

LIVING
FUCKING
CREATURES
BY
PORPENTINE
CHARITY
HEARTSCAPE

The success of
battle today
depends more on
conceptual
coherence than
on territorial
proximity. Thus,
one battle might
be fought in
order to secure
victory on
another
battlefield.
-Schlieffen

We live in a tin can. A mechanical beetle sprayed with graffiti. The landerwalker. She walks on legs that punch holes in roads. She can hunch low and go fast like a centipede, or pick her way up rocks like a goat.

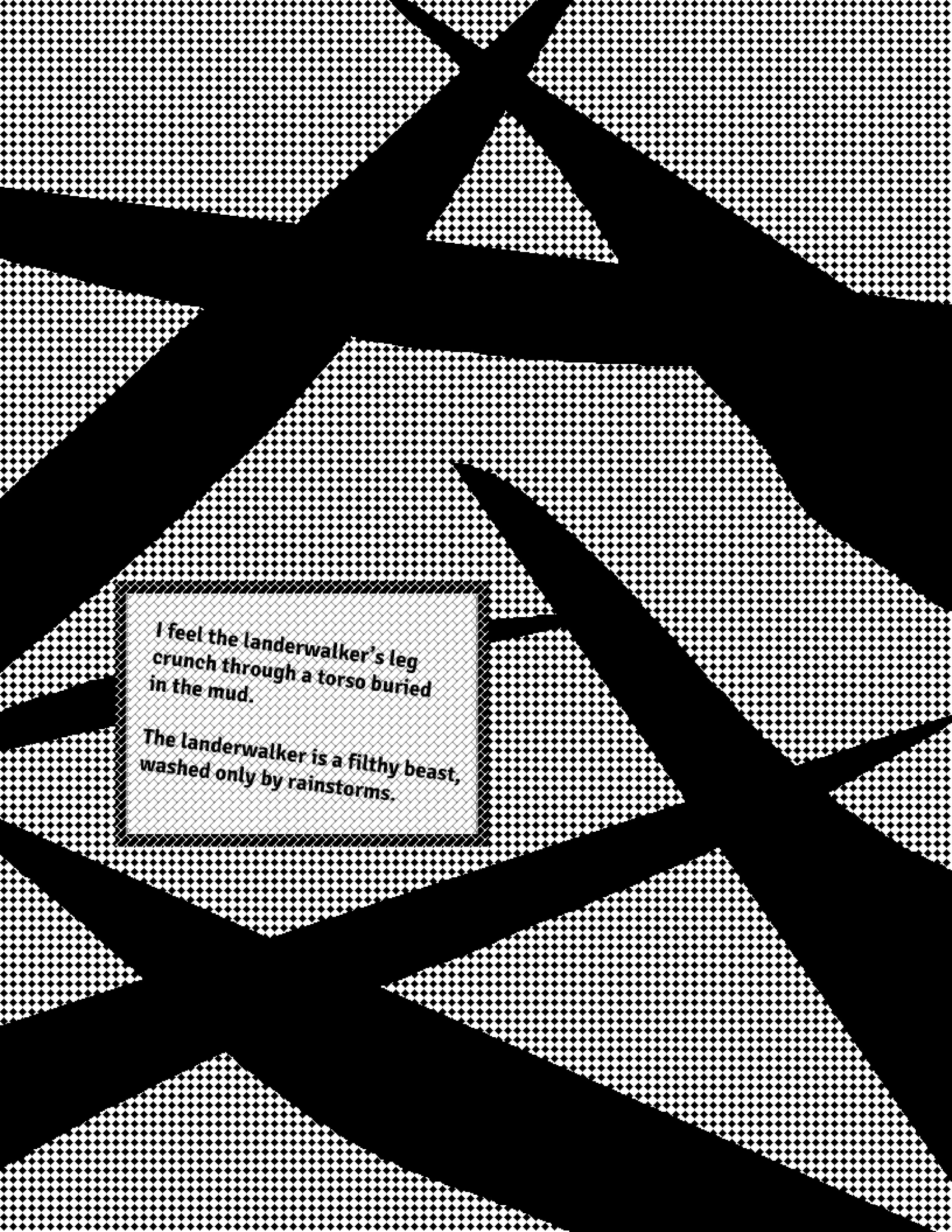
She has two guns. One is lazy and powerful, the other nervous and fast. The difference between punching a hole in a building or shredding a gaggle of torsos.

