

# Raptures



**William Scheinman**

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious and the product of the author's imagination.

**Raptures**

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**To**

**MOM**

**You're one of a kind.**



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*Perhaps everything terrible is  
in its deepest being something  
that needs our love.*

—*Rilke*



**PROLOGUE:**  
**SHADOWS BEHIND THE EYES**

Kensho Retreat Center  
Santa Cruz Mountains, California — Sunday

Kensho is beautiful this spring. The brooks and streams are swollen with clear rushing water, and the hillside grasses, destined to be parched yellow within weeks, are lushly, ethereally green. Wildflowers dot the trails and fields with pinpoints of brilliant color. During the day the temperature is hot but not baking, and the air is scented with bay, sage and jasmine. Although the mosquitoes are starting to hatch they're still too small to be much trouble. Claire and I are totally overjoyed to be on retreat. Last week we were married in a simple Buddhist ceremony performed by our teacher Jack before some 50 of our closest friends and relatives. We made our vows within a circle of flower petals, at the edge of a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, surf crashing on the rocks, with bridesmaids in white wearing crowns of gardenias and looking like pagan queens, and my parents standing side by side for the first time in 20 years. So now, excited newlyweds on the verge of a four-week honeymoon to Italy, we've decided to come to Kensho to spend a week sleeping apart and meditating for 10 hours a day — a week of dealing with stiff muscles and joints and sore knees just to clear our minds of the stress surrounding the wedding, to relax into presence, and to start our life's journey together on the right track.

It occurs to me that I've been writing in this journal for more than a year now without having given an adequate description of meditation. Okay, here's the thing about it: basically, you do nothing. You just sit there with your eyes closed, trying to be aware of the breath as it comes and goes. There's nothing to fix or figure out or control. You just breathe and notice your breathing. And when you feel properly absorbed in the process of the breath, you can allow your awareness to open out to include whatever is strongest in your experience — a sensation in the body, an emotion, a racing train of thought, being aware at the same time of whether your mind is interpreting the experience as pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, not judging yourself for whatever you experience, not holding on to any experience and not pushing anything away, allowing everything to blossom in its own time, pain and pleasure, fear and joy, allowing yourself to become absorbed in the flux of the moment, the nowness of things. Along the way, of course, you become assaulted by the ugly ruts of your mind: fantasies of having sex with gorgeous women, or being cruel to an enemy, or planning your next vacation right down to the tropical rum drink you sip out of a pineapple while you sit on a soft beach at sunset — assaulted by all the judgments and narcissisms, the fears and bigotries that have created the weave of your life, the quirky and unavoidable stitches of the mind that form your karma. And so while you sit there doing nothing (your knees on fire or your leg snoozing like a hunk of lead pipe), you're actually doing everything. You're living your entire life up close and personal. You're creating a space between your habits and your ability to act on them. Slowly but surely, you begin to free yourself of the need for pleasure and the fear of pain.

So far, the first couple of days of practice have been routine for me. In the mornings we rise at six, sit in the Zendo for 40 minutes, walk for 30, and sit for another 40. After breakfast, there's more sitting and walking until lunch. During the afternoon there's time

for yoga or qi gong or hiking on the trails. After a hike to the ridge some of us cool ourselves off with a nice dip in the pond hidden behind a stand of trees off one of the trails. The pond at Kensho is always a high point for me. We paddle through the icy currents, laughing Buddhists, our skin stinging with cold and our minds awake, as the turtles bob their reptilian heads in the water and the neon blue dragonflies flit across the surface like tiny toy helicopters. At the far end of the pond a lone blue heron stands proudly among the reeds, waiting for the silver flash of a carp's tail. In the evenings we have our silent dinner at a long table in the common room, and it's given me joy, a thrill, really, to know that Claire, my precious new bride, is sitting just a few feet away. Now and then we encounter each other in one of the buildings or on one of the paths connecting them, stopping to bow politely, a mischievous smile rippling across our faces, then pass each other without even touching. After dinner Jack or one of the other teachers gives a dharma talk, usually a splendid one, followed by student questions, and then we all go to bed and start it over again in the morning. Men and women sleep in separate dorms, or in tents on the grounds between the buildings. Claire is in the women's dorm, but I, wary of snoring men, brought my North Face tent and set it up in a shady glade between the common building and the Zendo.

