

## There, Past Old Age (~6.5k words)

by GB and others

When Sigmund Weber-Käsemann was first dropped off at the edge of our town, I was a child with no experience outside of happiness and sadness, but the details of the day, once obscured by my adolescent memory, have finally unfolded after a lifetime of servitude.

It was heavenly bright. The sun was at full exposure and the shadows were thick and precise, stodgy on the flat dust that bordered our clay houses. The train that ran through the expanse puffed black smoke a few miles away, and it all dissipated quickly in the frosty air, for the temperature was still cool and dawn had yet to fully leave. The desert ran onwards and our town was little in the blurry mirages that would fall like consecutive blankets, woven down upon the flat dust, like sheets of cotton caught in static.

My parents were out herding the brown cattle by the patches of mint when a man approached them tugging a wheelbarrow. He was tirelessly panting under a deep straw hat that covered a flailing patch of sharp silver hair. He had a pair of orange trousers soaked with mud and sweat—bright orange, if not ridden with the stench of the laborious journey he made through this flat desert. He mixed with the fresh smell of the morning mint and had saliva trailing from his cracked lips.

Far away, on the porch of our clay home, I peered into the wheelbarrow. Inside was an impossibly pale body. It looked as if it was slaughtered without bloodshed.

“Take him,” the traveller croaked, not in a violent manner, but just exhausted from his journey, “I’m too old to care for him anymore.” He pointed down to the body.

My father, closest to the traveller, lunged precariously to see an old child, only twenty or so years old, who looked as if he had just started to grow hair on his chest. Wrapped around his neck was a dog tag with the name ‘Sigmund Weber-Käsemann,’ and that would be the name by which, at the end of the universe— *or at the end of all universes*— this small town, only periodically occupied by fleeting ranchers, would be remembered. Every other face seen was nameless and temporary, including my own.

“You think I’m joking...” the walking man stated, “You think I’m insane,” he coughed, bending over and falling on his knees. My parents rushed towards to help him up, but his legs had folded and his frail body would no longer stand. Unveiling the cuffs of his orange coat, they found his skin wrapped to his bones, warped, and his ribs protruding like masts with sails in a storm.

“Get him something to eat,” my father ordered my mother. She turned around and ran towards me on the porch, but within a few feet, the man who was braced in the arms of my father screamed:

“No!” It was an obtuse, deep plea. He got our attention and continued, “Don’t bother. I’m not hungry. I’m just old.”

“Don’t listen to him,” my father interrupted, attempting to take control of the situation which had began to make him sweat salty lines below his earlobes, “Go get him something— anything.”

My father was a noble man. It was my dream to one day ride the horses before the sun came up with him. I wanted to see the swiftness of the dark and his face dimly lit by a lantern, smiling as I trotted towards him.

“You don’t understand,” the traveller continued to croak, “You might never understand. That’s okay. It’s just how it is.” He twisted himself around so he could lay on his back in the shade of the wheelbarrow, “Take the boy for me. I don’t ask for food, I don’t ask for shelter. All I ask is for you to take the boy.”

It was disgraceful to hold another man as he died, so my father scoffed. He believed that the traveller was disillusioned, but the traveller laughed and rested his cheeks into a somber grin, looking up at the clear blue sky until his eyes turned blank and his suntanned face rested silently, eyelashes flowing with the gentle wind. There he was, like how all people end: brittle and dead— *all people except Sigmund*.

The boy in the wheelbarrow had not moved an inch during this whole ordeal. My father stood up to listen closely and was surprised to see he still had a fluttering breath. Sigmund was healthy in all ways except that he was not living. He was not seared with a tan by the sun— no, he was effortlessly pale, brightly contrasting the murky desert. His mouth was open, and his teeth were not black or yellow. His eyelashes were crisp, and his skin was still moist against the dry wind.

He just sat there— arms outstretched over the edges of the wheelbarrow, no focus in his eyes, but that slow cyclical breathing in his chest. And then I had the thought, while leaning over the porch rails trying to see more beyond the inferior mirage of heat, that for the rest of all time— longer than any torture humanity can imagine— this boy would never grow, and he would be pale and wear that blank stare for eternity. I do not know why I thought this. Perhaps it was a thought blown in the wind, from him to me. Perhaps he was warning me of something I was ignorant to.

