

The Others
by Eric Cecil

It's the year after next, and we've lined the buildings with mirrors. It's how we keep the others at bay. They approach, stop, stare at their reflections. Inside, everyone watches from high windows. It's quiet.

It gets louder when we mirror a truck and drive it out of town. The others chase it with abandon. The truck leads them beyond the outskirts, to the hills and the prairie beyond. They follow until their legs give. Then they gallop on skinned hands and knees. When the truck powders over a field and onto a highway, they claw ahead, still going.

Going to get worse, some of us say. So we mirror still more: the empty trains that whistle the rails, the fences that guard the fossils of buildings, the machines that rust inside them. We scar a ditch in the center of town, chum its depths with truckloads of looking glass. Seven years bad luck, one of us jokes. The jokes end as soon as they start. The others crest the ditch, meet their doubles, then crush the glass to sand. When they emerge from the gulch, we scatter, eyes wide for what we've just seen.

Word soon spreads: no more mirrors. No more pausing at reflections or chasing cars. Stronger needs now press them. Rumors persist of new techniques. *Duping*, some call it, or *strangering*. The others don't name it at all. They take to the shadows, looking for those who might pass: them for us, or us for them. And many of us go missing.

The rest of us take cover. We flee to the west, to a campus of outbuildings we've never seen, to a life that none of us wants. We venture outside only in pairs, and when we return, there are tests and trials. How do we know? one of us says, guarding the door of a cell. Several eyes return his gaze. Which are theirs and which aren't is anyone's guess. Any one of us, says the guard, could be *duped*, and all of us might be *strangered*.

Stranger developments unfold when the others take nearby buildings. They creep black cars down surrounding streets, tires popping over pebbled glass. There are night raids first, then daytime invasions, and we take to one single highrise. We climb to its uppermost floors, the others scaling behind in patient strides. The mirrors we've hung in the stairwells no longer deter them. Now they only show the fever of our flight.

On the rooftop, we block the door. Someone stokes a small fire. Another leans an orphaned shard against a pile of rubble. In silence, we look into its depths, studying ourselves: faces paisley with bruises, puckered with wounds, drawn and pale with exhaustion. One of us sobs into his hands. His neighbor hooks his arm: Look at yourself. Look at us. And we sneer at the last of the mirrors.

When the door to the roof swings open, the others bound forward. They find us lost in our reflections.