The inside is dirty metal, blood scrubbed a hundred times, maybe more, I don't know how old she is, it always smells like sweaty copper. I feel like part of the engine. We're just machine parts that can pop and bleed. We try to dress it up, put our photos and profanities on the walls but imagine opening up your truck and seeing the carburetor put a photo on the wall, that would be pretty silly wouldn't it?

This is my seat. There is a photo glued next to my sighting glass. It is not my photo. I found it in the mud and wiped it off. It's a black and white landscape with a little house. I stare at that house and imagine how green the grass is. I imagine who is in the house. What her voice might sound like. It is hard to imagine a voice that is not in the register of whistling metal and shuddering earth.

There is a crack in my glass.

I vent the landerwalker, dropping a mass of shells and waste behind us, days of pissing and shitting and firing, we can't go outside for a single second. Shit-encrusted casings.



**I feel the landerwalker's leg
crunch through a torso buried
in the mud.**

**The landerwalker is a filthy beast,
washed only by rainstorms.**

Canto is the leader. She knows shit. She has antennas.

Deacon was a chaplain until they needed another driver. She has a bible in her jacket and reads it every night. She has a cat's tail.

Rur is a crazy bitch who smells bad and makes you smile when nothing else can. She has bat ears.

Armstad is the mechanic. She trained at an actual academy or something, was a certified engineer before she got drafted. She has good skin and little antlers.

I'm just me. I do sighting and whatever random shit needs doing. If something happens to someone else I take their spot.

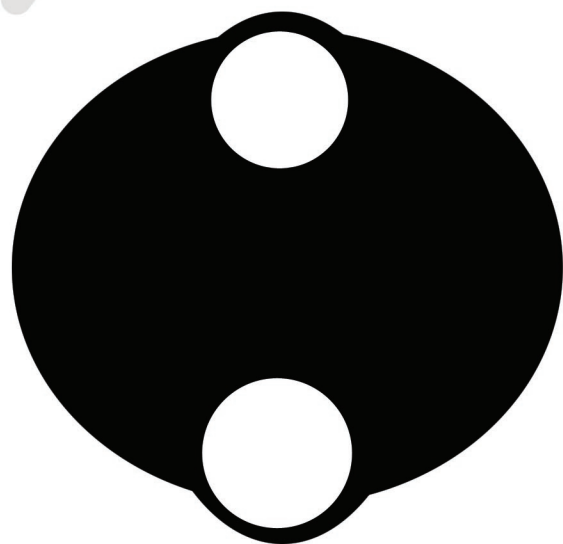
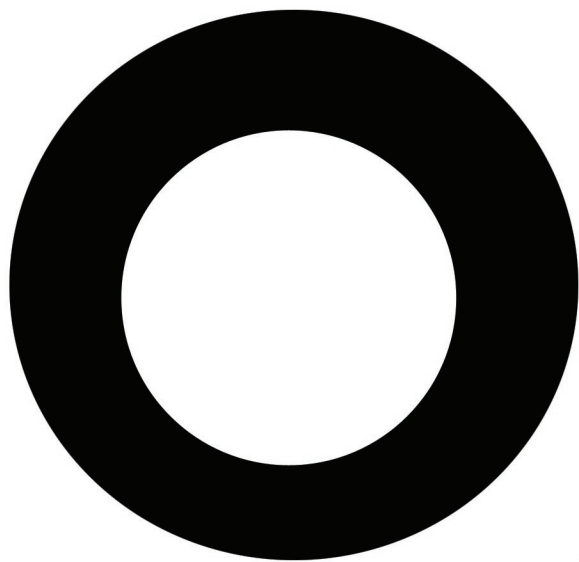
"THE ENEMY HAS EVOLVED DENSE,
ELONGATED ORIFICES LIKE DUCKS. THIS IS
TO INHIBIT OUR SEXUAL PLEASURE."

