

Grant Cogswell

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Girls, talking.

“Poor Caleb,” and,

When it'd been three days the men all lined up at the back of the Town Land Line, spread their arms so their fingertips touched, and walked at a pace through town and out the launch road, and came to the other fence on South Crater Ridge without a trace of Caleb. So they cut the fence and walked out and saw a trail, all of 'em hoping it would end soon, because they didn't want to get out in the Test Zone, no matter how safe they says it is. If it's so safe how come they put up signs and a fence.

They didn't have to go far out, because up the second crater ridge they saw the dirt crumbled away, and on the other side, leaning up against the wall, cold with his dry blood running out his wrists to the crater floor, which was so far down it could not be seen, there was Caleb.

All of Williamstown who was old days enough to know who the Dakeses was thought the same thing about them: that they was common as dirt. So why should it come as any surprise that Caleb Williams, whose dad was way up there in Minerals, and who got straight A's all through his first two years of high school, should suddenly drop out of Engineering without a reason why, start wearing raggedy clothes like a rock addict and become some kind

of King of the Smoking Area, and suddenly take off running around with the oldest Dakes girl, Danelle, the one who was pregnant by her daddy twicet and hasn't gone to school in years and works out at the restaurant at Launch 5 and wears them pearly wigs?

Distance.

The trees and town here and the streets, which his brother's eye runs up at night, Caleb knows, are an illusion. Water is sucked up, half ice, at the poles and is piped halfway across the hemisphere, where it melts, and could nearly boil in places in the daytime if it did not know the night would come and make it, still flying fast through the pipe, want to freeze. He's seen those men come in from the pipeline, in from the poles, their eyes all buggy from the distance seen and not remembered, smoking rocks like they were old cigarettes.

He's not afraid to come up from the valley floor and look out at it all, even though it scares the hell out of him. Not his brother, though, Tab looks out while Caleb is standing there silent and says, "Isn't it glorious?" He can stand up on the rim of the South Crater and watch a test, while everybody else is down at the amphitheater, watching it silhouette the houses. Not Tab. He wants to see the line of light spread down the horizon while the dust turns to glass and then burns. Caleb will go with him every time, until he refuses, which is later, and because it cannot leave his mind. When he is in bed down in the valley and just seeing the rope from the swing out his window and the rooftops on the next hill and the stars, all that distance that lies beyond it is pulling out around him in his head. Sometimes it tortures him so bad that he has to get up, open the window and smoke a rock, leaning out so his parents don't smell it, and then his whole field of vision narrows down to a point, a speck that he could draw a circle around and it would look like a dot of dirt on a page.

Not Tab, though. When he turns around so he is not facing it, all the distance leaves his eyes. And it is then that Caleb, seeing the long line of burning glass behind his brother which makes him look

infinitely small and vulnerable, and as if it might swallow him up, wants to take him in his arms and cover him, down into the dirt where they would be pressed so close there would not even be enough air.

Girls, talking.

The way I heard it told, he came into the coffee shop at the Launch on a Wednesday night, about the only time between the Monday shuttle and the Friday back, and the weekends when it's all tourists, when there's nobody around.

He came in just for coffee I guess, it was late, or early, depending on how you look at it, and there might have been trouble at home like there sometimes is when a boy is sixteen, and he just wanted another place than home to watch the first sun come up, and the second follow it up the sky like a baby dog or a lost little brother. Anyway she was there, and I reckon took him in back, just free of all his books and equations not a month yet, and gave him something else to think about all the time. It's rude by me to picture it, but I'll bet she rode high on him, both of them listening for the door, with him knowing nothing, just following, and her knowing how to please a man, even if he wasn't a man yet, until he was like to explode.

Flor told me and it was her that came in afterwards I guess, and saw the counter in a desert and her uniform wet and rumped and him sitting there pretending to drink his coffee, breathing like it'd just up and chased him around the room.

