

Construction  
by Eric Cecil

She's up early. Or late. She slips on her dress, threads her belt over her waist. Its buckle clangs like a bell. It rings throughout her apartment as she searches for her shoes. They are lost. She leaves anyway: fastens her belt, shrugs into a thin overcoat, pads barefoot down the hall.

The front door is ajar. She does not close it behind her. She finds her block quiet and cold. And dirty. Frozen rills of garbage and debris litter her sidewalk. She kicks through them and eyes the many cars that line the curb, staring at the fog that films their windows. Behind each she imagines a phantom, a specter grimacing at a glowing dash. Maybe they would drive off a cliff, she thinks. Maybe they would speed into a gorge at the edge of town. But no such place exists. No phantoms.

No one at the end of the block. Just the building. Its facade is tentative and uncertain. At its perimeter a chainlink fence curls to ruin. She slips through it easily. Her feet are already thick with filth, are bleeding. She does not notice. She advances over a patch of damp concrete, past the base of a large toolchest, and approaches an entryway scabbed with slats of plywood. They clatter as she wriggles between them.

She emerges into what will one day become a lobby. It is now a cavern. Deep ruts scar its earth. A small crane lords above them, the bucket of its trowel a fanged shadow: odd, ugly, prehistoric. Beyond it, a large hole in the roof opens onto a patch of night sky. The faint glow is a rift in everything. Everything is unfinished, she thinks. Everything is unfinished and quiet and cold.

In the dark she spies the slant of a ladder. With her toes she discovers an icy rung. Her foot, slick with grit and blood, slips from its narrow step, and she stumbles, rights herself, removes her overcoat. It whispers to the ground. As if watching herself from afar, she then seizes the ladder with both hands and hikes onto its lower reaches.

As she climbs, she sees that the hole in the roof is not a hole. There has never been a roof. It's only a confusion of beams, scaffolding, open floors. These part as she ascends. The sky unfolds and opens above her. It looks as if she might climb all the way into it. At the end of the ladder she pushes away from its topmost rung and kneels onto the platform of an upper floor, her feet bent beneath her. Her wounds ink the smooth concrete. Only now does she know she is bleeding. Only now do the cuts and abrasions pain her. She crawls on her hands and knees, her arms pale and slight in the glare of the moon, her wrists striped and hickeyed with daubs of mud. At the end of the platform, where it joins an unfinished wall, another opening appears.

It's a window. A sheet of heavy plastic bulges from its frame, expands and contracts like a lung. The building breathes her toward it. She rises as if floating. She limps to a neat pile of masonry, leans into the recess of the open wall. Its interior is ribbed with frigid metal slats. She nestles between them and rests her right leg on the stack of bricks, looking through the plastic tarp. It is colorless, but fogged, nearly opaque. She is a phantom behind it. She is a specter staring at an obscured image of her block. It is foreign to her now. Eyes closed, she sinks deeper into the wall, deeper into the fog, into everything.

It's somewhat brighter outside when she wakes. There's just enough light to bruise faint shadows over the platform. There's not enough to warm her. Nor enough to show her the way home. Home seems very far now. She shivers. Her body aches. She has slept wrong and has ruined her feet. They are gnarled, black, stiff with earth and blood. She looks at them as if they belong to another. Like she has followed them here and they have strayed and stranded her.

Left her on this platform. She lowers herself from the pile of bricks and pulls herself to its edge. Ahead she sees a gauntlet of tall beams, their lengths uniform, interminable. They appear as the trunks of so many mechanical trees: a kind of ferric wilderness trailing off and away. At the end of the platform, she spies the dark and misshapen prints she has made with her feet. She does not see the ladder.

Her head just over the drop, she peers into the shadows below. The slanted form is there, scant light glittering its contours. Its topmost edge is now pillowed against several bags of concrete. The ladder has landed on its side, rails akimbo. It now resembles a fallen animal. Her thin overcoat is a victim, pinned underneath, caught unaware: arms outstretched, collar crushed and folded.

She closes her eyes and swallows, considers dropping to the ground below. It's too far, too severe. There is no other way. Again she crawls and drags herself to the pile of masonry, clambering up its side. The coarse edges bite at her forearms, skin her knees, her shins. She grunts and pushes herself onto the crest of the stack, sinking against the window's frame.

Full morning approaches. She can make out its advance from behind the plastic. A streetlight still haloes the intersection. But from the other end of the block, dawn now reaches to meet it. She cannot stay much longer. She bends and makes a needle of her finger, pokes at the clouded tarp. A slight divot whitens into a skid, a scar, then yields to a small hole. She hooks the hole and pulls.

Soon the plastic is a ragged wound and she is yelling through it, is removing bits of masonry from beneath her. They are still warm from her body. She drops them from the height of the window, hollering as they land with dull, percussive thuds. The sound is forlorn and distant. Her

shouts are hoarse threats. The voice is not hers. In silence she looks onto the street again, the sun now picking at the cars, needling against their windows. She hurls a brick toward the nearest vehicle. It clips the top of the fence, tumbles end over end onto the curb. A shard powders from one of its corners and shoots into the street. The noise is like planets forming. It cannons up and down the block, then dies in a sudden stillness.

She stoops forward, her chest heaving. Sweat dews her forehead, her neck, the bend in each knee. She is too tired to yell. The breaking of bricks is the pump of her chest. The throbbing of her feet is a pounding outside.

Outside. She hadn't noticed the sound before. She notices it now: a persistent clapping that emerges from the street. It tacks toward the building, softens to a faint and gritty rustling somewhere below. She pulls back, her profile flush with the window, and watches. A bundled figure appears at the far end of the lot. They do not enter through a large gap in the fence, as she did. Instead they stop at the crooked frame of a gate. One hand holds a bucket. The other tends to a chain that threads the misshapen seam of the fence. It jangles with every moment, chimes as the stranger removes a lock. The entire fence seems to trill when he pulls the chain loose, then shudders as he pushes the swinging panel into a perfect rut that lines the lot's surface.

She cannot see his face. She can only discern small details of his person: the slow, rolling gait, the large black boots, the thick pack slung over a broad shoulder. The bucket in his hand, she now realizes, is a helmet. It dangles from a closed fist, swaying as he examines one of the bricks she has just hurled from the window. When he bends at the knees to inspect it, she sees that he is bald on top, tufts of hair pluming at the sides. His bare crown is like a hole in a roof. Like a gorge on the edge of town. Everything, she thinks, is cold and unfinished and quiet. She fingers one last brick from the pile, scraping her nails against its ridges. It is as if her hand belongs to another.