

The Silt Verses

Chapter II: And Next Of Dark Deceit

OPENING SEQUENCE.

We hear FAULKNER, whispering his prayer.

FAULKNER:

Forgive my erring ways, Trawler-man.

For I am amongst enemies and their eyes are upon me.

Protect me, Trawler-man.

For there is no trust in me, and I am alone.

Bear me downriver, Trawler-man.

And when the river rises,

On that great day when the river rises,

I will find my peace in silt and water.

I will rise in the currents, made anew.

These are the Silt Verses. And I name its disciples thus, in order of appearance:

B. Narr, as Faulkner

Calder Dougherty, as Stanton

Méabh de Brún, as Carpenter

Jamie Stewart, as Mason

Jonah Knight, as Peterson

David S. Dear as Sid Wright

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Script by Jon Ware

Editing by Muna Hussen

(Faulkner names the cast and crew, and delivers any content warnings for the episode.)

END OF OPENING SEQUENCE.

MOTEL LOBBY, INT

We hear the motel reception bell ding insistently.

CARPENTER is standing at the desk, waiting to be served.

Finally, STANTON emerges.

STANTON:
What?

CARPENTER:
The phone in my room isn't working. I need to use yours.

STANTON:
(Suspiciously)
Can't you go to your friend's room?

CARPENTER:
(Deadpan)
He's the one I'm prank-calling.

They stare at each other, caught in a stand-off.

STANTON:
All right. Go ahead.

A stony silence as CARPENTER continues to stare at STANTON, waiting for him to leave.

CARPENTER:
(Like she's talking to an idiot)
It's not going to be funny if you're listening in.

STANTON snorts incredulously.

A moment later, a door slams as he exits.

We hear CARPENTER pause for a moment. Then she lifts the phone and dials.

CARPENTER:
(Hesitantly)
I'm on... 315 364 1952. Call me back.

She replaces the phone.

A moment later, it begins to ring.

The sound is harsh, and jarring.

CARPENTER:
(Narrating)

There are times when you might be feeding a god and not even know it.

I've heard it said that when you murmur a hateful or hated thought to an empty room or into the choking depths of your pillow, you are in fact praying to a god, an unacknowledged and unloved god of unspoken things.

An unhappy and an awful god, a creature of buried urges and secrets, roaming the quiet and tenuous places in the margins of this world, seeking new vessels for its revelations.

And if you're walking alone in a very silent place, one of those pockets of empty town streets where the sound itself seems, so unnaturally quiet that your footsteps themselves sound choked upon the pavement and your nervous humming seems to grow quiet all of its own accord...

...in the vast ocean of this silence, you may begin to hear the guttural, choked whispers of the Stitched Lip.

*-I'm not happy. It's a long time since I've been happy-
-I hate you. I've always hated you-
-I don't understand what's happening to me-*

And the whispers grow louder and more frantic as the noise gathers around you, developing its own momentum, until the sound becomes a dreadful, delighted shriek, a cacophony of pain and outrage finally finding its true voice, growing louder and louder-

-as the Stitched Lip swoops up and streaks down your own screaming throat. Shattering teeth, exploding the feeble vessels of your swollen lungs and skin and bone.

And afterwards, your final shriek of incomprehension will linger on in this new haunt, a lasting echo that will make the builders and architects shiver as they come rolling in and build new homes or new towers over your ruin.

A scream in the night that will still wake children, centuries from now, as they sit upright and sweating in the bed that sits in the house that lies upon the foundations of your lonely death.

I've heard it said - from unlikely survivors, I suppose, or perhaps it's just a story and we shouldn't expect too much from it in the way of logic - that one whisper feeds this god more often than any other.

It's the simplest of all.

-I don't want to.

I am muttering those words now, as the receiver rings, and rings, in the lobby of our hotel.

I don't want to have this conversation.

I don't want to face what's coming next.

The phone continues to ring.

The phone rings - and then cuts out as we hear CARPENTER finally lift up the dial.

After a second, we hear the tinny voice of MASON on the other end of the line.

As before, the pair speak casually but meaningfully.

MASON:

(On the phone)

Tell me more about what you saw.

CARPENTER:

It was the shrike, Uncle. No doubt about it - the genuine article.

MASON:

(On the phone; unable to contain his excitement)

It must have been magnificent. Where is it now?

CARPENTER:

It's still out there. Well hidden in a place amongst the reeds. I can't imagine any other birdwatchers will find it.

MASON:

How did the boy react?

CARPENTER:

He held his nerve.

He almost threw up with excitement, honestly.

