

Jellyfish Dreaming

D. K. McCutchen

"This is the way the world ends. . . ."
T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"

Jack in the Marketplace

I wait (*like always*) scuffing along the boardwalk, spitting in the surf, watching plastic bags swirl like a memory of octopus' tentacles in the surge. I've heard rumors and I have questions. So I wait until the thin man shows up at the Trash Café with his larger, squarer companion. Then I wait for them to leave again. It's dull.

The docks are more interesting. I check out the catch as it comes in; buckets and crates full of jellyfish, nets ripped from flotsam, decks scattered with interesting debris. The ocean coughs up jellyfish and plastic rubbish these days. The Fisher folk are hard men and women from a dozen different races and places, tough survivors of every catastrophe the world has thrown at them. They ignore me or stare hard until I wander on. They're busy enough shifting the catch without getting stung by the odd boxjelly, they don't need a Warehouse tramp distracting them, maybe nicking something. But now and again they'll give me or the other Warehouse kids a small square of tatty tarpaulin wiggling with seaworms or nematodes, or sometimes a basket of the odder-looking jellies to eat, in exchange for mending nets. They supply improvised gloves of layered plastic and cloth—whatever washes up—to protect from unfired nematocysts tangling in long skeins, clinging like nerves to the weave of the nets. But they watch carefully so's we don't run off with the gloves.

The two University men drink in the shade of the café while I dry up in the sun and wind. Finally they finish their business, which seems to have been just chatting with Tao Ownerson and sipping hot algae tea made with water boiled and condensed in a solar still. Nothing could survive in that. Safe water. Tao's the one told me about their research on the immaturity (*immortality?*) epidemic. I traded a fistful of—mostly—live crickets for the info. I didn't get any tea.

When the University Doctors leave the Café, I follow, drifting from stall to stall behind them as they wind through the jumble of overflowing crates and makeshift

shacks that make up the market. Once it becomes clear they intend to leave the waterfront and climb the hill back toward the University, I stop trying to blend. It's pointless. No one but Uni folk, or Townies with Uni concerns, use that narrow path up the cliffs. I'm almost on their heels when the big, hairy-faced man turns and asks my business with them. My apologetic "*sumimassen*" clearly irritates that one. But the slender, fair-haired man looks excited when I whisper my reason for intruding. I want information. I know there'll be a price.

They also want something from me. The blond hesitates between taking me immediately up to the University lab for testing or clinching the deal in the marketplace (*where one does deals, after all*). I'll squeeze this for what I can get. I tell them I'm hungry; that I need new clothes. The big man looks disgusted but the blond pinches his arm before turning to me with a surprisingly kind smile. He introduces them both (*which I ignore*) and waves his arm back toward the market as if offering me the world.

*Time skips forward and slingshots back
Around the planet—why do some memories repeat?
My mind walks through one door,
just to end up where I began.
No exit.*

The Trash Café

The market is a new and exciting place when one has credit. The Uni Docs buy me things. Recycled plastiweave jeans—*remember when jeans didn't crackle and pinch?*—a softer, hand-woven flax T-shirt and sarong. Someone salvaged a container full of antique coats made of real milled cotton and is flogging them in the market. I wear my new/old coat with tails sharp as a tern's wing—*extinct seabirds skimming long-ago waves*. The coat overhangs crackly jeans and remaindered combat boots; in the gritty wind they make me sweat. But I don't care. I'm making memories. I imagine swooping out over the surf. In my fancy clothes, I feel like the Luck-in-the-Leftovers. The two well-dressed men who are paying for it all stop to help admire me in every surface that reflects.

The Trash Café is the only place left on the protected side of the boardwalk where folks with credits can sit

out of the wind and watch rubbish swirling in the surf. This time I get to be a customer.

“Charlie.” The biggest man talks while waving us to a table, continuing a conversation I’ve been ignoring for a while. “You didn’t give your full proposal. The University could withhold research approval—but you’ve definitely piqued their interest.” He chuckles, a deep note that can be felt through the bones.

“What proposal?” I ask. A hot current of air sneaks through the open door and sucks the words away, leaving me breathless.

“We’re running out of time,” the big man mutters. He seems to understand I won’t have remembered his name. The thin man, Charlie, will have the answers I want. No one else matters (*not yet*). He re-introduces himself as Leopold Vassily, “Call me Leo,” professor of something unpronounceable.