Armstad and Rur
are laughing so
hard they're
crying, pointing
at a corpse got
flung by an
explosion or
something so it
landed funny on
the edge of a
building.

WE'RE CREEPING DOWN
THE STREET, I'M
SWEEPING MY LENS BACK
AND FORTH SWEATING
THAT SOMEONE IS GOING
TO SNEAK UP AND ATTACH
A BOMB TO US LIKE
SQUISHING GUM UNDER
THE DESK AT SCHOOL.

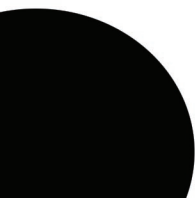
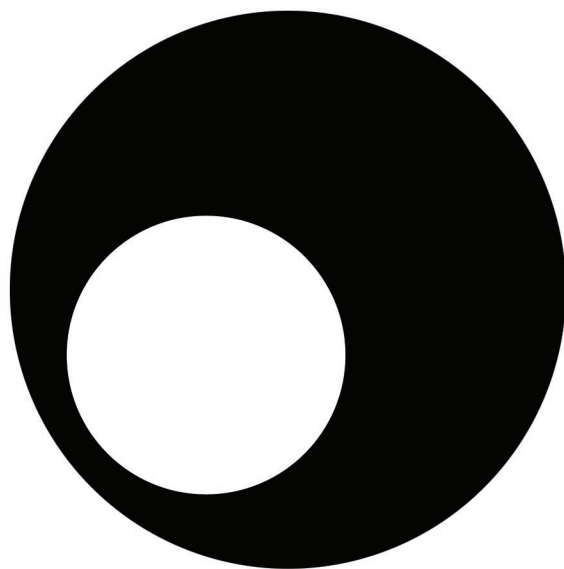
RUR: "I NEED TO SHIT. "

CANTO: "YOU TAKE A SHIT
AND I'LL STICK MY DICK
UP YOUR ASS. "



We find a jar of aspirin in a shelled-out pharmacy. The pills inside are pulverized by the impact. We drink the bitter powder with rainwater.

Canto does map calculations on the landerwalker with chalk, her station pale with the dust of too many fucking miles.



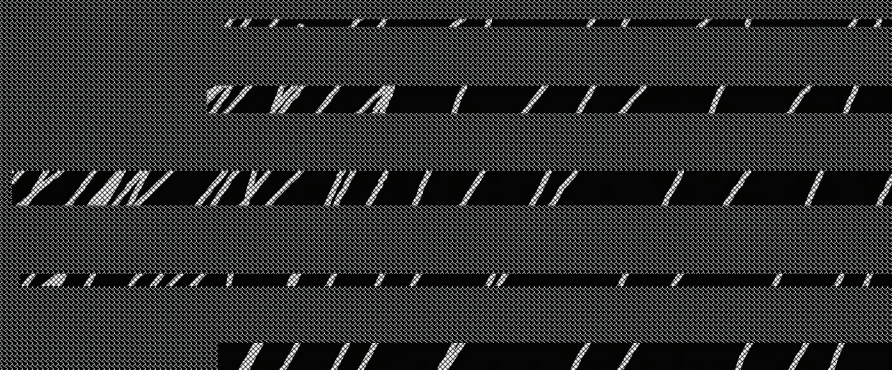
Rur is getting in my face. "You
shit with that mouth? You
shit? You spit-lickle
dick-goblin fuck-shitter
ass-cunt piece of your mother.
fuck-head. Suck a fucking
broken knife of your mother.
Your mother. She was a fuck.
A shitty shit slutty dick piss.
Uh. And so forth."

