Most of the day, Brother Johnson prays. Most of the day he starts, and stops, and stays the wheels that turn his abbey. Then he gets crabby, unerringly, at six o'clock, in time to grumble about his supper being too cold, or too wet (in the case of soup), or moldy (in the case of bread), or packed unprofessionally by his own damp hands. The rumor is that he lives alone in his keep, a single shuttered room above his flock of tidy plains animals in a field of wheat that blows sand, no matter how windy, eastward, as if urging travelers on. Bad friends to the monk, this wheat, which demands watering, and planting, and harvesting, and only ever gives him moldy bread.

Brother Johnson forgave the wheat, post-mortem, when he woke one summer morning to find it all dead. Not under the sun, fried by an uncharacteristically hot season, not spasmodically, with sickness, or for any other reason than a thick blanket of white powder that had been deposited over the field at night and choked the wheat away, like a baby suffocated silently in its pillow. Off on the road leading eastward lived only one lonely willow, looking eastward, urging travelers eastward, to the sun, surging westward, always awkward, to the night. So frightened was the monk that he returned to his window with a satchel of things like a masthead and a matchbox full of horseshoes and a hamster he'd forgotten and let rot at the bottom of his bed. From this satchel he removed a long silver ladle with a peregrine handle that wandered all over like a root. He let the ladle down and sampled the powder from the sands twelve storeys below him with skill (he often drank water lifted to the roof of his keep from the sill of his well with this ladle, it was so long, and he so adept at using it).

When the first member of Brother Johnson's abbey had arrived in the mail he had arrived in a box full of packing powder. Dusting Brother Thermopolis off and pulling the frustum

from his face, the second thing Brother Johnson had done after checking to make sure Brother Thermopolis had had enough oxygen for the trip was to read the inventory sheet, conveniently given to Brother Thermopolis to carry, which included thirty-five pounds of packing powder. Lacking the savvy to convert this easily from its Imperial measurement, Brother Johnson had only assumed it was a fair amount, without being sensible and looking inside.

Brother Johnson provided the necessary paperwork to Brother Thermopolis once the powder had been brushed from his smart lapels and shoulder-padded shoulders and the hunch ironed out from his stoop. A tanned thing, it was only after staring at Brother Thermopolis curled over his paperwork later that day, and scarfing down the three cans of bootblack that Brother Johnson had labeled and put into tuna cans, that Brother Johnson discovered that the new monk could not write, and considered sending him back for repairs before heeding the word of his God, which said, "God says thou shalt suffer the good intentions of others," a metaphor, and undertook to teach him himself.

Brother Thermopolis had been defective from the beginning. The poor man just tried too hard, undertaking to walk down to the bathroom at the bottom of the tower when he needed to piss or insisting that books needed to be read to be understood. Brother Thermopolis spent most of his time reading books. Or rather one book, which seemed to especially challenge him, about the anatomy of love. Naturally, this book had come into Brother Johnson's possession because of his firm grasp of the subject, and it was only an indication of Brother Thermopolis's uncreativity that the new monk stooped over the casket-sized book day after day with his magnifying glass before finally committing suicide.

Brother Johnson had never gotten a refund for Brother Thermopolis because it had been so hard to reassemble the parts, but he had learned several valuable lessons from the

experience: first, that men weren't made half as good as they used to be, and second, that God was always right.

Obviously Brother Johnson had overlooked a third lesson—that with packing powder comes trouble—and realizing this for the first time as he examined a pile of the stuff in the cupule of his ladle, he retired behind his black shaving table to whip himself vigorously with a hickory stick twisted wickedly as to leave splinters every time it was touched. And touched as he was by the word of his God, which said, "God says thou shalt whip thineself vigorously after every oversight" and was always right, he returned to the window in great, pure pain just in time to glimpse a shape overhead, flying in and out and leaving welts on the clouds like a divine but petty punishment. It didn't seem right for a crop-duster to be flying there. Frying there, in the heavy-lidded sun overcome by a great communication of clouds, a contagion of crowds wearing red bowed tuxedos and speedos making way for the boom of a crop duster flustered into flying higher than usual, overhead. Instead of pesticides it dropped risicides, reissicides, salixicides as the willow on the road facing east became delimitized by a mashed-potato mimeograph of packing powder, a tomato dropped by God, who says, "God says thou shalt not compare Him to machine," or machine, or plane, or crop-duster, or the shame of a species of human being.

