classrooms. At Thanksgiving dinner they sprung from the turkey knife and on Christmas morning they hung on the tree. Reflections shrouded in the tinkle of wind chimes, swaddled in the lullaby of a baby's mobile, cowered in the bell of a trombone. Our very houses were thick with them, pools of light bouncing off varnished cherrywood floors, brass doorknobs, laminated coffee table books. We were inundated, assaulted, overrun, and yet we felt ourselves to be like hunters at the beginning of time, when prey was abundant and the thrill of survival keen. On we marched in a tighter and tighter spiral, hunting reflection without mercy, teasing out accidental mirrors from the mass of objects that inhabited our daily lives. Solutions

came almost faster than problems as teams of engineers worked day and night designing windows that did not capture light, sunglasses that would not cast our likeness back, steel girders that refused to absorb our image. Shiny bicycle bells turned into electric klaxons. Tire rims prematurely oxidized until their rusty faces no longer offended. Wine bottles vanished and oenophiles chattered about the delicious taste that cardboard boxes gave. Did they detect a hint of strawberry? No, smokier, but hard to say exactly what. We put a two-story fountain in the duck pond to ensure that our faces would be rippled beyond recognition and we painted our sinks, tubs and tile with carbon black so that we wouldn't be tempted to steal a glance while washing. An algal layer of lily

pads soon carpeted the reservoir. The more minute the source, the more we relished absorbing ourselves in its eradication. A silver wedding band, a souvenir belt buckle, mother of pearl buttons: all were amended or replaced, charred or shattered.

But not every reflection could be quieted or reborn. Some had to be amputated, the gangrenous limbs of our city. With an unremarkable aye the city council waved goodbye to the amusement park, a victim of its shining roller coasters and winding waterslides. They bulldozed the lacquered roller rink, smashed the pottery coop's vat of celadon glaze, padlocked the glassblower's studio. When a respected zoologist said that a darkened pool represented a dangerous aberration in an animal's natural environment, we simply sold off our polar bears and penguins and cemented off their exhibits. In another landslide referendum we voted to shut down the rail station, the bus terminal and the airport. Planes, trains, buses: these were reflection's country estates, the villas where it would lounge and from which it would undoubtedly slither back. We did not destroy the buildings, for who among us knew what marvelous technologies lay ahead? But until they could find redemption, we cast them out. All were summarily painted black, bolted and walled in, three gigantic, bodiless mausolea.

As our ambitions broadened, we became fascinated with our efforts. Fierce competition grew among the television newsrooms to scoop the heroes of the Movement. One station reported how a toddler had filled his birdbath in with sand so as to keep out insidious pools of rainwater. Another detailed the efforts of seniors in a nursing home to replace one resident's lustrous Silver Star with a matte certificate of gallantry, signed by K. and conferred by the penitent, nose-haired mayor. The most popular channel ended each evening's newscast with a segment on the regular efforts of regular folks. Each night we tuned into Your Movement and watched, rapt, while tears of pride or longing streamed down a spinster's face as she recounted shutting her eyes and taking a brick to her prized collection of miniature crystalline turtle sculptures. Every set in the city flickered with the face of the stuttering third-grader who used her favorite kaleidoscope as a softball bat, and we turned up the volume as a high school band director hummed on about sanding the ivory patina from the school piano's keys. The highest ratings were received during a weeklong profile of the brilliant civil engineer, a box-jawed wunderkind who masterminded the effort to dye our water supply midnight blue. Without his ingenuity, the anchor said, we would have no choice but to close our eyes while we cooked, while we washed the dishes, while we

enjoyed a cool plaster-of-Paris cup of water on our unglazed porches. In a rare interview, K. himself declared that the engineer had put all of us upon his broad shoulders and strode bravely into the future.