“We have questions.” Leo seats himself at the rickety table. I sit opposite, gingerly. Tao raises an eyebrow and greets me with the name I gave him earlier, along with the crickets.

“Jack.”

Now the researchers know it too. Charlie fills our mugs and, ignoring the public cistern, heads for the solar still with the empty water pitcher.

“How old are you, Jack.” Leo asks. “And where from?”

“Seventeen. Born inland—in old Chicago.” I’m a good liar. Chicago was buried in the massive snows and winds that fragmented the Midwest. No records to prove or disprove. There are refugees from all over wandering through, looking for a place to be—like this semi-arid northeast coast (*wasn’t this temperate rainforest once?*). It’s nothing new.

All things repeat.

I pick up my cup to avoid Leo’s gaze.

“You sexually active, Jack?” The man asks abruptly.

A jolt of adrenaline shakes my hand. I fiddle with the clay cup; there’s no maker’s mark. I’m not used to hearing that name anymore.

“Why? You interested?” *Jack*. The name is comfortable as an old hat, but suddenly feels too intimate for strangers to use. I’ve had lots of names, but *Jack* is the one I use when change is coming—or I need a bit of luck. *Jack jumps over the candlestick*. I manage a stiff

smile. Leo is hard to read; brown eyes camouflaged in bushy hair and whiskers. They seem like kind eyes, but Jack-the-survivor has learned to distrust even his own impressions.

“I’m curious whether *you* are,” the man says. “How’s your libido?”

“Don’t have much to compare to,” I mutter. I decide not to wait for the distilled water Charlie’s paying for and tilt my cup (*Jack’s cup*) to taste the silty-gray cistern water. “Don’t feel up to populating the world if that’s what you mean.” Tao told me earlier that Charlie’s research has to do with why so many humans and animals can no longer breed. But he’s also some big brain in genetics. That’s what interests me. What makes us what we are? (*What am I?*)

Leo chuckles deeply, the light table vibrating with the sound. “Where do you live, Jack?” My hand quivers along with the table.

“*Oi*,” I say. “Why don’t you tell me where *you* live—*Leo?*”

“With *him*.” Leo says calmly, pointing to the blond lecturer who’s gusting back toward us on the gritty wind. “Dr. McCauley—Charlie. I know his work intimately.”

Charlie thumps down the newly filled jug with a “*Hmph*.” Our poor table may not survive this meal.

“You should pay him properly, Charlie.” Leo says. “Food and clothes are fine, but the lad doesn’t have a place to be.”

I stare. Why would he know that?

“What say, Jack? Want to room with us while Charlie tests his pet theory?”

“Don’t decide on your own!” Charlie’s eyes are pale blue with white lashes and brows, his chin hairless. He looks like he’d disappear if he stepped into a sunbeam. The bright ponytail whips around angrily.

I half-listen to the men argue. The food arrives. With a muttered “*Itadakimasu*,” I eat pickled jellyfish with my fingers from the common bowl while they talk. As usual, it’s the only thing on the menu. Jellyfish is what the Fisher folk catch, and for so long now no one seems to remember when it was different. But I know—as much as I know anything, my memories a mix of half-forgotten stories, bought information, flashes of insight and great yawning gaps; especially when the memory

pertains to me—I *think* I remember how Japanese became part of the *lingua franca*. Maybe even how I got here—sometimes. But what feels like my memory is also told on the docks as an old Fisher’s tale (*and there are even older tales layered over them*).

It’s the story of the 7000 islands of the legendary *Nihon-koku* archipelago sinking beneath The Great Wave. Back in a time so long ago the snows hadn’t yet made the middle-country impassable, humans still had it in them to feel generous to hungry strangers who washed ashore; especially strangers with survival skills to share. The Jellyfish Masters came, by land and sea, along with the first wave of hungry immigrants, and taught the people how to catch and prepare Jellies. The Fisher folk even made a harvest festival of it, though no one celebrates it anymore. Thanksgiving, it was called, *Kinro kansha no hi*, though it used to be *Niname-sai*, the celebration of rice, the origins of which not even I recall (*though, gods, how I do miss rice*).

So here we are eating pickled jellyfish today, dried-shredded jellyfish tomorrow and, on good days, jellyfish stir-fried with kelp, jellyfish sashimi with vinegar, jellyfish burgers, jellyfish satay, jellyfish tempura, candied jellyfish. When was the last meal I’ve had sans jellyfish? If it really has anti-aging proteins—I may live forever.

