

## *Suicide Fugue*

A seashore at night, in winter. A boardwalk, deserted in the wan yellow light of streetlamps along the rail. Shuttered stores and arcades. Eastward the dim sands and the utter blackness of night, pale breakers curling like faint distant ghosts, the ocean's ceaseless, heartless roar and hush. A solitary figure appears: a youth of about thirteen, dark-haired, dark-coated, pale face and limbs. Head down, he descends the stairs and crosses the sands. He moves with the inexorable helplessness of one possessed by nightmares. He disappears into the darkness, where the ghostly breakers foam. The sea takes him, indifferently, as it takes all things indifferently.

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When Chuck McDonough was in eighth grade, the art teacher arranged a special Saturday field trip to the Met. Chuck went because he liked going to Manhattan and liked getting away from his family. He cared no more for art than any other eighth-grader; though he did find himself lingering in the Greek galleries, with their statues of muscular naked men.

They were taken through a visiting exhibit of Japanese sculpture. One piece depicted a creature called the Baku. It was one of those hallucinatory zoological jumbles of which Eastern theologies seem fond: a tiger's feet, a horse's body and tail, a lion's mane – though arrayed in cascading ringlets as though attacked by a demented hairdresser with a curling iron – and the face of a dog: toothy lower jaw and tongue-lolling smile, and specifically the bugged-out eyes of a Pekinese. From this face emerged a snout like an elephant's trunk. "The Baku," said their earnest young guide, "was a good spirit called 'Eater of Dreams'. When a person had nightmares, which the Japanese believe are caused by evil spirits, they could call upon it, saying 'Baku, eat my dreams.' The Baku would then turn the nightmare into good fortune by eating the evil."

Like most 13-year-old boys, Chuck thought earnest young museum guides were bullshit. He nudged his friend Carey Weinstein. "Ugliest damn dog I ever saw." Carey murmured back, "You know what *I'd* feed it"; grabbing his crotch for emphasis.

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