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## While You Live

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WHILE YOU LIVE

A Thesis Presented by Christopher Salveson

Submitted to the graduate school of the University of Massachusetts Amherst  
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MFA for Poets & Writers  
Department of English

WHILE YOU LIVE

A Thesis Presented

by

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ABSTRACT

WHILE YOU LIVE

FEBRUARY 2022

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Directed by: Edie Meidav

This project started as inspections of violence in different forms, specifically childhood violence. I created scenes of lost youth and displacement and some kind of fragmentation, or eruption of violence, that seemed to also justify the fragmented nature of the scenes, and how they may have been jaggedly connected. Then I had a strong urge to novelize the characters I had written, I wanted to tell their full story.

The narrator Christian overtakes the novel, so it could be described as an i-novel really. He isn't always an active participant in the action of what's happening in the scenes, but he'll sit back as more of an observer. The narrator's most salient feature is his need to connect, as he presents a series of failures in accessing, or being accessible to, his friends.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
EPIGRAPH.....	v
CHAPTER	
1.....	1
2.....	20
3.....	44
4.....	54
5.....	70
6.....	137
7.....	144

When I am dead  
Cry for me a little  
Think of me sometimes  
But not too much.

Think of me now and again  
As I was in life  
At some moments it's pleasant to recall  
But not for long.

Leave me in peace  
As I shall leave you in peace  
And while you live  
Let your thoughts be with the living  
-Ishi, Yahi People of the Pacific Northwest

1.

I RAN INTO SOPH, after quite a few years, at the Safeway on Fremont. Soph said it was God who brought us together at the grocery store, at Safeway. Or just that something was guiding us back to each other. Something more than the thirst for the liquor on the aisle that we found each other on. I didn't disagree with him about fate or divinity and all that. But then my enthusiasm was more reserved, because we were both out of a job and pretty dim about our prospects.

I spotted Jeanine first, who I had almost forgotten about. She yelled my name through the whole aisle. I went to middle school with them. It seemed like a lifetime ago, my childhood, or a dream from the night before. They used to be a couple and maybe they still were. I went up to her and said, "Hey, Jeanine," and we caught up for a bit and she hugged me. Then I guess Soph heard us from across the store and came over to see what all the racket was about.

"Look who I found," said Jeanine. Soph nodded a few times as he walked toward us without really looking at me. We shook hands briefly.

"What are you guys doing?"

"I was gonna kick it at my friend's house," I said.

"So I wanted to grab some whiskey or something."

"We were just talking," said Jeanine.

Eventually Soph broke his stone face and smiled at me.

"When did you get back to town?"

I explained to them how after I graduated from the UC, I stuck around Santa Cruz for awhile going to divebars and couch surfing with some friends. And then how I moved back to town with my mom and started working at a pizza place. And also how I felt really suffocated there, at Little Caesar's, and had to quit. It wasn't just the job, though, I explained. I told them how I had fallen in love with someone I probably shouldn't have. This woman from Mexico, who had a son to take care of. I had always thought of her son as this adorable little boy, until he showed up at work one day as a 10-year-old with a sideways baseball cap and silver teeth in his mouth and some kind of dust in his eye, which might have been wisdom. He acted older than his age, and I couldn't remember if we were like that too when we were young.

"So it didn't work out with her then?"

"No. She had a whole life going on. She was taking care of her family, watching out for ICE. And I had no life at all."

"Don't worry, Christian. It'll work itself out," said Jeanine and she gave me a hug.

"And she ended up hooking up with one of our other coworkers."

"That's how it goes. I guess," said Soph and we all laughed.

"I'm glad you're back in town," said Jeanine.

"Yeah, bro. Hit us up next time you want to drink and what not."

Before we called him Soph we called him by a different kind of name. It was a more innocent name that he wore out like a true child of the city, like he really had the power to summon fire from his hands. It was a name that could burn. Burn like we were



young and the orange stove called us to touch it just for a second to see if we could, and jerk back in time and not really feel a thing, or like the car lighter when it's smoke curled up at you. Burn anyone who said the name aloud and fixed their tongue around its syllables. It was his birth name, that his parents gave him, that we eventually forgot, but his hands were always heavier than words. In any amount of light—sunlight or electric—his hands would glow with the pinks and oranges and blood-reds of melting candle wax and church windows. At times, when we were younger, he would catch me staring at his hands for too long and he would reach up quickly, and snap his dusty fingers in my face. "What are you looking at?" His fingers would peel awfully. Dead skin dizzied off them in snowy flakes like they were translucent orange slices.

The older kids used to tease him about his hands and this and that, called him *crack baby* or whatever, but he was cool, he didn't care so much to be bothered by people's thoughts about him. He figured certain things out about people I think. How you couldn't underestimate anyone. That's what made him cool. His grades were good. And girls loved him as they say. He was outgoing and could be extremely loud. We mostly thought his laugh sounded like a hyena. He had quite the stubborn streak. We could all be hard headed, but he was the most hard headed of us all. Everyone was sure he was alright, that he was gonna make it.

I moved back home, back to Corridor to live with my mom, to have my own room, to get a job and save up. I didn't want it to be for too long, just long enough for me to feel right. I hadn't been feeling that good and I mostly holed up in my room.

Occasionally I would gather the courage to venture forth into the greater map of the city. I had a handful of friends I stayed in touch with from before college. One of them was Chip whom I met at La Mesa High, which is the charter high school we went to. We drank sometimes and goofed around. We had met in theater class and he brought his guitar every day. I read to him some poems I wrote and he encouraged me to perform them live. I ended up transferring to another high school, or rather the administration recommended that I attend another high school because I was flunking out of theirs. My mom got these calls about my absences and failing classes. It was the strangest thing. I sort of had this realization that I could just walk off of campus and no one would stop me. So I did.

When I discovered that I could just leave school I took it a little overboard. I could not be contained. I didn't know there was this possibility, although maybe I should have.

There was one time in middle school at Westlake when hundreds of kids actually wore white shirts and walked out of school in protest. I knew there was a certain time, after lunch—because why the hell would we miss lunch, that the walkout would happen. Someone told me in passing. I might have even got a text about it. Everyone at the school had known about it for days if not weeks. The marchers were going to merge with another middle school's group of protesters a few blocks away. Activists from the local high school helped to organize us. I wasn't sure who at our school was receiving that information. I thought, maybe no one, it was a protest of osmosis. But when the time came I noticed a particular girl taking charge, giving orders, directing students. She was dark with a strong accent, but it had not occurred to me that she may have been

Mexican. Now, in her white shirt like mine, touching hands with everybody, knowing and acknowledging everyone, speaking Spanish to some and English to others, I saw it. It was Jeanine. I loved her simply but it was still too much for my small heart. I wore my white shirt proudly that day. Two of them in case one got dirty. Why white shirts? Because it was the most common Tee-shirt and so the most amount of people would get to wear it without having to go into a store and buy a new shirt.

I was hanging onto the chainlink fence that separated the classrooms from the blacktop, my fingers hooked through the wire. I watched wave after wave of kids in their white-tees march off of campus, through the playground, into the street toward their destination. They even got a hall-monitor and one of the lunch ladies to join them, the two of them the friendliest and most relatable of the adults who worked at Westlake Middle. The Latinx kids formed in groups, linked their arms and headed off, and they were joined by their Black and Indigenous and Asian and Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander and Caucasian comrades. I didn't know there were so many of us and that we all felt this way. I was awed by the communal spirit we were sharing but it also scared me. I felt funny about the whole thing and that made me feel even weirder, to have a gut level reaction to a certain event and to not be able to understand it—the sinking feeling of being caught in an inch of water.

“This isn't real,” I heard myself say.

“It's as real as we make it,” someone replied behind me and I didn't have anything to say to that.

It seemed that everyone I knew had brought a clean white shirt. A few had Mexican flags draped around their shoulders. Another had an Irish flag. Someone had an

American flag but they burnt that on the basketball court. The boy who brought it didn't exactly give the flag up willingly. He had wanted to join the protest and display something he had brought from home as well. He wanted to share what his family thought was important, as backwards as they may have been, and to contribute the significance of his own upbringing—the only world he knew, to the beyond-our-years conversation we were all having with forces beyond our scope, with power so powerful it was in our water and the clothes on our backs. I wonder how we were supposed to intelligently have that conversation at only 12. Our teachers didn't talk about it, what was happening, what was going on. My friends and I didn't really have the language, although we did talk about the walk out and related issues. The news didn't talk about it either even as they were the main part of the conversation. When you report on an event but don't talk about it something probably happens. A thing darker and more subtle than we could imagine. To report and not talk is to summarize and generalize. In order to not be biased the reporter becomes mute and unaware, the anchors all glassy eyed and whitened teeth. They conveniently forget that the object of inquiry is not the event itself but the real people who are affected by it. Is it possible to report something and talk about it at the same time? It just seems like pretending. Like the news is pretending. The news told us one thing in a color coordinated way so we would know they were on our side, and we get the same event from different angles, but what they really wanted us to understand is that we're alone without them, each of us in our locked rooms without a key.