During these first few days my meditation practice has followed a standard trajectory: in the morning my incessantly distracted mind becomes flooded with thoughts and images until, as I focus and refocus on the breath, it manages to collect itself into a one-pointed field of awareness, a process I always visualize as being like defragging a hard drive on a computer. By mid-morning, my mind gathered, calm and radiant, I often attain the first Dhyana, a preliminary state of absorption free of gross thoughts and mental defilements. But after the lunch break I typically become afflicted by the hindrance of torpor, my mind unraveling across a vague dreamscape until I catch myself nodding off on the cushions, jolted awake by the fear of falling over. By the evening meditations I start to get focused again, and if I choose to sit on after the dharma talk I often attain my deepest concentration of the day —sitting on my bench in the dark zendo, candles guttering softly on the shrine, my physical body seems to dissolve as the breath flows sweet as honey, my hands, legs, torso, and face all eventually disappear, until finally even the breath vanishes, with nothing remaining but awareness itself, and a stillness that's explosive. It's great to be on retreat.

### Monday

During the first sit this morning, my mental defragging was amazingly brief. Within moments I became highly absorbed, my breath razor thin. Soon parts of my body began to melt away, thoughts didn't come at all, and the stillness became laced with pure presence. I'm not sure how long I stayed like this, a few minutes probably, before I noticed a sensation racing around the edges of my body, a rawness that I soon identified as fear. I sat with the fear for a few minutes, noting it as fear, fear, fear, as we are instructed to do. But the sensation of unease gradually increased and, suddenly taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes and squeezed my hands into fists, instantly aware of my body again. The stillness, so conducive to calm just moments before, now seemed to be a portal through which fear traveled to me. The fear surrounded me like an invisible abyss filled with teeth that could swallow me at any minute. To fight it, I looked around the zendo at my fellow meditators. Sitting on their cushions or benches, backs straight, some faces soft, some faces twisted into frozen grimaces, some bloated with sleep. I saw Claire one row behind

me and three mats to the left, her posture perfect, her face tanned and clean, black ponytail hanging down her back. I could hear the burble of the engorged stream down the hill, the birds singing in the trees, a meditator coughing, shifting in his seat. Everything was as it should be. We were all just trying to do our best to become more aware, trying to become better people, and we would all be okay in the end, wouldn't we? All at once, the fear seemed to leave me. I no longer felt that ravenous void surrounding me, and with a little wiggle of my torso I closed my eyes and resumed my practice.

Almost immediately I began to see the shapes. Somewhere in the light behind my closed eyelids, patches of shadow began to shift, images started to form. Tall, dark, moving shadows, they seemed to become larger as I gazed at them. As the seconds passed these shapes gradually became defined as walking figures dressed in black. There were several of them, tall figures staggering slowly toward me, tentatively, as if they were sleepwalking ghosts emerging from a dark alley. An icy sensation ran up the nape of my neck, and I opened my eyes for a moment, hoping to break the link these images formed with my mind: people sitting on their cushions, a blue jay alighting on a branch, sandalwood smoke curling up to the rafters, a pinch of tightness in my hips. But when I closed my eyes again the figures were still there — only now they were closer to me. And now their faces had become visible, if not quite identifiable: vague, blurry, strangely shaped. Faces that were in a state of motion.

Then one of the figures reached out a blurry hand and squeezed my shoulder.

I opened my eyes, jerking backward with a gasp and, my bench collapsing, I tumbled over.

Later. . .

The smell of mint tea drifted under my nose as a gust of wind blew leaves across the boards of the verandah and the bay tree tipped and shimmered. The room was small and rustic and smelled of burnt wood. They call it the dokusan, or teacher's room. There was a cast-iron stove in one corner, a neat pile of firewood next to it. A little pine bookcase stood against a wall. It was filled with volumes of Buddhist sutras, collections of Ryokan and Dogen, and Bhikhu Nanamoli's *Life of the Buddha*. An old dusty futon was spread out on the floor, and a spider rappelled from its ceiling web. I was sitting on a black zafu opposite Jack, who sat with a frayed wool blanket wrapped around his shoulders, holding a mug of steaming tea in his hands. It was around ten in the morning.

