

The sky is full of Michaels. They stream by, chins lifted, coats flap-flapping so the sky is filled with a faint but persistent rustling. This is what the plague of locusts must have been like, Reinette thinks, streaming over the cities of Egypt. Except in this case, it is a plague of Michaels.

She cranes out the window, though the drop below her to the street makes her toes curl in the carpet. She can hear sirens, overlapping in a dissonant chorus. Car horns. Screams.

The Michaels stretch as far as she can see. Their shadows race over the pavement.

“Michael?” Reinette calls, but her voice is tiny and barely breaks through the insect rustling of the Michaels’ coats, let alone the city in uproar.

Besides, she thinks, to which Michael should she direct her attention? Are they all him, or is there one true Michael, hidden in the multitude? She doesn’t know. The truth is, she doesn’t really know Michael at all. This hurts, like a pill stuck in Reinette’s chest.

She wrestles with the window, trying to force it all the way open, but the wood is old and swollen. In the end, she squirms through the small gap, emerging onto the fire escape in a shower of paint flakes.

Wind blows hard off the estuary and the fire escape sways. Reinette clings to the window frame with both hands, limpet-tight. She recalls how she shrieked when she found Michael out here one afternoon, leaning lazily over the rail.

“The fire escape is ancient,” she told him. “Rusted through. You could fall.”

He had stared at her in that blank, black way of his, head tilted, some indeterminate calculous balancing in his mind.

Then he looked down at the alley below and Reinette had the terrible feeling that he *wanted* to fall. To find out what it felt like to hit the concrete from four stories up, what would break, and what would endure.