So that's why we protested and kids chose to walk out. At the certain time we streamed out of our classrooms in orderly fashions. We didn't have to talk too much, get

too heavy, but we were all excited. I hung back at the chainlink fence while my friends passed me by. I wanted to join them but I was hanging onto the fence and just caught up in the moment, the one inch of water.

I SAW SOPH AGAIN a few days later after my first and only therapy appointment.

George sat with legs crossed and his muscular arms folded over his chest. He made the office feel cramped, but it wasn't really, it was just bisected by tables and chairs and lots of manila folders. It was part of the Community Health Center. He looked into my eyes and I knew it had started. The session, or whatever it might be. The blinds were down but tilted slightly up and let in ample light. Enough to see each other completely. I sat in a comfortable chair.

"...what do you think brought you in here today?" he asked.

"What kind of problems are you having?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "Just that I haven't been getting along with people."

He looked at me in a way that distinguished him as one of the great sympathizers of our age, a telephonic shaman for our disordered lives. It was a look that wasn't feeling sorry for me and was also very understanding. Although he may have been low on the totem pole of mental health workers—I trusted him right off.

"Have you noticed this recently, or has it been going on awhile?"

“Awhile, I think. Since I was a kid, I think. But not always.”

“Not always. So what are things like when you do get along with people?”

“I guess I try to make them laugh. Or if it’s someone I’ve known for a long time.

And it’s like when I was younger—before I went to college.”

“I see.”

I confused him. I didn’t try to, but I thought that it might happen considering how little I talked about my past.

“And when you don’t get along with people, what typically happens?”

“They avoid me or just act like I’m some non-serious, wild, crazy person. And then I get mad. And I just don’t know what to say to them. I try to go on with my life. But it feels like I don’t get along with anybody, and that we can’t see eye to eye, no matter what I try to say to them or how I try to be with them.”

And I regretted saying ‘crazy’ in a therapy session. It made me think of how difficult his job could be. To have to parse through a person’s garbled reflections on their own life, their memories, and weird idiosyncrasies. To get paid to help someone.

“Is there anyone in particular you don’t get along with, or are we talking more generally?”

“More in general. Like with friends, ex-girlfriends, my parents, coworkers. Stuff like that.”

I didn’t know what I was saying. I didn’t think about it or rehearse it before hand. I couldn’t find the words to say to this guy, to explain what was wrong with me. Of course

I worried there was nothing wrong with me at all, and it was all in my head. Just a mental twitch or splinter that needed to be dug out.

“We get into these disagreements and I just can’t get past them. Or, these little arguments that I won’t forget for a long time. And to them I don’t even know if they felt the same. If something was wrong. If it felt bad to them. I just wish I could do something to let them know that I really do care. But I can’t get over all this stuff that I remember that happened but you just can’t talk about it, because it makes things too difficult and just takes the air out of the room.”

I said all this looking down and away from the guy. I felt myself shake a little. I couldn’t even think about what I was saying. My words sounded like gibberish to me, but they seemed to convey something at least to him. Something for him to go on I hoped.

“Have you ever thought about how we hold our past traumas in different parts of our body,” said George.

I nodded.

“It was something I learned back in the day when I was studying for my degree. Not that long ago actually. I was a late bloomer when it came to school. For example when I used to go to my chiropractor she would tell me, ‘George, you’re holding so much anger in your shoulders and arms.’ That’s why I was so tense all the time. Very stiff in the upper body region. I couldn’t move. You know it’s all nerves up there, up around your spine. My anger was so debilitating, it had got to a point where I could barely pick up a hammer. That’s how you know your trauma is being kept in the body, and it doesn’t want to come out. You would think that your body would automatically release any lingering negative emotions that you have, you know, carried with you. But

that's not necessarily the case. For many healthy people there's a period of suffering and wallowing that they may go through at different times in their life, but there is only so much negativity that a healthy brain can take before it begins to shut down, or go in hyperdrive, or any number of things the brain will do to protect itself. One of those things is that the brain can pass along a traumatic event into the body, so it no longer takes up the space in your brain that you need for brushing your teeth and tying your shoe laces and waking up early. So what happens is that problems which we feel mentally end up getting expressed in the body. And we think, 'Oh, I must have busted my knee on something,' or 'I slept wrong and now I have an aching back.' And we don't realize that our physical injuries can be traced back to what's going on on the inside. I can't say if this does or doesn't apply to you at this point, we would need another session at least, but it's part of a strategy to keep the mind and the body limber, and there's a lot to like about these practices if you decide to give them a chance."

"Yeah."

"It sounds familiar," I said. "I could have heard about it somewhere, but I don't remember."

"That's okay. And I wouldn't tell you that this is what you should live your life by. It's not a magic cure for sadness or not getting along with people or anything like that. It takes time and patience like anything else, but some have been known to get a lot out of it."

"No, I can see how that would be helpful to think about, at least for me."

"So, I told you about my shoulders. Are there any injuries you've had recently? If you don't mind sharing."



“It’s funny this should come up. When you were talking about that stuff I was thinking about my wrist.”

“Your wrist? Huh. Tell me about it.”

“It’s not a sprain. It just started hurting a lot and got stiff and I couldn’t really grip onto things. It’s better now, but it comes and goes. And I started getting this fat bump on the top. It’s kind of gnarly.”

I bent my wrist out towards him as he leaned in and squinted to see it more closely.

“Oh, yeah. That’s pretty nasty,” he said. “Have you gone to see someone for it? You should get that looked at.”

“Not yet, but I will.”

The wrist I didn’t mind so much. It gave me something to think about at least. The bump as a possible outgrowth of my need to control things. And how I’ve been trying and failing to get ahold of stability, a grip on reality. While certain parts of my life feel so fleeting I can barely remember them, and then other memories take on the permanence of architecture and laws. And I was losing something, through my fingers.

The meeting ended not that long after it began, which made it seem preliminary, and George told me to set another meeting whenever I wanted. I said okay and thanked him and we shook hands.

I said, “Thank you,” to the secretary in front.

She asked, “Do you want to make another appointment now? Or you can call us and make an appointment later.”

I stepped onto the sloped Obama way, priorly known as Broadway, bathed in afternoon glare. Traffic was steady. It's one of the main streets in town, cars dashed up and down it until late at night. It connects together most of the residential areas in Corridor, as it climbs the hill of the city from downtown, just a few feet above sea level, and the road goes a couple miles upward until it reaches Gen. John Lorn Highway, cutting into the wilderness.

The flash of cars and business windows bleached the block in impenetrable light. I had to shade my eyes. Across the street was one of the bakeries with a flock of balloons tied to the open door. The bakery had been sold and remodeled and rebranded a few times at least, but the food didn't change. Now they called it Paradise Bakery. The place seemed to have its own existence, its own reasons. I remember it happily even though I wasn't really happy there. They had all the *pan dulce* you could want. Dozens of different kinds packed along the wall in their glassed encasements, and more were left to cool in their silver trays on the broad metal racks that got wheeled into the middle of the floor, so customers had to circle around the selection of racks as they made their way to the checkout line. A partial list of the sweetbreads they had there: there was the swirly, marbled strawberry thing, with the coconut shavings, because the vortex in the middle of the pastry was akin to hypnosis. And of course the raised mounds of soft fluffy dough with patches of dark brown, orange, tan, and yellow—the confectionary on top cut in symmetrical patterns, and the white ones which looked like big cartoon seashells. The dense, powdered ball that's cut in half and smushed back together with red jelly. Round pink cookies the size of softballs. Other hard breads folded over a spicy pumpkin paste and were good for dipping in coffee. Doughnuts. At the counter you could get

tortas, different kinds of meats, or the crispy fried wheels packed in a long polyurethane tube of a bag and which soak up hot sauce, like one of those paper covers for a straw that's been bunched up on a table and water gets on it. But when you pour the hot sauce on the wheels they can disintegrate into a corny slop if you don't eat them fast. And the *Hamaica* or *horchata*, to slake your thirst.

I worked there a few months, and went without sleep to get to my classes. The shifts took some getting used to, 9 pm to 4 am. But I liked how they changed the shape of my days. I liked how we smoked blunts during our break, and some of the other guys would do coke. It did make me kind of sad. Sometimes I slept in a park and dreamed about bread. I thought the pastry chefs were magicians with their hands whenever I watched them. I usually cleaned the mixing bowls, and made the doughnuts, and the long sourdough breads. My first day I cut my finger on a sharp bread pan and had to bandage it, and the whole shift I worried about getting blood in the dough. After that the job went smooth.

I didn't work business hours because I can't speak Spanish, and would not have been useful to a lot of the customers.

The bakery was busy, though, and I didn't go in. I was so happy I could have kissed the next person I saw on the sidewalk. The session had not been what I expected it to be.

