I thought they were nightmares.

Roots pushing out of my mouth, twisting around my face and neck, making me gag. I'd fall backwards and watch the wide open sky being strangled by the branches growing up out of my mouth before twigs and thorns forced their way out of my eye sockets.

I would gasp awake, desperate for air, flailing at the roots ripping my face apart, to find the only lines surrounding me were safely attached to the walls, just wires and ducting on white plastic and grey metal… but for a few seconds I would still feel trapped by those coils and fibres, as if I was hooked up in Medical rather than dozing in my own small room. I'd compose myself and stare at the reassuring artificiality of the moulded ceiling panels, my eyes blinking in time with the lights on the consoles, the desiccated air drying my tears.

I never had nightmares, or even dreams, until I came here. I thought there was nothing within my consciousness that I couldn't control, I used it like any other computer.

Years ago I had plans, and I called them dreams but they were ambitions, heroic and full of boundless distance and scope, leading to a world that could be changed for the better rather than the one I was leaving behind: overcrowded, spoiled and sucked hollow.

I dreamed of abandoning the contamination of history and building a future in a place where it would start afresh with me—Year One, beginning with the first touch of my boot.

I didn't understand the nature of the legacy we all carry inside us.

The landscape of my new home had the kind of stark beauty that I appreciated back then: expansive and bright, with nothing to break the sharp sterile lines of the rocks and boulders, the deserts and mountains and the rivers of dust, lined with black stones lying silent in their beds.

I used to marvel at the patterns, swept by floods that had happened millions of years before our primitive ancestors had even pulled their heads free of the green scum clogging the seas. I thought of life as a kind of pollution, an invasive process that consumed and coated everything. I wanted the clarity, the cleanliness of a dead world.

I sympathised with those infinitely distant relatives—they must have sucked in that first breath, desperate for a new world, ready to die to reach it. Preferring possible death to the atrophy of staying where they were born.

Yes.

The window.

I try not to look out of it anymore. I used to spend hours perched on a metal crate set on its end, the perfect height, so that I could rest my folded arms on the rounded metal sill and stare out at the foothills. When the storms blew down from the granite ridges, I would keep my face pressed against the glass so the four layers were just a faint blur—and I was out there, waiting for the sting of the lifeless dust. Sometimes the storms would dance like dervishes, columns of pale sand bending and writhing, drawing indecipherable messages on the desert. Other times they would roll in like a tidal wave, bringing sound and darkness, battering at the domes, hissing and moaning in a voice I tried to understand.

I understand it now.

At first it scared me, even more than that first night I spent here in the depths of a new midnight blazing with yellow and violet stars, when the reality hit me that I was here forever—that one of those tiny lights was Earth.

Yes.

Morgan used to stare out of this small window too.

He was taller and would stoop, hands on either side of the frame, singing under his breath, his long fingers tapping out a rhythm. I never recognised the tune, it might've been his own, he was a good musician, and mathematician. And friend.

By the time we noticed he was missing, it was too late. He'd cut the tubes on the other suits so we couldn't follow.

He's out there now, a ridge in the sand. We let him stay where he wanted to be. I can't make out the shape of his body any more, and that helps me to pretend—like he did—that he simply went outside for a walk.

I miss his music.

Cathy confessed to me that what she missed most was rain, which made us both laugh because she was a born sun-worshipper from L.A., persistently teasing me about how I

must have suffered a pale and deprived childhood stuck in waterlogged old England.

She managed to keep her healthy glow even after the nine months of flying here and I suspected that one of her luxury rations was a bottle of tanning lotion. We each had our own way of coping.

When we first got here, she used to work as long as possible in the biodomes, stripped down to vest and shorts, making the most of the filtered UV, but she soon started to complain that it felt wrong, that her skin was drying out. She took to staying in the domes when the sprinklers were on, coming out soaked, which I loved, until I noticed she was hiding tears in the water running down her face.

I found her.

I thought she was sleeping amongst the rows of corn, lying on her back, enjoying the feel of the water on her face, but she had her mouth open and her lungs were overflowing. She looked sad and peaceful, her cupped hands filled with fake rain.

I stayed with her, stroking her wet hair, until the sprinklers shut off and the sun went down.

Then we lost Adesh.