MASON:

(On the phone)

Well, now. I'm sure that's all been quite a thrill. So - what are your plans for the rest of the trip?

CARPENTER:

We're going to stick around here for the time being. Ask about, see if we can follow its trail. There has to be a nest somewhere close to the river.

MASON:

(On the phone)

I might be able to help with that.

CARPENTER:

Thank you, Uncle. We can take care of this ourselves, though.

MASON:

(On the phone)

I know you can. But I insist.

CARPENTER:

All right. I'm grateful for that.

MASON:

(On the phone)

There's someone in town who it might be worth your meeting with. He runs a bookshop called the Tatty Spine, down on the riverside road past the Long White Crook.

An avid local historian, too. Really knows the history and geography of the region.

CARPENTER:

Is he family?

MASON:

(On the phone)

Not family exactly, but I'm sure he can help. Just be polite and you'll be fine.

Maybe take Sandra along. She'll enjoy that.

CARPENTER:

I'll let Sandra know.

MASON:

(On the phone)

I'll ring ahead and tell him you're coming.

And don't forget to send me the pictures of your shriek. I'm sure the whole family will want to see.

CARPENTER:

Do you...think you might come out and see it for yourself?

MASON:

We haven't decided that quite yet. But we'll all be very, very interested to hear about whatever you come across next.

I'm so proud of you, darling. Love you lots.

CARPENTER:

All right. Love you I-

A click as he hangs up.

We hear CARPENTER breathe out, hard.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

Sometimes, in our line of work, we need to seek out the followers of other unlicensed faiths.

We don't announce ourselves, of course. These false worshippers, like the lawful authorities themselves, are, ultimately, enemies of the Trawler-man's great and final purpose.

But they are also kindred spirits. In a sense.

The faithful keep their own records, and their own defences. They hold their own secret maps of this stretch of the river and the surrounding fens. They chart the places where gods may linger or hidden haunts may be located.

There are some religions that simply should not exist, of course, and these should only be approached with the utmost caution.

Sandra...comes as a relief.

I'll comb a different set into my hair, I'll find the fake driver's licence that's stashed away in my carry-all, and I'll wear the vague distracted gleam of someone who spends their waking hours lost between the pages of a paperback.

I'll hang a tell-tale black circling-maggot pendant discreetly around my neck, half-hidden beneath the collar.

I will be posing as a semi-estranged member of a sprawling, over-extended family that's dotted up and down this territory, making their nests in libraries and book rentals and papermills.

Personally, I do not know exactly why the national government of the Peninsula banned the record-keeping faith of the Waxen Scrivener twenty years ago or more...although I have heard some distressing rumours about how they produce their ink.

At any rate, we have a way forward.

I go back up to our motel room to tell Faulkner the good news.

The door is locked - but as I approach, I can already hear him praying.

Besides the tattered copy of the Silt Verses that's hidden beneath the passenger seat of our van, Faulkner insisted upon stowing a small, convenient chalkboard.

Every dawn and every dusk, my travelling companion will mark the signs of the Trawler-man across this chalkboard. Prayers seeking guidance, and protection, and the ultimate blessing itself - transformation.

He has twice thus far asked me if I want to borrow it.

I can hear him in there now, whispering frantically and happily, without an instant of doubt or hesitation, to the god and the sacred river that unites us.

I linger outside. I don't want to intrude on his private moment, I tell myself.

But if I'm truly honest with myself, it's more that I don't want him to welcome me in.

I don't want him to look up at me with a beaming smile and say,

'Please, Sister Carpenter, come in and join me. I'm only just getting started.'

I don't want him to see the expression on my face when I refuse.

So I linger on, in the shadows of the hallway.

And I wait.

Sting.

BOOKSHOP, EXT

We hear the click and flash of an old-fashioned camera. FAULKNER is taking photographs of the bookshop facade.

CARPENTER:

(Annoyed, calling)

Every photo you take can be traced back to us.

FAULKNER:

(Lightly)

It's in character. No normal person could pass by a bookshop this charmingly dilapidated and not want a couple of pictures.

They're barely civil now. And FAULKNER has begun to push back.

CARPENTER:

So you're not going to keep those pictures.

FAULKNER:

I didn't say that.

CARPENTER:

(Scolding)

Put it down and pay attention. We need to strategise before we go inside.

FAULKNER:

Is that genuinely necessary?

CARPENTER:

Excuse me?

FAULKNER:

I mean, I imagine you'll want to introduce us, you'll ask the questions, and you'll try and find out more about where the local churches of the faith may be hidden, and I'll maintain a respectable silence in the background.