"We get all sorts of visual imagery when we sit, Joel," Jack was reassuring me. "I wouldn't let it worry you."

"But it does worry me," I told him. "It was scary. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before."

Jack lifted the mug to his lips, blew, and took a careful sip. He lowered the mug and looked at me. "The question is really one of identification. If you identify with these figures, or with the fear they induce in you, then in a sense you become the fear. You see what I mean?"

I had to think about that one. Luckily, the sensation of a heavy hand gripping my shoulder faded as soon as I'd opened my eyes in the zendo that morning. My embarrassment at having fallen off my meditation bench, however, wasn't as easy to erase, and rather than continue sitting, I simply uprighted my bench, stood, ignored the curious

eyes of those who watched me, bowed to the Buddha on the shrine, and quickly exited the zendo. Lucky for me, I had scheduled this meditation interview with Jack the day before, and now he was just the person I needed to see.

“I understand what you’re saying, conceptually at least,” I told him. “But how do I stop identifying with my fear when fear is such a visceral emotion?”

“Just stay with the body. Notice where you’re feeling the fear. You can note it as fear, fear.”

“But I tried that and it didn’t work.”

“Then go back to focusing on the breath. Just remember: no matter how much fear you are feeling, it isn’t really who you are. Fear arises, Joel. This is a precondition of being a human being. Fear arises just like desire, hatred, and sadness arise. Just like physical pain arises. Whatever arises is conditioned. And whatever is conditioned will change. So don’t worry. Be open to your fear with kind attention, and it will dissolve.”

Afternoon —

I arrived late for the 11 o’clock meditation. Most people were already seated, eyes closed. I walked over to my bench, squatted down, then slid my legs beneath it. I tied my blanket around my waist, and set my hands palm up on my lap in a meditation mudra. I shut my eyes, saw vague patches of shadow and light, took a few deep breaths to settle in. I was determined to have a solid session of practice, no matter what. Rather than focusing on passing sensations as they arise, the classic Vipassana technique, I decided to focus solely on my breath, using the sensations of breathing to steady my mind and prevent any strange visual manifestations from arising. But as soon as I closed my eyes, my plans were thwarted. I discovered my mind to be so calm and concentrated that my breath was too soft to follow. I waited a few minutes for the usual parade of self-important images and thoughts to arise, but they never did. And my breath was still too subtle to use as an object of focus. So I just sat with bare awareness as birds chirped, jets roared high in the sky, and meditators coughed, sneezed, and shifted in their seats. Within minutes I had lost the felt sense of being in a body, and there were times when I seemed to be floating above the floor, or else expanded outward, boundaryless and oceanic. Flashes of fear arose in my mind like bolts of lightning illuminating a dark sky— I observed the fear, noticing a sudden surge in my heartbeat, breathing into it, then felt the fear release, the heart gradually slowing. Yes, it was working just as Jack said it would. Stop identifying with my fear, and fear merely arises and passes away. It’s nothing personal. It’s just a passing phenomenon.

I’m not exactly sure at what point the dull chiaroscuro behind my eyes became structured with tall dark shapes shambling in my direction. They just seemed to appear all at once, large cloaked figures standing above me, reaching out to me with long, weirdly-shaped arms. Rather than open my eyes to expunge the images from my mind, I decided to just let them happen. To become an active observer of my mind’s phenomena. Like a good Buddhist, I was investigating my mind. I was trying to see what these images were made of. If I investigated them deeply enough, I knew that they would reveal themselves to be empty, impermanent, without self. And my fear would dissolve.

But then I felt arms sliding on me, oddly-shaped hands gripping me. I felt myself being lifted from my bench and firmly guided forward. Before I could even think about resisting, I found that I had been hustled into another room, a small bare room lit by an eerie yellow

light. I was surrounded by the tall dark forms and an odd smell like rotten eggs. Compared to the imposing height of these shapes, I was like a child. I noticed a small wood table in the center of the room. Resting on it was a little polished red box. Strange gold symbols were painted on the sides of the box. The object seemed ominously familiar, but I didn't know why. Then one of the tall shapes moved to one side to reveal something stranger: a black figure was shaking violently in a high wooden chair. It bolted and thrashed about in a blur of movement. Something flashed below me: bright wiggling shapes moving in my direction. They were like tubes filled with white neon, or phosphorescent worms.