We are what we eat.

I push the bowl away and the men stop talking abruptly. I wipe my fingers politely on the table and stand. “I’ll have my credit voucher now, *kudasaimasu*.” I bow, hoping the blond will pay in advance. I want the information those credits can be traded for. The Doc has also promised answers after doing his lab tests. I’ll get what I need—but suddenly I’m almost afraid of knowing.

“Where will you go?” Leo’s voice is gentle.

I grab my cup of cloudy water, draining it quickly. *Water is life.*

“Gotta go,” I plead. “*Oitoma!* I can . . . I’ll come tomorrow . . .”

Charlie reaches for his satchel, but Leo puts a restraining hand on his arm.

“Jack.” Leo’s voice is so deep and resonant it hurts the heart. “We’ll pay you to help with Charlie’s research. Come with us. You’ll have a warm place to sleep, food, and no one will harass you. Promise.”

There’s kindness in this voice.

I can only turn away—just in time to spot Joon outside, making his way towards us up the littered boardwalk. My face flushes hot. Joon’s in his usual shabby black-on-black and looks thin and dangerous. Hazel eyes are narrowed under the thick coils of his dreads and his hands are hidden in deep pockets. I scan for a knife, but Joon isn’t stupid. He won’t show arms near the Market Guard. He stops at our table and nods to me alone.

“Jae. Forget to check in?”

“Couldn’t.” I say miserably, hiding my new boots under the wobbly table. “Been . . . busy. We was just . . .” How do I explain my new finery and all this food?

“You a friend of Jack’s?” Leo asks, deep voice rumbling. “Won’t you join us?”

Joon ignores him. “Time to go, J-boy.” I look away. I don’t want to go anywhere with Joon in this mood.

“Leo. . . .” Charlie has collar insignia identifying him as a Uni Doc. I see Joon calculating whether he’s the one in charge just as Charlie gives Leo a push and the bigger man stands, looming over Joon, dark eyes deep and impossible to read. I imagine Leo as a bear—but I have animal metaphors in my head that no one else gets. I also know Joon will just get stubborn if challenged.

“*Jun*, is it?” Leo’s deep voice is soothing, “We’d like to talk to you too—about a business transaction.”

“Might have a minute for business.” Joon’s uncomfortable. He *seems* to be backing down. *Wow. One up for the big guy.* But I notice Joon watching Leo closely and feel the first cramp of what might be jealousy, might be my jellyfish refluxing. Joon slides gracefully into one of the rickety chairs.

“And it’s *Joo-oon*,” he adds, nodding for Leo to slide over the food bowl. Like me, he doesn’t hold back when someone else buys. “Jae and Joon. We come as a set.” He smirks, but I know the anger is still there under the tight smile. It always is.

Leo picks up the sweating clay pitcher Charlie brought and refills our mugs with real filtered water, the clearest I’ve seen. It tastes delicious. It tastes like clean dirt. Once Joon settles, Charlie starts. “We’re paying Jack—Jae?—to help with our research. Perhaps you could as well?” Big Leo clears his throat but Charlie

ignores him. He's in lecture mode. I watch Joon's face, waiting for the storm.

"Can I assume that you're also . . ." Charlie stops suddenly, wincing. "Ow. *Ah*. Perhaps I should just tell you about our project." Charlie glares at Leo, who grins, showing big white bear teeth.

Charlie talks about the rubbish in the water and food and how everyone's bodies are messed up, so there aren't many new births.

". . . but recently, among the street kids, we've discovered true hermaphrodites, or intersex adolescents, able to choose their own gender—and other surprising adaptations."

I know! Ask me Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, so pretty some tramp water sprite got herself welded to him. But was it consensual? I mean, who invited her on board anyway?

"This isn't remarkable in an era of human-generated hormone mimics created, to put it bluntly, by our own garbage."

Poisonous rubbish creates hermaphroditic superheroes maybe? That's an old one.

"These changes are obvious results of plastics, pesticides, industrial pollutants and other endocrine disruptors—hormone mimics—flooding our environment. Indicator species like amphibians—before they died out—exhibited feminization of males and females with occlusions, cancers and reproductive difficulties. Humans were similarly affected. The horrifying extinction of our marine mammals, seals, whales, dolphins—along with the entire class of Amphibia—was just the beginning of a massive loss of species diversity."

I miss frogs. I can picture them in another memory, hopping, eating flies. Being used to poison arrows—or maybe that was a film.