That was when people didn't see him so much anymore, and he would spend nights down at the Launch when she was on, getting tough guy with whatever rocket assholes chose to try and put their hands on her. He grew a wispy old boy-moustache and we saw him for a while, always with her, in the stands at the tests on Saturday night, and when the purple and blue billowed up from the crater wall, sand atoms fusin' into one another, her mouth would open and those sweet lips would go O and you'd see him turn, lost in lust or whatever, and instead of watching even the most glorious tests,

look at her.

Those Williamses! Pretty as half a family portrait, with Bob Senior dead and one boy missing, four rows away, my heart went out to them! Big old Tab gone home to Chapel Hill, saw southern girls who'd never been to space, comes back and sees his brother with her! Her!

When they took the train to see the Hendersons and the cities on the Plate, which were supposed to have streets made of fused glass with wisps of color running through them that shifted and changed with the angle of the sun, so that no one ever tripped or fell because they were always looking down as they walked, the conductor gave the family big rocks and said, "Chew it, it'll put you to sleep," and they did, all except for Caleb, who held his in his cheek and watched the land fly by so fast he was glad he hadn't eaten or surely he'd be sick. This went on for a half hour, with his eyes jumping and catching flash bits of landscape, until he fell asleep with the rock behind his jaw, while the rest of the family stayed motionless and silent in their three-day naps.

When the sun had set he woke from a haze of nightmares, screaming, and pulled on his parents, on Tab, who were so deep in their slow rock-dreams that they didn't twitch. When he looked out from under the windowshade and saw the burnt land flying by and heard the conductors' frantic jabbering in the next car and could still hear the terrible voices of people he thought he knew in his own head, he bit down on the rock and swallowed it all at once, and pleaded, murmuring in some other language, for its closure to come.

Size: All of the figures are in any child's textbook, but Caleb no longer pays attention to those things. What he does know is that it costs twenty-five dollars an hour to call the Hendersons, their closest neighbors in those first five years, and for less than a penny he can spend all day on the phone (in secret) with Danelle, if he doesn't feel like walking all the way across town.

Professor of Histories.

CONSTANTINOPLE

Constantinople had started to empty out towards the end of the previous century, while the mill still employed a third of the county's workforce. But for forty years more the town survived, getting nervous and dark over the threats of closing and the pressure from the government to slow down production and stop putting waste in the river. For a whole generation in those final years the protesters would come out from the State Capitol on weekends and stand in the river road carrying signs and talking to reporters. Sometimes all the police watching would get a call to be on the other side of town, and then the union boys would come in big pickups and bust some heads and yell at the protesters and smash up their cars.

Finally the plant was called to close, and federal marshals had to be called in to patrol the streets, while the men prowled around empty-handed and got drunk and fought and had little riots. A month after the plant closed the town was dead but full of people, who haunted the streets full of boarded and barred windows like stoned daytime ghosts. Then the government offered every family in Constantinople County free land on Albers-7, and the Space Office in Cleveland had to run buses to Constantinople to pick up all the people who wanted to register. And bit by bit, they left. And when the winter came again some of the property in the county had been bought for summer homes, and some of the old people were still around, enough to keep the road clear where it came through Constantinople Township, but come spring grass and rust took possession of everything else, and while the millmen and coffee shop girls learned to grow things on a new planet and built other coffee shops and mills of their own, the last of the grandparents in the valley were dying off, and while the river had fish for the first time since the First World War, the weeds broke up the streets and the forest reclaimed the town.

Girls, talking.

That Dakes girl (not long after that) went with her family when they homesteaded on the Plate, which is just for the greedy and the insane anymore because now it's next to free land. Raising three-headed sheep and goats with no eyes that glow in the dark out there, I reckon.

And the Williamses went back to Iowa, it's all just taken too much out of them, I guess, except for Tab, who you can see all around.

