

The Keen

Leif Aaron

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Sequence of the Bafflegrab Series:

[1972] *Breeze of the Sun* (unfinished)

[1976-1977] Molly's Meteorite Subseries (discontinued)

[1980] *Bafflegrab* (published 2018, available at Amazon.com)

[1980-1999] *Cold Candle* (unwritten)

[1999] *The Keen* (published 2021, available at Amazon.com)

[2005] *The Reen* (written, unpublished)

[2040-2060] *Michael's Chimera* (written, unpublished)

[2072] *ZIB* (unwritten)



Contents

<u>1 œ Baffled</u>	10
<u>2 œ Sugar Pills</u>	12
<u>3 œ The Phone Call</u>	15
<u>4 œ Nate-D</u>	18
<u>5 œ The Eagle</u>	21
<u>6 Ω Garden of Jemel</u>	23
<u>7 Ω No Heaven Above Us</u>	26
<u>8 œ Flung</u> Error! Bookmark not defined.	
<u>9 Ω A Bird Living</u> Error! Bookmark not defined.	
<u>10 Ω Adu Awaiting</u> Error! Bookmark not defined.	

11 « YesterdayError! Bookmark not defined.

12 Ω DeynError! Bookmark not defined.

13 Ω BumpersError! Bookmark not defined.

14 Ω Dodos and Radios Error! Bookmark not defined.

15 Ω We are Edgar Martinez Error! Bookmark not defined.

16 « Six Months Earlier Error! Bookmark not defined.

17 « Mr. TomError! Bookmark not defined.

18 œ Jane Clark ParkError! Bookmark not defined.

19 Ω BridgmeetError! Bookmark not defined.

20 œ Karin and NoraError! Bookmark not defined.

21 Ω Raj Error! Bookmark not defined.

22 œ Regarding the Roof Error! Bookmark not defined.

23 Ω Thascal's ReenError! Bookmark not defined.

24 œ The Crystal Bowl Error!
Bookmark not defined.

25 œ All in BlackError! Bookmark not
defined.

26 Ω Munx VisionError! Bookmark
not defined.

27 Ω Defiance to the Fear Error!
Bookmark not defined.

28 œ EclipseError! Bookmark not
defined.

29 Ω Millions of Mysteries Error!
Bookmark not defined.

30 œ At the Tacoma Dome..... Error!
Bookmark not defined.

31 Ω At the Tea OakError! Bookmark
not defined.

32 œ Molly's MazdaError! Bookmark
not defined.

33 Ω Tasaranan Grove Error!
Bookmark not defined.

34 œ Milk & TruthError! Bookmark
not defined.

35 Ω NathanielError! Bookmark not
defined.

36 Ω City of JemelError! Bookmark not defined.

37 Ω Wall Between Worlds..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

38 œ Roanna Buzzing Error! Bookmark not defined.

39 « Dr. SapruError! Bookmark not defined.

40 Ω Grandma's Lamp Error! Bookmark not defined.

41 Ω Temdara's Palace Error! Bookmark not defined.

42 Ω Here ThereError! Bookmark not defined.

43 « Evil TricksError! Bookmark not defined.

44 Ω UnmessableError! Bookmark not defined.

45 Ω Life for Nate Geryon Error! Bookmark not defined.

46 Ω Jollape'feError! Bookmark not defined.

47 Ω KeenError! Bookmark not defined.

48 Ω BallastError! Bookmark not defined.

49 œ The DeedError! Bookmark not defined.

50 Ω Jungle Trampoline..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

51 œ What Than Means..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

52 Ω Axl & CroaxylError! Bookmark not defined.

53 œ Sengo ShapeError! Bookmark not defined.

54 œ GoleniteError! Bookmark not defined.

55 œ World BoxError! Bookmark not defined.

56 Ω The First HelloError! Bookmark not defined.

œ Epilogue œError! Bookmark not defined.

1 œ **Baffled**

Looking out over the small parking lot, Seth Tenebrae scanned the sky for any break in the clouds. Independence Day had always been Seth's favorite — small wonder for a boy living in Tacoma — with an air show, a waterfront festival, and a grand fireworks display to cap off the evening.

Last year, Seth and his family drifted around on Mr. Walker's boat, listening to the radio's play-by-play of the aerobatics directly overhead. Past summers they had camped and fished, watched ballgames at Cheney, ferried to Friday Harbor, and hiked Quinault Rainforest — felling crab balls off a steep highway cutout on the way home. His dad enjoyed adventures.

That was the problem.

Dad's lost.

It never left Seth's mind. And every fourth day of every month Puerto Rico Search & Rescue gave them an update. They promised six reports. Always polite on the phone, but nothing hopeful. Seth knew anything hopeful would come on any other day.

"Daddy's orange PJs."

The voice startled the twelve-year-old. He turned to see his little sister at the door. She hadn't opened it fully, just quietly.

"What?"

"I seed Daddy in pajamas," Sarah said.

The girl had just turned six and had a habit of sleep walking and talking. His mom had suggested that he and Roanna tell her to go back to bed. It usually worked.

Seth smirked, "Go back inside, Sarah."

The little girl opened the door wide enough he could see her entire face.

"Back to bed."

"Daddy's bed is in the shower."

"Your bed's in there," Seth pointed. She and Roanna and their mother all shared a queen mattress on the floor of the apartment's only bedroom. Seth slept in the living room.

Sarah took a step backward into the apartment but didn't close the door.

"Sarah, turn around. You're freaking me out."

"The sun blowed on it."

"Blew on what?"

"Blowed on the clouds on the planes on the seas on the beach on the trees on the..."