Cars turned tight U-turns into the parking lot of the corner store. The sign above the entrance said Corridor Liquor in big orange letters against a white background, and took up the width of the storefront.

The hill was panoramic. You could always look down at the beach and the shoulder of the bay and the highway along the shoreline. The bay surrounded by eggshell beaches. Redwoods. Oak trees. The extended ribcage of the sky. The world shrunk in the liquid reflection. Gopher holes. Inches of grass. The twin half-suns meeting each other at the horizon. Leaves dripping moisture. Ants smeared on the pavement. I was aware of the world's aliveness. But it was dead too. Or there was something dead in it. In the light. Like there was a pupil centered in that wave of color. Green. Yellow. Red. Walk. Slowdown. 5, 4, 3, 2...  
Don't walk.

I practically bounced back to the car, squinted through my glasses, the sun a red pinhole in the flat blue whorl of the sky. The earth and ocean arced away, I left behind the Community Health Center, and George. I was lifted and pulled along the sidewalk by a gravity well that was only my gratitude. This dream I was having of being a person was apparently real, this life which was carved out for me. The session had worked, I thought. George was a miracle worker. I was surely grateful. Some of his spiel was a little forced maybe, but I didn't mind that because he had a good sense of humor. When I scheduled the appointment I was hesitant, ready to judge the whole thing. I practically dragged myself the two blocks it took to get from the Honda to the Community Health Center. And I was so unfair to the idea of therapy that I could not believe how happy I felt now. It was stupid. I was impressed by what George had said. I thought there was something to it, as a method of self examination. And it was nice to have someone listen to me within a zone of comfort with no ulterior motives lurking. It wasn't necessarily the things we had talked about that mattered, but it was the way he spoke to me that felt

important. One of the last things he said was, “The older you get, the more you start to like dogs over people.” And I thought that was true, too.

In my car I searched every surface and nook where a spider might be hiding and getting ready to strike, since I had left my car’s windows open earlier, and one time a spider had emerged from out of nowhere and scared the shit out of me. When I felt sure I was safe I turned the key in the ignition and watched the dashboard hum lightly in case another one decided to rise up from the car’s metal innards. The air conditioner blew gustily. I put down the e brake and was about to drive away when another spider actually did pop out of a vent right by the windshield. It looked at me for a second and ran towards the edge of the dashboard like it wanted to swan dive off of it. Like it wanted to get me. I grabbed at the door handle convulsively and fell out of the car into the road. A construction truck whooshed around me. I crawled to the back of the Honda, got up and leaned against the trunk. I looked to see if anymore cars were coming and I could see none. I turned back to my car in the hope of seeing the spider somewhere in there, paralyzed with fear, so that I could kill it, but it was me who was frozen. I wasn’t sure what to do. I let another car pass and pulled the door shut slightly and leaned against the metal frame. I opened it again and opened the passenger door, too. Maybe, I hoped, the spider would just wander out. I paced in half arcs around the car for a bit. I wasn’t enthused about getting back in. I thought of leaving it there and walking home. I leaned in quick as I could, snatched my keys out, and then slammed the door. I was on a corner by Mel’s Market, only a few streets from where I lived. And a silver Honda

slowed down next to me and the window rolled down and I saw him again. Soph, my old friend Soph. His hand on the wheel.

“Christian, is that you?”

“Soph! Man.”

“That really is you.”

“Holy shit, it’s good that you drove by.”

“Is that your whip?”

“Yeah, pull over real fast. I need your help.”

He said, “Okay.”

I felt the distance there between us. All that I had heard. Those stories about him and all the shit that he got into. He had been at the scene of a double murder, and he had to testify in court with lawyers and a jury and a judge. He cleared his name and dealt with all the consequences that came with that.

“I haven’t seen you in how many years? Now I see you twice.”

He parked in front of me and flung his door shut.

“I don’t know. It’s been like five years maybe. But I just got back to town.”

“You’ve been back for months, and now all of a sudden you just pop out of nowhere.”

“Well, you’re not gonna believe this.”

“Believe what? Why the fuck are you parked on the side of the road?”

“There’s a spider in my car.”

“Christian! Are you serious? Hahah.”

“So what are you doing?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I was just about to walk home.”

“You were about to walk — Hah! Hahaha. And just leave your car here?”

“Yeah but then you showed up. Can you help me get it out?”

“I guess. Anything for an old friend. You’re really scared of a goddamn spider?”

“I might be. We need to find it first. It looked poisonous. But it’s probably not.”

“All spiders are poisonous.”

“Exactly.”

We searched the interior of the Honda for the spider, carefully and thoroughly. I secretly wished it would be Soph and not me to find the spider and again be surprised by it. We checked the front seats, the seatbelts, steering wheel, the air vents, then we moved to the backseats. We checked the floor of the car, trash and crumb riddled, and underneath the seats. Soph, who was bent over leaning in through the driver’s side door, lifted up a loose piece of paper (no doubt an unfinished, forgotten h.w. assignment from a year earlier) and hanging from it a shiny strand elongating downward and attached to the end its black widow. Soph let out an atrophied scream and drew back and dropped the piece of paper back into the car, where the widow detached from its strand and scuttled back under the driver’s seat.

“You let it go,” I said.

“I got scared,” said Soph, and we laughed.

“I’m going to try to get it out,” he said.

“Alright. But be careful.” Soph grabbed a CD case from the backseat and proceeded to prod the corner of the CD case into the cavern under the driver’s side seat in a chaotic fashion, as if he wanted to stab the creature through its heart.

“It’s not going to come out,” said Soph.

“What do you want to do?”

I looked around the car and saw the piles of trash that had been gathering since the last time I cleaned it. There were bags from McDonald’s and Wendy’s and Subway. Old soda and coffee cups. Stacks of untidy papers were pressed and flattened into the carpeting. There were cigarette butts and bits of paper and plastic. I had an idea. I took some of the less foul trash and stuffed it up underneath the seat where the spider was. Stuffed it all around there so it wouldn’t escape.

“Let’s just trap it for now so I can go home,” I said. Soph grabbed more trash from inside the car and helped me build its cage of pulpy fibers and wax cups.

“He’ll get out eventually, but it’s pretty solid,” said Soph about our work. That was it. I felt safe and I could breathe again.

“You want to come over and hang out for a little bit?” I asked him.

“Yeah bro.”

(he had parked on the side of the road with his friends for the purposes of a gun sale. And two of the heads he was with decided to shoot down the other two guys who had pulled up in front of them and were selling them the gun. It was a double homicide case. They scrambled back into Soph’s Lexus, where one of them told him, “Just drive or I’ll leave you here too.”



So he drove fast hoping to stay within sight and earshot of the accompanying cars on the road. When he saw another car's lights he sped up to it until he could make eye contact with the driver, whether or not they returned it, feeling like those could be his last seconds on earth. He just wanted to see their eyes. And he was aware that everyone in his car was focused on him, and his hands. He didn't want to get caught on a lonely road like the two they had just left lying in the dust.

He made it back to Corridor and deposited his companions at their hotel room. Then Soph drove to a Wendy's parking lot and began the process of getting rid of his Lexus as fast as possible. And a friend of ours advised him to contact some people in Greenfield who would be able to do something with the getaway vehicle. The next day he dropped the Lexus off in a garage in Greenfield that was equipped to repair cars even though it was just a regular house. There were statues of lions on pillars in front of the house and a pretty, broken fountain too.)

## 2.

I QUIT LITTLE CAESAR'S with the understanding that I had another job waiting for me where I would pick grapes in the mountains. This guy Robert I knew from my couch-surfing days had been telling me and telling me he had this job I would love. He would call every once in awhile and ask if I wanted to work. Eventually I told him I did want to quit the pizza place and go try out the vineyards. And that's when he said to get ready to wake up early on a certain day the very next week so I could meet him in Los Gatos at 6 AM and I would be able to work. It was great until I got a call from Robert the day before I was supposed to start and he said they didn't need me to work the next day because it was going to be a "slow day," he said. I was devastated. I didn't understand how such a mistake could be made, or why he let me know so last minute. Thankfully he was to call me back and give me a definitive schedule.

After work one day I sat dazed in my computer chair in front of the screen. I got a call from an unknown number and I was surprised it was Soph calling. He said to meet him at the Shop. He sounded light and anxious which encouraged me to say Yes and go meet him.

The Sea Notes Apparel shop was owned by our friend Thor who had purchased the space only a year after we graduated from high school. It was kind of a boutique of fancy clothes and sneakers, high end street wear, and skateboards.