Oh, Caleb, you wonder how a boy gets like that. My sister went to school with him and said sometimes he did the strangest things, asked the queerest questions, but funny, you know, questions you would never think to ask yourself, and even in grade school he talked about the tests, about how the bigness of this planet scared him.

I remember one Easter Day when I was going to school still, a hot day, he came up our road, and he was maybe nine years old, and called me out and give to me a flower, a big blue one, one of those that turn to cold water there in your hand. Oh, he laughed at that, with me standing there and that cold water that felt so good coming through my fingers. And he took off back down the road all of a sudden, his legs going ever' which way, like he didn't know which step he'd take next, like he was making it up as he went along. Across the way that boy laid down in the sand and started yelling things, maybe to me or maybe to the sky, I'm not sure which 'cause I couldn't hear.

Jay, who knew Caleb.

Once when Caleb was young he saw a small plane fall into the cornfield across the road from his grandmother's house. The corn leaves were dry and brittle, and thin: it was autumn and dust from the road where it topped the crater rim covered everything and rose like smoke when the airplane came tumbling through the corn-and-grass. The men from the silos and the houses on the rim came

running down and into the corn to try and get at the plane. When, from every direction, they converged in the rows, the plane's fuel tank made a noise as shallow and soft as when you put your finger in your mouth and make your lips pop, like a wine cork coming out, like that fuel tank was when it squirted orange flame onto the corn and suddenly it was too smoky to see.

What happened next is why I don't believe it was Caleb's body they found half-eaten with the blood, by the rim of another crater ridge. The men who came to help were on fire, with their white workshirts full of air and going up like sailcloth, and them all screaming appearing to Caleb and his grandma now and then through gaps in the milky smoke. They turned and turned trying to get out and finally fell in the field when burning corn was at every side, and tried to wait it out, rolled on the flaming leaves that fell on themselves, and in this way some survived, while the old woman and the little boy, who could have directed them out, if they had had the language for it then, stood on the backporch, too scared (or something else?) to move. When the fire ended in the dust at the ends of the rows, the doctors gauzed up the skins of the men and picked at the charred bodies inside the plane, and the smell of burnt flesh, which Caleb would again and again recognize as the smell of death, when they brushburned the rabbits out, when the launch burned, lingered until the snow froze it up into the ground and even the next spring and summer occasionally a hot wind would send a hint of it up from the ground, calling whoever smelled it back to that fall afternoon.

Caleb would not take his own life, I know that. People change, but not that much. Change really is the recognition of what has been there all along. I think he is somewhere else.

Maybe he is living under the sky in the Test Zone, drinking the water no one will drink, shooting the game no one will shoot because of the stories, and going to sleep knowing the day may come early and quick, fusing his hair and skin, burning him like a gnat caught under a match.

Maybe he is on Earth back in those Iowa towns he heard about and never saw. But Caleb Williams would not kill himself.

Bob Williams is dead and they named Williamstown after him.

Caleb knows how to walk like his dad; Tab can't, he spent too much time building up his leg muscles at Chapel Hill, rowing crew and walking, with the higher gravity. He's too fit, and his whole body knows where it's going. He can't do that swagger, from the heavy torso sort of pulling the legs along, he didn't spend enough time behind a desk to have the hunch like their father did, like he was still tabulating metal counts and had never gotten up.

Caleb can do all this so perfectly that sometimes, when one sun is down and the other is just behind the crater ridge, his shape coming up from the field looks just like the old man a little lighter, faster there in the shadow of the rocks, and Cora will look out the kitchen window and catch her breath.

Sometimes in the house at night he does it in front of her on purpose, as if to say, I'm him! I'm him! and she sees it and her face lifts and then gets sad, making him sorry he did it but leaving him feeling good and warm inside. Then he does it walking out onto the porch where nobody can see except the stars, and it feels good. He hunches and thinks, Tab can't do this. He's all her. I'm him.