He was calm and quiet, a natural leader. We got on well enough, but his dedication to the cause meant he considered a conversation without any practical application as a waste of precious time. He embodied the solid work-ethic of the pioneer; our finite lives had to be filled with construction or there was no point in being here.

He led our team through the initial repair of the operational systems that had failed after the abandonment. As it was, the core was reassuringly robust, insured with so many backups that even a worst case scenario wouldn’t cause a catastrophic collapse of the living environments, unless they were deliberately overridden. Most of the station had just gone into hibernation and all we had to do was wake it up again, so the whole process was completed faster than we’d anticipated, leaving us with time to settle down, and to speculate.

But there was never much open discussion about what had happened before we arrived. We just accepted that the first crew had driven themselves to breaking point setting up the station—it had always been acknowledged that there would be a danger of unforeseen psychological reactions to such extreme isolation, despite all the tests and screening.

We were well on our way when it happened—too late to turn back.

Control informed us that they wouldn’t send out any more teams until we had stabilised the station and the training had been modified and augmented back at their end. We knew they were lying, you could hear the panic in their voices even through the crackling distance and delay—they were abandoning us, effectively condemning our colony to die for the sake of their budgets, elections and cowardice.

We coped with it. It was all so remote, and somehow meaningless, we were already feeling so distant. Disconnection isn’t callous, it’s essential for survival—on both worlds.

As we were coming in to land we passed directly over their blast crater; a klick-wide black sunburst seared into the ground, glittering with torn metal and melted plastic.

At least it must have been quick.

There's no way back for us now, they scavenged and used up everything spare or adaptable. I guess their sense of purpose must have held them together, given them a positive focus for the duration of the build at least.

We were left with nothing but each other.

When Adesh held out his arms to me that day, I didn’t notice the cuts, his sleeves were down and tight to his wrists. He was smiling and I thought he was warming to me, and that maybe our tentative friendship would improve now that the most intense work was over.

I hugged him gladly, and he gripped me hard, but then his arms fell to his sides. Blood ran down his fingers and pooled on the white floor so fast that I couldn’t react, it was too unreal. As he slumped forwards I caught him, and he looked up at me still smiling and whispered, “Is it red enough?”

He never asked questions, he was always so sure of himself.

I said nothing, his eyes closed. I let him drop, his blood soaked my shirt, my back was wet with it.

It cooled so fast.

Dan, Mikhail, Chyou and Seb were the last.

They had been talking amongst themselves for a while, cutting me out. I’d made the mistake of telling them about my nightmares, just in conversation, and after that they seemed to turn against me, like I was contaminated.

When the last storm hit they were outside with the rover, supposedly repairing and fitting solar panels to the east array. I watched them from my window; walking, driving, standing together. They had turned off the outside comms in their suits so I couldn't listen in.

The hills behind them were darkening. I had no way to warn them.

It wasn't my fault.

The surging clouds reared up as they crested the grey hills, bringing the strange deep moaning that I can feel through my skull. It was going to be a big one. A hungry one.

It told me so.

I settled on my crate and laid my arms on the sill, cold from the conducted chill of the thin and freezing air outside.

They saw it coming, and ran for the rover. The sky was heavy and looming above them, all the pink-stained blue of the clear day suddenly swallowed up across the entire breadth of the horizon. Their white suits were lit from the front where the sunlight still shafted through the gaps between the domes, and stood out bright against the roiling wall bearing down on them. The rover swayed manically as they scrambled in and the six fat wheels span, kicking up their own dust storm.

I think they were too far away to see my face at the window.

Before they were halfway back the mouth closed over them and they were gone.

The storm slammed into the domes, howling and beating to be let in, my window went dark and I flinched away reflexively at the impact. But then slowly, I put my ear to the cold glass.

There was music in it, the sound of rain falling, the red of blood, the pounding of hearts, the sigh of breath.

Yes.

This world—my world—has tasted life and wants more. It has spent too long in mourning, crying sand over the empty rivers and seas.

We have water and soil and life in abundance, in our supplies and the biodomes and our bodies.

We can't be the settlement that Earth intended us to be, but we can become the colony

this planet wants.

Yes.

The thought doesn’t scare me any more.

I will break the seals on every dome, one by one, until I reach the one where Cathy drowned and there I’ll lie down where she lay, swallow all the seeds I can find, close my eyes.

And dream.