I had no idea how Thor could afford his own beautiful business with paintings on the walls, and a light refracting fishtank. Thor's parents were not rich and were not poor either. But the aura in which he moved could maybe be best described as "Hustle and

Shine". I didn't keep up with him, or couldn't. But as far as I could tell from those few times when we would actually hang out and also from lurking on the internet and checking up on him via updates, he was occupied by a wide strata of jobs, music projects, girlfriends, a nice car, and an apartment. He was in the middle of things, or was able to move through time in a forward arcing motion, while the rest of us just got stuck in it. The aura seemed to saturate the environs of the store, its customers, and employees. Whenever I went in there there were less customers than there were people hanging out in the back storage area. People liked just being there. Just to be. Chill. Make music. I had only been to the store a handful of times to either buy a new shirt, or hangout with Thor and listen to some of his beats. This guy Shaun rapped on some of them and those ones I liked the best.

The last time I was in the store it was actually a disaster, though. And I thought at the time it would be the very last time I'd ever go back there. But of course I decided that if Soph wanted to meet at the shop then I wouldn't throw a wrench in our new friendship before it even had a chance to get re-started.

I sat very still at my desk absorbed in the music I had recorded earlier and was in the process of mixing, not that I really knew how to do much of anything when it came to music recording, just fucking around having fun, when my phone buzzed and it was Soph and I answered. Dust emanated from me and swirled around in the window light. I had not taken a shower.

I clapped the laptop shut and went to look in the mirror. I went in the bathroom and brushed my teeth and looked at myself in the mirror and my hair was too long and awful

but I thought it was okay. My beard was just like dirty vines growing. And also I was covered in layers of dirt. I was broiled with it, caked. It was in my nails, in my scalp, in my buttcrack. It was in my eyelids and in the creases that my neck would make when I looked left or right. And the silty particles were even attached to the tiny hairs on my stomach. It was in the waistband of my boxers. It was everywhere. It felt like the crusty silt had melted onto or fused onto my skin. It felt like I had rubbed down with a dirt-based moisturizer, and it was coming back out of my pores. I couldn't help wiping my hands on my pants and my arms and thus even my hands themselves lacked their usual skin like feeling. They were clammy with dirt, and possibly chemicals. The doomed soil infected season after season and year after year and the fields and the orchards and the vineyards were sweltered in the pesticide carpet bombing. Some of it was organic pesticides—and “food based”, which means I guess that it's based on food but it is not exactly the real deal. And the wind picks up the pesticide molecules and spreads them all around mixing them up. The wind shortly scatters the planning of the plots and the juicereries and the jackhammered terraces and the farmers' best intentions in this wild land. It was so simultaneously overgrown and undergrown. Just exhausted. The land.

I finished the last of the coffee and got my things and left.

I drove down my street onto Obama Way and passed by a couple of black churches. Many devotees were congregated in a parking lot at one of the churches and were walking slowly and talking and holding hands and embracing each other. The service had either just ended or was about to start. And the churchgoers wore gray or

black suits, green or blue vests, skirts and dresses, different kinds of hats. Young men were huddled around an older man who walked with a cane as if guiding him across the parking lot to one of the cars. Women walked in pairs while toting purses, clutches, satchels, and even a fan or two. It was not Sunday.

I drove past the Paradise in Paris Bakery and a Mexican restaurant that turns into a dance club at night, and then the Community Health Offices, where I imagined George was sitting at his computer chair in deep healthful conversation with a patient, or lifting weights, or possibly meditating. Then past the post office and the project apartments. A weedy scrubby dirt lot stretched out in front of the apartments. It was almost like a construction site but nothing ever happened there. Just a few chunks of concrete scattered around with metal pipes sticking out. Then the karate studio and a thrift store. Went past the light store and the used electronics store and another thrift store and a store for cowboy boots and hats and shirts and spurs and ropes, and then the Baskin Robbins and the Buffalo Wild Wings that were on the corner as Obama Way ran into Reservation Rd. I waited for the light to turn green, then I turned right onto Reservation Rd. and followed it through the downtown business area of town, and I drove along the curve of the circular bay on the left and the woods and hills that pop up on the right which eventually they give way to the government owned forests of Fort Corridor and beyond that there are the moist farmlands, 'the salad bowl', where they grow strawberries, cauliflower, apples, grapes, oranges, radishes, avocados, marijuana, plums, carrots, pears, tomatoes, dragonfruit, kiwis, sweet potatoes, and other produce I can't think of, which are maintained, dug out, ditched, seeded, watered, trimmed, pruned, chemically bombed, with food-based organic and nonorganic, picked,

harvested, packaged, loaded on trucks, and delivered all across the country and sometimes the globe, by masses and flows of immigrants and refugees and migrant workers, usually from Mexico or Central/South America, many who are in the process of becoming fluent in English, and establishing residency, and applying for citizenship, and studying the laws and history of the U.S.A., or trying to stay close to god, or drinking and fucking up the way that humans do, or raising kids, or navigating love lives, or destroying themselves inertially, or rounding out a sports team somewhere, all of it together at once.

I pulled into the parking lot behind the Sea Notes Apparel shop and I had a feeling of how it would go. Thor had on jeans that weren't skinny, and weren't baggy either—but looked kind of cinched—in a way. He had braided his hair sometime recently and it looked good. He could pull it off.

“You been rolling around in mud?” he said.

“No, just working.”

I went into the back storage room with Thor. We walked into a shallow room and a horrible grinding sound. The room had a sink, counter, cabinets, and fridge on one side. It was a distinct office vibe. The room was mostly full of boxes. On the other side someone wearing protective eyewear and an electric saw in their hand. They were going to town on an object in their hand I couldn't see and they didn't look up to watch us pass by. We walked through another door to a bigger room. There were young people back there somewhat busy, hanging out, doing their own things. It smelled good in there and was spread out. There was a young man and woman on a couch taking

care of a baby. They waved at me. I recognized her from school and him from some tracks that were released online under the sponsorship of the Sea Notes shop. They had a cute baby and were very loving towards it. He was a good rapper. I was discombobulated. Reality felt sticky. On the walls were thick oily paintings of Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant and also landscapes of the ocean, jagged rocks, spray, the coastline. I thought that they might as well get a painting of Allen Iverson in here. He was Thor's favorite player. We used to watch the NBA and And-1 and make bets on the games. And we would play at the courts at Fort Corridor or at school, or on any rollaway in front of someone's house. But people get tired of stuff like that. They begin to resent what they used to love.

Soph was on one of the couches and there were a few others spread out and so we got ready to smoke two blunts back to back, and I wasn't sure if I was ready, and so I decided not to inhale too much. Soph turned on the fan which sat on the low table between us. A towel was put down so I didn't get the cushions dirty. The young couple on a couch on the opposite side of the room looked down at the baby they were holding. I recognized them both but I couldn't remember their names. One of them was "Ashley." I said her name. "Yeah, Ashley's got a baby." I had gone to school with them too, a long time ago, in middle school. They cooed at the baby and it continued to cry softly. And then a powerful grinding sound emitted from the kitchenette area to our left. That was Shaun at the counter, who I just realized was another childhood friend of mine and I hadn't recognized him before. Soph and I glared in his direction.

“He’s making bones,” said Soph. Drilling down the middle of these little figures stacked in a pile. They were literally little bones, or maybe pieces of antlers. They were smoke devices to hold your blunts with, like an old-timey cigarette filter for those disgusting Virginia Slims. I got so high I could barely breathe. I started to pass around the bone that we were using without hitting it. The bones really worked. They were smooth and breezy to smoke out of, no muss no fuss. They were dark and rigid like the outer part of a glazed wood coffee table.

Loud Bay Area style music played intermittently through studio speakers. I could faintly hear the baby cry and the mother trying to keep it calm through the music and drilling and the smoke and the fan. A guy was making the beat with an electronic keyboard positioned beside some speakers. Another guy rotated slightly back and forth on a cheap purple fabric computer chair, a pen just inside his mouth and then he jotted things down furiously in his notebook. The beat seemed good to me. It seemed clubby and was full of beautiful arpeggios. The electronic keyboard was sharp as lasers, the bass dropped like bombs, sounding like a future that had not arrived, like puffy jackets, bowl cuts, a rocketship gloaming towards its fiery doom.

I talked about usual stuff with Soph and Thor, what we’d been up to, stuff like that. I told them I found a job picking grapes at these vineyards in the mountains. I wasn’t sure if I’d get the job after the boss flaked on me. Stuff I knew we’d talk about. Soph had worked at a Tesla factory for almost a year before he quit. He had been living with Jeanine out of town somewhere, but he wasn’t anymore. Thor got stiff and tired when she was brought up in conversation.



The guy with the notebook wrote more into its pages and rapped what he wrote back to himself. I couldn't understand every word that he rapped but I knew that he was loud enough and his voice didn't break where it might have ruined the whole thing. I bobbed my head to the cadence of his words thinking his voice would translate to a good live performance.

"Hey, this is hard," said Thor.

"Wait til I'm don't with it," said the guy in front of the electronic keyboard.

"Those dudes are trash," said Soph, privately between just us.

"The beat's good," I said.

Soph clasped his hands around his mouth and bowed away like he was trying to hold something in.