Then I noticed an intense burning sensation beneath my navel, like small hot blades digging into me. I tried to scream, but my vocal chords didn't seem to be working. I tried to run, but I was pinned in place.

Then the scene suddenly changed. I was lying on a hard cool surface like a slab of stone, the smell of rotten eggs in my nostrils. Dark figures loomed all around me. I saw their shapeless hands moving over me, like methodical surgeons performing some special operation. I heard a series of precise clicking and snapping sounds, as they fitted something into place. There was a quality of fiendish routine to their movements that implied, horribly, that I had been the subject of this procedure many times before. My belly still burned, only now the sensation was sharper. I managed to lift my head and looked: a cluster of gold needles stuck out from my abdomen. Shadowy hands plucked these needles out of me, then inserted new ones back in. Somehow I had the understanding that I was being "refitted." I glanced to my left: the lid of the polished red box on the table was now open, and resting inside the box, on a bed of crimson velvet, were dozens of the short thick gold needles in neat shiny rows. . . .

What are you doing? I shouted, but the words in my mouth came out like the sound of rustling leaves, a crispy susurrus of nonsense. My head sank back. I gazed up at the dark figures, tried discerning the intent in their smeared, shifting faces, but couldn't. When one of them moved I noticed that the wall on my right had disappeared. In its place I saw the façade of a church that seemed to float on water. Strange yellow light washed down onto the face of the church. Illuminated by that amber glow were a series of stone sculptures inside niches — statuettes of monsters. Then I did begin to scream — and this time my voice was working fine.

Only now the arms that thrust themselves around me, shaking me and guiding me, weren't the arms of faceless dark figures in a room — they were the arms of my fellow Buddhists in the meditation hall at Kensho.

After dinner. . . .

Claire sat with me on the porch this afternoon, holding my hand and stroking it. "I'll be fine," I kept telling her, not believing it for a moment. I was feeling incredibly shaky, my muscles seemed to be made of air, and whenever I attempted to stand my head started to spin. All notions I might have had of a solid, dependable reality have been utterly shattered. From a Buddhist perspective, I suppose this might be considered a good thing, as it points to the truth of the insubstantiality of all phenomena, including that of a personal, eternal self. But my experience in the Zendo wasn't one of no-self — I had perceived the existence of mysterious Others who abide in a realm somehow accessible to my mind and who are capable, apparently, of physically touching me and doing things to my body. I have no doubt that this is what occurred — the large shapeless hands tapping

my shoulder, the gyrating seated figure, the bright needles sticking out of my belly, were simply too real to dismiss as hallucinations, which I've never had in my life anyway. I've even managed to speculate about the existence of these creatures. If they are real beings in some realm accessible to the human mind, do they also possess Buddha nature like me? Is their being, at its core, fundamentally pure? But what do they want with me? What do I have that they need?

Throughout the afternoon, as I sat with Claire on the porch, people would come up to me and whisper kind words. "Hang in there, Joel," was a typical refrain. After a couple of hours, holding Claire's hand and sipping chamomile tea and watching the sun blink down through the trees, the dizziness in my head faded and it was almost as if things were back to normal. But then Claire swept me off my fragile pedestal of calm with this: "Where did you go to, anyway, before you screamed?"

Her earnest green eyes searched mine with curiosity, but I was totally confused by her question. "What do you mean?" I asked.

She flipped my hand over playfully. "I mean before it happened. I opened my eyes and saw that you weren't on your bench. That you had left the zendo. It was strange to me, because I hadn't heard you leave. You know that building. It's so unstable on those stilts that any time someone leaves the whole floor shakes. But I didn't hear you. I closed my eyes and just a second or two later you screamed and there you were, back on your bench."

I felt a lump in my throat and swallowed down some June dust. "What are you talking about? I never left my bench. I was sitting there the whole time."