Initially, none of our neighbors were surprised by the occurrence. Our town was familiar with unprepared travellers stumbling into the roads. They came during the most inglorious hours. They stumbled burdened by the heat and screaming for help because they were guilty of not being acquainted with the desert. They were from the coast, where the temperature was always moderate and the sun did not rule like a holy emperor. This was no exception, we concluded.

But it wasn't until a few days after that my parents grew suspicious, and in parallel, concerned. Sigmund had not woken up from his trance and still bore that eternal stare. They fed him food, mashing it up into swollable bites like he was a baby fresh from the womb. We assumed that he was in a coma induced from heat stroke. No neighbor inquired about Sigmund. My father felt guilty for letting the fellow traveller die by the side of what was presumed to be his son, and so, told nobody about the laborious task of feeding the child and trying to wake him up. If anybody found out, it would result in shame. And so, the curtains had to be closed and the doors had to be opened to at most slithers.

Days passed with no expression.

In order to rouse the child from sleep, my father began with civil methods. But as time waned and my father realized that noon of today was beginning to become confused with midnight of yesterday, his methods progressed to more dubious, inhumane frequencies.

The process of revival began by mixing spices with onion and garlic and wafting them over Sigmund's nose— not even a blink was admitted by the child. Contemplating at night under the dim yellow light of a precariously-hung lantern, my father would ponder and eventually betray my mother's love for all things human. Creeping out into the living room where Sigmund slept, my father lifted the carcass of a fish and let it fall on the boy's cheek by the way of gravity, whispering, "Wake up, child. Wake up."

He would patiently wait. A few minutes would pass and he would repeat the action, letting the scales hit the boy's cheek harder each time. Soon he needed more force than gravity.

"Please," he begged quietly, "Wake up, child."

No admittance— nothing at all.

Our doors were thin, made of sparse wood infested by termites. Though my mother was snoring, I was a restless child, unsatisfied by the hours of recess at the local school. When I would dress to sleep at night, I only fell lightly into the mattress. This meant I could hear everything: the slapping increasing in volume and power, the pleas of consolation by my father. It sounded vile, but as time passed, I came to understand that it was necessary, but my mother did not.

One night, when she was sleeplessly worrying about the child and all the panic his solemn existence had caused, she found herself crying in a dream. I had never seen her do such a thing before. Or at least I had no memory of it. This slow whimpering would manifest itself more often from then on. I would find her crying while dreaming not just in her room, but in the kitchen, outside, and in my own mind, wafting in my own fluid dreams. During that first tearful night, I heard a rustling in the room next to me. She had awoken and walked into the living room to see my father with the rotten fish skin.

He turned around knowing that the dark could not hide his desperation.

“You can not do this to a human,” she whispered, wiping the tears off her cheeks.

But my father, desperately trying to maintain his stoic appearance that was faltering by each passing day, always replied, “He is dead right now. No? Do you see him? He is no better than alive.”

My mother knew what he implied. The child was blank— he did not listen— *we didn't even know if he could listen*. She nodded.

Then my father continued, “Do you want him to live or be dead forever?”

And my mother understood that no feeling could possibly be affecting the child. Her body would tremble at the face of an unbearable dehumanization, and so she would turn away, letting my father continue to hit the child.

“Wake, wake, wake...” he murmured all the way into the morning. My father's voice trailed into a language from his old home, a language far away with little resemblance of this desert, little resemblance of this planet.

Before dawn, I found my father sitting there on the couch next to Sigmund, blankly staring at the clock which was ticking with the rising sun, gleaming a broad yellow over the two of them. My father moved no part of his body but the pupils in his eyes.

Still among the dust, he said, “I want you to know... that what I do to Sigmund... is not ordinary. I would not do this to you.”

He was trying to justify an act that would be imprinted like an opacid background in my vision for more than all the years I would live. The fish skin beside him... the tinted sheath of salt water staining the couch...

Utterly desperate to claim his innocence, he stuttered, “This child is not ordinary... and I hope you are alright with him being here. If anything bothers you, you tell me. Yes?”

I nodded.