My snake tongue flicks out when I
don't expect it, it's a little
embarrassing. I don't like losing
control around other people. But
we're all used to each other's shit
now. I know Rur doesn't mean it.
She just has a lot of noise inside
her. And it hurts her more than
me.

They send the mentally ill
bitches to the front lines. No
room in a hospital if your
wound isn't written on your
body.

I straight up told them, you
send me out there, I'll cut my
whole squads throats in the
night. They didn't care. Put me
on the goddamn funicular.

That's us. Came from bad,
headed toward worse.



We're stationed at this town where the landerwalkers are meeting. We barter for cigarettes and pair off for handjobs. A few tents here and there, but this camp won't last longer than the night. The land is changing behind us.

I hear firing. Why haven't the sentries sent up a flare, yelled, anything?

It's coming from inside the camp. Just around the block. The firing cuts off suddenly.

I run around the corner. I see Rur up on top of a landerwalker towering over a soldier. It's our landerwalker, the soldier is Armstad.

Rur screams, don't you fucking shoot those geese, if you shoot geese I will stomp you into the mud. They're living fucking creatures.

She jumps down and walks away.

Armstad gets up and yells, why do you care?

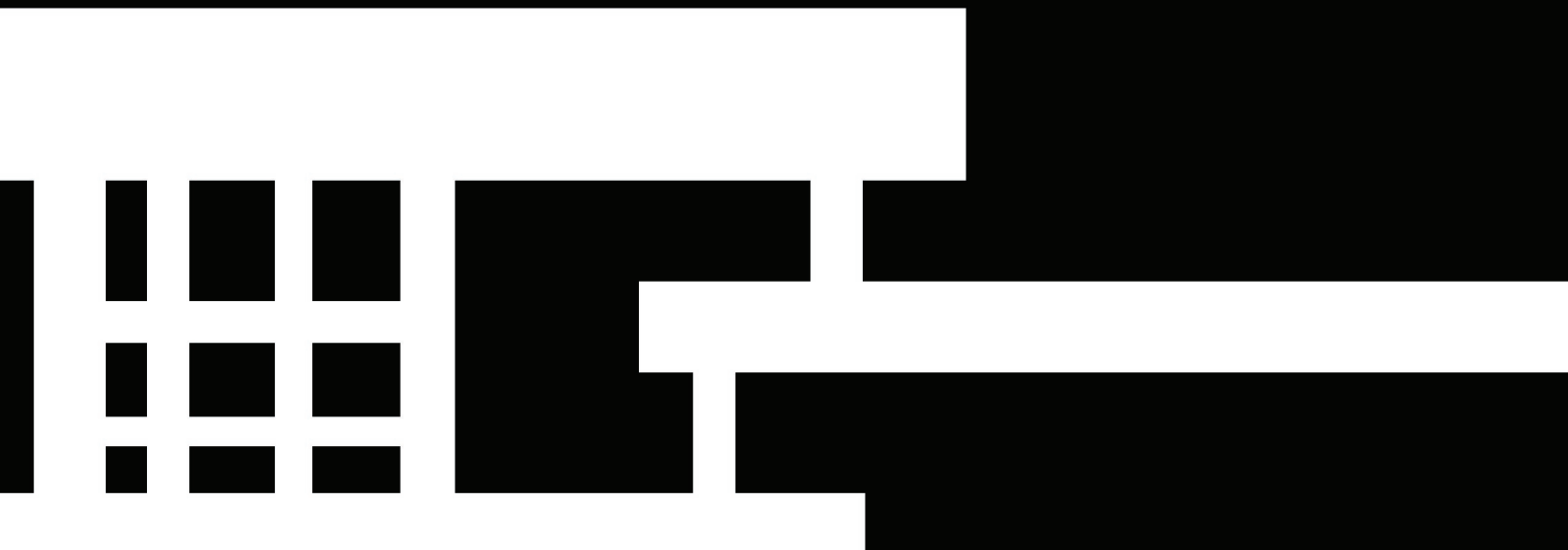
Rur turns around. "Ain't no pleasure in killing dumb animals." She scratches her flea-bitten head, flicks away flakes of dead skin.