'Strategise' seems a bit...grandiose.

He's outright goading her now.

CARPENTER:

Perky little shit this morning, aren't you, Faulkner?

FAULKNER:

You and I have been party to a miracle of the Trawler-man, Sister Carpenter. There's nothing you can say to me now that could spoil my mood.

CARPENTER grunts, irritated.

We hear her rattle through the door and into the bookshop.

BOOKSHOP, INT

CARPENTER's voice echoes slightly. This is a place of endless musty stacks; books left to rot in the damp over the centuries.

CARPENTER:

Hello?

CARPENTER:

(Narrating)

Inside the bookshop, the stacks totter on their tables. The dark oak bookshelves seem on the verge of toppling inwards at every second.

There's a lingering smell of paper rot in this place. There are tiny black worm eggs or shit or corpses speckled across the leather and wood.

The Scrivener's people don't care about the preservation of their own texts. For them, knowledge, like skin, must be shed to be renewed.

A moment. And then we hear shoes clacking on the floorboards as PETERSON - mild and thoughtful - enters.

PETERSON:

Hello.

CARPENTER:

I'm sorry about the idiot outside taking photographs.

PETERSON:
It doesn't matter.

CARPENTER:
My name's Sandra. I was expected.

A long, thoughtful silence. PETERSON is observing CARPENTER, waiting for her to speak.

CARPENTER:
Words, like flesh, are food for worms.
Today I offer them a feast.

The silence lingers for a moment longer. Then-

PETERSON:
Lovely to meet you, Sandra. It's always so nice to encounter a new member of the family. My name's Peterson.

Is your friend...?

CARPENTER:
A recent convert. A constant regret.
(*Yelling out to FAULKNER*)
Hey!

We hear the door clatter open as FAULKNER enters.

FAULKNER:
This really is a beautiful old shop.

PETERSON:
Ah, the Scrivener holds a special place in her heart for dank old places like this. Upon rotten parchments hidden aspects shall be revealed. The great electronic libraries, I fear, tell us nothing in their stagnancy.
(*To CARPENTER*)
I was told you were interested in looking at some maps.

CARPENTER:
Yes, we're charting this stretch of the White Gull River. Trying to establish which territories belong to other, false faiths.

PETERSON:
(*A slight amiable chuckle*)
False faiths. Oh, yes, we have plenty of those lurking around here. Your purpose?

We hear PETERSON turning to rummage in the stacks.

CARPENTER:

To darken paper in truth and ink, as is the Scrivener's will.

(Explaining herself)

We believe there still might be a hidden church active somewhere in the flats, but we'd like to be certain.

PETERSON:

(Distractedly searching)

As is right and proper. Let me see, now...

Your coming is timely. Once upon a time my brother Abel and I would ride in up and down these territories upon gleaming black motorcycles, our tomes and record-books strapped upon our backs.

(Happily)

We'd chart each mile and mark the territories of each parochial god wherever we found the marks.

(More grave)

Any records I have left to offer you now, I fear, have long since rotted into disrepair - or they've been burnt. The post-war raids nearly cleaned us out.

You passed by Ees, did you?

CARPENTER:

No, we took the river road.

PETERSON:

Good. A ghastly place, Ees. I'm glad you didn't have to see it.

The towers stand tall and the pylons pock the landscape for miles on all sides. Monuments to the interloper faiths. The Slag King. The Saint Electric. And out along the coast, the horrid steel rigs of the Petropater.

It was almost better during the long wars. These...commercial gods swallow everything. They leave no place for life in the margins. Their end can't come soon enough.

FAULKNER:

(Perfectly genuine)

May it be so, brother.

PETERSON:

May it be so indeed.

(Gently curious)

If you don't mind me asking, my boy, how did you come to join our family?

Faulkner hesitates.

FAULKNER:

I was...called.

It's feeble, but PETERSON doesn't seem to notice.

PETERSON:

That's a fine sentiment, to be called. You will never know the Waxen Scrivener in her full glory during your lifetime, I fear - but hold fast.

All things, even this great empire of steel and wire, will rot to nothing with time's passage. You could say that-

CARPENTER:

(Growing impatient)

We're in a hurry.

PETERSON:

(Unruffled)

Of course you are. Here we are. Come close and take a look.

The sound of a map being unfurled upon the table.

PETERSON:

To the east and the south-east of Ees is mostly farmland. Field-gods and slaughterhouse deities. The inspectors turn a blind eye to most of it, I gather, so long as the produce keeps flowing into the cities.