Stepping toward her, he said, "Mm-hmm," as Sarah kept listing things wind could blow on. She walked backwards, further into the apartment.

"Odd kid," he said to himself as he closed the door.

Seth remained outside at the railing on the fourth floor between two apartments. The other belonged to Ms. Petke. He glanced at the older woman's door, known to open with ghostly stealth, and then slam shut like a collision of worlds.

Interactions with the woman had been, what his mom called, "abrupt." Seth already brought her newspaper. His substitute delivery job earned him three dollars a week from Nate, the local

paperboy. Now Seth got Ms. Petke's calls. The paper's late. The paper's wet. The print is smudged. The paper's torn. There's an ad covering the front page.

Seth stared at the news headline on her welcome mat. A homicidal rampage in the Midwest. For a moment, Seth imagined his dad, coffee in hand, reading it, shaking his head at the gray-tone stippled photo, guessing wildly about what could make a person do that.

Lifting on the doorknob to avoid an irritating squeak, the boy went inside and flicked off his canvas sneakers. He tugged at his damp socks one at a time while hopping toward the bathroom.

Standing there, he realized he could see every inch of their flat. Sarah had collapsed horizontally on top of his mom and Roanna. The bathroom faucet streamed just stronger than a drip. He shut it off and went back out into the living room. Time in the morning before his sisters got up felt peaceful. He wondered if there would be a way to distract them when the call came.

"It must'a fell off," he realized he wasn't wearing his hat. He wasn't going to venture out barefooted. He decided he would take his sisters outside to look for it when the phone rang later.

Dad's gone. Mr. Walker too. He had a wife and kids too.

He thought about this final update from Puerto Rico. Final. Like a final breath. Seth knew what they'd say. It's hopeless to hope.

He sat betumbled in the couch — also his bed — and couldn't refute the obvious thought: today will be the worst day in the history of my family.

2 æ Sugar Pills

The morning clouds moved eastward and their replacements came in higher, brighter, and choppy. By early afternoon on July 4th, 1999, broad blue rivers of clear sky teased the crowds along Commencement Bay.

Seth's mother, Sofia, would not let her children go down there by themselves, and she would not leave, and risk missing the phone call.

It could come any second. Seth wouldn't leave his family until it had, but afterward he certainly *did* wish to leave. Assuming the search and rescue people wouldn't call until the end of their day, Seth figured no later than 2pm. He glanced down at his Casio wristwatch: 1:41.

They sat around the table. Seth watched his five-year-old sister, Sarah, stab at the light-blue frozen concoction in front of her. Roanna hoped to melt hers by pressing it between her palms.

"Nate wants to watch the fighter jet from his building."

He wouldn't ask for permission just yet. The question of Nate's reliability had become a frequent topic of conversation. With the exception of doing his paper route, Nate always seemed to be causing or somehow attracting some form of trouble. Seth knew she knew this.

But Nate not only provided a small source of income and activity for Seth, Nate's mom collected rent for the owners of the building. Sofia had already asked for a day's extension on that payment in early June.

Roanna interpreted her mother's thoughts on the matter, "Mom doesn't like Nate 'cause last time he was over here he stood on the balcony rail and knocked over the planter with the Pollyannas."

Defending the young teenager took energy and mental gymnastics. Half of Seth's mind remained on the phone call. While Roanna continued citing Nate's faults, Seth tried to convince himself that there *could* be good news. His dad and Mr. Walker *could* have ditched near Las Cucarachas or Los Farellones – Seth had pored over maps of the areas surrounding Puerto Rico. Unfortunately, the biggest, darkest, scariest thing directly north of Puerto Rico was a 200-mile-long trench in the Atlantic Ocean. Worse yet, it was five miles deep. He put that out of mind just now. Now that everyone was up and around him, he felt slightly more hopeful about things.

"I don't like it," he heard his mother say. She stood next to the table, one wrist hanging loosely from underneath her crossed arms.

"I don't like his brother," Roanna said, mostly to herself, "but at least Nick's ahead of me in school."

Seth stated, "It's almost two. There's not enough time to get to the waterfront before the show starts. And we can't see anything from the parking lot."

Roanna pointed toward the door with her spoon, "We can see it from the seminary."

Sofia stepped into the kitchen, "In a while, maybe."

Twice in the last six months his mother had flown to Puerto Rico with Bridgette, the wife of their dad's best friend Denny Walker. A week after their disappearance the Navy divers at Roosevelt Roads gave up the search. Other volunteers lasted a bit longer, but no real investigation continued past March. Any travel or searches after that cost the two wives a great deal.

They sold their Puyallup rambler and moved into the city. They had to part with Brizo, their elderly black and white cocker spaniel. Seth insisted Brizo would be a perfect Tacoma dog as he had walked with them around Point Defiance Park on many occasions. But they simply couldn't afford a house in town. Greystoke, Roanna's cat, fared better. Apartment life agreed with the overstuffed gray and black feline.

"C'mon," Roanna patted the side of her chair. Greystoke turned the other way.

"I'll share," young Sarah spoke to the cat. "It's called a *Fourth of July Freezie*."

Their mom hired an investigator in Luquillo who found a witness that claimed she saw two airplanes flying closely together near the horizon off the northern coast of Puerto Rico. She said it happened in January. Nothing else came to light. No wreckage. No beached bodies. Nothing spotted on radar.

Seth, seeing Sarah attempting to feed the cat from her spoon, spoke with confidence, "Cats don't eat sugar."

"Do too."

Seth tried to not resent the cat when he couldn't have Brizo anymore. Brizo had been a rescue dog. Now he'd have to be rescued again.