"You kill people."

"I don't kill people, I kill humans."

Heard about this one landerwalker, the gunner let off a grenade inside with everyone else there. We call that tomato juice.

Some people lose it, you don't know when they're going to blow. I don't know when I will. It'll happen, but I won't be able to stop it.



Rur turns and says to me all of a sudden, "I'm sorry about cussing at you. It just lets off my nerves. I don't know what these hands would do if I wasn't whistling like a tea kettle."

Deacon has little piles of tobacco around her, loose papers fluttering in the cold wind. Her head bandages are crusty brown. She's lucky it was just a primitive weapon that shoots metal through a tube. Or those blues eyes of hers would be sapphires.

"Why are you unrolling cigarettes, Deek?"

She looks down, lips parted like she's thinking of what to say.

"Well, Armstad, if you really want to know, I'm unrolling cigarette papers because the bible is missing a page, and I believe it may have been used to roll up a quantity of tobacco."

Rur shambles over, draining a bottle of some despicable ferment. "Someone fucked with your bible?"

"This is what I used to think. That it was my specific bible being fucked with. But after I got shot in the head last night, I suddenly developed a new way of thinking. It was revealed to me that the platonic Bible itself is missing a page, omitted from the councils of canonization for impure and unrighteous reasons, to keep us shrouded in ignorance and confusion. My bible missing a page is no more than the simple brute animal selfishness of my fellow crew, but in this small theft the greater theft is hinted at. This missing page of the one true Bible travels the world, waiting to be found by those with the eyes to see."

"A lot of cigarettes have been rolled since before you were even born. How do you know it wasn't smoked sometime in the past or that right now some poor sap isn't enjoying the fine aroma of your burning page?"

"Well that too was revealed to me. If the page is destroyed, it reappears elsewhere, springing eternal. For it is written that the door to salvation shall not be closed, but until the day of judgment, the path shall remain open."

"The bible already talks about getting saved."

"For the ordinary person, yes. But the things I've done, that we've done, there isn't any hope in the bible as it stands. I checked very carefully. And I know I'm going to burn."

"So this page has something the others don't."

"It describes a method of absolution for people who have found themselves doing battle with dark forces, and who have succumbed to those dark forces, and become lost."

Armstad hoots at one of the discarded papers, rescues it from the wind. Rur's head thrusts over her shoulder. "Shit! Who the fuck would immolate these gold-star milkers? I've changed my whole mind. We need to issue a moratorium on these book-burnings and cigarette-rollings until we can sort out the titty material so vital to the war effort."

Armstad says, "I think this is the one where she fucks that lizard bitch. Or gets fucked. I can't tell. If you look at the edges here, you can see her dick, sticking right out of the char..."

"Who would use an issue of Fuchsia the Slut to roll their leaf?"

"Some kind of anti-sex person."

"A chaplain."

"A hard-smoking, sex-hating chaplain."

Canto turns around, her mapping done for the night. "Mystery solved, girls. Rur, if your jizz gets anywhere near my area I'm going to fuck your face with my service revolver."

"I swan I already let loose at the sight of Fuchsia. There's nothing left in me."

"Someone's on top." Sparks fly through the hatch vent, it's a blowtorch.

Deacon: "We need to clear them off. Someone has to go up top."

Rur: "We're in the middle of the fucking street, someone's gonna blow your head off."

Canto: "Forward five paces."

Deacon jerks the landerwalker out of the street, into a shop, legs crunching the broken glass of the storefront window.

"Stop."

A metal plate of the ceiling starts to bend back, crowbar scraping under like a curious tongue.

"Elevate."

The landerwalker's legs pressurize with hydraulic fluid and spring up.

The scraping stops.

Blood drips through the hatch vents. We slammed into the ceiling.

I get out and look at the chandelier of guts.

Rur brushes Armstad's hair.