“I only want him to be alive,” he said, breaking the contact between our eyes.

Without hesitation, my father started shaking Sigmund, tossing him about the couch. He lifted him up like a wrestler, spinning him around the lamps and whisking his nose on the ceiling. Down on the couch! It was a flurry of manic impulse. Limbs contorted in ways that would cause children's eyes to be covered, but yet, I was watching, and all I could do was stand there under that rickety doorway, watching as my father abused the child like he was a doll, smashing him down, screaming for him to feel anything, to feel pain if that was all he could muster.

This procession continued for several days, or several weeks— I could not distinguish the difference. Time had lost its power.

Though eventually, my father did admit defeat, and my parents left Sigmund on the couch without food or water. My father resumed his work herding the brown cattle and my mother accompanied him.

We truly thought he would die in silence. Just like that, in a snap—sunken below the shallow breeze. But we were very wrong.

As Sigmund thinned, he let out a wild gasp and then proceeded to choke in the night. My parents awoke and rushed to the living room to see him flailing around as if he was alive. At first, they cheered. Next, they fed him, and once the boy was full, he went back into that destitute state until he was starving again. My mother would then mash imported tomatoes into a thin paste, decorate it with mint, and pour it down his throat.

As if he even tasted it. As if he would lick his lips afterwards. No—he just let his head fall limp backwards, neck stretched out like his throat had been sliced.

My father, distressed by the time he had sacrificed on the useless boy, was furious. After all he did to squeeze life from the boy's body, Sigmund still had the audacity to ask for his servitude. The boy wallowed in the nights and wheezed when he was hungry, but my father shrugged him off and continued to herd the cattle into the train carts with an unapologetic gaze. The smoke would blow over the town like black ash and the machine would churn off towards the coast. Income was slow, but intermittently there. The sounds of cattle faded and while watching the train leave, my father regained his sense of being—there was something moving, he thought to himself—*finally something was moving, even if that meant it was leaving.*

But in contrast to my father's indifference to Sigmund, my mother was shadowed by a tremendous guilt, for she could not let the child die knowing that shoving mashed vegetables down its throat kept it from wallowing in pain.

When asked by my mother to help her feed the boy, my father pled his own selfish case, "Why feed it if all it does is sit there? It just keeps eating. It just keeps consuming— you have to produce something if you want to be worthy of living. He can't just be here and steal our time." He threw his straw hat onto the counter. "He's just taking us... keeping us hostage."

"But he is human," my mother sobbed. She was dreaming again, but nevertheless, guided by the heart. I too felt a mysterious forthcoming of great compassion for Sigmund, but I did not understand why that was so. It was as if he had meandered his way into the back of my mind when school grew mundane and I stared behind the teacher's eyes.

"He is not human," my father eventually argued, putting a harsh stop on his sentence before beginning again: "How can he be human! He can eat, sure—he must eat. But he does nothing with that food! And too..." he stared at my mother, below him on the couch, pausing as if he knew that his next words would hurt, "He is not even our child."

"Then what is he? Tell me what he is," my mother ordered.

The pace of the argument accelerated with each jabbing response.

My father, lacking an answer, angrily replied, "If you love him so much, then you can feed him yourself. I have a business to run. I'll do it

all myself. I'll sort the cattle, I'll sort the finances, I'll talk to the conductors, I'll gather the herbs and plant the grass. I'll do it now- I must, otherwise I will not see my bed tonight, or perhaps ever again." He stormed out the door and left into the hazy morning.

My mother took his advice to heart and followed as so: for six or seven hours a day, she would sit there, slowly shoveling the mushy tomato paste into the boy's mouth, clamping his jaw up and down with her palm so he wouldn't choke, inducing his paralyzed body to swallow.

The sound of this cyclical endeavor became ambience to my life at home. I heard him wallow- it was always the wallowing- desolate screaming when the mash fell down his throat, forever, until night, when at last, peace would usher itself through our windows as wind and the faint moonlight brushed the growing hairs on my chin. I plucked at them, realizing that soon, I would be needing my father's razor.