Along the very brink of the White Gull River...well, here you used to find water-worshippers, dotted up and down the banks. Followers of the Trawler-man.

But their kind have all long since fled, of course. The cruelties and excesses of their faith made an example of them when Devlin passed his edicts.

CARPENTER:

You're certain they're all gone?

PETERSON:

(Shrugging)

Nothing is certain. But I haven't heard hide nor hair of them in years, at least.

Ah. Now here, if you follow the road south-east, you'll find something intriguing.

Penda's Slake. A tenuous place where the water meets the woods. A number of vanishings reported there over the years.

Abel was certain that a god kept its haunt somewhere in those dark trees.

He found the prayer-marks in the bracken, and he saw some evidence of ritual sacrifice, but he never managed to establish the location of the church itself.

CARPENTER:

I don't suppose you have those prayer-marks written down anywhere.

PETERSON:

(Apologetically)

Like I said. The raids cleaned us out.

But if you're looking for forgotten gods along this stretch of the river, I'd advise you to begin there.

CARPENTER:

All right. Thank you very much for your time.

We hear the door rattle as they turn to exit.

PETERSON:

One moment. Before you go...would you like to meet our Saint?

A sudden change in temperature. When CARPENTER speaks next, she's trying hard to conceal her rising dread.

CARPENTER:

You have a Saint here?

PETERSON:

In the back rooms.

(Nostalgically)

We were blessed just after the raids. Abel was so despondent about everything we'd lost. He blamed himself, really.

He prayed and he prayed, night after night, seeking some kind of absolution.

Until the Scrivener took pity upon him...and she hallowed him.

(Blissfully)

It really is quite a sight.

There's a moment of hesitation. But CARPENTER can't blow their cover now.

CARPENTER:

(Feigning enthusiasm)

Of course.

We'd be honoured to see him.

We hear their footfalls upon the wood.

And, as CARPENTER narrates, a fast and furious scratching sound can be heard from above.

Quiet at first. Growing gradually louder and louder.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating; with increasing horror throughout)

Faulkner and I don't look at each other as we climb the winding staircase at the back of the bookshop.

We don't speak.

We can already hear the sound of scratching limbs from the locked room above.

We can already hear the clicking lips of something great and huddled and inhuman as the old bookseller fumbles with the chains and pushes the door ajar, ushering us forward.

We cannot scream. We cannot give any indication that the sight before us is anything but divine.

So we gaze in silence at the colossal white larva that's sprawled and writhing across a shattered writing desk, the rows upon rows of tiny pincer limbs rolling down its belly, wetly scrawling black ink across the scattered papers and the floor, its naked flabby skin conjoined with the shimmering chitin of its back, and its long neck flops and drops as it

rears, and two squinting, pale eyes gaze inquisitively at us for moment.

And the larva lollops furiously in its chair, and the wet lips in the centre of its face split open to reveal a mouth of circular but distinctly human molars that wails a single, shrieking soprano note, perhaps in greeting, perhaps in anger that its sacred work has been disturbed, and I realise a moment later that it must, in fact, be the latter-

-Because as the larva topples forwards out of its seat, rolling over the desk and clattering down onto the floor upon its tiny rowed legs, in a sudden, horrible turn of speed, the bookseller quickly draws the door closed and a second later we hear the thump of the thing that was once Abel thudding with its full awful weight against the wood...

...and then the chains and the old man begins to fumble the padlocks back back into place as the thump, thump, thump continues, rhythmic, patient, unabated.

In that brief glimpse before the Immortal Saint charges us, I can't remember seeing any kind of meaning in the inky papers that lay at its feet.

Perhaps these things are only visible to the truly faithful.

BOOKSHOP, EXT.

We hear the door rattle as CARPENTER and FAULKNER step back out into the open air. A long moment of silence. Both are audibly shaken by their experience.

FAULKNER:
That was-

CARPENTER:
Keep smiling. He's watching us through the blinds.

FAULKNER:
(*Strained*)
That was horrible.

I mean, it was like a, a gross parody of the Trawler-man's revelations, only, only-

CARPENTER:
(*Quietly cynical - the Trawler-man's revelations are equally horrible*)

Hm.

FAULKNER:

I didn't think the false gods could do that.

CARPENTER:

Sainthood doesn't come unbidden. Peterson summoned that change onto his brother.

Or perhaps Abel did it to himself.

FAULKNER:

At least we have an idea of where to look next.

CARPENTER:

Yes, we do.