"Now almost every species on our planet is in decline. What we don't normally see are *increases* in reproductive possibilities in any species besides jellyfishes, some insects, and bacteria—yet here's the possibility of an advantageous mutation."

He sure is long-winded. I watch Joon. Charlie finally gets to the point, about how he believes some of the most messed up *can* still have kids, once they grow up.

(I never will. Never.)

Joon eats and maybe listens. When the food is gone,

he pushes away the bowl, leans back, and says, "*Ge*. So what you *hetchi* pervs want is to—what? Fuck my freaky boy Jae and create a race of *superherms*?"

I can't help giggling. I figure Joon's gonna blow now. *Why doesn't he?*

"What I'm offering," Charlie says sharply, "is hard credits to Jack *and* you—for help researching. . . ."

"Charlie thinks the street-kids are humanity's last hope." Leo cuts in abruptly. "Despite the reality that even if a sub-species emerges that *can* breed; it will have nowhere to live, no plants or animals to share a very lonely existence."

Charlie glares. "Unless we discover a regulating hormone or . . . gene . . . transferable to other species!" Why does this sound like a comic strip?

"A madman's dream." Leo smiles tenderly at his partner.

Joon's mouth turns down. "So what am I, then?" he asks. "Some kinda control? Like, to compare my boy Jae to, *neh*?"

"No." Charlie says. No one speaks. Joon stands, shoving back his chair, which clatters to the floor. He glares at me and stalks away.

"But I never said anything!" I wail. *Jack is abandoned again.* "I never said!"

Charlie's eyes are hound-dog sad (*no more dogs, dogs-gone*). "You didn't. There are visual indicators . . . sometimes. Slim build, no body hair"

I want to go—but where? Joon is beyond angry. I can't go there.

"Jack," Leo says. "Can you take us to others like you two?"

The words tip me into panic. With no destination in mind, I run. It's what Jack does.

Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack had better run like shit.

Jack is cold. Jack is alone.

I've eaten too much and feel ill. Why didn't I get the credit voucher?

Why did that Leo make me feel so . . . Freak! There's an alley. I hide and consider what to do next, how I will survive for the next little while.

Jack is cold and alone

Snap.

Uni

The Market Guard don't find me until after the other Warehouse kids do. The guards carry me to Charlie. I drift awake from a long, hot nightmare (*dreams within dreams*). Charlie is asleep nearby, long hair loose about his face.

"Mother?"

Charlie wakes with a start. Not Mother.

"How old are you, Jack?" He asks, soothing my bruises with a cool cloth.

I have no answer.

We don't talk about Joon (*or why I got beat up*). I know Charlie wants to know how many others like Jack and Joon are out there (*I need to know too—so badly. Is there any one of them like me?*). But I can't pull my multiple lives together into any kind of explanation. Charlie never once mentioned an overly long lifespan as a side-effect of toxic garbage. His research seems focused only on our immaturity and potential baby-making superpowers. (*Eat your heart out Spiderman, plastic hormone mimics are the new radiation—now in pink!*). And I never mention how very long I've been alone. I'm in Charlie's world now—out of the wind—with daily walks through quiet halls, the bio lab with its acrid smells, and the psych lab with its carefully neutral colors.

I become familiar with the guards at the entrance, the few lab and hydroponic workers. No one questions my presence and I start to lose the feeling of being a bug on a pin. Charlie gives me (*free!*) access to the University's online databases, to answer my questions (*but what should I ask?*). This after multiple warnings about cross-checking information. The warning is unnecessary. I've understood for a very long time that nothing is ever what it seems.

This is the first time I've had easy access to the University's fragmented—and contradictory—collection of databases. In the market it's referred to as the Idiot's Encyclopedia, or NonK. NonK is my digital alter ego. We both have trouble remembering things. My head keeps just so much in it and no more. But then an image, a *knowing*, will pop out of nowhere. This can complicate day-to-day existence. But Charlie's research

and NonK's databases, however flawed, are my hope for answers if I'm ever to understand *what* I am.

NonK: From noncomp. (adj) idiot, moron, stupid (Eng.); 'baka (Japanese). Derived from the Latin 'non compos mentis'. IE: "Dude, you're such a noncomp." (Archived by NonK from The Urban dictionary.com, New Millennium circa 2010).