Life at home became so cyclical that there was nothing to be excited about. I always knew what the next day would hold. Weekends were no different from weekdays. Every morning my mother would be up early feeding the boy and my father would be out tilling the mint. I would soon begin to help him in places my mother no longer had the time for. Some mornings, I rode to the rails and negotiated with the train conductor and his gristly beard. After those sweltering trips, I would shave and see stubble that ever so slightly resembled his own scruffy chin- I was maturing. Frowning in the mirror, I tried to remember the last time anybody had sang to me for my birthday. My family never celebrated anything anymore. Our lives had been isolated through different perceptions of time, as unlike our neighbors, we never had the leisure to gaze at the arrows ticking on the clock.

Because of this slow descent into the mundane and expected, I found the greatest comfort in leaving home. I slowly forgot about Sigmund as I learnt to ride and take horses out into the open range. I'd find patches of mint and let my buck nibble at the ground. There, I would squat, watching the town from a far- truthfully, the further I rode out, the smaller it looked. Once I arrived by the train tracks at noon, twenty miles out from town. From there, there was no bump in the flatscraping desert- our town was gone, invisible. It was an infinitesimal dot on the horizon, if anything at all, so small that it might as well never had existed.

Though I do believe dread and woes dominated my time in the dust, rare moments of happiness did exist, but they proved ultimately to just be distractions, because as friends came and went, there was only one consistency in my life: that damned infinite child, Sigmund Weber-Käsemann. A lot of those I knew at school left for the coast, envying a rich life of rain and moisture. A lot of the neighbors who held me as a child started to gently pass away. Neither my father or mother attended the funerals.

In those times where change was felt, I discovered that my strange and growing love for Sigmund was because I admired his consistency. Even though

he did not speak or move, he comforted me in times when I did feel change. When the ground shook and I feared our clay house would collapse, I crawled to the living room and sat beside the couch. There he would lay, neck bare to the sky. I knew that if the ceiling were to fall, he would survive. I reached out and held his hand. It was cold, but pulsating. Dust sifted through cracks in the ceiling and lodged between our fingers, but death held no stake at all— not one bit.

I never blamed my mother for treater Sigmund with greater priority than myself. When I was home on the weekends, my father working his overdue shift, I was alone, not eating with a large family, but a sparse one. I started to believe that my mother was hallucinating by sitting next to him all day. After all, she still cried in her dreams, and those dreams crept into the daylight. She would hug him and I was disgusted because I felt as if I was being rightfully neglected. It was on those nights when my mother was occupied in her fruitless pursuits, and where my father was stuck trying to put humble food on our table, that I found myself wandering the blue streets and staring up at the dark sky of glistening stars. Finding a comfortable patch of mint, I would lie down and draw constellations with my fingers until my mind withdrew from reality and meandered through a realm of thought. It occurred to me that Sigmund had exacerbated a sense of futility in my progressing life. The people I loved was decided by the time I was forced to spend with them; the activities I enjoyed were the ones I was conditioned with as a barely-conscious child; the desert was too vast, and nobody knew my name, not even my parents. Under the stars, I was at a horrific risk of becoming severely apathetic, because all the light and mass in the universe was so far away, forever out of my reach, but still mocking me with its dazzling size and beauty. I felt unbearably small.

Meanwhile, my family was in a silent, underground war. Perhaps this is exaggeration, but in times of isolation, even the dust accumulating by the floorboards becomes frightening. It was trench warfare— a battle against an enemy that could not be shown or seen. If anybody happened to intrude on our home, they would be more scared than confused.

“Who is this child?” they might ask, *“Is he yours?”*

And those questions, none of us could answer. But the town would surely demand answers, I thought. They would latch onto us like parasites pricking at our skin, fearful that we could be abusing this boy or even worse, be kidnapping, raping him— criminals hoping that the simmering heat of the desert would hide their atrocious acts of violence. If we were suspected, the nosy townspeople would call the sheriff and he would come to investigate, requesting answers... always requesting damned answers. But what could we say? And what should we do when confronted by authority? He held a pistol on his hip and was itching to rip it out of its sling. A trigger-happy bastard, he was. What could we do when we were demanded answers to questions we did not know ourselves?

There was but one inglorious solution: to take the bullet in the forehead and become guilty for a crime committed by nature— the crime of helping Sigmund live forever.

