The old woman’s flesh, stretched and sagging, unfolded over the gurney like a vinyl tarp. The surgeons had removed the horse. Black and shiny, slick as spit, and with the help of two operating room attendants, two nurses, and a bug-eyed anaesthetist, piled its sorry carcass in another corner of the operating theatre. The horse was a gelding, an Oldenburg. Deep-chested, strong-necked, heavy-hooved.

The barrel of its body was oddly expanded; yet even with this deformation, one could imagine it stepping fastidiously over a cedar trail, strong and well-postured, carrying the old woman, whose face and extremities were as brilliant an unearthly white as the horse was black. The old woman was dead, of course. There had been no saving her. After failed efforts to retrieve her grossly distended body by ambulance, she arrived at the hospital’s emergency entrance in a hay wagon, the purported victim of a riding accident. She was nearly dead then. It had taken the wagon forever to haul her up and over a hill. Even with earlier medical attention, it would have been the same. The fact she had hung on as long as she had was a miracle, for the horse had crushed every organ in her body and completely flattened her heart. But the removal of the lethal horse was not the end of this strange proceeding, for just as the anaesthetist was leaving the operating room, it came to the attention of one of the surgeons that the dead horse was moving.

It was soon discovered that inside the horse, there existed in its entirety a dead cow, still in the grip of reflexive spasms, and inside the cow, a goat in the early stages of rigor mortis. The surgeons were almost fearful to proceed, yet scientific curiosity drove them forward with their scalpels to unearth a decaying border collie inside of the goat.
A hush descended in the theatre as both surgeons paused to mop their brows. In the excision of the dead animals, the anesthetist’s usefulness had been reduced to that of voyeur. The nurses and operating room attendants also found their presence redundant, but in spite of their growing queasiness couldn’t bring themselves to leave.

“It’s just like one of those Matryoshka dolls,” nurse Glinda Brown muttered, recalling the large, wooden nesting doll that graced her grandmother’s mantel. As a child, she’d been allowed to play with it, and recalled the delight and surprise that accompanied the twist of each body’s opening. How excited she had been to discover the miniature revelations, to see them spill one from the other. She considered this now, this pure, happy memory, and realized how, by association with this grotesque and inexplicable horror, it would be forever changed.

The other nurse, Susan Lacey, who’d once been an aspiring Egyptologist, thought instead of the Valley of Kings, the practices of mumification and entombment, and just like those nesting dolls Glinda evoked, the way sarcophagi contained sarcophagi. If it had just been her and Glinda, she may have expressed this thought, but knowing how the applied science of medicine despised and mocked the humanities, and how the males of their surgical team likewise despised and mocked her and Glinda, she thought it best to remain mute.

Both nurses had suffered bullying at the hands of their male colleagues. The operating room attendants and the anesthetist routinely shamed them, while the surgeons frequently berated them, and during various stressful times, hurled sharp metal objects at their heads. Another nurse, who’d suffered similar abuse, lodged a complaint and when she was summarily dismissed, Lacey and Brown knew better than to protest.

Nursing required endurance, of steeling oneself, of sucking things up. “It’s because we’re powerful that they act this way,” Susan whispered, but neither she nor Glinda believed it. If they really were powerful, wouldn’t they have been able to stop the abuse?
open. Inside of the shriveled spider was a fly. Its dark body not in the least faded, its wings complete. Its multi-glistening, green-blue compound eyes glinted with a flicker of animation. The surgeons argued over how such a well-preserved specimen might be displayed (an entomologist’s case or the glass bulb of a paperweight) and who, for they’d both been diligent in this excision, would get to claim this trophy for display in their waiting room.

The stunned nurses, Lacy and Brown, were reprimanded for their indolence. Surely, they could see that a specimen jar was in order. As the two women hustled to retrieve a container, the fly, resplendent upon the tip of the scalpel, much to the shock of all assembled, suddenly took flight. It ascended swiftly and directly towards the harsh surgical lights. No eyes could follow its progress. In a second it had vanished.