Using the back tips of his fingers Seth slowly pushed the dessert into the middle of the table. He wanted the stupid phone call to be over with. He watched his mom pick through her stack of Spanish language cassette tapes.

"We going to learn Spanich again?" Sarah breathed on the back of her spoon and pushed it down over the top of the plastic cup.

"Can we listen to the radio?" asked Seth. "They're probably starting to describe the planes and pilots."

"Sure," his mother put down the cassette and switched a knob on the top of the portable tape player, "not loud."

Seth moved the radio to the table and began searching for the local broadcast.

"Mrs. Petke called this morning," his mother told him. "Seems she didn't get her paper until six."

Sarah started scraping the top of her confection. Ice shavings sprayed onto Seth. He tried to brush them off before they melted. He only managed to spread the sugary moisture all over his own forearm.

"Okay," Seth always spoke more kindly toward Sarah than Roanna, he pushed her cup farther away from himself, "do that over there."

Sarah adjusted herself in her seat to scrape away from her brother.

Roanna spoke for her, "She was just trying to keep you cool."

"Mom didn't spend twelve hours making freezies so you guys could play with them."

Ever since his father had left for Puerto Rico, Seth had assumed a more no-nonsense *man-of-the-house* attitude, deciding to take life more seriously.

Roanna did not subscribe to that philosophy. She started scraping at the top of her freezie too.

"Stop."

Roanna continued, "You're not the boss of us."

"Mom," Seth pointed, "Roanna's getting it on the floor."

Sofia sat down, "It didn't take long to make, Seth. And Roanna, your job after this will be to wipe down the table."

Upon prying with all the force she could muster, a chunk of ice jumped out of Sarah's cup and onto the table, "Oops."

It began drifting toward Seth. He pushed it toward Roanna. Roanna quickly slapped down at it with her fist. That motion, however, launched the sugary ice toward their mom.

Despite its rapid progress, the woman leaned left in time for the projectile to carom off the cupboard, skid across the linoleum floor, and settle under the far corner of the small utility closet.

Their mom brought the mug of tea to her lips, suppressing an unavoidable smile, and said, "Add that to your list of duties, Cinderella."

"Why doesn't Seth have to do anything?"

"You want to get up at 5:30 and deliver papers?"

"Someday, I'm going to *write* the newspaper," Roanna said.

Sarah remained focused on her dessert.

Seth found the correct radio station. "Now she's just making things up."

"Am not."

"Not you. Ms. Petke."

"Mrs. Pesty!" Sarah offered.

"She got the first paper this morning. What else does she want?"

Sarah pointed upward, "A happy pill!"

Seth thought about the phone call from Ms. Petke. His mother had probably assumed it was Puerto Rico. It angered the boy to think their grumpy neighbor had upset his mom over something so trivial.

Seth's mother must have seen it on his face. She placed her hand over his. "Don't worry about it, Seth. Actually," she chuckled lightly, "it was a relief to hear *her* voice."

Roanna went into the bathroom and ran the hot water. Greystoke jumped onto her vacated chair.

"Sorry, mom."

She shook her head with a smirk, "That's the life of a big city news carrier, my boy."

"You shouldn't have to put up with it," he shook his head. "I hate this stupid city. Why can't we go back to Puyallup?"

"We're still in this world, Seth. Things keep moving along. Yes," the woman admitted, smiling at Sarah, "some people need to take a happy pill now and then."

"If you have a happy pill," the small girl reasoned, "it should be made out of sugar."

"It doesn't work that way," Seth corrected her.

"It," she licked the back of her spoon, "makes me happy."

3 œ The Phone Call

It happened then. The phone. Seth looked at Sarah, who started to pet Greystoke. At the sound of the second ring their mother pushed her palms down on the table with barely enough force to convince the rest of her body to stand. It rang a third time. She reached for the wall phone. If there had been a way to take the call in private, she would have.

As soon as his mother said *hello* a feeling of weakness pulsed through Seth's body. He turned down the radio volume and listened carefully to the speaker's staccato voice.

"Is this Ms. Sar-, please can I to speak for Mrs. Sofia Tenebrae?"

His mother nodded and quickly covered her mouth. After a moment she managed a quick, "Yes."

Roanna opened the door to the bathroom but only stood at its entrance, watching their mother.

"I am so sorry to be saying to you this information, Mrs. Tenebrae, but having this been six month we have to call off the operation and cancel the searches. I wish so much for you that we can do more for you and the family. We have informed the Federal Station in El Yunque about Mr. Tenebrae and Mr. Walker, who also is missing, and they will be to get more understanding to you, I believe."

The speaker paused. His mother managed another syllable into the receiver.

"Take care for yourself, and my prayer be with you, ma'am."

Sofia hung up the phone carefully. The children watched her arm shaking as she did so. Seth stood and took a step toward his mother.

"I'm alright, Seth," she leaned against the counter. She let her body slide down the veneered cabinet and sat there, legs curled to her right. For several moments she glared at the blank wall-space on the opposite side of the kitchen below the family calendar.

Despite what she said, and without warning, Sofia let out a muffled sob. She squeezed her eyes shut and allowed her chest to heave with a burst of sharp convulsions.

Seth sat back down, feeling helpless. He managed to put his right hand on Sarah's head. The girl, in turn, comforted Greystoke. Roanna hadn't moved from the bathroom's doorframe.

The children watched their mother weep – something she rarely allowed them to witness. In an effort to conceal her frustration and grief she turned her body away from them.

After several moments she stood, making no effort to wipe her face. "Seth, I need you to stay with the girls right now."

Seth watched his mother step noiselessly around the corner and into the bedroom.