Reeling from this sight, Brother Johnson collated his thoughts in the safety of his cell, though they frustrated: who would arrive to deprive him his wheat (already deprived), his books (most newly revised from their earlier ancient editions), his decision—to stay! to live! to worship! to pray!, his tower, his maze, his home; on his own he wondered if he could live a day without his rosary, a little wooden mass that he hadn't even recognized for several years after

receiving it—to say nothing of understanding its significance. He was to be boxed and taped and tagged and wrapped and slapped then packaged away and it was all his fault, he thought; he prayed.

A flutter bobbed around in Brother Johnson's gut where it strut to the podium of his pelvis and surmounting it sounded a welcome to a counterfeit Elvis who came out on stage and nailed it with a break from "He's Only a Prayer Away." The anxiousness faded away quickly, but strictly in a way that gave him ulcers for days as he sat, sometimes staring out and others staring in, either way at a grim field of suffocated wheat, waiting hopelessly and with abandon for his pension to be deposited from the secret closets of the church—tied to a little slip of birch wood foist into the chimney by the messenger birds that the clergy used to carry their word and whimsy to the farthest reaches of the civilized land, for God was often known to say, "God says that thou shall spread the word to the illiterate," and even though God was always proven right, Brother Johnson often suspected that the meaning of the words, "word," and "illiterate," had been misinterpreted. He was sure of it, sometimes, when whining as they do at the sermons, the sermoners would murmur so ponderously and sometimes it seemed with such difficulty that it seemed briefly impossible that they could in any capacity be understood; the metaphorical, the metaphysical bores.

The church proper had never been, between stuttering to and from missions, Brother Johnson's favorite venue for inspiration. It was an old sort of tradition, the priests' imitations of the saints such that every letter written, bite bitten, or word spoken was open to criticism for being not enough in character. The saints were all smart looking men in their day, who under great pressure had found out a way to make more efficient the sarcastic dolery of

pointing out what was wrong with society by inventing the desktop publisher, the commuter, the artistic type, and of course Democracy. It wasn't until after these blockbusters that they incorporated and appropriated the idea of the missionary and the priest and the altar boy to ensure that demand never exceeded supply, the business of cynicism which they were just beginning to invest in. The monks came a couple of years later, but one controversial bishop suggested that this new class was really just the reemployment of the Founders' entire research and development team under new job titles in several books conspicuously published after his death.

Despite their success in the area of complaints, the Founders are best known for their success securing a majority share in what they began to market as "relaxatives." The old holy texts suggests that their ultimate strategy was to control the source for most basic creature-comforts such as binge-drinking, binge-eating, bingeing, sleep, and bright sunny days so that they would be able to expand their product solutions without seeking out a whole new target demographic. They then built the Royal Holy Headquarters Community Center to give worshippers a place towards which they could make pilgrimage and to expand their physical capacity to store raw materials like crate upon crate of stuffed animals, candy canes and lollipops and other hard candy, collectible trading cards, and Santa Claus impersonations.

The Royal Holy Headquarters Community Center of the church is a peculiar contrivance of some fairly revulsive architectural styles (it is rumored, however, that it was actually a compromise between the Founders' personal tastes and practicality): the storage vats for ice cream, for example, required a mixing mechanism to keep the ice cream in different parts of the vat from freezing solidly, but one of the more sarcastic saints thought it would be appropriate to shape the vat in the form of an enormous bulging stomach. Thus, not only are

there now row upon row of gigantic growling stomachs on some part of the grounds (Brother Johnson had never seen them himself), but according to the log of one minister who oversaw the distribution of sweets for a few months (before being fired for Existentialism), there were always mixups with orders for cute babies, which were stored in a converted gymnasium miles away, becoming confused with tubs of ice cream instead.

The sacred halls of this self-contained city the saints had built, some perfectly reflective marble corridors emblazoned by watermarks and statues of hairy nostrils, others warren-like caves studded with sconces for the burning of wet-denim scented incense, still others paved in deodorant so slippery that special skates were required to cross them, these various and nostalgic halls for anyone who was once a novice at The Royal Holy Headquarters Community Center (as Brother Johnson was at the time) hid a growing anxiety among the order. The saints had begun to die in a rapid, regular succession of old age and the few remaining had begun to desperately invest in wild fads like nanotechnology and Puritanism that were comfortably forgotten a decade later. Now, Brother Johnson worried at the unseasonable vista out his window that the world was actually changing. With every new Sir Executive Pope Shaman in the last century had come a rigid deference to the traditions of the saints and the word of God, but only an institution as resourceful as the church could accomplish something as massive and as terrible as this. After all, it was God who said, "keep your friends close and your enemies closer," but Brother Johnson had always assumed it was a metaphor, and fingered the rosary that hung against his sagging chest.