Some of the things I knew about my friends felt merely half remembered, maybe from Facebook or Twitter. Or the memory was somewhere between. Like Thor going to prom, or Soph getting accused of murder and losing his football scholarship. Stuff I simultaneously knew and didn't know.

The one guy was done with the beat and the other with the lyrics and they yelled over to tell us that they were ready to record. "Alright, we'll get out of your hair," said Thor. The guy who had the notebook slipped into the makeshift studio booth in the corner, which was made of black velvet curtains that were draped over clothing racks. Shaun quit it with the drilling and slunk his way past us and into the store.

We went into the office that was there in the back and closed the door behind us. I realized for the first time in a long time how close I had been with these two, who were always more mature than I was. We were friends at a crucial time for me I think. I

couldn't tell if I was alone in feeling this or if they realized it too. I was freaked out just being in the store after what had happened the last time I was there. When I was basically present while the store got robbed and was next to useless at preventing it from happening. But that was before I knew that Soph was around. I wasn't sure where I thought he was or if I thought about him enough to wonder where he'd been, but I had the feeling he had been away for awhile.

The robbery at the shop happened a month or two before I first ran into him, I don't remember exactly. It had turned into one of those things I just gauze around in my mind.

"Where have you been at?"

"At home."

"You're the same as you've always been."

"Maybe I am."

"What are you looking at?"

"Is it ok if I smoke this in here? It has tobacco."

"Christian you can do whatever you want. You don't have to ask. If you just do whatever it is and someone doesn't like it they'll tell you."

"Is there any water I can get?"

Thor went to the counter with the sink and came back with a clear plastic cup of water absolutely filled to the brim. I sat and looked at the cup in my hand as if it contained life itself, a floating specimen doing pirouettes for me and also the world to see. He hadn't spilled a single drop. I gulped the water down. It was cold. I finished it in about 10 seconds and then held the plastic cup in my lap and squeezed it with my hands. I lit the

spliff, which I liked because they didn't get me as high as a blunt. Although, they're much more dangerous from a health and wellness perspective.

Thor and Soph watched the monitor, attached to the wall, hanging above our heads. The screen was split into a grid of six boxes, each digital feed representing the cut-up floor plan of the store, not including the office that we were in. The boxes on the screen showed the interior of the store, the sales floor, where a few customers drifted around, and our other friend Warren was sitting behind the counter at the register in a leather computer chair. Warren was likewise really absorbed by the laptop in front of him and was not paying any quality type of attention to the customers. I couldn't blame him, just letting them do their own thing. Shaun sat in the other corner of the sales floor on the leather couch just reading a magazine. They were twin guardians. But there was something so mesmerizing about the little scenes arranged on the monitor like that which also carried with it the obvious overtones of Security and Enforcement and Rules. The lower boxes showed the back storage area, the outer walls to this office, and the backdoor that lead to a shared alleyway and a couple of blue dumpsters. Soph leaned back in his computer chair and Thor angled his face upward and they stayed like that and examined the live feeds that were on the monitor hanging on the wall with amused satisfaction. I could feel the sheer joy of it, to be a voyeur, on this side of the camera.

"Oh shit, there goes Robin Mohessie," said Thor, as a stocky man walked into view of the cameras.

"Who the hell is Robin Mohessie?" said Soph.

"He's the fool who used to come by talking about his Xterra."

"Thor how am I supposed to know what any of that shit means?"

“He was just hella into street cars but he didn’t have one. I didn’t know that. It was kind of funny. I had met him online and we—“

“You met him online?”

“Yes. And he was straight up lying saying he had all these cars with modifications and paint jobs and stickers.”

“And you believed him?”

“Well yeah I didn’t think he was gonna go into all that detail just to lie to some kid on the internet who’s got a beat up Honda.”

“You sent him pictures of the whip?”

“Yup. Of the old one. And he sent me pictures back of like two different cars that he said he had.”

“Oh no.”

“So we just chat or whatever, send each other pictures of dope cars and what not.”

“Uh-huh,” said Soph, who just seemed to be in a perpetual state of disbelief.

“And then he wants to meet up with us at a car show.”

“Who?” said Soph, with even more shock in his voice.

“Uh, I think it was me and Shaun. And we go meet him in this parking lot at a school in San Jose. We’re just drinking and chillin, you know. Before the show starts. And he spots us from hella far away and comes over. We chop it up. Whoop whoop. And I’m like, ‘let us see the car that you brought.’ And he’s like ‘nah the shows about to start’ and all this shit. Trying to avoid the situation I just caught him in lying about these cars!”

“You shouldn’t have believed him.”

“I know it now. So we eventually saw him by his Xterra with his wife and baby, and he acts like nothing happened, like he didn’t try to get me to believe he has a Charger and rims and stickers and all that. So he just says, ‘Oh my Xterra has 4-wheel drive, and it has bike racks on top and sometimes we go fishing’, and he shows me the features it has for no reason at all.”

Thor showed us his newer songs, played them on his laptop connected to more speakers in the office. He switched the music off when he heard the guy outside rapping in the curtained-off booth. He switched it on again when the rapping stopped. I told him how much I liked the songs and made some comparisons I thought he might find intuitive.

“There’s not anything really like it,” I said. “It’s hard and sweet at the same time. It’s like the bay area’s response to DJ Mustard and party anthems.”

They thought that was funny.

“It’s pretty good, Thor,” said Soph.

He had been mostly quiet the whole time. Soph had. He seemed preoccupied, like he was watching me closely. I got the feeling that he heard every word that I said. Whenever I reached out for something or made some small comment or gesture he smiled and giggled with his hand over his mouth and bounced in the chair. It seemed like he couldn’t help it maybe. He looked at me sincerely with his wet eyeballs. He was really there with me, or he was waiting for me in some other place, but the place was close, close enough for me to feel. They started to pass around another blunt but I had to say No, thanks.

“I’m good. Thank you though,” I said.

Soph cried out in laughter like what I said had been a punchline to some joke. It was like everything I did or said was funny to him. But it was weird because I didn’t feel much of anything about it, specifically I didn’t feel anything negative about it. The both of them knew that I was sensitive since forever ago, but it wasn’t even like that. It was like we were truly young. Thor started to laugh.

“What the hells so funny?” he said.

“Nothing. It’s just Christian,” said Soph.

They both laughed and I didn’t mind. I was impervious, had walked into a suit of armor, couldn’t feel a thing. Even with the previous unpleasantness I could stand it. Maybe *this* was belonging. I tried to laugh with them but it didn’t sound right. I could tell where the conversation would go and when it started to happen it seemed unreal. Because we always talked about the same stuff but this time seemed different. I didn’t know why I would feel that way, but the vibe in the store was more hopeful than I thought it could possibly be.

“You remember Los Gatos?” said Thor.

“You remember you almost got shot?”

“How could I ever forget?” I said.

The few times we saw each other after it had happened we couldn’t not talk about it. The three of us had hung out together only a handful of times since we were 13 (though the two of them continued to be besties), and that’s how old we were when we took the trip to Los Gatos to spend the night at Thor’s house. Back then Los Gatos was an industrial suburbia surrounded by farmland. It’s past Greenfield and Santa Cruz and just

before San Jose and it was so hot there it felt like you were entering the atmosphere from outer space. It was the perfect end to our childhood.

Then it was ten years later. I couldn't have known how little I'd see my friends afterwards, and they couldn't have known either. But when we did manage to hang out, like we were doing now in the office, we would rehash the story again for old time's sake and revel in the shared memory and throw on the skins of our younger selves and feel ourselves again running down those darkened cookie cutter streets.

But soon as it really comes upon us it doesn't seem worth it anymore.

It was in 2006.

I remembered playing football and basketball for most of the day with other teenagers from the fecund housing development. We rode around on bikes and scooters and skateboards. It was like a hundred degrees.

There was a ramp a girl cobbled together with plywood and 2 by 4s and took wherever she went. She hauled it on a wooden dolly attached by a rope to her waist, riding through the neighborhood on her princess bike, silver streamers flying.

I was scared to try that ramp. I wasn't that experienced with a bike. Thor said I rode like an old woman.

It was Thor, Soph, me, and Warren. We went and saw the last Lord of The Rings movie at the shopping mall in the afternoon. We got out of the movie and the sun was eclipsed behind some apartment buildings. We walked over to the ice cream store at the end of the galleria and there was a vortexing mosh pit of teenagers some of whom we were playing with earlier outside of Thor's house. A line of motorcycles were parked in front of the store. We heard cussing and yelling and Thor didn't want to get involved but we pushed through the crowd anyway to get a better look. Dozens of kids formed a human glyph that spread outwardly into the parking lot. It could have been a rave or a side show or a rodeo—right outside the ice cream store. Some of the bigger teenagers argued and bumped chests with some grownup white men who wore t-shirts and boots and straight cut jeans. Three girls rode their bikes round and round on the fringe of the action. There was the girl with the silver streamers.