Sarah picked up her spoon and continued chipping away at the ice as the door clicked shut, "They didn't find Daddy this month?"

Despite his own thoughts, Seth struggled for an answer to his sister's question. A memory came upon him, and in that moment he felt absent from his age, and she from hers.

"Remember going out on the Walker's boat last summer?"

Sarah nodded.

"Remember how long we had to wait after the airshow before it got dark, and the fireworks could start?"

"The blue heron landed right on the top of the boat," Roanna added, stepping toward the table, "and Mr. Walker's orange music hat!"

"That's right," Seth pointed to his own forehead, "*Every Good Buoy Dunks Fine.*"

"And," Sarah recalled, "fireworks coming down on top of us." She placed her spoon on the table, "It was like heaven and angels."

He could see it again too. Seth turned up the radio volume just enough to hear a voice coming out of it. Greystoke jumped down off the chair and sniffed one of the table legs. Roanna reached down to smooth her palm over the top of the cat's spine.

Their mom reopened the door to her bedroom. Seth noticed a tissue in her hand. The woman cleared her throat. "Nothing new to report from Luquillo." She managed a brief smile. "Let's finish our freezies and then walk to the seminary."

"Can I work your camera this time?"

"No," she said absently.

Sarah changed the subject back to Ms. Petke, "Why is she so mean?" The little girl still carried a grudge against the older woman for shooing Greystoke back down the stairs on a cold night in March.

Seth waited for his mother to respond. After a few moments he answered, "Probably had a rough life, right Mom?"

"I think so." The woman spoke with a small voice, as if she was in two places at once.

"She and her daughter are estranged," said Seth.

Sarah added, "Strange and mean."

"No, *ah-estranged*," he clarified, "which means something strange happened to them."

Seth noticed his mother's hands covering the top of her mug and how she let the steam rise up between her fingers. She lifted her left hand and touched her earlobe. Seth had never seen his mother with earrings.

"Did she lose her?"

Seth shrugged.

"She lost her mind," Roanna joined the conversation.

"That's not nice, Roanna."

Sarah added, "Did she lose her toothbrush?"

"I bet the people you investigated weren't nice," said Roanna.

Their mom shrugged, "Sometimes."

The kids knew their parents had been involved in private investigation work, and had determined to keep them from the details. It bothered Roanna more than the others.

"Maybe," Roanna prodded, "you could tell us about it sometime? We'd like to know stuff."

She took another sip of her tea, "There's things to know and things to *unknow*."

Nobody said anything for a minute. Roanna sat down at the table warming her freezie and staring at her older brother tuning the radio, one station at a time. Greystoke took some interest in the Dorado houseplant just inside the balcony.

Sarah did not understand the lack of conversation. "Did she lose her hairbrush?"

"Ms. Petke didn't lose anything, Sarah," Roanna said.

Their mom smiled, "I'm sure if she did, Seth could find it."

"Yes!" the little girl said enthusiastically, "like your hairclip, Ro."

Roanna had to agree, "Yes, he found my hairclip."

"Yes. Your pretty blue butterfly hairclip," Sarah said before remembering- "And Stokie! Poor Stokie and when we first moved here," she turned around to look at the cat, "you were so bad and went outside when you didn't know your way around and Seth had to ride all around, and down the hill by the train tracks, and he founded you."

"Luck."

"I don't know," his mom took a drink of her tea, "you've had a knack for finding things ever since you could walk, like it was your own personal sport. How many times have you found my car keys?"

The boy didn't answer.

"Seth?"

He spoke evenly, "I can't find Dad."

Roanna looked back and forth between her mom and her older brother.

"Seth," the woman reached out and touched the side of his arm, "it's not your fault your father wasn't found."

"*Yet*," Sarah corrected her mother. "*Not found yet*, you mean, right, Mommy?"

Her mother nodded and slipped her fingers back and forth underneath her glazed mug.

Sarah too was investigating their faces. Both serious. The girl suggested, "Maybe Seth could go to Porico and look for Daddy."

Seth stood and pushed his chair in. He stepped over to the couch without responding.

"So, you coming with us," his mother asked, "or are you staying around here with your friend?"

4 æ Nate-D

Seth didn't particularly enjoy spending time with Nate. Neither did he want to miss seeing the jet and stunt planes because of the tall trees surrounding the Weyerhaeuser Mansion.

"You guys go ahead."

"I don't want you going down to Ruston Way."

"We won't."

"Then where are you going to watch from?" asked his mother.

In the kitchen, Seth placed three pancakes in a plastic sandwich bag and stuffed it into his pocket. Ever since Seth started helping Nate with the paper route, he had needed a weekly supply of pancakes to fling toward an ill-tempered Labrador.

"Nate didn't say. On his back porch? It's gotta have a better view than ours."

Roanna asked, "If Seth doesn't come with us can we go to the *Corner Cupboard* for ice cream?"

"Has anyone seen my Phillies hat?" Seth asked them. "I know I wore it this morning."

"Ice cream!" Sarah echoed her sister's request.

"I haven't seen it," his mother said. She told the girls, "You just had freezies. No ice cream."

"You can take the radio," Seth offered. "They have one."

"They'?"

"Nate and his little brother."

"Oh, then, you're leaving now?"

"The show's starting." The boy retrieved something out of what he called his *stuff box* – he also had a *wear box*, next to the living room couch – and hurried out.

Seth's mother and sisters listened as his footsteps carried him down the stairs. It was the last time, on this earth, they ever saw him alive.

Nate Geryon adjusted his small transistor radio on the top of the apartment roof's low side railing. Nate, older and larger than Seth, could win the trust of most people due to his honest-looking face. Until people got to know him.