Claire's hand tightened on my wrist. "Joel, you weren't there. When I opened my eyes a few seconds before you screamed, your bench was empty. You had to have gone somewhere."

As my chest tightened and the dizziness returned, I let my head fall back and closed my eyes. I squeezed Claire's hand and felt the pulse in my ears pound like thunder. I breathed deeply and followed the breath, and noted, fear, fear, fear.

When the dinner bell rang, I stood and Claire, standing with me, stroked my arm, her intense green eyes, glittery and kind, receiving me with complete acceptance. But leavened with the kindness inside those sparkling jade depths, I saw tracers of real worry. A shadow emerging in her mind about her new husband.

A few minutes later we were in the dining hall with all the others. I stood over a large metal pot, looking down into a mass of steaming yellow dal. Spicy carrot salad with cumin seeds, nan bread, cool raita, hot mango chutney and brown rice rounded out the menu. I put modest portions of everything on my plate, chose a place at the table, and set my plate down. Claire had taken an available seat on the other side of the table. I sat down, assessed my food, and looked at my hands resting on either side of my plate. I noticed my wedding ring, the slightly constricted feel of it. I had never worn a ring before, and I was still getting used to it — the oddness of it was wonderful to me, a constant reminder of our vows, of my bond with Claire. It made me feel, perhaps for the first time in my life, like an accomplished man. I reminded myself that I had come a long way. For most of my adult life my failures with women were legion. My parents' rocky marriage and bitter divorce had damaged my mate-catching instincts. As a consequence, I made notoriously bad choices when it came to romance. I always chose women who deviously feigned interest in

my attentions only to leave me high and dry in the end. Meeting Claire was the first miracle of my life.

The sounds of forks and knives on plates and mindful chewing awakened me out of my reverie.

I grabbed my fork, took a bite of dal, then decided it needed salt. I looked to my left, to the middle of the long table, and immediately I bolted up, my chair falling to the floor with a loud whack.

“Oh my god.”

On the dining table, between a vase holding white lilies and salt and pepper shakers, was a small polished red box, with curious gold letters on its sides.

I turned and ran out of the dining hall.

Evening

“Give yourself a break, Joel. Pull back. Take a day off from meditation. Go for a walk on the ridge tomorrow. Chop vegetables in the kitchen. Do some yoga. Stay in the body. Relax.”

Jack sat inside a patch of shadow just beyond the aura of soft amber light cast by the small table lamp in the dokusan room.

“I think I’ll take your advice,” I told him. “But what about that red box?”

Jack curled a finger over his thin mustache. After a thoughtful pause, he said, “You must have seen it here at Kensho previously, forgotten about it, and when it entered your waking dream and then showed up on the dining table it was if a dream object had materialized. It’s just a misperception, like the man who sees a stick on the road and thinks it’s a snake.”

Jack’s analysis of things seemed so reasonable, and he had offered it with so much kindness, that the effect on my fear was instantaneous: I felt better, safer, and more connected. In spite of the horrendous day, I think I’ll be able to sleep tonight.

Tuesday

I slept late in my tent this morning while the other retreatants went about the routines of daily practice. Before breakfast, though, while everyone was still sitting in the zendo, I emerged from my tent, stiff-boned and yawning, slipped into my sandals, and walked through hot morning sunlight up the path to the dining hall. I passed through the kitchen, smiling meekly at the cooks who were stirring the morning oatmeal and stewing the fruit, and entered the dining room. I walked up and down the long wooden tables, placed end to end, where we would soon be having breakfast. Beyond the eating area was a little lounge equipped with battered sofas and bean bag chairs, a wood-burning stove, and a modest library of Buddhist texts. I stepped into the lounge and had a look around, turned back and walked past the dining tables. I scanned a corner of the room where there was a desk and some shelves. Against the opposite wall there was a low cabinet on top of which sat a bronze Buddha, a bowl of rice and a little bell. Hanging on the wall above the cabinet was a lovely Zen painting of Bodhidharma, his fierce eyelid-less face defined in just a few black brushstrokes. I glanced at the counter between the kitchen and dining room: toaster, blender, silverware tray. . . .