We sail paper boats down a flooded street, pages from a sacked library.

Deacon finds a book with unburnt pages. A description of plants found on caldera rims. The delicate quick-growing life that springs up between lava flows.

We collect rainwater through roof vents, drink it from a spigot.

Some days it tastes like ash, or chemical gas (there's one bomb that gives it a kinda refreshing citrus taste). On a good day it tastes basically clean. We call that dessert.

"Out of rations."

We pick a building that looks like it might have been a market. Canto screws a bayonet onto her weapon. She holds it high as she turns each corner.

Glass snaps like a twig in the forest. She spins and aims at the second floor, exposed through the blasted ceiling.

Shards explode from her chest, pulsing like sharp fountains of water up and down fast as hummingbird wings, her tongue thrashes around outside her mouth from the force of it, tears and saliva spattering the wall in front of her. She falls to the floor, crushed by her own body, the flesh parts of her lapping against crystallization like tide against a shore. She claws at her geode guts, purple-blue chunks suffused with frozen clouds of blood, veins like roots suspended in amber.

I'm watching from the back of my eyes. I watch us fire at the ceiling, plaster snow raining down, blinding us.

We bury her in a mortar hole. We pick bricks from the rubble and make a cairn. We stand like ghosts around her, faces white with plaster. I want to say something but there isn't much to say. Even Deacon can't think of something nice to say, her bible tucked in her jacket. We've seen it too many times before.

I go outside myself. Watch her. No I. Only her.
Moving like a doll. Sometimes dolls bob up and
down when talking. Sometimes they slam
together, to kiss, to fuck, to kill.

She splashes puddlewater over her face, tries to
make out her reflection in the murky ripples.
Can't tell it from the sky.

Squeezed behind a tatter of brick wall trying to fit my whole body behind it, crushing myself into the dirt as weapons shave crystalline edges into the brick. I can't reload, if my elbow juts out they'll blow it off, I have to crush myself to a speck, disappear, I try to yell for the others but my throat is caked with red dust.

If I die they'll send me back down again. I'm in their system now. In the satellite. I won't come back the same. I might not know myself. Or my friends. My head will be all scrambled. I saw someone with an extra finger, tusks, bug eyes, it's just a recipe and the list gets looser each time you make it.

Wish Canto was here. She'd at least tell me to do something so I could stop thinking.

They drag me inside, I lay there in the warm shells, unable to move, rainwater and piss sloshing around my head.

The landerwalker gets hotter, I think, am I dying? My body is burning itself inside out, wait, fuck, they're sweating too,

"Oil," Deacon says calmly.

I seen a lot of landerwalkers burnt out like bits of charcoal across a street, smelling so good inside you want to pry them open like oysters. Someone dumps pitch or whatever on you, turns you into an oven, you're fucked.

Deacon says, "I'll do sighting." She drags me onto the pilot's seat and leans my head against the scope. I get my hands up on the controls somehow and listen to her instructions.

"Right."

"Right."

"Keep going."

Through the oil-soaked lens it's just a blur of colors changing, the red-blue of the city changes to brown, we're over mud, the brown is cut in half by pink, it's evening on mud, we're on a precipice or something, why is she doing this?

"Forward. Top speed."

We start sliding, we're rattling down a slope, shells clatter around inside our tiny air. I want to lock the legs but Deacon raises her hand.

We crash and the walls of the landerwalker hiss. A hot blast of air eats at my skin, then oil splatters through the carapace, I'm on fire, I'm thrashing, trying to get it off, it feels cool now, has my skin burnt away? Is there nothing left to hurt?

Rur opens her mouth and lets the oil fall into it.

It's just water and the hiss of steam.

Rur opens the hatch. Water sloshes over the edge. "City lake."

I let the dirty water clean my face, trickle down my throat. The vents can't seal tight enough, the landerwalker is slowly filling up.

Armstad takes over piloting. "How do we get out?"