His brother Nick acted like a human appendage. He did everything his brother did, not out of loyalty, but because their personal goals aligned perfectly. Nick agreed, and participated wholeheartedly, with whatever hijinks his brother got himself into.

The KJY broadcaster's voice bellowed through the radio speakers: *"For you wingless wingwatchers out there, let me tell you the main thing straight off: you gotta know your stick. You gotta know when to push, when to pull. The ground rushes up when you push and falls away when you pull. Everything's about velocity control out there in the blue yonder."*

Fifteen minutes earlier Nate had coaxed Seth onto one of the apartment's carport roofs. They had to scale the dumpster and balance along a high cement retaining wall before taking the leap onto that roof.

At the other end of the carport a four-foot-wide abutment wall led to the custodial ladder. Nate had gone first. He had been carrying a paper sack. He threw it up onto the roof twenty-five feet above him.

His larger frame had no problem stepping over to the rebar rungs. He climbed up. Nick, though smaller than both of the other two, jumped over to the ladder as if he had accomplished that task

several times already. Seth didn't look down until his grip felt secure. Fifteen feet below him lay the asphalt parking lot. Then he started climbing, telling himself it would be worth it.

He felt Nate and Nick glaring down on him.

"Hey!" the older boy shouted.

A nervy flinch shot through Seth's body. By this point he assumed this was something his mother would not approve of. Not even Dad. The air between rungs inspired an increasing amount of finger sweat as he grabbed each one.

"Don't think about the ugly spot you'll make on the parking lot if you fall right now," Nate said. After that, he had dropped a small roof pebble down the ladder. It clanked off the rung above him and kept falling.

"That took a long time to reach the ground. I bet you'd fall a lot faster, though. Don't worry, you're doing fine. Don't look up!"

Seth locked his jaw and kept climbing.

"Hurry up," said Nate. "I went up twice today, twice as fast as you."

When he had reached the top, he grappled with the parapet wall in order to pull himself up. Nate glared downward.

Seth's right hand slipped across the tin railing, but he deftly shot his other hand up, bending his left fingers forcefully under the edge of the painted metal covering. He re-gripped with his other hand and lashed his body up and onto the roof.

"Nice move. You should join the circus."

Seth did not know exactly how to define his friendship with Nate. Nate had managed to belittle almost everything Seth took seriously: his scout badges, his bike, the dog he had to give away, piano lessons, his curfew, his grades in school, the fact that Seth got along with his teachers. Slightly more humorous than mocking, Nate kept just within Seth's tolerations.

And he took great pains to describe his many exploits, like throwing rocks at passing trains along Ruston Way, flicking matches off his apartment balcony, wearing a different mask to return to the good houses on Halloween, tossing 6th graders' backpacks on the breezeway roof, getting sent to the principal's office. Most recently, he bragged about his fireworks collection and all the ways he could scare people with a well-placed ladyfinger.

At least Nick doesn't talk as much as his brother, Seth thought. Nick would tag along with them for an entire afternoon without saying more than one sentence. Seth assumed the younger boy struggled with schoolwork. Nate had told him Nick was being held back in fifth grade – Seth didn't have the heart to tell that to Roanna.

Seth had to confess the excellent quality of the view from the apartment building roof. The only better view may have been the previous July on Mr. Walker's boat in the middle of Commencement Bay.

"Want to see me get shot?" Nate asked.

"I want to watch the airshow."

"Shut off the radio!"

Nick, who had been looking over the far corner of the roof, stood up and obeyed his brother.

"Just watch," Nate demanded. The older boy blew out sharply, making a gunshot noise, and wrapped both arms around his belly. He stumbled back a few steps and reached a hand out toward Seth. He then allowed his body to tumble onto the pebbly floor of the roof. After a couple seconds he shook his leg to signify his last dying convulsion.

Seth clapped sparingly, "Wow, Nate. Thank you for acting out one of my favorite moments in future history. Bravo. Can we turn the radio back on?"

"My name is Nate-D."

Seth forgot about Nate's current desire to become an influential gold-chained rapper in high school.

"Can I turn your radio on again? Please, *Nate-D*?"

Nate sat up. "Go ahead, loser."

Seth turned the dial. He could hear one of the airplanes, both close by and through the speaker, but could not see it. A steep bank separated most of the north and west end houses from the waterfront.

"You act like it's a baseball game." Nate gathered a few loose pebbles in his palm and dropped them one at a time into one of the cylindrical roof vents.

"Baseballs don't go a thousand miles an hour."

"Why's this stupid airshow so important? The whole city shuts down. The only good part is the Eagle. A hundred kills in combat and no losses."

Seth popped a stick of gum into his mouth. Cinnamon. He stood, saluting to block the sun, and listened to Ricky Dust, the local KJY radio announcer.

"That's Muzzy Izzet's specialty, folks. He knows the stunt pilot's golden rule: altitude becomes energy, and energy becomes altitude. You can hear the drone of that marvelously crafted Pratt and Whitney engine as he roars past the Les Davis Pier. He's throttling up now – pushing his machine to its apex – if all goes well, he'll invert the plane... Wow! Look at that, folks! That was a six-G maneuver in a four-G body!"

Nate added his own commentary: "Yeah, let's give him a hand for driving a stupid stunt plane."