The red box was nowhere to be found. I went back into the kitchen.

Mary, a stout blonde woman wearing a faded purple bandana, was churning the oatmeal in a giant steel pot. “Excuse me Mary.” She glanced over, her brow red from the heat of the kitchen. “Need anything?”

“I just wondered if you had seen that little red box that was in the dining room yesterday.”

“Oh, that. Yeah, we asked the Kensho community if it was theirs, but no one had ever seen it before. So we don’t know who it belongs to.”

Something sank in my chest when I heard that. I’d been hoping that she would tell me that the box belonged to a member of the retreat center staff. Its unknown provenance was all the more disturbing, given what had been happening to me.

“Do you think I could take a look at the box?”

“Sure, it’s over there, by the Cuisinart.”

I stepped past her into a corner and glanced around. My heart froze when I saw it. It rested on a metal counter between a food processor and a bowl of hard-boiled eggs still in their shells. I reached out and gave the top of the box a quick tap with my fingers, as if I was afraid it might contain a lethal electrical charge. But it was just an ordinary decorative box, or so it seemed. I picked it up and noticed that it was unusually heavy, as if it held something metallic. I turned around and said, “Thanks, Mary,” and left the kitchen. I sat on the porch in front of the road in a splintered wooden chair as the morning sun hurled shafts of silver light through the branches of the hillside trees. Holding the red box in my lap, I looked it over. It was about six inches square, with its sides roughly three inches high. Because of the thickness of the red paint, it was hard to tell of what material the box itself was made. Metal, wood, some sort of synthetic? I couldn’t decide. The gold symbols painted into the sides of the box had a vaguely unpleasant effect on me — snaky serifs and bizarre half-moons and piercing tridents all rendered with a sort of fast fluid blurriness, they seemed to speak of realms of dark knowing, and something detestably familiar that I couldn’t place. I ran a fingernail along the sides of the box, looking for a seam, a way to open it. But I found none. Perhaps, I reasoned, this wasn’t really a box at all, but merely a useless piece of decoration. And yet, in my zendo waking nightmare, the box had been opened, and it was filled with those bright gold needles. . . .

Just then the sun broke above the tops of the trees, sending down a ray of blazing heat onto my face and arms. Uncomfortable in the sudden concentrated warmth, I set the red box down on a table, stood up and walked back to my tent in its shaded cool glade. I lay down on my Thermarest for a few minutes, and was just beginning to doze off when the breakfast bell began to ring. When I came back up the path I glanced at the table as I entered the kitchen. But the red box was gone.

Friday — San Francisco.

We’ve canceled our trip to Italy, and I have an appointment to see a doctor at a psychiatric hospital. Things have been getting worse with me ever since we left Kensho, but I think it’s important for me to write about our last day there, so here goes.

I took Jack’s advice and went for a walk on Tuesday afternoon. I took the trail that went past the pond and switch-backed through wooded hills. I got to the ridge in 20 minutes and stood on the edge of a slope. The sun beat down on the ground, the mud

flows caused by recent rains beginning to harden to a pale crust. Below me, the tall green grasses swaying on the broad slopes seemed to lose more color by the hour. Within weeks, perhaps days even, the hills would be covered by a vast sea of seared yellow. Down in the hazy distance, past softer hills, the Pacific's wide blue swath hovered past the coastal clouds as if on top of them, like some floating Shangri-La. My brow was hot and slick with sweat, my heart pumping fast. The brisk but steep hike through pine and madrone trees was always good for a cardio jumpstart. A few feet behind me a fire road skirted the top of the ridge. Trails were laced into the hillsides and now and then pairs of bikers, wearing vented helmets and nylon tights, would speed past me.

As my heart slowed and the sweat on my brow began to cool in the steady gusts of Pacific breeze, I glanced through the horseshoe-shaped gap sculpted by the accidental convergence of two Monterey cypresses. We called it the "Sunset Gap" because it was positioned in such a way as to frame the most beautiful summer sunsets. On previous retreats some of us would hike up here and watch in silence as the leafy gap seemed to cradle a giant ball of orange fire, dropping slowly from the sky, then turning dusky red as the sky began to close itself, sinking beneath the gap through the branches, its crimson glow bleeding down through the trees and entering the gathering darkness.