Time Surges

I see Joon several times during brief visits to the market. Joon keeps his distance, but I know he means for me to see. I'm left breathless and disoriented. On bad days—the Joon days—I dive into NonK's virtual library. I choose histories and plunge back in time until my eyes weep—from the backlighting, so I tell myself. I avoid fiction. I could lose myself in story, become the tale told by firelight. My brain is already so full (*so disorganized*) it's difficult to keep my memories separate from stories and dreams. Even with eyes wide and staring at the here and now, the wail of older winds haunts every empty room.

I eat well from the hydroponic tanks and greenhouses; I avoid jellyfish when possible. My body feels good. One hunger's satisfied, at least. Jack thrives. Jae pines. *What would make us both happy?*

Then Charlie mentions that I'm growing taller. I stop eating. My hands are shaking when the researchers meet me in the lab to draw blood.

"What's going on, Lad." Leo's resonant voice is out of place in a lab, filling the space as if it will shake apart the hand-blown glass vials and pipettes. "You're sugar-crashing. If you get dehydrated, you're fuck-all useless to us—and yourself. You in love or something?"

"Freak no." I flinch. Lies don't flow smoothly these days. Life is too easy. (*Could this confusion be love?*) "You want consistency for the tests, *na?* If I don't eat, I don't grow. So I stay the same, *ne?*"

Charlie frowns. "You're at that post-pubescent stage when you're supposed to have growth spurts, Jack. You've heard of anorexia?"

"Is he *post?*" Leo says thoughtfully.

I feel ill.

"Jack, you will *not* run away this time." Leo's voice is stern. "I won't have you disrupting Charlie's research. What's so upsetting to you about the idea of

growing-the-hell-up?”

“He’s *pre*-pubescent? Leo—that could explain so much.”

I do not want to have this conversation.

Charlie hands me a cup of sugar-beet water. “No blood today. But Jack, how old are you really?”

I wince. *Wrong question/misdirection.*

“You asked about the others.” I stop, ashamed.

“You’re safe here Jack.”

“There are lots of us,” I say finally, heart pounding (*willing it true, willing them all like me*). “Dunno how many. We come and go. But no one tells!” I feel like crying (*like lying*).

“Are there any girls?” Leo asks.

I stare. “Well, *duh*.” Leo grimaces in apology.

“He just means anyone who identifies as female.”

Charlie says dismissively.

(*There is. There are.*)

“Look Jack, you have this hormone mimic in your system complicating things.” (*Some comic book deus ex machina.*) “When we understand, we can help. All of you.”

“I said I’d be in your study,” I say miserably, “because I need to know too. (*What am I? Will I always be alone?*)” “But that’s why Joon and the others are angry. Why I can’t go back.”

Joon. My heart may crumble to dust.

“Would Joon come here?” Charlie asks eagerly.

Leo growls, “Was it Joon who hurt you?”

I shake my head. “*Ah*, no. *Gomennasai*. . . . Sorry.”

So we’re all surprised when Joon arrives the next morning, face dripping blood.

“Are you sleeping?”

“Are you dreaming, Jack?”

In the Hallowed Halls

I take Joon through the echoing halls of the University. Charlie fed him and bandaged his face. Now he wants to see everything. The way is empty and well lit. Abandoned treasures gather dust in empty rooms. At an intersection, glass cases display specimens of extinct species. We inspect colorful preserved frogs and stuffed seabirds white as ice. Joon stands for a long time in front of two small toothed whales, smiles curving

painted mouths.

“There were some long as the hall,” I point upward to a giant skeleton hanging from the ceiling. A great bowed bone shows where the jaw must have been.

“Good that one’s dead, *ne?*”

“*Baka*. That one ate critters the size of millet grains. You never heard the old stories?” Sometimes I forget and talk as if I’ve seen these alive and in the world. Joon does not.

“And this one?” Joon’s fingers splay on the glass where the dolphin’s laughing eye is frozen in time.

“There’re stories of drowning sailors being saved by those.” I lower my voice, as we all do when speaking of the lost ones. “Charlie thinks they died out around the time *these* took over the oceans.” I point to three aquarium tanks set in one wall. Each swirls with a different kind of jellyfish rising and dropping in artificial currents like lovely little plastic bags. The first tank holds numerous tiny creatures. The next contains just two jellies, each the size of a church bell. Joon stares hungrily.

I point toward the first tank. “Charlie calls the tiny ones *hydrozoans*. They aren’t edible like the jellies the Fishers harvest, the *scyphozoans*.” I’m showing off. I like using the right names for things (*except for me*). “Charlie says *hydrozoans* are incredibly adaptive survivors. He says they remind him of . . . us.”