The memory of these strange events lingered and all who witnessed them suffered the uncomfortable amplitude of an experience too rich to fully digest. This surfeit took on a predominantly destructive character. In the case of one of the O.R. attendants, his persistent obsession to know the motivations that led to the old woman’s death caused an increasing fascination with livestock and insects.

He left his job at the hospital to devote himself entirely to this study. Although most farms that reared the diverse species found inside the woman no longer existed as multinational corporations had gobbled them up, he eventually located a small family farm as his research project. The operation boasted four strong Norwegian Fjords for plowing, fifteen Jersey cows, half a dozen Angora goats, one Schnauzer and a barn full of mix-breed cats. Swallows darted elegantly over the fields and formed muddy cup-shaped nests on barn beams and overhangs. Orb-weaving spiders, too, created sticky webs in these places, while thousands and thousands of disparate flies flew in and out through open windows. There were blowflies and flesh flies and botflies, flies that sucked blood and flies that ate manure. Flies that fastened themselves around the eyes and ankles of cows, as well as ones that were swished away by strong impatient tails.

Because the farmer believed the O.R. attendant’s research was intended to prevent small farms, such as his, from being consumed by largescale predatory companies, he allowed him to camp on his land, sanctioned his study, and provided absolute access. He grew suspicious, however, when it became apparent the man carried with him no note pads nor any recording devices. Besides this most apparent lack of professionalism, there was also the question of his research methodology, which appeared to the farmer nothing more than gawking and gaping. In the end, he had to take out a restraining order to keep the lunatic off his land, but the obsessive man’s preoccupation had grown to such an absorbing fixation he wouldn’t be bridled by law. He moved his tent beyond the farm’s property line, and under the cloak of night carried out his covert rendezvous, repeating, as if a mantra, “I don’t know why she swallowed the fly.” He was certain that the enlightenment he sought would descend upon him in an illuminating flash if only he could work his way to the inside of what he was beginning to define as the oneness of all creation.

He was neither a psychologist nor a philosopher, yet he intuited that the old woman’s motivation for her boa-constrictor style slaughter and suicide could only be known by experiencing the minds of the insects and animals she’d consumed. With flashlight in hand, he silently communed with the gloomy-eyed horses and gentle cows, with the mischievous goats that tried to eat the cuffs of his pants, and the yappy dog that he inevitably had to muzzle with an anti-bark device. The barn cats expressed their sense of indignation, resignation, and karmic injustice, while the barn swallows pretended they slept. The spiders rested at the centers of their webs, great ego consciousnesses, surrounded by all-encompassing selves, and the flies, for even at nighttime there were hordes of them, swiftly evaded his approach, mocking and jeering, and calling, he was certain: “Catch
us if you can, you troubled, confounded, inquiring man.”

Their words landed in his head with all seeing compound eyes and a rainbow’s iridescence, but he was still unable to grasp hold of the puzzle’s solution. The secret poked constantly at his waking thoughts, like a large, regurgitating proboscis.

Then, one day, the great mystery unfolded within him like the pleats of a giant accordion. He had never known anything so large. It opened and opened, filling him as if he were a small pitcher, overflowing. Through his mouth and into his head, the sounds of barnyard creatures became ghostly music. In the surrounding darkness he was becoming pure light. The sensation in his body was so swift and overwhelming that he could not pay attention to the thoughts shooting through him, though he was able to capture one fleeting, fluttering, wriggling, jiggling perception: Human beings had difficulty experiencing more than one thing at one time. On its own, it didn’t seem a particularly profound insight. Then, all became bird cheeps and horse whinnies. The world closed in upon him, just as if it were two barn doors over a gate’s groundsill. The following morning he was discovered on all fours with eyes as glassy and dark as the most melancholy cow’s. There was nothing he could say as the farmer cursed him, as ambulance attendants hauled him away, as a bed was made ready for him in the very hospital he had once worked in. “Moo…” was his only thought. “Moo…moooo,” for the mystery had been transmuted. Yet it would not easily come to an end.