My father continued to draw the curtains on the windows to hide the boy, only opening them if the smell of his constantly excreting body became too much for our lungs to filter. We were isolated without the possibility of being understood, but it was for our own safety against a barreling judgement.

Years began to pass like months, and months began to pass like days, quantized into single events such as short greetings with travellers who told stories of the mystical cities of art and revolution by the coast. I had no motivation to follow these intermittent travellers, because the disease of apathy had spread from my soles to my head. Of course I listened to them during my young nights at the saloon, but I had no memory once they left. All magic was forgotten instantaneously. The sensual desires of eating the sugary sweets from vendors at the empty town center was all that remained. I drunk the whiskey and sipped the blotchy tomato soup. It was my tongue, simmering in the heat, that acted as a rancid organ to put my entire weight on. That existence was fragile. It was dangerous. I was desperately trying to convince myself that the day was not just something invented by humans.

Eventually, those years stacked up and I noticed my mother's hair turn silver gray. One morning, I opened my bedroom door and saw my mother standing beside Sigmund, who was still a boy just out of adolescence with only flickers of hair on his chest. I recollected the memories of that first day when he was abandoned here. That exhausted traveller— the primordial carer of this child— died just as my mother would when she realized her life was spent indoors and during here entire existence, she didn't even learn why the sun moved.

Should we have listened more intently to the premonition of the traveller's grim death? It was not heat stroke or malnutrition. He was well old— alike my mother— I could see it in his silver gray hair. He too had cared Sigmund his whole life. He had loved the boy just as much as we had.

By the time my mother was ready to be buried, she had lost all emotion, so she mercifully said the same line as I heard from the porch of our clay house all those years ago:

“Take him— I'm too old to care for him anymore.”

My father, now retired from work, knelt by her side like he did for the traveller long ago. This time, though, there was no guilt. He felt betrayed by this world, like an exception among others who all lavished in success and gold, living in mansions on the coast where the sun didn't peel at your skin, where the world wasn't flat and trying to crumble every home that disrupted its perfect planar surface.

He screamed into the sun, staring directly at it, letting that burning sensation dry up the last tears he would ever cry. That was all he could do when at the face of eternity.

No man, diluted by cycles upon cycles, could do anything else. Just scream.

It was in our innate nature to believe in an ending, but Sigmund was the most phenomenal rebel to humanity, or perhaps, on the contrary, the greatest ally to eternity.

He was forever, and with the daisies laid on my mother's grave, I was reminded of how strong she truly was. She had no qualms with servitude. She had been wound up like a mechanical toy and set to live without questioning anything. She was given the boy, and she cared for him. In her stubbornness, which could have so easily been interpreted as stupidity, I found immense integrity, an impression that would shape me as a man.

Somewhere, in the years that were as long as decades but as short as seconds, I accepted the fact that nothing new or exciting would come to my life until death. I had adopted my mother's trait of being undeniably stubborn as to us, it was advantageous. Horrified by watching my father scream at the grave, buried not with soil but with thin dust, I spent my hours staring at the clay walls preparing for my formal meeting with eternity. I wanted no gripes with my life spent here— sleeping and waking with nothing but manual behavior in between. On the nights when the air was cooling in the winter, I gathered my coat and walked in my leather slippers among the stars, as I did long ago on those unfamiliar nights when Sigmund was considered my brother— now, he was young enough to be my child.

The town center had emptied out. Any bush that was planted only had sunburnt outlines of where the leaves used to be, tanned bark that look unfinished by nature. When the one tree that stood tall in the center circle died, it was swiftly removed because the townspeople could not bare to look at themselves. The council had to pay for a train cart to carry it away and we were left with a hole a few feet deep at the center of everything we'd ever known.

Now that my mother was gone, my father had given up his business of herding the brown cattle. He let them roam freely, but a few still stayed under the yellow porch light at dusk. When he would wake in the morning, he did nothing but watch them graze the shedding patches of mint. Here and there, somewhere out anywhere— it was all lost to him. He would then settle on the couch and shove the food down Sigmund's throat, huffing and cursing when the boy would choke and spit.

There was one night when I should have been in bed. I was out roaming later than when the lights of my neighbors were extinguished. I came home to see my father laid out on the couch, sobbing into the chest of Sigmund, still expressionless.