All the media spoke with a single voice. Even the venerable newspaper, long stodgy and perpetually scooped, found itself reborn. A tangle of new businesses advertised in its margins. Powertool scourers, Movement-Certified glare-proof DVDs and flatscreens, copper-corrosion outlets. There were front-page tips from the now-unanimous city council, reminding us to throw away all nail polish and beware of shiny apples. The mayor's handy wife wrote a letter to the editor that explained how to save shiny patent leather shoes and purses by coating them in adhesive calcium carbonate. The culmination came every Sunday, when the firebrand K. wrote a column evaluating the week's progress: always better, never quite good enough.

We began to see that purity was an imperfect endeavor. We smashed picture frames only to discover our dim faces reflected in the gloss finish of a photograph. We burned the photographs and found the curling corners of our flaming snapshots cast back at us in the aluminum cap of the lighter. But we worked with the vigilance and steely focus of alchemists, tantalizingly close to our fabled Eureka! Gripped, obsessed, we could think of nothing else. Sunlit church pews remained as empty as the benches in the abandoned bus terminal. The annual holiday clothing drive yielded record lows in the mittens, scarves and canned goods that the settlement house depended on to get through the winter. In

homeless shelters and under bridges, complaints rang out about the sudden epidemic of tight wallets, upturned noses and downcast eyes. But everywhere else, around midnight-blue water coolers and at charred oak dinner tables, the only topic of discussion was how it would feel when we finally achieved that first moment of lasting purity.

We were kept afloat by a careful balancing act. The Seven Years Movement officially declared tin foil eradicated at the same moment it asked us to change all coinage into bills. News that an Australian jewelry magnet had agreed to buy up our diamonds at value was tempered by a city mandate to destroy porcelain. Mirror carp and glassy sweepers were declared illegal just as the aquarium began general reclamation. We wavered between despair and ecstasy, never fully succumbing to either. Our stampeding passions were carefully managed, herded through an endless maze of triumphs and dangers, all in the hope of reaching the other side, some wide- open prairie where safety and bliss awaited.

Gradually we surrendered cameras and camcorders for, as the firebrand K. noted, what were these devices but a sort of durable mirror? Then the Movement demanded that we hand over all photographs and videotapes of living people, glossy or otherwise. They would be held in escrow by the city historian's office, released when the subjects were dead or no longer able to recognize themselves. A brief outcry was stifled when K.

patiently explained over the airwaves that even one source would undo everything, would it not? Wasn't purity, by definition, absolute? In keeping with this logic our portrait artists became still-life painters and

our new street caricaturists once again found another line of work. Even the most durable record was changed. One twin bleached his hair while the other grew a beard. A set of triplets wore veils to the family reunion.

In spite of ourselves we developed a thick-skinned skepticism that lived alongside our wide-eyed hope like some lurid, indescribable secret. A phrase emerged by which to hang words on our fear. Every false declaration or roseate forecast was faced with the same wall of doubt: Wait for the next rain. Each cloud that broke, every light shower revealed to us a million different tiny mirrors: the rain-drenched spine of a maple leaf, puddles in potholes and on sandlots, tiny pools quivering within the folds of a tulip. But not even Mother Nature could stop our march.

While tinkering with shoe polish esters in his garage, a retired bioengineer discovered an organic waterproofing enzyme. The Movement bankrolled the patent, held tests to prove the water-bearing adequacy of subterranean roots and rhizomes. Within days it was on shelves; within weeks every leaf and flower remained dry as a bone. Soon the Movement enacted a ban on outdoor concave objects and repaved our streets at an

angle so that runoff flowed smoothly into the new drainage systems that lined every street, alley and park. It was not long before we forgot that the rain had ever made us anything but wet.

Even as our victories mounted, the pressures built. Months of ruthless searching wore us down as the asymptotic nature of our task drove us to the brink. Police found a young waitress at three in the morning, muttering Almost, Almost, Almost as she scrubbed the blinking neon open sign outside her restaurant with a steel wool brush. A record aficionado whose vinyl collection had been seized months earlier glued cardboard LP covers to his body and ran through the streets, hollering Turn It Up, Baby! Elementary school teachers drowned the class spiders, casualties of their gossamer webs, or buried the butterfly larvae on account of their impending luster, or shaved the guinea pig, because really, who could be too careful?

