**Onward**

Sam Fouts

The last human, among the remains of a black and muddy earth, will die at the foot of his daughter’s shallow grave. After burying her, he fixes his gaze on the night sky, letting his eyes dissolve into a magenta streak of gas and dust, while every second bleeds into the next. He lingers for an unknowable time, but tear-stained, knows can’t stay here forever. Yet when he does attempt to move, he finds himself impaled by fatigue. Sleep calls him to the ground, and there, he lets the mud hug his body. And swallow him whole.

His eyes begin to flicker. His breaths fall into a rhythm. Gravity enacts its neutral will. Try as he does to fight the pull, his voice falters before he can cry out for more time, and all of his fleeting thoughts are swept out of mind. Without his consent or realization, he eventually ceases to think at all. Something stalls between those bones, and by morning, he’s dead.

With him, every writer, poet, philosopher, scientist — an entire pantheon of immortals, their works and words — are snatched behind the same curtain, for an extinction has occurred. And on a now nameless stretch of land, tucked in the ruin of an overgrown house, a clock dishes out four empty seconds, unheard and unmeasured. Crows screech in the brick ribs of a mansion. The first streams of a new river are eroding their way through a warehouse, sending a brook weaving between crates of clothing and shoes, while patches of grass prepare for their reclamation. Under the mud that’d come to proliferate this dead planet, roots inch towards healing soils, and after some eighty cycles around the star, green spreads like a fire over the wastes, over battle tanks and barns, dead fields and dollar bills, the man and his daughter.

Together, their corpses bloat, leak, green, redden and bubble with gasses and rotting liquids that rupture through their peeling skin. And as their flesh spreads at the site of the burial, the father and daughter become far closer in death than they ever could have been in life, collectively forming a feast for the likes of worms, maggots, mushrooms, and microbes — a sprawling web of life long before grass would come their way and find itself growing greener between their ribs. Now the bones mingle in silence, only to be disturbed when a sapling hooks the skull of the man and hoists it up its trunk, where it hangs like a monument until the returning birds pluck it down.

In a matter of thirty days and nights, the rodents and critters that had since crawled out of their holes pick the skull to teeth, with some tumbling on for a thousand more trips around the sun. Long after his skeleton is worn to dust, but by no means an eternal stretch. For the man’s upper-left canine is swallowed in a mouthful of grass by a feral cow, the lower-right is blown around by wind and storm, cracking into smaller pieces until every shape is ground to sand, and a molar makes its way into a lake, finding rest on its floor, where millions of years burry the lone reminder in mud, shifting continents, mountains, hills, rivers, glaciers, rain and snow and layers upon layers upon layers of dead fauna and flora — all sealing a tomb that fruits a fossil: a petrified relic of the man’s mouth that endures billions of years, unscathed when the sun grows hot enough to boil the blue marble bare, only perishing as the alien remains of earth are swallowed by the expansion of its mother star, and every record, every ruin, and scar of activity cut into the planet is rendered down to the dust it had been derived from.