(Decisively)

You're going to drop me off at Penda's Slake this afternoon.

I'm going to need you to go back to the hiding place. Make sure there's no trace of the fishing boat, make sure it can't be seen in daylight.

Mason may well want to come and see it himself.

FAULKNER:

You...don't think we should go together?

CARPENTER:

We need to be making better use of our time.

If there is a church out there, we don't have anything to worry about. If there's nothing, I'd rather you didn't waste the afternoon as well.

(More kindly)

If I do find anything, I'll leave it alone until you get there.

FAULKNER:

All right, then.

Silence.

CARPENTER:

(Narrating, a little uncertain of herself)

It's a lie, of course.

I don't really know why I don't want him there, whenever I find whatever there is to find in those woods.

But I don't.

I want to be alone.

Anyway, he seems to buy it. Faulkner is naive, if nothing else.

STING.

CAR, INT - INTERLUDE

We hear the radio scratch. The car engine roars.

SID WRIGHT:

-wasn't that a classic? Didn't it set you up with the fighting spirit to get through the day? I feel like I could take on the world, listeners, and I don't know about you.

The time is quarter to four. It's Sid Wright here, crooning in your ear, and we're going to be following that up with a fresh new single from Bebbie and the Cat Attack.

Praise the Daily Grind! Praise the Signal which will not cease!

May my voice hold out as long as it can. May you be awake, and vigilant, and capable of hearing me.

We'll be back right after this.

The radio scratches and fades.

STING.

PENDA'S SLAKE, EXT

The sound of a car pulling up.

FAULKNER:

(Narrating, unexpectedly)

And so we pull up on the roadside, in front of a mouth.

Penda's Slake is a wound in the countryside.

Dark water and mud broiling up from underneath, drowning the roots of slender, ghostly white birch that raises its starving fingers towards a disinterested dull grey sky.

There's only one path inwards. A battered walkway over the water, twisting unhappily around the darkness and into the tree trunks.

Carpenter gets out of the car. She checks her rucksack to make sure she has everything she needs. Snatches up her copy of the Verses and tosses it inside.

She leaves the revolver behind. I note.

She says something like-

CARPENTER:

(Brusquely)

Be back here by dusk. Don't be late. I don't want to be left too long in these woods.

FAULKNER:

(Narrating)

-and she slams the door on me.

I watch her as she strides away, rucksack slung over her back, growing smaller and smaller, that same quietly sullen expression upon her face, diminishing into the mist...

...vanishing into the trees.

The sound of the car starting up again.

FAULKNER:

(Narrating)

People always seem to underestimate me.

Part of that comes naturally when you're the youngest of three siblings, and your life begins and ends trailing after the taller, grander, more confident versions of your own self.

You learn to make yourself a little smaller, to show them that you know your place. You stoop your shoulders and you walk at a skip-and-a-run, and you ask them constant foolish questions, playing up your own innocence and naivety.

And they roll their eyes at you and swipe at your head, but they feel satisfied, because they get to answer your foolish questions, and they feel reassured of the natural order of things; that they are old and you are young. They are big, and you are small.

I am on some level an earnest, prating pest to my very core, of course. I've lived with that part of myself too long for it merely to be an act.

And I do believe in you, my Trawler-man. With every inch of me.

No, I'm not false. There's nothing false about me.

Perhaps I'm just not as simple as people like Sister Carpenter tend to assume.

She's known this river all her life. She's lived amongst your worshippers, my Trawler-man, for decades or longer. She's fought her wars and she's earned her scars, and this?

This is the postscript beyond her struggle, and none of it is capable of making her happy any longer.

It's as if she can't live with victory. She doesn't know what to do with it.

And she thinks I'm just some fresh-faced city child with a heart full of faith that has yet to be tested.

That's true enough, I suppose; I didn't even see your sacred river until sixteen days ago.

All through my childhood, we lived out in the trade roads, across the Whisper Plains.

Pine forest and dry red earth and great torn-up tyre treads driving right through the middle of the broken-up woodland, for when they wanted to send the lorries through faster but nobody could see the point of building new roads.

There were houses here, built and worked and repaired and, inevitably, abandoned amongst the trees. Most families refused to stay long, because between the noise of the lorries and the constant seeping hiss of the electricity pylons above there was never any opportunity for real comfort or real rest.

It was whispered in the roadside bars that sometimes the colossal pylons, angels of the Saint Electric, would tear themselves free from their moorings and walk across the woodland in terrible strides, whipping the power lines about them in a frenzy of destruction.