Now I looked at that same horseshoe space in the trees and noticed something about the sky it framed — the quality of the light was strange. It was tinged a vivid yellow, glowing almost with the effect of neon. I took a step forward, allowed myself to slide a foot or two down a steep slope to get a better look. Now, both feet planted on the sloping ground, I watched in disbelief as the sky in the gap flickered, like projected film disjoined from its sprockets. Then the scene in the sky changed: floating in the gap was a medieval church of brick and stone with monstrous carvings in its façade. When a smell of rotten eggs drifted under my nose, I backed away in fright, but lost my footing on the loose scree and fell. I slid on my ass down the gray slope, sending small avalanches of rocks and dust down with me, my arms flailing for something to hold onto. I finally came to a stop as my foot slammed into a felled tree trunk, my right knee protesting with a tight burst of pain. I rolled over and began scrambling up the slope, already aware that the ground and my arms were bathed in yellow light.

Then large strange hands were on me, pulling me back, pulling me down.

My feet kicked, my hands clawed at dirt, but it was no use. They were all over me, dragging me down. Gradually I stopped moving, and like a segue in a dream the scene morphed. I was lying on my back on a slab. I seemed to be in some sort of room. The tall shapes were milling about me, their faces shifting and blurred. I looked up but instead of seeing a ceiling I saw the sky. The horrible church was still there, floating above me. I was still on the hillside, but I was also in this strange room. It was as if I simultaneously existed in two different spaces.

I felt something small and hot moving over my abdomen: fluid shadowy hands were sticking needles into my flesh, arranging them in a circular pattern just beneath my navel. I heard the clicking and snapping sounds again. I struggled to rise, but I seemed glued down to the slab. Then the scene morphed again. I was sitting at a table bathed in a strange yellow light. I held the red box in my hands. In one corner of the room a dark faceless figure shook violently in a high chair, as if jolted with electric current. The burning pain in my gut continued.

I saw several bright tubular shapes writhing on the floor beneath the thrashing seated figure. Like hungry worms suddenly aware of me, they seemed to slither in my direction. I took a step back as the red box dropped out of my hands. I glanced down and saw that the box had tipped onto its side, its lid having opened to spill dozens of bright gold needles onto the ground. That's when I realized that I was no longer in a strange room. I was back on the slope of the hill. No figures were around me now, but the sky was still tinged with that alien yellow light. But the church in the sky was gone. I was almost out of their world, but not completely.

My limbs now working, I began a frantic ascent of the slope. My hands clawed at red dirt, at natural color, but my feet pushed down on yellow-shaded dirt, the strange yellow light climbing up the hill after me, rising like a fast shadow, trying to suck me back into the place where the dark figure jolted in its high chair and the strange church floated in the sky. I reached the top of the ridge with a groan and staggered onto the road as the fire on my belly worsened. Without looking back to see if the yellow light had overtaken the road, I entered the trail and, holding my arms to my gut to ease the pain, descended through the trees as fast as I could.

By the time I arrived back at the parking lot, the angle of the sun in the sky didn't seem right. I glanced at my watch. It was twenty minutes past four. Yet it seemed I had been at the ridge no more than 20 minutes ago, when it was half past one. Holding my aching belly, my right knee stiff with pain, I limped across the parking lot toward the porch, where several people, including Claire, were sitting. Claire was sipping tea from a mug. She looked just like she did when I first came to Kensho over a year ago: a radiant woman full of promise and grace. She looked up and noticed me then, standing up when she saw that I was in distress. I think I must have let out a grunt, perhaps even a sob, for as I pulled up my shirt I heard people calling my name. As I brought the edge of the shirt up beneath my chin, I heard things falling onto the dirt at my feet with a tinny clang.

“Joel, honey? Jesus, god, Joel!”

My hands were covered in blood, but the holes in my belly were beginning to scab over. Down at my feet, something glinted in the dust. I stepped aside as the blood poured from my hands, and looked: at my feet were several thick bright needles, drops of blood on their ends.

I looked up and saw Claire and began to scream.