Caleb knows there wasn't really enough talk between the two of them while he was alive to justify this sort of talismanic action. But nevertheless he thinks of himself as the sort of secret son Bob Williams thought he never had. If he told him it was all the things from his father inside himself that made him spend hours at the South Crater, smoking rock, just a little, enough to make it seem like the space of blue he could see bounded by the crater rim was the whole sky, the old man would say, bullshit. But still Caleb thought it was the gap of generations (one and a half, in their case) that bridged this misunderstanding and the same harmony Bob had found in the knowledge of the precise metallurgic composition of the planet, and from that its creation, its drying at the center and freezing at the poles, was what Caleb saw, below the crater wall, in his visions, of Earth, which he had never seen, and of the long path of circumstance which had brought him to where he was and would soon send him back.

And hadn't it been Bob Sr. who had said, when he was drunk, a week before he died, that when he was young he had deserted from the Army and gone into the desert to live in a cave in the valley of the Colorado, for no reason but that he had felt something, which dissolved there, was calling him? Hadn't he said after this, "Oh, I was a fool," and not meant it?

Professor of Histories.

They had wanted to name it Bob Williams' planet, but Bob was too shy and besides, when everybody in Con County came, and the tests started, it wasn't even that anymore. He had wanted it named Cora, after his wife, but she only said, "Bob, I don't think I could handle that," and so it went without a real name, and on charts and documents it was called just Albers-7, and in conversation, away from it, on Earth or maybe on Albers-5, which was named after Orville Wright, and where it was a third of the sky sometimes, people called it the big planet, and that was all anyone needed to say. Did anyone have to say it was too big to be named?

If Caleb were to examine his soul right now, he'd find it as clean as music. But that's not what he's about these days, instead floating free between commitments, or commission on any major thought or action. What he is doing is hiking up to the big crater to the west that's just inside the township line, sitting under it and sometimes smoking a couple of rocks in a plastic straw he's gotten from the diner, and looking out over the flatlands, full below of trees and small farms and salt-pits and high silos for corn next to farmhouses, packed together down the road to the other side, where only the trees hang on because it's too steep, and beyond that the road stops because there is nowhere else in town to go save for the Test Zone.

He has visions here that he doesn't recognize as such, coming up on seventeen, and if he were aware of what he's about to come upon he'd trade those visions in, because they are setting into stone his ideas about this world, and wait for what will come and blow all those ideas apart, and leave him wandering through days like these

with only one thing on his mind: her.

She's not as bad as they think, would be what she'd say in defense of herself if they said what they thought, if she didn't have two brothers who'd come in and kick anybody's ass. She's got compassion for folks is one, which is why she takes in these rocket boys, one of whom gave her the last child, who she's got to say is her daddy's, otherwise he would have come in and started busting heads, no matter who. As for tourists, the fusion bomb is all that brings them here, but still when she's on she don't let Homer spit in their eggs.

Also, she's saving herself for her one true love, who will one day come through that diner door and have such a look in his eye and a way of cocking his head that she will know immediately that their meeting was directed by Divine Providence. In this way she is chaste as her own new-born child, inside her inside a pillar of unstained virtue.

Girls, talking.

And the last night anyone saw Caleb wasn't long after his brother came back to bury Bob, that one night they was in the launch, full of people 'cause a tourist rocket had just come in, somebody said something—he'd, Caleb, had been carrying his weight around too heavy of late, and punches was set flying, it not even being a rocket night like the bad ones are, just tourists and Marines. Caleb came out with a bloody nose and one old man was vomiting up on the counter, moaning like, "Oh, oh," and Caleb moves up and over the bar, grabbed the Dakes girl by the wrist and led her around and out to the front, where there was yelling in those big spotlights Frank's got out there, and they could all see them, but wouldn't nobody go outside. Then the police captain came out and told neither of them to leave and everyone saw through the glass doors him pull on her and her back, him again and her clawin' his arm and screeching like a cat, screaming at him, and the captain watching it all while he turned on a heel and vanished around the corner and into the dark.