Seth worked on his gum. He thought about his father and how he loved to find adventures for he and Roanna and Sarah. Once, shortly before heading to Puerto Rico, he bought tickets for all five of them to ride in a hot air balloon together. They drove three hours north to Ferndale. When they arrived, Roanna took one look at the huge ball of gas and refused to climb into the basket. While mom calmed her down, Dad asked the aeronaut about the weather. Seth experienced nearly the entire ride in silent awe, quietly immersing himself in the sound of the slipping Dacron gores, the whiffs of propane, and the gondola's quiver at each gust of wind. He missed that quiet now. He'd even prefer Roanna's pertness to the Nate and Nick show. Seth closed his eyes again and pretended to be aboard that hot air balloon. It had butterfly designs. That's where Roanna got her blue barrette. She didn't like the balloon, but she loved that hairclip. He saw fractured clouds, but they were high, and the view of Whatcom County had been stunning.

5 ∞ The Eagle

A change came over the broadcaster's voice. Seth's mind had wandered, and he just then realized a new pilot had been introduced.

"What's going on?"

"Sh!"

"That's the F-15 Eagle?"

Seth pointed upward, "This guy's going into the stratosphere!"

Even Nate had no derisive comment for the aerial display they witnessed. Without speaking, both older boys moved closer to the ladder-side of the building.

A massive rumbling dominated all other Tacoma sounds for several minutes. The July sun had bullied its way through the clouds. The roof was getting warm. Seth had to give Nate credit for picking a good spot for viewing. The only higher structure was the thick brick steeple of the neighborhood Presbyterian church.

Nate walked over to his paper bag.

A few blocks away Sarah stood atop a brick wall, palms firmly pressed to the sides of her head. Sofia leaned against it, one hand securely attached to her daughter's right ankle, the other holding Roanna's hand.

"It's so loud!"

Her mother nodded, watching between trees for the F-15's next exposure. They had made it to the old Weyerhaeuser Mansion on Stevens Street.

The jet began another massive loop, starting over the bay. It reached its apex in an upside-down position then slowly righted itself.

"Brizo would go mad about this noise," declared Roanna.

The jet took a long course over downtown and then south in the direction of Fort Lewis before doubling back toward Commencement Bay.

"Get down," her mom insisted. "Let's get closer to the gulch."

The three of them walked behind a couple holding hands.

"How did you and Dad meet?"

People on the south side of Madrona Way started cheering when they saw the dot of the approaching fighter.

"Uh, hmm, we met," the woman wondered how she could possibly describe it, "we were at a park. And that's where we met."

Sarah was curious too, "Did you like each other at first or not like each other, like sometimes in the tv shows?"

"We didn't know each other to like each other, like that, yet."

"Oh."

The jet flew over Vashon Island, north of them, and banked hard to the right.

Sofia motioned toward Dash point, "See it? It's coming back this way."

"Seth said you and Daddy worked in the same job place."

They reached Mason Avenue and found a gap at the fence separating the sidewalk from the large cottonwood-filled gulch.

"Wow, that's coming in low," their mother pointed at the rapidly approaching F-15. "Yes, we did, but not right away."

Roanna did not hear her mother's reply, mostly because of the jet noise, but also because of the excited sounds being made by the people around them.

"What's that?"

"I'm going to shoot them up, right when he's overhead."

Seth looked at the colorful cylinder in Nate's hand and shook his head, "Think that's a good idea?"

"I have the lighter," Nick said to his brother.

"I wish we could film this."

"It's a Roman candle, right?"

"It'll shoot five-star balls fifty feet high. We're fifty feet high now." Nate straightened his mouth and looked upward, "I wonder if I can trigger the chaff."

"I think we'll get in huge trouble if you light that thing."

As if reading his brother's mind, Nick flicked open the lighter.

"If you wanna wuss out, go ahead."

Seth leaned over the low rail and caught a quick glance of the ladder. He turned around. Nate and his brother were squatting and trying to prop the firework in a small flimsy box.

"Say when!"

Seth tried to ignore him. He stood close to the teal painted edge of the roof, knowing that if his mother spotted him up there it would be the end of his life as he knew it.

He didn't want to waste a second of this flyby. And he didn't want one of those boys to jump in front of him with that stupid Roman candle and distract him from the best part of the airshow.

It appeared to Seth that the fighter jet's path would take it in a low straight line from Dash Point to the old *Top of the Ocean* pylons. About halfway over Commencement Bay, Seth could see that the pilot had corrected to the right, aiming more toward the unpopulated gulch area.

"Now?"

"You're going to miss this," Seth called back. "He's coming in fast!"

The older boy lit the top of the Roman candle and watched the plastic melt away. It sizzled and sparked.

It felt like a car alarm buzzing through Seth's chest as the military jet sliced itself directly over the Presbyterian church and his apartment building. He tilted his back and spun around as quickly as possible.

A single glimpse stuck in his mind like one of those action photos in the newspaper: Nate diving away from his own firework. Then Seth locked his eyes on the Roman candle.

It had fallen into a horizontal position. Before he could say a thing, or even wonder if they had succeeded in lighting it, a ball of light shot toward his left leg.

Seth pulled his leg back. His heel struck the low tin parapet.

By the time the next ball of light came at him Seth was already falling backward, off the roof. An odd sense of disbelief and wrongness confused his speech. A word came out of him, or a yell of some sort. From Seth's perspective the gangly railing launched itself upward, like a heron taking flight.

A reflex caused his hand to jerk repeatedly at the rising roof, but it found only sweat and air.

6 Ω Garden of Jemel

Seth's eyes flinched as his body descended. The next half-second they blinked open. The Roman candle, the F-15 Eagle, and the entire apartment building dissolved into oblivion.

Tacoma vanished!

An intense rush of cool air replaced the fury of the military jet. The fiery July sun gave way to an emerald canopy of limbs and leaves from bewilderingly tall trees.