“How old do you think he is?” I asked, leaning on the doorway. My eyebrows hung low. I was just a silhouette to them both— my father might have not even realized it was me, but regardless, he wiped the tears off his cheeks and refused to sleep that night. Out of all the forgettable nights, this was the one I remember.

I had recessed into my bedroom gently shutting the door behind me. Lying down, my tired body settled into a deep sleep. In truth, it was so deep that it might have cycled around and become real, more than a dream— the lucidity of objects was immense. Every touch was sharp and there was no such thing as a soft blanket, not even the couch, which had seen its springs turn into sagging wool.

My bedroom door had been opened, not by me, but by someone else. Walking out, I broke into a heap of tears, melting to the floor. Standing in the kitchen was Sigmund.

*Standing.*

He was laughing. Then he pronounced my name like we had talked a thousand times before, like we ran together through town as children, like we rode horses by each other's side as growing boys. For the first time since before he had arrived, I had felt... like something— I had been acknowledged by the universe.

*“Ignacio,” Sigmund said.*

Then, while stranded on that floor, overcome with hands covered in wet snot, my father kissed me on the cheek a few times, revolving around my head, before it all cut to a damp ending as Sigmund continued with his speech:

*“How have you be-”*

My pillow was broken by strands of tears. Walking out into the living room, I found all the curtains open and had to cover my eyes with my forearm to block the searing light. My father was gone, but Sigmund was untouched. He was not standing. He had not moved at all.

Within the next years, I aged rapidly. Perhaps it was because I had removed the ticking clock from our living room, or because I closed the curtains again and the cycle of night and day had become irrelevant. Wrinkles would form beside my lips and I forgot my age. It was reasonable to assume that ten years was one and so on, but regardless, I was old and tired. After my father had passed away, I sold the cows we had remaining and slowly burnt the hereditary fund. Understanding that Sigmund was the only value left in my life, I rationed our food carefully so that if it had to be, I would starve first.

During the last few weeks of my life, decades after my parents had passed, I relied on the charity of a young barkeeper who was avid to help the poor.

“Good on you,” I thought, while starring at him through a drunken lens. He knew nothing of eternity. I knew to keep it that way. I was content in my loneliness and felt no need to impose it on anybody— that was, however,

until I began to become drawn to the dark hallways in our home, and the fear of death jumping out of that darkness was instilled within each beat of my heart. Once I was gone, nobody would be there to take care of Sigmund. At last, I understood: the traveller did not abandon the child— he was with him his whole life. Like I would, he died saving the boy by finding someone else to feed him.

The closet of our home was gray with dust. I threw the scarce boxes onto the floor and dug out the dog tag which Sigmund wore before arriving here. Rubbing my thumb over it, shavings of rust peeled off the bronze metal. I wondered how old it was. I wondered where Sigmund came from before the traveller. I wondered how many travellers had come and gone like me, watching the boy live forever.

With my newfound silver gray hair, I hobbled over to the saloon where I would take refuge on a skinny stool. My eyes bulged out of my face and the barkeeper slid me a small glass of whiskey. I took it and noticed that my hand was shaking, the golden spirit turbulently oscillating around the rim of the glass.

The barkeeper recalled that earlier in the day an inventor had passed through our town. Believing he had already left, I shrugged off my curious muse of his invention. But as my drink started manifesting itself in a purple distorted vision, I saw next to me an unfamiliar man with a blonde mustache and a velvet cape. From a small bag, he unwrapped a little mechanical structure that had a knob by its wooden base. He held it out. I did not register if he spoke or not, but reaching out towards the mechanism, I twisted the handle.

A whisper grazed my mind, “Keep going.”

And so, I kept twisting and slowly brass rings of small orbits emerged and rotated around each other, like the planets in our solar system, the stars in our galaxy. There were a thousand intricate metal balls and gears, shining as they sharply hit the reflection of the candles beside us.

I heard the whisper again... “Keep going.”

The small planets and stars went round and round until I became cognizant of their motion, but my hand grew tired.

The inventor started pulling the mechanism away from me but I gripped the handle. I had to keep going... I had to...