The second O.R. attendant also struggled with the incident. It haunted him like a hungry phantom, clinging to his consciousness, though his quest was anything but the desire to understand it. His wish, instead, was to obliterate every residuum of it.

“I don’t care why she swallowed the fly,” he said to himself again and again, a kind of magical aphorism he believed would keep thoughts of the gory scene at bay. Yet his bedroom walls at night depicted images of the broadened woman in shadow and the buoyant sparkling fly. His days were filled with the splash and clatter of sounds his mind instinctively poured into the plaguing memory. The clink of a knife against a plate would recall for him the probing scalpel, while the swish of water in the kitchen sink would conjure thoughts of flowing fleece and fur. The buzz of voices, of radio static, of the internal monologue of the world, generated in his tired mind swarms of mulish insects.

“I don’t care why she swallowed the fly,” he would repeat aloud, with increasing desperation, several hundred thousand times a day. “I don’t care why! I don’t care why!” And when it became apparent to him that his mind would not believe his protests, he took to systematically attempting to obliterate all thought with the drinking of very potent Scotch and the obsessive attending of brothels. Sex and alcohol, taken together in large quantities, had a numbing amnesiac effect, and all may have worked well for him if it hadn’t been that one day he found himself beneath a large horsey woman at the brothel, who possessed a genuine World War I British cavalry riding crop.

“I don’t care why she swallowed the fly,” he began repeating in breathless desperation before ecstatically swooning. He remained unresponsive for over an hour. His hands and feet grew cold, his flesh became a mottled grey, and his breath grew shallower and shallower. A drone, like a thousand blue-bottles, permeated the outer hall as the brothel keeper and her staff determined what to do. “A corpse in the house will absolutely kill business,” she lamented.

Fifteen minutes later, the man, packaged and weighted with lead, was promptly disposed of in the sea. As the briny deep infused his nostrils, he awoke from a dream of a mare named “Mystery” galloping crazily towards him. He’d just devised a way to avoid the creature’s trampling hooves when all turned to buzzing foam and sparkling water, embracing him like the body of a hungry old woman.

Various unhappy fates befell other witnesses.
One of the surgeons hanged himself, while the other jumped, without parachute, from a plane. The anesthetist, after resigning from his job, changing his name, and finding an entirely different occupation, succumbed to a morphine overdose.

Since the horrific exhuming and the annihilation of most of the former surgical team, Nurses Brown and Lacey's work environment improved and they found no more need for their ritual blighting. However, their thoughts remained far from untroubled. Glinda Brown's mind persistently lighted around memories of her grandmother. She saw the old woman cooking her favorite ethnic dishes, telling her Russian folk tales, while Glinda played with the tainted nesting dolls. No amount of mental swatting could quash the image of the hospital's butchery. It was like a Chinese finger trap: The more she fought against its grip, the greater became its hold, and she wracked her exhausted brain trying to devise an escape.

She'd learned a trick in a psychiatric nursing class based on a well-known experiment. Intentionally avoiding thoughts of white bears tended to make the mind perversely produce them. Perhaps she could escape the mélange of dismembered animals, she considered, by focusing her efforts in trying not to think about one that was whole, and pure, and white. "Don't think of a white bear," she told herself, and within moments, the imagined image of the hospital's butchery vanished, and a friendly polar bear materialized. In her mind's eye, it loped along snowy arctic pathways, and she sighed with relief in breaking free from the combat of reflexive traumatic memory. Her respite, however, was short lived. The bear left its snowy fields, ambled up the stairs of a hospital and hungrily pawed its way into the fateful operating room. Its nose twitched as it sniffed the air and beheld the mess of bloody dismembered life. Through its ravenous eyes, the heap was just available meat. It pushed forward, knocking over surgical tables and the anesthesia cart, consuming the grotesque mass of quivering flesh. It was almost more than she could bear, she thought. The horrible pun struck with surgical precision.