The drunks would swear blind that when a house was wrecked by these awful steel giants, the electricity company would have no choice other than to pay out a fortune in hush money to the injured party, and each one of them could name at least one local legend who'd moved on to better things as a consequence of the angels' rampage.

Our father never said as much, but he mentioned this story to us frequently enough that I can imagine, if only irrationally, that he was holding out hope that one day the angels in the pylons might come crashing out through the trees and smash our little shack-like house to smithereens and augment his frankly inadequate salary that was spent in full every month on food and water and keeping my brothers and I in school.

Dad worked nights, in the wind farms forty miles from the house where we lived that was not yet home. If he had any faith at all, he was too tired and too absent to teach it to us.

He relied upon a trust system to see that the three of us woke up each morning and ate our breakfast and went to school and returned safely. Foolish, but the system worked for us.

When we wanted to go to school, or when we thought it necessary to avoid the truant's scold by putting in a token appearance, we would take the long and straight path through the tall pine trees, an hour's walk or more, in the gathering dawn light.

When we didn't want to...well, the forest was vast, and there were endless paths to explore.

That was how I found you, my Trawler-man.

Because there was a water tank out in the woods.

Rusted and sagging, its scummy innards exposed to the sky, sat next to a fallen mass of tin sheets and blankets that had perhaps once been a nearly-home like ours.

The water was deep, and dark, and the things that skimmed across the surface did not look like any kind of life that I recognised, and there were thick white markings in paint across the sides.

You could climb the ladder, and gaze down into the depths of the tank, and see a version of yourself that was not yourself, but blurring and dripping and swarming with primordial movement all at once, shifting in the sun's light with every second.

I stayed there for hours, the first day I found it.

I went back the next day, of course, dashing madly through the trees, in search of my secret place.

The secret water where your reflection went wrong.

I stayed until nightfall.

It was on the third day that I could not have been gazing into the swimming depths for more than an hour, or perhaps longer than I realised, because as a thick hand gripped me by the shoulder and dragged me around I suddenly saw, blindingly, that the sun was already high in the sky-

-and my middle brother Charlie was glaring down at me, snarling,

"What the fuck d'you think you're doing? You can't just go running off like that, shitweed."

Was he really irritated or frightened? Or was he just glad to have found a reason to exercise his brotherly rights of shoulder-poundings and blandishments?

I'm not sure.

But as I gazed back into his eyes...for the first time in my life, I heard the whisper in the water.

From within me, and from far outside of me, and from all around me.

A voice that was two voices, both high and shrill and low, and groaning with the weight of bursting pipes and dams and the softness of running streams.

It was your whisper, my Trawler-man, and although I heard the words in clear, explicable syllables, it was also the sound of driving rain, and rushing currents, and the thick inhuman gurgling of brackish and stagnant waters.

The whisper said,

“If you lower your head into the water of this tank and hold it there, until the breath has dribbled out of your nose and lungs and you begin to imagine that you are drowning, you will begin to hear music drifting up towards you from below.

Clear and beautiful music, like nothing you’ve ever heard before, and the longer you stay under, the clearer the music gets.”

And grinning, I spoke aloud to Charlie and repeated the words that had been passed to me;

“If you lower your head into the water of this tank and hold it there...you will begin to hear music.”

At the time I thought I was being tricky - but now I understand that this is the role of a prophet.

We translate the truth that has infected us. We find a way to pass it on to others.

Charlie looked at me, then looked back at the tank.

He stayed looking at the tank.

My middle brother was stubborn and crude and would rather walk off a cliff than listen to me, the youngest, and therefore the weakest, of our family-

-but oh, that still, black water.

It had a way of holding your attention. It had a gaze that demanded to be met.

“Shut up,” Charlie said vaguely.

In a heartbeat, he let go of me.

He climbed the ladder, stared into the water of the tank for a moment, which was now swimming with his own perplexed and stupid reflection-

-and submerged.

I watched as he remained there, and the bubbles trickled up on either side of his floating hair, in ever-decreasing volume.

I began to feel at once proud- that I had passed this great secret on to my brother - and jealous, that I could not hear whatever he might be hearing beneath the water's surface.

After a while, I began to feel curious about why he was so still and so calm, although the bubbles were no longer rising.

Then my brother surfaced, gasping and wild-eyed, as if he'd had some kind of terrible shock-

-but there was brightness in his face. A smile that was too radiant and too wide to be restricted to his mouth. A peace that I'd never seen before in any human being.

"I could hear it," he said, "I could hear the music-"

-and then all at once the light seemed to fall away from him, and he blinked and said in a tone of sadness and crushing disappointment-

"...but I couldn't make out the words."