“Stop it!” he said in an acute foreign accent.

Finally, I let go and in my weary trance a surge of satisfaction fell through my body, through my lungs and heart, through the deepest organs, reverberating— after so long with Sigmund, I had forgot what it was like for something to end. Even my own death felt impermanent.

I followed the inventor out behind the chatter of the saloon. Everything became still and quiet.

"I can tell you like it very much. But please, let me be— I must leave now in order to beat the dust storm," he said, flicking the hairs on his mustache and shoving the mechanism into the back of his wagon.

"Where do you come from?" I replied with a drunken question and slurred speech.

"The coast."

"And are more foreigners there now?"

"Many."

I paused, pasting my lips with saliva to fight against the dry winds. "You made that mechanism. You know the stars very well."

"I do."

"Then why come all the way out here? Why come to this forgotten town in the desert?"

He grinned, laughing a little bit. He tied the last ropes around his wagon and was almost ready to leave.

"Because..." he began, "... out here, the sky is clearer. You can see further. I'd say, you can almost see as far as the universe goes. Past our sun. Past our galaxy. Past all light." He looked up. I could see through the blur of my many drinks that he was marveled by the stars. He loved them and he wanted to be with them. He wanted to feel the weight of their mass and most undeniably, the length of their life— he yearned to understand, to touch, to feel intimately their powerful grasp over our behavior.

His steed kicked the ground with its hoofs as he mounted onto its back. I panicked and waited for a contorted gale to pass through the alley before shouting at him.

"You won't make it in time," I exclaimed.

He twisted his neck away from me and flapped his velvet cape in ignorance, ready to ride off. I was just a drunkard. I had no deliverance.

"I've been out there before," I claimed, now with a more confident tone, "I've seen what the dust can do. The storm will take you by its palm and shove you into the ground. And its palm is big. It is too big, if anything, for you to escape under the night. It does not need light to see— it can wind up in the dark."

He squinted and looked into the deep blackness. The wind pressed against his chest and whipped his cape over his shoulder.

"You can stay at my home for the night," I offered.

Glancing back and forth, he resigned from his steed and hobbled over to me where the light seeped through the wooden blinds of the saloon to barely illuminate our posture. In that dim tone, our fears were subdued and a hope was passed between us. I reached out my arm and he hooked it with his own. My brittle body scuffled through the dusty sand to that clay home, dragging him along. Upon opening the door, he saw Sigmund and tried to greet him in conversation, drawing his cape open.

But the pit between words was too deep to cross. He was sure that somewhere down there Sigmund had a torch and that he was just slow to light it, but no— Sigmund was silent— a living carcass, unalterable and forever.

With the sole light of the dangling overhead bulb, I said I was sorry.

“What do you mean?” the inventor asked.

“He is not sleeping.”

“Is he alright?”

“He has been, but now—” I stuttered.

Dreams of the past as real as the present incapacitated me. First it was the traveller who dragged the wheelbarrow, then it was my mother, and now it was me.

“Take him,” I abruptly ordered, “I’m too old to care for him anymore.”

“What?”

I gripped the inventor’s wrist and pulled him towards Sigmund. He resisted, but I fell onto him and pushed his body onto the resting boy. The inventor wanted to rise but it was too late— the innate warmth had plagued him. He felt the boy’s presence and the coursing blood under his skin. It could not be denied. The inventor was sealed in the same way I was, overridden with guilt for a crime he did not do himself.

Unsatisfied with my last words, I gave him advice that was built off watching Sigmund breeze through generations but still maintaining that heartbeat which made those who touched him too fearful to let him go.

I smiled. “Be stubborn. Don’t be afraid of forever. Just...” And then an overpowering feeling emerged and ran up my spine to splinter at the neck.

The night penetrated the clay walls and I was not encased by the monotonous dark but instead by the dazzling lights of a billion stars.

An ending, at last.

I took a final look at Sigmund and with an unrivaled sense of pride, I crumpled over in the doorway like a limp doll.

Sixty years of life with nothing to hold proud apart from a boy who wasn’t mine.

I had come, and I had gone.

But there he was, past old age— *past age entirely*. A creature greater than time:

Sigmund Weber-Käsemann.