That evening shadows careered across her bedroom ceiling: grossly distended old ladies and their menageries pursued by a rider of icebergs. Repression zapped her energy. Even thinking that the shocking memory should be kept at bay conjured images of howling border collies. In panic and despair, she made her way to Susan Lacey's place, only to discover that her co-worker was undergoing ordeals of her own.

Anubis, the Egyptian jackal-headed god of the dead, had begun making nightly visitations to her. Frequently, he was flanked by the goddess Ammut, a terrifying composite creature with crocodile head, lion torso and hippopotamus back parts. "She's known as the devourer of souls," Susan said.

"It's only a recurring nightmare," Glinda tried to assuage her own anxiety by comforting. "You shouldn't pay any attention," though she knew the advice was absurd.

"I believe this is some sort of curse," Susan suggested, no longer fearing what others might think of her past study of pharaonic Egypt. The old lady and the beasts, she explained, were sarcophagi of sorts. She was certain that the horrific dissections and excisions had triggered something powerful and malignant. "There were eight creatures consumed," she said, "a number particularly important to the Egyptians. In fact, the elite often had an ensemble of eight nesting caskets." Not only was disturbing a tomb profane, but cutting open a corpse without Anubis' blessing was a heinous violation, she told her.

"But we didn't do the surgery," Glinda protested.

"We didn't try to stop it, either," Susan said, "and that not only makes us culpable, it also means we're condemned."

"Surely not," Glinda laughed lightly, feeling the pit of her stomach sink.

Neither entertained the possibility that such a curse may have been wrought by their own incessant
maledictions. Neither believed herself capable of harming a fly. It would never occur to them that the toxins of justified hatred they'd discreetly discharged against their tormentors required careful handling and had blown back upon them like a lethal insecticide.

“You've heard about the curse of Tutankhamun, haven't you? Twenty-two people died, and only a few of them were directly involved in excavation and dissection.” Susan spoke with authority.

Glinda chuckled uncomfortably. “I doubt very much the old woman was Egyptian.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Susan's agitation was infectious. “A violation is a violation and the eye of Ra knows no geographic bounds.”

Glinda lapsed back to thoughts of childhood. She knew it wasn't the same thing, but her grandmother often spoke of the evil eye, which she called the sglazi. It could wither crops, kill animals, devastate nations. She hung a pair of old shoes outside of her bedroom window to ward it off, and sometimes, when she felt sglazi threaten, she’d quickly cross herself and spit three times. “Curses are like chickens,” she'd mutter cryptically, “in the end, they always come home to roost.”

“We need to stay calm.” Susan was speaking to herself as much as to Glinda, who was now all of five years old, sitting on her grandmother's soft lap, a pert little monkey in peddle pusher pants, enjoying the story of a childless couple who'd fashioned a boy from clay. The boy was insatiably hungry and devoured everything in sight. Glinda had been amused by the silliness. Now, however, she saw with the most vivid of internal vision the hopeless carnage of the operating room, and felt overwhelmingly suicidal.

“We also need to take action,” Susan declared, nudging Glinda from the despond that was engulfing her. “We can’t just wait to be picked off like sitting ducks.”

The two women stood in Susan’s rustic kitchen, the buzz of their anxious voices ascending. Neither were aware of being observed. Neither realized that high above them thousands of photoreception units were differentiating their movements.

“We need to find a way to fight this,” Susan said, slamming her hand down, making her skeptical friend jump. “We need to protect ourselves.”

The ceiling observer rubbed her forelimbs, like a miser rubbing hands. If she could have sardonically chuckled, she would have. Her metallic body sparkled as she considered her two human accomplices. They had summoned her, a curse, into the world and fed her with their passive vengeance. Now, she hovered above them, a demon of death and putrefaction, absorbing through her antennas the exhilarating scents of their ignorance and terror. She imagined them cadavers and scanned them for visible orifices where her eggs could safely be secured. The stench they presently exuded would vanish. All that would remain would be their panicked, fetid sweat. Her eggs would mature in their decaying apertures and her tubular young, feed and feed, eventually shedding their earthbound bodies and flying off into the all-consuming world.