We turned, together, and stared into our own reflections.

"When I go back under," Charlie said, "I want you to climb up on the ladder after me and sit on my back. Use your whole weight. I might struggle, because I'm going to think I'm drowning - but you need to keep me under the surface. When I lift up my right arm out of the water and give you a thumbs-up, it'll be because I've heard the words and it's safe to let me come back up."

I have always known how to say the right things to keep people on side.

"I promise," I told him, "but first - what did it sound like? What was the music?"

My brother paused. His lips moved gutturally, and in silence.

"It's not..." he said eventually. "It's not like...anything, you know? Like nothing else."

Then he turned, in what I would only come to understand years afterwards as a ritual silence, ascended the ladder once again, and gave me one final look.

“If you let me up too soon,” he said with trembling sincerity, “I will pound the shit out of you.”

He needn't have bothered.

I was in a place beyond fear, and driving for wonder.

Charlie stooped, took a small and halting breath, and plunged his head back into the water.

I hesitated for a second, then scuttled up the ladder past him, hauled myself up onto his exposed back in its sweating school shirt, and arranged myself in cross-legged pose on top of him.

I pressed my weight down, feeling with satisfaction that I was playing my part.

I watched for the bubbles.

They came.

They ebbed.

They ended.

And I was expecting that great calm to descend over my brother again, so I was surprised this time when he suddenly pitched in the water, rolling his head violently back and forth as if to try and raise it to one side, and his legs began to kick.

I pressed my weight down harder. This likely meant, I thought, that the music was growing clearer.

Perhaps the words were coming into focus for the very first time.

And because I was dutiful, I watched for his right arm, to see if it would lift in a sudden and undeniable thumbs-up.

But it did not; it only kept thrashing, and although Charlie rolled and rocked I stayed pressed upon him from my perch and clung to the sides of the ladder with both hands and I kept him down until he told me to let him up.

It was a relief, when the calm finally descended.

I stayed sitting there upon my brother's back, until the sky grew dark and the sun's glint could no longer be seen in the water's reflection.

When I finally got up and peered down at Charlie, it was hard to see clearly through his swimming hair and the murk of the water, but I thought his face might have changed.

As if it was crawling with life beneath the surface. The widened, panicked eyes still twitching beneath their lids.

By then, I knew, they would be expecting me at home, and so I climbed down the ladder and ran back through the woods before the darkness swallowed up the paths, and my eldest brother Eddie and I ate microwaved potato waffles together in sullen and companionable silence.

For a while there's only silence.

FAULKNER:

I was lucky.

Because by that time word of the Drowning Song had begun to spread across the schoolyards of the Peninsula, in playground whispers, and the grown-ups were beginning to panic.

The law officers who found my brother's body explained patiently to Dad that Charlie had been hoodwinked by a cruel viral craze, a kind of infection that was spreading amongst the young people.

Strangely, it was now that Eddie became more fatherly to me – fussing over how I dressed, marching me straight to school every morning, offering no opportunity for me to dash back to the rusted water tank that stood alone and beautiful in the empty woods – while Dad himself receded.

My father became a sigh behind the bedroom door. A creaking floorboard in the daytime that indicated he had given up on sleep, although he continued to work.

A shadow moving through our garden.

At school, meanwhile, the Drowning Song was being spoken of everywhere, and even I had accrued some small measure of popularity through exposure to my brother.

Did he give you any sign? The other children asked.

Did he tell you if he could hear the music?

Meanwhile, the headmaster called us into assembly and made us sit through an agonising piece of amateur theatre about the dangers of revelatory exposure, and the need to do the sensible thing rather than listen to irresponsible or foolish peers.

The actors that played the parts of our fellow schoolchildren, were all in their mid-thirties, and behind each awkwardly-delivered line you could see the truth of their unhappiness and desperation.

Perhaps they were struggling to convince even themselves. Perhaps they wanted to hear the music as well.

We did not listen, of course. The teachers and parents, clutching at their caged and neutered gods - to them, stability is ethics, and that's enough.

Many of us took part in the challenge of the Drowning Song. Most of us came up from the water secretly disappointed, sodden and unhappy, having heard nothing at all - although of course we bragged to our peers that the song rang clearly in our ears.

We were flawed participants. While we knew the ritual, we didn't understand the hidden language and meaning that lay beneath it, and the crude symbols that we daubed around the edges of our bathroom sinks were poor imitations of true prayer-marks.

I played my part from the shadows, as well as I could, to make things better.