Professor of Histories.

Once, when Tab and Caleb were boys, when Tab was eleven and Caleb was about the age his brother was when he witched for water, the second aqueduct was being run through town and a crew came and camped up in the high flatlands, and girls from the town would go up and get money from the men to let themselves be looked at, and of course sometimes for more than that. And families in the town who were waiting for the rockets to come and had no work would rent out rooms in their houses to the men who were losing themselves sleeping under the open sky and needed four walls around them while they rested, and to eat good food, and hear children laughing in the next room late at night.

Then the boys would paint their faces and sneak up to the workers' camp and kick stones in the shadows and make noises like warrabawarrabawaba because the men were very afraid of ghosts and said they saw spirits and things of all kinds when they were not close to a town. So Tab went to the basement for flour and cooking oil and Caleb found shoe polish and two pairs of plastic vampire fangs from Halloween, and they fixed themselves up and climbed out the window when the night was darkest, just before moonrise. On the edge of the camp clearing they shuffled like kinds of creatures that had never lived and made argabarga-barga sounds. One man who had walked out to take a piss and be alone with himself behind a rock was standing naked in the dark saw them and gave a little yelp. So they circled him, shaking their terrible heads and frothing their spit and clawing the air, winding it in and drawing closer to him. When they were roaring near enough to touch his bare sides, which were still as stone, the moon came over the rocks and lit everything up like a soft, grey sun. Then the nude man saw the lines the sweat made running down their painted faces, and their tiny shoulders that could only belong to little boys, and in a rage he kicked off his shoes and ran after them, and all three flashed across the ridge above the town like playing cards. The man was big, and fast, and for every pace the boys took he took two, and his were twice as long. But they knew the rocks, and he kept slamming his

bare feet into boulders, and scratching his privates in the tumbleweeds. They ran to the spillway by where the aqueduct lay open and unfinished. The water came out there onto the ground, and had formed a deep rushing pool where some boulders dammed it up. "There," Tab said, and the boys dropped into the water and held themselves under it, while the paint washed off them and it was so cold that to Caleb it felt like he imagined it would be being skinned alive. But they held themselves under and when the man stumbled to the pool he looked down to where the footprints ended in the water, but all he saw, swimming against the flow were two enormous gray fish, and he thought that these had swallowed the boys, or that they had been turned into them by a ghost, and in either case it did not matter.

Size 2: Geological Hazards.

It is so big that it is unable to contain itself--that's what the scientists would say about this planet. The continental plates are so huge that every day, someplace they give way to the forces bending them, just a millimeter here, there, which add up and throw shock waves across a hundred thousand miles until there is a weak spot, a fault in the crust, and then the ground buckles big, swallowing mountains, oceans of sand. They say the magnetic forces inside the planet have to swing out over so much full, thick space that they lose their ends and cannot connect. There is evidence to support the theory that the poles switch every century or so, and the juxtaposition is due. This, if it happens, will do more than make water run uphill and the magnetic trains go backwards to the stations they just left. There will be storms, there will be earthquakes. This green valley the pioneers have made here could fill with sand, or ice, in an hour. But the people have not been told all of this, and so their lives go on with no expectation of a sudden end....

....down to the 1147th one of them, standing on the oak ridge, who sees this valley as nothing else is, something permanent, something safe. Beyond that above the hills, is the desert, and that is all that is unsure, all that can envelop men and rise up against them.