After having sat for three days against the flat wrapped pack of wooden boards that he had transformed from statue of platonic love to rocking chair early in his internment,

motionless except for his wrestling thumbs, he decided that another deferment to the church would be dumb. Before long his twelve-storey tower would be half that in the climbing desert of powder, and besides, he suspected that the Sir Executive Pope Shaman's receptionist would know more about the situation in person than she would by letter. He fished out a gimbal from an old mechanicle Wimbleton that'd he'd kept around (but had long since lost the tiny tennis rackets) out of a glass of lemonade he'd rehydrated last year. He'd found it sitting neatly on a ledge that had been neglected so long it was wedged tight with slight little pamphlets labeled Lemon Tea is Good for Me volumes one through fourteen and green bits of treacle that may or may not have been green when they were first dug from the earth below a tree where Brother Johnson had once thought some truffles might be. He could not remember, and blamed it almost entirely on his mental exertions, acrobatics, his various self-sustaining diversions, his Socratic immersions that for two hours, three, he debated his plans for the next two weeks before his fate was finally sealed by clear packing tape and a postal address and a massive corrugated box; he had designed in his mind from this gimbal an elaborate plan to convert what remained of his study, the few good planks of his bed or the balustrade instead or the muddy rafters that swayed slightly in bad weather a bicycle, no a tricycle (for he had spotted the hoop of copper wire that had once been part of an elaborate heating mechanism and thought it would do nicely as the tube for a third wheel), a vehicle to take him across the desert of packing powder, through the subterranean catheter under the southeast mountains to the lake where the fakefest is held to honor the Smorgas, to Siraccuse, where braggarts grow from green nubs on the Spurious tree, to a land where it is vaguely taboo to have a proper noun that starts with anything other than "S."

Into and out of his study Brother Johnson whooshed like a jousting hummingbird with

only its reflection in the various panes of glass and shards of metal and screwdrivers and old plough pedals for friendly competition, he and his intuition, racing one against the other for the will to build a contraption, a three legged contraption with legs so bowed they were round, and gears of tinsel and twine and once-toothsome candy vines and books with pages that had melted over the years into blocks and books with ears so dogged they had their own separate socks once stuffed with food every week by a young Brother Johnson that had more time for trivial thoughts and books wrote in rhyme and spelling mistakes than his old seasoned self (with thyme), dressed (in a hide habit) for any accidental encounter with his God and venerable (in the gustatory sense) as a tough old boot. The tricycle birthed head-first from a pile of junk that had become from the shelf of organized stuff (there was only one) a drive train of soaked nail-files, a tire of toothpaste tubes, an electronic global positioning system fashioned out of discarded band-aids left lamely to droop from his sink he smashed and took its pieces and carved a blinking figurehead (with the assistance of a tiny motor looted from his clothesline reel) of a bear with spiky straight hair he'd glued from some scraps of old toenail. He began on a second figure but gave up at three when it was time for tea, the last of his delicious Menage.

Brother Johnson built a parachute from sheets and what else remained of his bed—bungee cords that once held the frame together and a sharp stone that he suspected had been responsible for the sharp sleeping pains in his left shoulder ever since he had seen his mischievous uncle Georgishban Floot. The same Georgishban Floot that had dedicated his entire life to becoming the premiere floot player in the country in order to live up to his name, or what entirety of his life remained after plotting his clever and infrequently respected jokes. Georgishban had given him a floot for his twenty-sixth birthday but had tampered with the instrument so that it could do nothing but appear to flatulate in a surprising variety of ways,

therefore it was only for sentimental reasons that he packaged it away with the water sarong, his bag of lucky teeth, some nuptial grapes, and a soda can brashly labeled "Superior Firepower" that had once caught his eye blowing down an empty Native street after its sacking.