Copying the markings, exactly as I'd seen them on the sacred water tank, practicing them over and over again in the notebook that I always kept clutched to my chest.

Leaving them scratched onto the back of stall doors, in scrunched-up paper balls inside empty lockers, where I hoped they might be found, and passed on, as holy truth must always be passed on.

And even after the craze had died down and the Drowning Song had all but been forgotten and Eddie had left for the big city with a solemn and, as it turned out, unfulfilled promise that he'd come back for Dad and me once he'd found a place for us all to live -

-you remained with me.

I could never explain to someone like Sister Carpenter that it's been your guiding voice, from within me and without me, that has led me on my life's journey.

You were there when I finally left the empty house behind, and began my pilgrimage across the plains.

You were there when I came to the hidden halls where our brothers and sisters of the faith conducted their own private ceremonies.

I could not explain to her that it was your voice that guided us both to the miracle of the boat that was drifting in the reeds, waiting for us to find it.

Because someone like her doesn't understand – she could never truly understand – what it means to love, and to be loved in turn.

If she knew what I'd done to get here, perhaps she wouldn't roll her eyes when I talk.

Speaking of which-

MOTEL, INT.

Unexpectedly, We hear the phone ring. The same sound as before – we're back in the motel.

The sound of FAULKNER picking it up from the hook.

MASON:

(On the phone)

I was expecting to hear from your sister.

FAULKNER:

She went out alone. Wouldn't tell me why.

MASON:

(On the phone)

Do you know why she might want to do something like that?

FAULKNER:

I think so. She isn't birdwatching. Not any more.

MASON:

(On the phone)

Do you want me to send someone else out? Someone who can come and pick you both up?

FAULKNER:

Not just yet. But thank you for offering.

MASON:

(On the phone)

I worry about you, son. Left alone with someone who can't be relied upon.

FAULKNER:

I can take care of myself, Uncle.

MASON:

(On the phone)

All right, well – you know where to reach me.

And if she ever gets too much and you're not sure you can handle her yourself...there's always the police.

FAULKNER:

Would we do that? To a family member?

MASON:

(On the phone)

That's what they're for, dear boy.

You do understand...what you saw out there in the fens, amongst the bulrushes and the flies...it's the real thing, son.

It's the truth you've been looking for all this time.

She can't be allowed to spoil that for you.

FAULKNER:

She won't. I'll make sure – she won't.

MASON:

(On the phone)

Well, I'll speak to you soon, then.

FAULKNER:

Love you lots, Uncle. And thank you – again.

I-

A click as MASON hangs up.

FAULKNER replaces the phone with a sigh.

FAULKNER:

(Narrating)

It's been seventeen days travelling along the precipice of your river, my Trawler-man.

When we first stopped on the edge of the great hydroelectric dam, got out of the car and stood on the bank together, Sister Carpenter and I, not speaking, barely breathing, just gazing out over the land that turned to reeds and the reeds that turned to black water and the water that became endless white mist, and the things upon wings both great and small that weaved in the sky before us...

...my awe was not feigned. My reverence was all mine. I showed upon my face what lay in my heart.

And perhaps it was only my imagination, but I thought I saw something bob just faintly above the surface out in the deepest waters.

A dark and oily head, with two glistening black eyes, and a face that was composed of many shifting faces.

Like a fish coming up to feed - you could almost be certain that it was a fish coming up to feed - except that it was looking right at me and I was looking back and I knew it was Charlie, or Charlie's immortal reflection, coming up to greet me from beneath, and he looked at me right in the eyes as he had never once looked at me in life.

Like he knew me. Every inch of me.

And then it was gone again, only a faint round ripple that looked like a widening, fading eye, and then the ripple was gone too.

Beside me, Sister Carpenter turned and said something like,

“It looks impressive now. But it only gets narrower, the further you go.”

Something sly. Something cynical. Of course.

My only disappointment, my Trawler-man, was that I should be sharing the sight of your great emptiness with someone who had so transparently stopped caring.

Someone so empty, and so unhappy, and so unwilling to change.

I’m beginning to suspect that you’ve brought Carpenter and I together for a reason.

So if you **do** give me that sign, somewhere along this long and twisted road, at a precise and ordained moment of your choosing, I will take Sister Carpenter’s head and I will plunge it beneath your surface.

I will hold it down until the bubbles of air come trickling up, until the bubbles of air no longer come trickling up.

Until she kicks, and stops kicking.

And after that, my Trawler-man...

...perhaps she’ll hear your music again.

OUTRO.