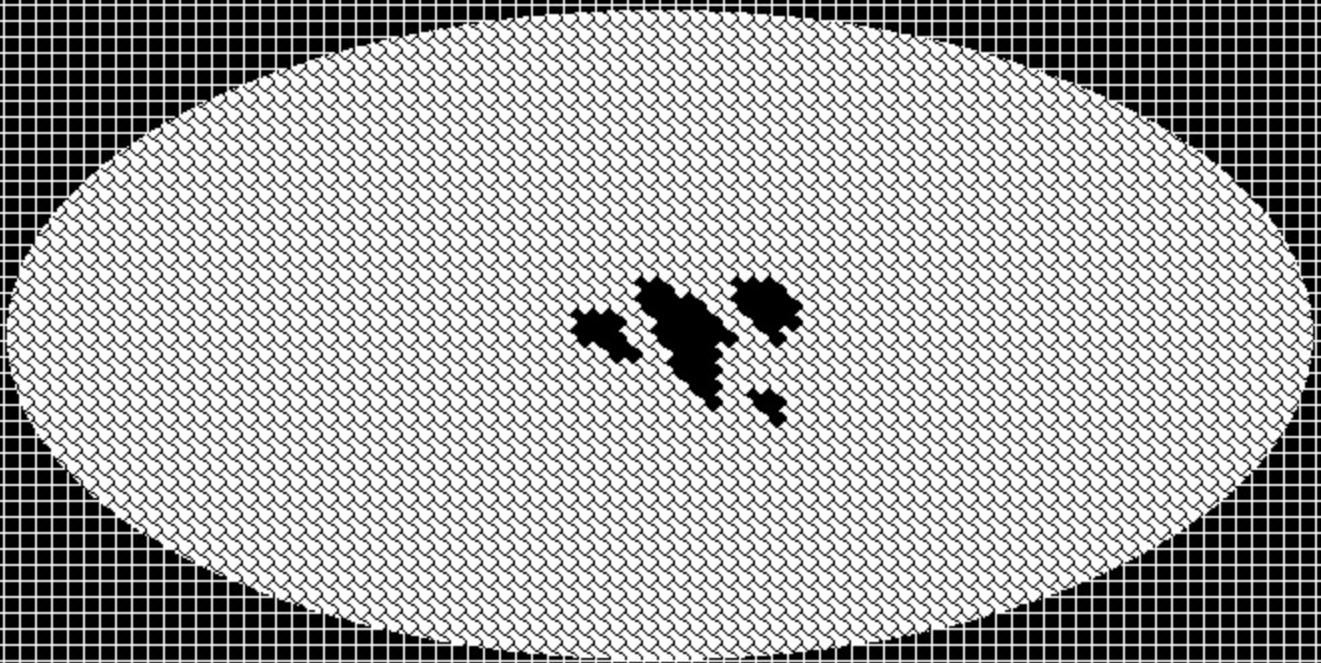
Deacon squints down the sighting glass and says, "Shore slopes up over there, we run straight across the bottom we can get up that side before we flood."

The landerwalker pushes slowly through the water, soft and hard things thumping into us, the air is stale, my heart flutters in little bursts of panic. Then she lightens, and her legs seem faster than ever.

We see Canto coming down the street, weapon dragging behind her, scales on her face like a lizard. She looks younger, jacket hanging loose.

We're all wondering, do you remember us?

What did you see?



"When I was up there I saw my sister. She was on the roof. She was looking at something far away. She wouldn't look down at me when I yelled up at her. But my words didn't have any sound to them. I hoped she would look down. I wandered around looking for the others then remembered no one stays up here. There was a long time when I didn't have eyes. I tasted chocolate. It was the most delicious chocolate ever. It filled up my mouth, it oozed down my chin, throbbing like a tooth infection oozing chocolate instead of pus. Then I was at the train station. I was sad to be there, because that was the last time I saw home. I had my draft papers in my hand and I remember they gave me a paper cut. Seeing it again I couldn't believe there was so little blood. I've never seen so little blood. Just a drop."