Item: An angel passing by can see Caleb in his leather jacket, walking under the big archway sign that is the first thing you see coming out on the road from the launch, and says, in big black painted letters on the wood, and red neon for night, surrounded by red-white-and-blue trim,

Welcome To
WILLIAMSTOWN!!

and hear Caleb, walking down from that launch hill where they used to have picnics, *ah! we were so young! thinking, who am i? i'm Caleb Williams*, walking under the sign proclaiming the town named for his late father, not giving a whittle that his, his own name, not his father's really, and Tab's too, because his father wouldn't let them name the planet after him when they tried, and wouldn't approve of this, *thinking, i'm Caleb Williams and i love my girl and i love my brother and i love my father and my mother*, and wonder, in it's quick flight past here, at this all.

Water.

But they were the first family here, shuttled down before the pipeline was built and when it was all still desert, and with a huge metal tank of water and enough wood to build a house, which Mr. Williams did, with a porch that wrapped clear around, and the timbers at the top of each wall coming out at the ends, so it looked squared off and solid, like the house back in Cedar Rapids.

They didn't need the tank after all, because after the third week they found that if they blindfolded little Tab and sent him spinning out across a crater's floor, he could find the spot to dig where the water had condensed in natural cisterns over the bedrock, one over the other, and down, and down, for a million million years. Then Tab wandered all over the homestead, pressing his feet down hard when the feeling came, and the hard pressings finally formed a line, under which was the spring. He had found the ancient riverbed.

It was around this time that Caleb was born, and now when they see the slides taken then, for Tab it is like hearing himself speak a language he cannot remember, seeing the way his eyes would roll back in his head before he stomped.

And here is Tab, head up, eyes back, while baby Caleb, looking at the ground, clutches his brother's pant leg.

I should leave you with something like a conclusion to this very short and important life on a planet in the future, a future most of us will see one way or another. This planet is due to destroy anything on its surface so delicate as a town of this size any decade now. I could blow them up while Caleb is looking at this fertile valley he will never leave. They put him in a bag, and walked back down to Williamstown. The switching of the poles could fry all this scenery in a second and send this boy's soul spinning out like a piece of lace into a landscape he does not recognize. I could ask you to believe that Caleb's bled body is a ruse and like in the novels Danelle reads when business at the Launch Cafe gets slow, Caleb has killed an evil twin who showed up late one night to slaughter the Williamses and avenge his abandonment to the wilds, his father's abandonment to calcium cigarettes and early death. With Caleb's apparent suicide and the evil twin in a grave under Caleb's name, he and Danelle could ride up into the sky and go anywhere, holding themselves in that perfect moment where all they need to do is pick a direction to fly in their stolen rocket, while she feels their baby's first kick.

This is no joke, but like in a joke I'll offer two possibilities and enter a third. This is not a planet where reality happens in ways we are used to. The scientists are waiting to tell that on this planet up becomes down occasionally. Those who cross the wastes dream of the cities that will one day be built here. They walk those streets, not with their legs, because their bodies are the ones left behind on the train, in the laborers' camp, stone-faced. They've seen boys turn into animals and small-town girls into fearful monsters that eat them up, and it is bliss. They slide out of their burnt foreheads onto a plain where anything is possible, and happens.

Caleb cowered from that plain, I think, because it was where he

came from. Bob Jr. was the baby conceived in Iowa, not Caleb. He is in the ground on Albers-7, still dreaming his womb-dreams, and Caleb is the child they made mourning Bob Jr's loss. So here's Caleb. Everyone always told Caleb he looked like a ghost, and in the half-a-night where his wrists are bleeding into the desert I see him in the same field Girl, talking saw him in when she was sixteen, and there he is again, talking into the sky, and not being familiar with these wide-open spaces, I can almost, but not quite, hear what he is saying.

And here's Caleb, at five, snaking his finger along the Ohio River, on the green border, where it turns north to point at Columbus, then back again, Constantinople! He moves the word across his tongue and then ends it, and all day it hangs in him repeating itself like a litany. Constantinople! while he runs across the crater floor, getting green yet, and at the spillway, no Ohio, but Constantinople! here too, Constantinople! he yells, across the field to the barn where Bob Sr. hands the last loft support up to Tab so he can nail it in.