The mostly latino teens in the middle of the scrum found themselves getting pushed around by 5 or 6 older white dudes. Some other guys sat on their motorcycles parked in a line in front of the shop and they just ate their cups of ice cream with their mini pink spoons. And the white men were explaining to the teens how they needed to square up one on one if they wanted it to be fair and if they were men, which obviously they were not, and then it would be settled. A kid left the fracas and walked over to us and asked if any one of us wanted to volunteer to fight for them, if any of us knew how to fight. "Hell no, we're just trying to get home," said Thor, who actually was a black belt.

The kid was agitated.

"They're fucking grown ass men. And they won't let us be!"



We laughed it off and wished the kid good luck, and Warren told him that they should calm everyone down and figure out how to sneak away in different directions.

“Maybe,” said the kid and he walked away. Back into it.

“I would have knocked one of them out,” said Soph.

“Yeah right,” said Thor.

We tried to get around the crowd to leave and go back to Thor’s place.

But a lifted truck rampaged into the parking lot and cut us off and then pulled up alongside the motorcyclists who were still sitting there and eating their frozen desserts. A really muscular white dude hopped out of the truck and ran toward us and someone said, “Oh shit”, and all the kids scattered like rabbits at a shotgun blast. The dude’s white v-neck barely stretched over his veiny chest and biceps. His face was a red pit, like a dragon’s.

The teenagers hopped on their bikes which were strewn around the parking lot leaning on trees and cars and they mashed away at the spiky pedals, tried to gain momentum. The muscular dude stopped right in front of us for a second and turned around and asked, “Who was it?” A guy on his motorcycle whistled at him and pointed with his pink spoon in the direction of the teenagers riding away. And the muscular dude took off like it was a game. Like it was war. And the rest of the grownup white guys followed the buff dude’s lead and sprinted after him in a state of possession. They ran faster than the bikes. It was just a handful of seconds. Soph, Thor, Warren, and me walked slowly down the street in the other direction hoping to not be noticed. I turned around and the teens were getting clobbered off their bikes by wild haymakers. The

grownup guys just took pop shots at them as they ran up behind them, and their bodies crashed into the street barely conscious.

“Don’t look back,” said Thor.

Then the sun went down.

Later a cop followed us through the suburbia Thor and his family had recently moved into. Thor told us the cops were worse in Los Gatos but we did not believe him.

Thor and I have known each other since we were tiny. My mom had baby sitted him when she was in college and Thor’s dad was her college councilor and they became friends.

When his family moved inland — about an hour from Corridor — I stopped seeing Thor so much but I still went to his house for a weekend here and there. He was the only one to have a house at the time. His family moved to Los Gatos because the houses were cheaper there.

We were looking for one of those basketball hoops with the glass backboard and the NBA logo on it. They were the best ones. Some of the richer neighbors had them in their driveways. Thor bounced the basketball on the sand blasted sidewalk, which echoed down the street and sounded like he was firing off torpedoes.

“Are you sure we’re allowed to play on these?” I asked.

I looked back at the windshield's reflection off the cop car down the street. The streetlights were so widely spread out there. I wasn't sure if it was a cop car and it was weird to me that nobody else noticed it. It was like looking down a well and thinking there's the water but the water is the law.

"Everyone knows everyone here," said Thor. "I know damn near every single person who lives on this street except for that house and that house. No one cares if we hoop."

The worst thing I could think to say to him was, '*Thor, you're a Whore*' but I didn't do that. He was just difficult and I was difficult too and he would get on my nerves and get this shitty fucking attitude over the dumbest stuff and then he would suddenly stop being nice to me.

We found the right hoop partially lit up by someone's front porch lights and so we formed a traditional layup line and we warmed up and practiced the fundamental. Not long after that the cop car blitzed us with its spotlight and we heard the engine. We practically ran out of our shorts. Full of adrenaline me and Thor turned right at the next street and Soph and Warren went left. The cop chose the other two. The spotlight faded down the tunnel of the street.

Thor carried the basketball with him and I had the gift he gave me back at his house. It was his namesake: Thor's hammer. Someone got it for him for a birthday once. It's probably Toys R Us plastic but it looked real enough. He turned around at me.

"Stop following me! Go your own way!" He said.

So I ducked into the large swath of vegetation that lined the street and dipped into obscuring thicket. I laid in the mud and tried not to make a sound. I heard Thor's sneakers clomp further and further away.

I would wait until morning if I had to. I waited 10 or 20 minutes. Then I saw the lights and the car roll up in front of me.

On the bullhorn, I heard the voice say: "We know you're in there! Come out now with your hands up!"

That couldn't be true because of how deep I was in the bramble. Unless Thor told them where I was hiding. A few more cars rolled in. I listened to the cicadas chirp.

Thor's voice from somewhere out of the darkness, and higher than usual due to fear, said: "Christian just come out! We all got caught already!"

I couldn't believe he had been flipped. Not me, I thought, not if I can help it.

The bullhorn sounded again: "Get out of the bushes. We will sick the dog on you. Come out of the bushes."

No way, I thought, alright then. I crawled out and put my hands up. Two cops stood by their cars and looked at a distant streetlight. They got startled and yanked their guns from their holsters and pointed them at me.

"He's got a weapon!" One of them said, the youngest and handsomest one.

I realized I still had Thor's hammer which I thought was funny.

I yelled out to them, "It's just a toy."

The youngest and handsomest cop said, "Don't fucking move! Now slowly put the weapon on the ground!"

I was like, "It's not a weapon it's a toy."

Then I complied with the instruction. I put the hammer on the ground slowly. I got patted down and cuffed and put in the backseat. The cops huddled up in the middle of the road. There were four of them, for the four of us. And four cars. A hell of a way to spend a budget. I tried to look around but the handcuffs bit into me. Then the young cop got in and rolled the windows down. Then an older cop blinded me with his flashlight.

He said, "Where'd you get the hammer, huh? Planning on breaking some windows?"

"No, it's not mine," I said. "Thor gave it to me. It's Thor's hammer."

"You smart ass piece of shit you think this is a game? Where the fuck did you get the hammer?"

They didn't know our names. They obviously had no idea that Thor was in one of the other cars. They were all pissy about it but I explained it to them and eventually they got it.

They took our cuffs off, put us on the curb.

"You don't know how close you were to getting shot," said Soph under his breath.

"What?" I whispered.

"One of the cops told the younger cop to shoot you. He said *Shoot him, shoot that kid*. I swear to god. You hesitated when he said to put down the hammer. One more second and you could have been dead."

"How do you know?"

"I was sitting in the car right where they were!"

“Hey. Shut the hell up.” The command yelled from somewhere behind us.

We squeezed into the backseat of the youngest cop’s car. He drove off and I looked out and the hammer was still on the ground. He wrote us a ticket for breaking curfew and gave it to Thor’s dad. We thanked him and he told us to have a good night and he drove away and we stood in the curb for awhile and joked around and Thor’s dad went inside and told us to go to bed soon. Soph looked over at Warren and then looked down at his feet and said, “Warren where are your shoes?”

After our little meet up at the Shop, Soph followed me back to my house. It was in the Teens, which are the streets with teenager numbers, and are the highest up above sea-level, with the best views. I parked in the driveway. “You have to park down the street,” I said.

He parked down the street and I waited for him before going in. My mom was there, she had something on the stove.

“Hi Mom.”

“Hi son.”

“Soph’s here,” I said as she turned around.

“Oh my goodness, Soph! How are you? It’s been so long since I’ve seen you!”

She was happy to see my old friend. She used to tell me that he was her favorite out of the kids I would hang out with.

“Hi Beatriz, I’m good. Staying alive. How are you?”

She hugged him and said, “That’s all we can do sometimes. I’m good, too. I’ve just been working and traveling. I’m so glad you’re here. I didn’t know you were still living in Corridor.”

“Yeah, I moved back recently, like Christian. Where did you go?”

The fish sizzled violently in the pan.

“On my trip? Let’s see, I went to Vera Cruz, Oaxaca, Puebla, Mexico City. My sister and I—we went on a few backpacking trips. Daytime hikes and then we would end up at some cheap hotel. It was beautiful and amazing and I highly recommend you go traveling in another country, if you can, if you get the opportunity.” She turned back to the food heating up.

“Maybe if you convince this guy to go. Then I’ll think about it,” said Soph and he looked at me.

“Don’t let me hold you back,” I said.

The house was small but pretty and had a great backyard. We drank soda back there. It was nice to talk and exist with each other for a minute. It had been a long time since we talked. Soph said he didn’t watch sports anymore which was surprising. He had been a killer quarterback in high school. I grew up watching him play.

“You got a girl?” He asked.

“No.”

“Good. You don’t want to have a girlfriend. That will just fuck your shit up.”

“I might. One day I want to have kids,” I said.

“No, you don’t. You’re just saying that. You’ll feel differently once you realize—“

“Once I realize what?”

“Realize you don’t want to have kids. You won’t want to have them growing up in this fucked up world. The world is ending,” said Soph.