But Joon looks only at the giant jellies. “Do we eat these?”

“Dried, shredded, pickled, marinated. They’re the same kind we ate this morning, stir-fried with crickets and salt-kelp. They grow bigger. Charlie says more than 500 pounds!”

Joon presses against the glass, staring at the enormous animals.

I want Joon to notice the *hydrozoans*. They have high bells the size of my pinkie nail and opaque pulsating sides that expose bright red stomachs.

“I like these best.” That gets his attention.

“Charlie says most are short lived, but this one, *Turritopsis*, can stop being adult and return to its immature stage if it’s under stress. He says it’s pretty much immortal.” I watch Joon carefully. “Course, that only helps the individual creature, it doesn’t add diversity or anything to the gene pool.”

Joon says nothing.

"But Charlie says when it *does* mature it can choose its gender—choose to be a male or female and reproduce sexually—you know—make babies from several parents. It's only when the pollution's toxic or weather's bad or there's nothing to eat that it kinda turns inside-out and goes back to the beginning again. Then it roots in a new place and starts over.

"Like you and me . . . ?"

We contemplate the tiny parachutes, small survivalists rising and falling in the current. A disturbingly successful species—going nowhere.

"Maybe like you. Not me. You remember birds, ya freak," Joon finally says. "And frogs." He flashes a bright grin that doesn't reach his eyes and stalks away down the corridor, dreads bouncing in mimicry of the thick, deadly tentacles of the sea wasps in the very last tank.

I lean my forehead against the glass. (*Snap. I float with the tide, letting the currents take me . . . Crack.*) My skin shivers and I push off the aquarium glass. For a brief moment I imagine cracks spider-webbing through it. Then the glass is clear and whole again.

I turn and hurry after Joon—as I always must.

Jack & Jae

Jae has Joon in his bed for the first time in months. Joon is sleeping, a line of drool stringing down from sculpted lips. His dark face is so lovely in sleep—mouth relaxed, fierce eyes lidded. I'm worried about the others, and why Joon was hurt, but it's peaceful watching his sleeping face. Joon rolls onto the bandage that covers a gash along one cheekbone. He hisses and the hazel eyes half-open. I stroke the smooth forehead and Joon's eyes close again.

I want to know what the men are saying. As Jack, I often wander at night. I hear things. Jack is braver than Jae, has been around longer. It's Jack who pads barefoot to the cistern for a drink. The moon is full, so when I enter the living space I can clearly see people outside on the balcony. My scalp prickles and I think *intruders*, but I know it's really Charlie and Leo.

I slip closer—don't want to consider whether I ought. I've been watching the two men at home, at work, testing my feelings when I see them touch. When Leo pushes Charlie's hair back from his face, I feel pain. I tease the feeling like a loose tooth.

It makes Jack a lonely boy.

I creep across the room. Charlie's breathless whispers alternate with Leo's bass rumble. Two bodies tangle with the moonlight, shifting and sliding, bright skin and dark shadows. A hand, massive and square in the darkness, twists into silvery hair, a breathy voice gasps as the hand tightens and draws a shining, moonlit body down. A furred giant—a demigod or satyr—erupts from underneath, swinging the smooth tree-nymph body underneath; muscled chest and thighs heave in the dark. I'm unable to move. My heart thunders wildly with conflict: fear, loneliness—longing. I can't look away. Then the great shaggy head turns and dark eyes seem to stare directly into mine, slitted with what looks like fury. Jack runs.

It's Jae who curls next to Joon, watching him sleep (*though Jack's heart races*). I remember Jae and Joon's many nights tangled together, usually under a filthy tarp in an abandoned warehouse. We cuddled for warmth, for companionship. Joon would lay his head on my shoulder, legs layered. Never was there a hint of the . . . thing I've just witnessed. Surely I'd know if Joon felt that way. What's wrong with me? With us all?

I love Joon. I believe Joon loves me. I run a fingertip along the side of his face. Joon murmurs in his sleep, the beautiful lips curl and fingers close around the hand I slip into his. I lay my head beside the darker one on the futon and drift into memories of dreams, chastely holding the hand of my lovely, dangerous Joon—while the world ocean shrinks to a rocking swell, soothing us to sleep. We drift and dream, flying out over dark waves.

*"Is it like this
In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone."
—T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men"*