And Seth continued to fall. Instead of a clutching terror, he knew only exhilaration. He felt the sudden push of gravity at his back as his body tumbled into a deep pile of spongy leaves.

Lying on his back he had yet to take a breath. His eyes widened as he stared, straight up into the underside of a vast canopy. Vast both in breadth and height. He pushed down on his left arm to roll over and stand up.

The leaves under him gave way easily. He stepped out of it and inhaled. Air rushed into Seth's lungs as if he had never breathed until that very moment.

Both sweet and vigorous, the air charged his blood and limbs in an instant. He turned, looking at the pile of foliage and could see that landing any other place would have caused him serious injury – though, that deduction fell from his mind as an impossibility.

Instead of lying crippled and bleeding on an asphalt parking lot, Seth found himself in a forest. And what a forest! A million variations of green glimmered while shafts of sunlight speared through the high canopy.

Beyond beautiful, it seemed to Seth that he had never really seen anything before that moment. But he did remember something else. He had been someplace. But any concern of that other place – of whatever import it had seemed back then – paled in comparison to this new vivid undertaking.

A thousand thoughts shot through his mind, as if every neuron in his brain brought forth a dozen observations and questions and declarations.

His eye became distracted by a white light on the ground. He stepped toward it and crouched down to get a closer look. It appeared to be a solid object, just a little larger than a pebble and flat like a skipping stone. Its brilliance nearly caused him to squint. He reached out to touch it but heard a voice.

"Quite a fall."

Seth shot a glance to his right, and then turned his body to face a younger boy.

"Hi," he introduced himself, "I'm Jason."

Something about that statement seemed wrong, "No you're not."

"No, that's *not* my name. I'm Jatus."

"Yes," Seth agreed, "and I knew that. How did I know that?"

"And you are Sengo."

"I *am* Sengo, but I thought my name was something else. Seth, that's right. No, that's wrong. It doesn't sound right. Seth isn't my name."

"It never was," replied the boy. "How do I know that? And my name was never Jason."

"Jatus," Sengo said quietly. "Have we met?"

"No, I just saw you fall out of that massive tree."

"Do you know where we are?"

"I don't know anything," the younger boy replied. "I was on my bed, having another coughing fit. The next second I was standing upright on the other side of that tree there. Just breathing. Breathing deep. It was wonderful."

Without knowing why, Sengo stepped over to the boy and gave him a hug, "I'm glad you made it."

"Wow. I'm so clear. It's so much clearer than back then."

"Then?" Sengo inquired. "When was then?"

"Whoa," the boy pointed behind Sengo, who immediately turned around, "what's that?"

A huge yellowish-brown bear quietly sniffed at the other side of the large heap of leaves Sengo had just fallen into. The massive animal, larger than a draft horse, paid no attention to the humans, but lumbered off.

"Where are we? And what was that?"

"It was a gybear," Jatus replied. "I've never seen that before."

"How did you know what to call it?"

Jatus shrugged his shoulders.

"Hear that?"

Both boys stood quietly for a moment. Sounds from the forest gradually filtered into their consciousness. Tuneful bird songs, an alto mammalian call, the distant sound of a strong river.

And footsteps.

"From that way," Sengo pointed to his left.

Undoubtedly now, brisk and long-strided footfalls approached their location. Between the massive trunks of the trees Sengo made out two adult figures. Their light turquoise long sleeves swung in an odd fashion before and behind them. One was male, the other female. Their enormous height and inscrutable expressions startled the boys.

If the two hikers sensed the boys' alarm their pace did not show it. Jatus edged close to Sengo so that they stood side by side to confront the beings together. The approachers did not look directly at them until they stopped advancing, no more than twelve feet away.

Though only a brief moment passed between the two sets of pairs, Sengo gathered much information. He could sense in their gaze both benevolence and purpose.

Jatus spoke quietly, not fearfully, to Sengo, "They knew we would be here."

"Welcome to Earth!" spoke the female. Her face smiled as the words rang out with honor and ebullience.

"Sengo and Jatus," the other spoke, "the Prince of Jemel sent us to meet you here in his garden."

The two beings had similar markings on their clothing. The male wore a gleaming emerald shirt. A pattern of gold, weaved into the fabric, traced down the inside and outside of his long sleeves. The other, too, had the same gold weaving throughout her aqua pinafore-style gown.

Sengo found himself amazed and speechless in their presence. They exuded a beatific and terrestrial presence unfamiliar to his experience.

Jatus spoke, his voice sounding shallow compared to their greeting which still danced in the air, "Are you angels?"

Some subtle communication passed between the two beings. "We are tarvants," spoke the male being without further explanation.

"If you had seen us in your previous world," offered the other, "you may have called us angels, but we are telluric beings, made by the Supreme One."

"I am Nar and this," he motioned toward the other, "is Varsa. The Prince has generously allowed us the pleasure of keeping his garden until the Great City arrives."

A thousand questions entered Sengo's mind at once, but Jatus spoke first, "This is a garden?"

Varsa nodded, "The Garden of Jemel grows for the pleasure of the Prince and for those he brings into it."

"How did we get here?" Sengo clarified, "We haven't always been here."

Another brief moment of communication passed between the tarvants before Varsa answered. "The Prince does not wish to bring grief into this place. Neither does he wish to withhold information. And so, if you allow it, I will lay my hand on you, and you will recall that which is needful."

As Sengo bowed his head slightly, the tall being in front of him stretched out her arm.

7 Ω No Heaven Above Us

He remembered everything that had taken place that day. Getting up early to deliver papers, eating leftover pancakes, arguing with Roanna, watching an airplane- and then another memory surfaced. Sengo recalled a huge cathedral, its brightness nearly overwhelmed his imagination. There was a man-

"We died!" Jatus blurted out.