“Maybe it’s just beginning,” I said to lighten the mood.

“You really believe that?”

“I believe there’s some really smart people out there. And they’re working really hard to figure out a way for us to get through this. Scientists working in labs day and night. They want to invent cures and find the next technological breakthrough. They’re out there, these people, and I trust them.”

“You only trust them because the opposite is too scary for you to comprehend,” said Soph.

“I just don’t know why everyone is so sure that the world will end.”

“It’s just in the ether.”

“What if it’s in your head?”

“What if it is?”

...

“If you’re not doing anything,” I said, “you could come work out in the vineyards with the crew.”



We were in my room and the air was still. The dust fell straight down. My poor dog Luna, bless her heart, was brightly alive and precocious, getting her nose into everything. I played Misogi on these old beige desktop speakers I had found in the garage and had plugged them into my laptop when my other speakers died. Misogi was a terrific bedroom pop artist. Cross-genre, dreamy, hazy, ethereal, etherized, noise. It sounded almost like nothing at all, like tv static, My Bloody Valentine without all the groaning.

“What do you even do out there, in the vineyards?” he asked.

“We pick grapes—“

“I know that!” he said. “But, like, specifically...”

### 3.

WORKING MT. EDEN for the second day in a row, we were perched over the clouds and could see out across the city of Los Gatos, and the high-rises downtown. Driving up the mountain toward the vineyard around 6am you get caught in the raspberry dream sunrise bouncing off everything: the cars the clouds the puddles the trees the dirt. The crew and I were the cheapest grape pickers on the circuit and we made little money. We were seasonal. And I don't know why you'd name a city 'The Cats' unless there's a shit ton of cats in the city but I haven't ever seen evidence of a feline presence in my time there, which is limited only to stopping at its gas stations on the way to the mountains and also the time when I almost was shot.

The first day I brought Soph to work the day went swimmingly. The boss was always saying that he's looking for good people to work the vineyards. So he was stoked to meet my friend who, I had to intimate to the boss, is amazing. The first day was a short day and so uneventful, peaceful, as it didn't get too hot since we left at lunchtime. We're the cheapest crew of pickers out there and it isn't really close. If we had to work with another picking crew all we could really do was offer to help them by running their buckets across the vineyard in the sweet warm muck. But we considered ourselves specialists, that's what the boss told us, mainly because we had this small market cornered. For people rich enough to own a vineyard but lazy enough to not care about the results: we were perfect. And also perfect for really small vineyards.

The second day I brought Soph things were interesting. He was already upset from the day before at the fact we made so little money, and that we had an hour commute both ways.

“This is horseshit. But you probably knew that.”

“You’re horseshit,” I said. “You’re chopping off the branches like a lumberjack, you’re mutilating these poor plants.” He just laughed and lopped off another green branch with a wide snap of the shears.

“You do it,” he said. “No one’s around.” So I snipped off the branch I was working on and right then the boss rounded the row and he watched as the leafy limb of the vine hit the ground.

“What the fuck are you guys doing—chopping off branches?” said Robert.

You could tell he was in disbelief. He skipped over to us very oddly pleased at the idea we would idiotically destroy the owner’s property and then get caught right in the act of doing it. He picked up a couple branches lying by the last bush we were on and waved them at us. I realized Soph was cutting them down for who knows how long already. I was sort of pissed at this behavior but also felt it was my fault for bringing him and also hyping him up about the job in the first place and recommending that Robert give him a chance. I was at heart the instigator of this misunderstanding. Robert’s face was fudged in sunscreen under a wrinkly safari hat and blue surfer sunglasses protecting him from the killer sun that was sitting on top of us. Soph had wrapped his t-shirt around his head and wore a ribbed white tank top. By then the fog and most of the clouds were burned away.

“What do I always say to you guys out here, Christian?”

“Um, fuckin. How you do anything is *how* you do everything.”

“That’s right. And I mean that shit. So why are we going around chopping these vines like you’re fucking a couple of monsters?”

“To make wine,” said Soph.

“No,” said Robert.

“We make wine by cutting off the grapes. Not by chopping down these shoots which is the reason why one plant can grow good grapes year after year. If you chop off the shoots you’re preventing it doing what it does best, which is grow grapes. Like how what you’re doing right now is how you do everything, these vines do everything perfectly all the time.”

Soph and I both rolled our eyes and looked at each other and creepy smiles showed up on our faces and we both laughed and tried to hold on to each other. His laugh was light and sharp and crazy and mine sounded like a person choking. I grabbed ahold of a grape cluster and yanked it off its stem and took a bite. Soph looked upward. He belted a high-pitched scream at the blueing sky. Robert just shook his head at us and couldn’t help giving us a smile.

“You guys are somethin else,” he said.

“I’ve almost never seen this degree of incompetence. Almost never.”

Robert had his hands on his hips and was taking it pretty well but I could see he was at a loss in knowing how to guide us and with the loss of potential revenue in the grape business. But he didn’t need to be such a weirdo about it. For the rest of the day he had James, his right hand man, follow us row by row and up and down the vineyard slope to inspect our work. He told us what he was noticing we were doing wrong on

each of the plants and vines, and tried to instruct us on how to properly extract grapes. This was an unnecessary abuse of authority in my eyes.

So during a break Soph had his shears and went and punctured James' metal water canteen. James lived in a tent in the woods and didn't exactly have a lot of stuff. It was a stinging blow. At the end of the day we're getting paid out and we see James hobbling toward us with his metal canteen swinging wildly and his shears clutched in hand. We got paid and ran to the car and locked the doors. Soph was in the driver's seat and rolled down one window just a bit so we could hear James calling for the whole crew's attention on him. He held up a holy canteen and gestured with it and in that way baptized the crew where they stood gathered.

He said, "Listen up. I have something to say. One thing. It'll just take a second. WHO the FUCK stabbed my brand new WATER canteen? That's all I wanna know you fucking coward."

I didn't feel too bad about it and I'll say it broke my heart not because of James but it was sad that I had to watch his speech from inside the car and I was burned and dehydrated and not making enough money to ever do anything with life, like move out of my mom's house, and not doing anything so I feel my body is just being dragged over the earth by some large magical hand that sweeps me up in the wind and brushes tears and pats down hair, however is not there when I need a hand the most and you know I begin to understand why a person needs a savior and why a person thinks they need a savior and why those who believe there is a savior will be there when it's all said and done.

Whooshing through the Los Gatos Mountains is the closest you can get probably to a rollercoaster amusement park feel while you're driving on a California highway. It's one of the deadliest highways around and everyone knows someone who has crashed on it. Soph drives the Honda and takes the curves pretty loose until he gets on the grumbling dotted line and swerves back and I have to tell him something. I notice that his eyes are closed. I look back at the road as he rounds another curve of the mountain. I watch his hands on the wheel gently aim us toward the safe side of the road.

"How are you driving with your eyes closed?" I ask.

"I'm asleep bruh," says Soph.

"How can you be asleep if you're fucking driving a car."

"I don't know bruh. I feel like we're gonna die." He smiles through the side of his mouth while his eyes keep shut.

"Well if we die it's your fault!"

"I know bruh. I'll pull over and you can switch spots with me, yeah?"

"Hell no. You're doing a jedi mind trick right now. Like when Luke has the helmet covering over his face and has to block those little laser with his lightsaber. You know what I'm talking about? You know what the fuck I'm talking about. This is just like that. You're just like Luke Skywalker. You should put both hands on the wheel though."

We snorted coke until dawn. Soph said it was providence that we ran into each other at the grocery store the other day. I wasn't sure how many times we'd had this conversation. But it didn't matter. It seemed like nothing mattered. "God brought us together," he said. Smoke curled around his face, sweat licked his nose.

"If I hadn't pulled up right before you were about to leave. Remember?" "At the grocery store." "At Safeway."

I started to remember. His voice bored into me. But something clicked and I thought, Well, maybe that's why he's being so obsessive. Maybe he wanted me to understand something. I looked at him and his eyes reminded me of Dahli's slimy clocks. I was afraid of him and I also needed him. My friend. His pistol was on his lap. He was careful with it. More careful than the majority of people whom I met, who went about their lives not worried about stick up boys.

"It's like we were both looking for something, you know? But we didn't know..." said Soph.

And I saw him for how sad he really was. And if two people can look at each other and feel each other's hearts break then that is what happened right then. We were so far from home and with nowhere to go, because we were actually in my mom's garage. The drier rattled away and blew warm air through the wall.

We came up with the idea to pool our resources and scrap together a cash flow, to invest in these drugs, and keep on the move with a varied clientele.

Soph said that Thor made good money but he wasn't able to save it right. And despite the fact that the idea for the Sea Notes store came from Soph, and they had discussed it at length, he didn't own any part of it. And Thor was reticent of certain things because of Soph's reputation. So my guy was just fed up with egos people have, I think, and their petty competitive drives.