A cortisone tablet jammed into an impractical rabbit-shaped tin that already brimmed with them was the last of his packing before the crop duster returned; it hummed overhead like a bird or a bauble with teeth mousing weakly down a street filled with cotton candy, drops of brandy with no wheat. It began to snow the deadly snow, and amidst it Brother Johnson slipped dangerously out onto the slippery sill where the sun shone hard but the snow fell still and slid under his feet which were weakly bent to let his hands find where they'd once went a long time ago. Once pulled onto the roof, his body grasped at the rope he'd tied when he climbed here last. Above him twirled the clouds, the plane, the postulate rain of packing powder powdered so faintly his face, his lips, his tongue that sucked it in unbeknownst, and with a tug at the rope (a grope), a banner unfurled that Brother Cuticle had left before his departure—sloped there against the band of the concentric tower it was hard to see, it read, "Handle with Care" in immaculate red instead of "For Sale," (in blue) or "Help!" (in green), each messages that could have equally been and been accurate. It snapped a burlap snap in the Monday wind and rose to fly like a flag for the crop duster dragging sprays of sand gleaming white with no why. Brother Johnson slid back down the roof to the edge, slipping his feet back into the wedge he'd climbed before, swung to the floor of his cell and out to the stairwell for the first time in many years. He dropped his parachuted saddlebags down its center, and began to walk his tricycle awkwardly down the steps, muttered prayers jolting out of him at every sudden descent. Goodbye cell, study, prison, relaxing dacha and unbearable gulag;

goodbye, home of his last twenty years. Safe trip.

Brother Johnson spoke softly a new prayer for every step he conquered up the pristine stone spiral of the staircase, each one a reliquary adequately gasped and spluttered half from exhaustion and half from wonder at his new home. By the time he had reached the fifth landing of twelve he had spoken so many and conquered so much that the week-long event (thus far and five hours) became in his mind a saint's campaign, though what sort campaign varied between religious and military and political and epistemological on the day, and the day, Brother Johnson had found, varied less at such high altitudes (he was three-hundred and fifty-five thousand steps up) on what time of week it was than it did on how hot it happened to be and how fast the wind was blowing. Thus, in particular on the summer of his arrival, Brother Johnson discovered that he could spend months trapped inescapably on Monday, and sometimes even longer on Thursday.

Brother Johnson first burst through his study door at the monastery on a Thursday, and finding the temperature of his new cell perverse, he raced indelicately despite the exhaustion of the climb to open windows and vents and to put out the self-tending fireplace and other fussy behaviors until it was Wednesday again, and a good while after the sun had set he checked his calendar and noticed that it was now a Tuesday, the day that Brother Johnson came to hate most because of how loud the wind became, rushing and tooting through cracks in the stone and wisping up scraps of paper that the fastidious Brother Cuticle, the tower's previous resident, had left behind like an anxious mother: "clean the desk every week to keep the hamsters from nesting there," "wipe the whip if you've used it more than three times in a day—penitence must not come at the cost of sanitation," "do not move the shrine, it covers a

mouth-shaped hole in the floor that will talk endlessly, even at night." Even that first night, before Brother Johnson began a compendious desecration of the room's surfaces that had the study buried in reliquaries and humongous and fingernail-sized tomes alike by the end of the week, Brother Cuticle's little notes betrayed a disorganization that seemed natural to the space, its arching sides closing on its resident like an artichoke on its heart, always obscuring from him a nook or crevice behind a bend that he was sure hid some cache of disorder, but never did on investigation. The floor appeared dusty even if it was clean—the stone was cloudy; the history of the abbey said the construction material came from a quarry high in the mountains directly southeast (unseen by the new monk, who stood at the only window and frowned into the Tuesday wind). He had seen the symbol of the church, the lens and barbed wire, rusted so completely in its place at the top of the roof pole that it looked like some Vulcanoid mobile, an intensely terrestrial Saturn squealing into the breeze.

Over a white sand dune of packing powder that was once the monastery's useless refectory (no more than one person had ever lived in the tower, as far as Brother Johnson knew, despite how often he shrewed at his window with a telescope, spying on the other squat buildings uninhabited by aught but mice and gargoyles), over the sand dune and out over the sedimentary plain rose two detrital drifts, one pierced by the lens and barbed wire that had once risen from the chapel, the other unmolested but by the scribble of Brother Johnson's footsteps—seen from high above they scrawled across the landscape in what could only imaginatively be called a straight line—and three parallel streaks underlined as if by a grammarian a whole sentence to be capitalized. And then, as if the subject of criticism had ceased to matter, there were only three parallel streaks; Brother Johnson had at last climbed

aboard his tricycle and, pedaling heavily, disappeared over yet another hill that had once been a lonely willow, looking eastward, to the sun, surging westward, always awkward, to the night.

To be continued...