We became raw with the pursuit. Squabbles over burdens shirked, sharp fingers stabbing the air. Then, like an adulterer witnessing the creep of sunlight across his wife's brow, we were shaken out of our pettiness and set to rights. An aged and beloved matriarch collapsed in her bedroom and was rushed by ambulance to the hospital. When her daughter arrived and asked what happened, she whispered slowly that she had finally gathered up the strength to destroy her hidden mahogany hand mirror, a precious heirloom from her dear,

departed mother. But the pieces on the floor, sparkling their accusations - all of it was too much to bear. K. visited her bedside the day before she passed and wrote in his column of the lessons to be learned from her sacrifice, from her courage. It was with dear old women like this - it was for women like this that we soldiered on.

On the first anniversary of the Second Shattering, the firebrand K., once again bedecked in that blindingly white tuxedo, cut the ribbon to the new high school. It was the first public building erected since reflection's prohibition and it wavered at us as we entered, its smoked palladian windows winking with promise. We scurried behind K. as he strode down hallways lined with white polyethylene lockers, pointing to jet-black cement urinals and desks made of sanded PVC. Breathlessly we took in the synthetic rubber basketball court, the Bakelite staplers, the mountains of Styrofoam cups and plates stacked against the polyurethane walls of the cafeteria. A sanctuary, K. called it. A monument to our endeavor. Proof of possibility. And indeed, he was right. Nowhere could we find anything more telling than the shadows of our profiles. An entire building devoid of metal: no steel bolts, no aluminum lintels, no manganese microchips. A miraculous collage of matte oak, dull plastic and concrete. Even the most persistent sources of reflection - cooking oil, fluorescent light tubes, soap

bubbles - had disappeared. The new high school was our new beginning. Purity was within our grasp.

Afterward, in the frenzied hum of the reception, amid a ruck of dignitaries and scribes, bearded by a forest of microphones, the firebrand K. struck a frosted plastic wine glass with a Formica knife three times and toasted to our success. Here, now, is our moment! Brothers, sisters! Remember this feeling. And do not forget to forget.

Word soon spread across the city. We poured out onto arched streets and bone-dry fields, set off fireworks in the on-ramps of abandoned expressways. We shimmied across abraded parquet floors, splashed in algal ponds, a breathed, blind vision of ourselves, a chanting, dancing, fizzing ocean that did not reach high tide till sunrise.

In the years that followed our little city scraped away the last few would-be mirrors until there were none. Discussion of appearance never was formally outlawed, probably because action was unnecessary - the taboo surrounding such folderol did the trick. Children were born and grew up without ever knowing whether they had big ears or buckteeth or freckles that appeared in the summertime, and schoolyard insults evolved from barbs about four-eyes into chants about vanity. Our pockmarks and cleft chins nagged at us for a time and then faded peacefully from memory, like the words of an old

nursery rhyme. The bald lost their hair before they realized it was gone, and cowlicks and gray streaks abounded. Toothpaste stayed caked to the corners of our lips, our cheeks and our beards until a husband or a mom saw fit to flick it off.

Of course we couldn't get away from certain things - the fat knew they were fat and the short knew they were short. But the importance of these impressions diminished when we knew nothing of ourselves, no yardstick. Plastic surgeons left town or became ice sculptors. Trophy wives displayed at the country club remained blissfully unaware of their husbands' designs, and Adonises married plain, earnest high school sweethearts, trembling in disbelief at their luck. Homecoming queens thought themselves merely genial, the pregnant felt nimble, and love handles grew into their name.

But every now and again, after prom or before a wedding, two lovers could be found in some secluded spot, their fingers woven together and their heads tilted to the side, staring deeply and seriously into one another's glistening eyes, searching, searching, as if trying to remember a secret.