In that moment the enormity and effect of his death on his mother and sisters rushed into Sengo's mind.

"I must get back to Mom and the girls," he looked around for a clear path in any direction. "I shouldn't be here."

Jatus had worked it out. He had died after a long illness. It had been horrible for his loved ones to watch.

"It has been recorded in the Books for the Ancient of Days," Varsa spoke.

"This is Heaven?"

The tarvants looked at each other.

"You know," Jatus pointed skyward, "up there?"

Nar replied, "There is no 'Heaven' above us, if that is what you are asking."

"You are on a planet orbiting a star," Varsa explained, "which is seated in a galaxy within a-

"We didn't make it to Heaven?" asked Sengo directly.

"This is Earth. You are in a vast garden which covers thousands of square miles on this planet."

Jatus corrected her, "But we're *from* earth."

Varsa said, "We may not be able to satisfy you with the answers you require. However, it is our understanding that your forbears left it long ago."

"They chose a lesser place, one devoid of the blessings of the Supreme Creator," Nar continued. "We tarvants do not seek knowledge of such things. As part of our service to the Prince it is our cherished task to welcome those who leave that place and return here."

"Return? This is not where we came from," Sengo tried to explain, "or, it's a different part than we're from."

"I have heard others of your kind speak of a fracture," she turned to Nar.

Nar stepped over to the pile of foliage Sengo had fallen into. He bent down and swatted them with one long arm. Several dozen leaves dispersed away from the main heap. "It was one," he said, "and then it was many. Perhaps your mentor has a more complete explanation."

"Mentor?" asked Jatus.

Varsa nodded, "You will have a guide and you will meet your greater family at the due time."

"A family?"

"Child," Nar looked at Sengo, "you have a vast family that will exceed your expectations. They have been patiently anticipating your arrival your entire life."

"Where are they?" asked Jatus.

"It would be overwhelming to see them all in an instant," the tall womanly being answered. "The Prince has chosen for you a mentor. At the proper time your mentor will bring you to your greater family."

"Who are they?"

"They are those who earnestly await your arrival."

The gybear approached from behind the tarvants. Both turned around and gestured for the great beast to move in the other direction. They had to gesture and step toward it several times before it finally relented and walked away.

As this happened Sengo turned to Jatus, "I'm not sure they know who's waiting for us."

"Who is *the Prince*?"

Sengo lifted his palm and shrugged.

"I don't want to be left alone around here. What's it like at night, I wonder."

"It doesn't feel scary right now," Sengo replied. "Those stones are so bright I bet they light up everything."

"That bear is huge."

"It will not harm you," Varsa re-entered the conversation. "Nothing in the Garden will cause abject fear."

"What about fear of death?" asked Sengo.

The tarvants glanced at each other. Varsa then said to Nar, "Die, dying, death means *the other from life*."

"Oh," he turned back to the boys. "There is not *death*."

Sengo looked at his younger companion. "We just died, didn't we? Jatus and I?"

"You clearly did not," Nar blinked restlessly at the question. "Your soul is alive. If you had experienced death we would not be conversing."

"Your situation may feel unusual at first," Varsa put the palm of her hand on her companion's shoulder. "I assure you that you are both exactly where the Prince wants you: upon His Good Earth."

"Where we came from was good too," Jatus stated.

"That earth certainly retained some goodness-"

"The echo of goodness-"

"The shadow of goodness," the two beings attempted to respond to the boy, "which emanated from the Supreme One."

The boys stared at him without replying.

"Does not one smell the good aroma of food before one consumes food?" explained Nar.

"We messed up the earth, or, I mean our version of earth," Sengo tried to get his mind around it, "like with pollution?"

Nar turned to Varsa, "What word is the *other from harmony*?"

"I do not know all their words," she rejoined. "They have words for the *other from generosity* and the *other from kindness*, as well."

"I don't get it," said Jatus.

"They mean bad stuff isn't allowed here," Sengo explained.

Jatus said it flatly, "Nothing bad can happen here."

"So, I can't," Sengo made a slow slapping motion directly in front of Jatus's nose, "smack someone?"

The tarvants shared a glance with each other. Sengo thought a smile crossed Varsa's serene face.

Jatus took a cue from the older boy and pretended to punch Sengo in the stomach. Sengo grabbed his midsection and blew out his cheek as if in pain.

"Try it for real," Varsa suggested.

Sengo nodded, turning to Jatus, "Okay, punch my shoulder." Jatus nodded. Sengo heard the impact and felt the sting.

"Did it hurt?" asked Jatus.

Sengo rubbed his shoulder, "Ow. Yes. You're a strong little guy." He looked at the tarvants, "I thought there wouldn't be any pain?"

Nar smiled, "Illumination!"

"What's that?"

"It is our understanding that before leaving the Garden of Jemel every human is given three gifts," Varsa told them. "You have the first, which is this life, and you have started on the second, which is illumination."

Sengo asked, "What's the third?"

"One white stone," he worded it carefully. "Your tutor will tell you more."

Jatus bent over and picked up one of the snowy bright stones near his foot, "There must be thousands of them."

"Billions," Nar stated. "But that one is not you."

"Not *yours*," Varsa corrected her companion.

Sengo and Jatus, both squinting, tried to make out the intricate pattern which had been etched into it. These did not look like natural stones but some craft, and with some chemical or electricity in it causing the intense glow.

Sengo looked at Varsa, "What are they?"

"You have all to explore and all will be examined carefully," Varsa replied, "then, *you* can teach me."

