

Excerpt from The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre

~Prologue~

When the vision came, he was in the bathtub. After a decade of using mercury vapors to cure his photographic images, Louis Daguerre's mind had faltered—a pewter plate left too long in the sun. But during his final lucid minutes on this cold evening of 1846, he felt a strange calm. Outside, a light snow was falling and a vaporous blue dusk seemed to be rising out of the Seine. The squatters had set fire to the barrens behind the Left Bank and the air was full of smoke. Louis sat reclined in warm water perfumed with lemon skins, a tonic he believed to be good for his skin and nerves. The wind gusted under the eaves. He placed a hand against the adjacent window and from the bath, perched high in his rooftop belvedere, he felt the night pressing in against him. His head was partially submerged and he heard the metallic click of the tenant's pipes below. It was a message; he was sure of it. The world was full of messages.

He sat up, wiped the steam off the window, and looked out. There was something ghostly about the boulevard in the wintry pall. The bare-limbed almond trees were flecked with snow. A nut vendor pushed his cart through the smoky twilight. A man stood before a storefront, staring at a pyramid of startling white eggs. Was he counting them? A man was counting eggs on a street at dusk while the peasants were trying to burn the city down. This pleased Louis, though he couldn't think why. He leaned back in the bathtub again and heard, as if anew, the ticking of the pipes. He lay there, letting his mind go still, and became aware of his own heartbeat, the sound of a tin drum through water. This was the time of day he grew speculative or nostalgic and he set to thinking that the pipes and his heart were talking to one another, exchanging notes in a secret, mechanical language. Then, as

Louis watched the increments of darkness grow at the window, he heard his heart skip a beat. His chest tightened and he felt a dull, cold pain in his fingertips. This had happened before, a stutter in his pulse on account of the mercury in his blood. But he had never listened to it, and now his heart stopped for a full second. It was like a small death.

He felt something shift in the room. Holding onto the rim of the tub, he pulled himself to a standing position. He reached for a robe and put it around his shoulders but was unable to move further. Looking around the washroom, he felt himself alien to his own life. Poison blue bottles of iodine lined out the medicine shelf like Prussian soldiers; his straight razor stood a gleam on the washstand; a flask of mercury shuddered on the sink. Everything seemed directed at him. He looked out the window and saw the moon rising behind a cloth of weather. An enormous albatross sat perched amid the stone gargoyles of Notre Dame. The peasants had looted the zoo and all kinds of exotic animals had escaped. A Bengal tiger was said to be prowling the Latin Quarter. Louis saw that the barrens continued to burn, but now there was a barge loaded with firewood drifting down the river in flames. Night was everywhere. People had quit the streets except for the man counting the eggs. The man stood with his hands in his pockets, fingering his change. The little life one leads.

Louis threw open the window and felt an inrush of cold on his face. There was a moment of tremendous clarity, as if a scrim had lifted. The vision, now that it came, was really a series of insights and hallucinations, a feeling of things coming into focus. The egg-man looked up at him, startled, and Louis understood that he was returning from a funeral, perhaps his father's, and that he'd stopped to observe the precariousness of life in the pyramid of white eggs. Louis looked down to the river and saw that the burning barge was not carrying firewood at all but the bones of the dead. At the street corner, the hands on the neighborhood clock had slowed to half time. Everything is a portent. A low, rushing noise rose from the heath—men's

voices on the edge of panic. They were going to burn the city down. Not now, not tonight, but eventually. The lootings and the fires, Louis understood now, were acts of fear, not rebellion. Men could sense oblivion coming, feel it in their knuckles and teeth. Then Louis saw that it was not an albatross on the rooftop of Notre Dame, but a young girl in a white dress, her hands laced behind her back. She had felt wings pinned to her dress and she was going to jump from the ledge. She didn't jump; she leaned into the air in front of her and shot straight down. All the way down she refused to unlace her hands from behind her back. A burgundy ribbon streamed out from her long, dark hair and Louis watched it until she disappeared into the smoke. The egg-man looked on with his hands in his pockets. The end of the world is contained in a man's pockets.

Louis closed the window, stepped onto the rug, and dried himself thoroughly with a towel. There was a kind of relief in knowing about the end, a kind of symmetry and beauty. For years he had felt a strange sense of foreboding in the smallest detail—a tarnished coin, a glossed pear—and now, he saw, these had been a thousand small proofs. He looked at himself in the mirror and noticed that there were beads of spilt mercury on the medicine shelf. They resembled tiny planets of glass. He stood there staring at them, his head cocked as if listening to a difficult voice. Each bead captured his reflection and the light from the window.