Luna roamed around us looking for food, a good pat on the head, or a scratch behind the ears. She weighed about as much as me. The Dogo Argentinians are bred to be boar hunters. A pitbull mixed with the DNA of various other kinds of dogs. They have a lot of extra neck skin which can protect them and save their lives against a boar's ramming tusks. My dog Luna has a broad droopy face in a perpetual frown. Her collar jingled gently. She had been left roaming the forest around Corridor for a week before she was spotted and reported to animal control. There are a lot of boars on the outskirts of Corridor and Luna's owner had flown here from Argentina with a pack of dogs to go hunting. Then he left her. After being in a cage for who knows how long she was at risk for being put down because no one wanted her I guess or maybe she had been a problem. Luckily my mom upon seeing her, fell in love, and brought her home, named her Luna. Later, she had Luna designated as a therapy dog, so she could easily move, dog in tow, from our cramped duplex by the aquarium to the nicer house we live in now which is practically next door to the tiny city of Brayden, aka the itty bitty city by the water.

Brayden by the water. And the whole city of Brayden exists within the Corridor city limits. Incorporated in 1955, it is a town within a town, a rare phenomenon if I've ever seen one, though I haven't done much research about it. It's a half circle right on the



beach, just a couple of square miles, at an elevation of almost nothing. There's a few long sandy streets intersected by perpendicular short ones that lead right to the water. There isn't a lot of foot traffic over by the beach, with Brayden having a population of around 300, and despite it being filled and patronized by tens of thousands of people during the day. The streets that follow along the shoreline are home to a lot of industrial, construction, and design businesses and also boast a number of artist workshops, painters, woodworkers, potters, the like, who are a kind of fringe remnant of the fish boom that kept the area afloat in the 40's. From the beach a bike trail and a scraggly hiking trail will also lead you out of Brayden back into Corridor.

On the northern edge of Brayden is Corridor High. The high school looms lovingly over Brayden from upon its vantage at the beginnings of the highlands, a piece of flattened land which was once a wild, brushy plateau that more recently had been used for the housing of high ranking military officers and their families, but was now an upperclass gated community. Military people still lived there but it opened up to others I guess maybe around the time the Corridor base was decommissioned in the 90's, about when they had a regiment of their own soldiers (approx. 2,000) called down to Los Angeles to help contain or rather fight back the race riots that happened down there for the man Rodney King and what was done to him by five police officers, a scene depicted on news channels across the country.

Fort Corridor was the first racially integrated military base in the U.S., which allowed nonwhite soldiers to train with white soldiers, and those soldiers made it possible for the town to expand into the largest African-American population in California, between the cities of Oakland and Los Angeles. It may have been noted that

this particular unit could possibly encounter less resistance when engaging with the rioters. To boot the *7th infantry light division* stationed in Fort Corridor was known to have “an unusually large percentage of Mexicans and Indians”, who also lived and shopped and raised families in Corridor and helped build the town over the years. The *7th infantry light division* was one of the few regiments to be deactivated along with the fort.

For some mysterious and preposterous reason Corridor High is really located within the town of Brayden. But apparently because the high school is officially part of Corridor, the town of Brayden has no obligation to pay property taxes to the high school even though it's located inside of the town, and many of the students and their parents frequent the large and prosperous shopping mall in Brayden, the Applebee's, the Adamberto's, the Gamestop, the gas station.

If Corridor High collected property taxes from Brayden it would be one of the wealthier schools in the state. As far as I was concerned though, I never had to worry about that because my mom decided to send me to the charter high school where we had no grades just evaluations. There were 85 of us in our class.

I thought college would be a good change of pace for me. But I couldn't make it. I joined the artist dorm to find people who I would get along with. Turns out I kind of hated everyone I met there. Not their fault. To their credit they disliked me too, but probably for different reasons. College taught me I wasn't ready to leave my home town. I came back to my mom's house.

I went from one indeterminately sized pond to another, never understanding the breadth of my being, and reaching ahead of me in the dark for a wall, like a little kid at a

swim lesson just wanting to reach their parent or grandparent on the other side. I didn't want to leave and go home either because I was loath to see my parents too, I realized in a rush of shame.

I recalled a flashback of a younger me carving the horrible words 'I HATE YOU MOM' and 'I HATE YOU DAD' and 'I HATE YOU COUSINS' on my dresser drawers over and over again that way she would see it. Much of my furniture she ended up keeping, but that dresser was one thing she threw into the dump, doing us both a favor. I had made it ugly. If I could only be easy going with the people in my life who I grew up with—we would be able to love again.

#### 4.

THERE USED TO BE a reoccurring structure in my dreams sometimes, which would have different settings and climates but also the same disorienting architecture. The structure will have lots of hallways and rooms and staircases and elevators, and sometimes the rooms and hallways are all outside and you have to go in and out of these places and you don't know if you're inside or outside. Until you've gone through all these rooms and you get to a clearing and you look back at this massive, snaking maze and you're still in it. It's like ruins, like the ruins in Peru on Machu Pichu, with the foliage growing through the stones and waterfalls in the distance. A defensive structure which guards the heart of the people, a battlement, castles made of stone. And you walk through the ruins and you don't know if you've actually left the battlement or if there's some crumbled wall lying further ahead.

When I got back from my trip to Peru the school year had already started. I was in the 6th grade. My teachers said I had to make up weeks of work. My mom thought the trip was educational enough and I agreed with her even though I got altitude sickness on the mountain and threw up by a llama. For each teacher I wrote up a one page summary of the homework I was supposed to have done, and the objectives that were covered in each lesson, including a couples example questions. My math teacher wanted to have an emergency meeting with my mom and when we all met he wondered whether I should be held back a year to repeat the 6th grade on account of the time I had missed. I realized that this was how people were held back. Something not really

chosen. You just fell into it. A trap that waited for you your whole life. An unseen terror that fed on days and weeks and months like a cave to hibernate in until it grew teeth. Ultimately the teacher wasn't committed to seeing me in class again the next year so he dropped the issue.

Not long after my mom and I moved into the apartment in Corridor—this overcast, beach town tucked in amongst the sand dunes—we heard on the news that a single mom had gone missing and was possibly dead, and she had lived close by us. She was the third person to go missing in recent years. All female. One found dead. The other was also still missing. There were no suspects and no witnesses to any crimes. Her name was Talia Demonte. But that's not her real name. She was a devoted mom who lived with her son and a roommate at Fort Corridor, the old decommissioned military base, where we also lived alongside many other families of kids who went to my school. The day of Talia's disappearance she was supposed to have lunch with her mom in downtown Corridor. That's what they said on the news. When Talia didn't show, her mom didn't think much of it. Later that day when her grandson's school called saying he hadn't been picked up yet she began to worry and called the police. A couple possible suspects, two Hispanic males, were said to be driving a burgundy sedan. Seen driving in the area. There was a young woman in the backseat. This information was given to the public and a tip line opened. Sketches were drawn of the two men and plastered around every block and phone pole in town. And then broadcast into everybody's living room. Later a jacket and then a flip flop were located not far from where it was thought she had been abducted.

Her remains weren't found for many years, and when they were by a building contractor under a bush next to a commonly used bike path that lead to the Cypress Mall the case would be cold for over 11 years, and the remains so worn away it was impossible to get an immediate I.D.

On the day of her disappearance Talia's car was found in her neighborhood at Fort Corridor a few streets away from her apartment, and the police speculate that the car had been parked there after Talia was allegedly abducted. She was said to rarely leave the house but there were frequent visitors at the home. Her son's father Michael Arboles and the boy's uncle, Michael's brother Victor Arboles, would visit the young mother and son frequently. Talia's mom reported that Talia ceased having a romantic relationship with Michael Arboles and that him and his brother would visit primarily to spend time with the son.

The FBI arrived in Corridor from San Francisco in the late summer of 2015 to examine the body once it was discovered, and to assist the investigation due to the abduction possibly happening on land which was still owned by the government. Victor Arboles, the ex-boyfriend's brother, was promptly arrested and held for questioning. He had a prior felony for the manslaughter of a shop owner when he was a teenager and was released from prison when he was 25, shortly before Talia's disappearance. No evidence could be found linking Victor Arboles to Talia's murder and he was released from custody. There were no other leads for the local police or the FBI to go on, or that's at least what was disclosed to the media.

The residents of the Corridor base got together and reformed the neighborhood watch from two decades before, known as the Yellow Jackets, when a general crime wave of robbery and grand theft auto had torn through the fledgeling town. They marched the streets of the base and peeped in windows and saw a glimpse of what they might look like from the outside. People were destabilized once again. While I could see many who refused to feel powerless, our parents, teachers, grandparents, hall monitors, for everyone's benefit, I also saw a glimpse of the tragedies adding up on an invisible counter vaulted in the sky which could not be redeemed or changed but only tick tick ticks ahead into the future and formed a reflection that spread over us every day like the holes in the ozone.

September mornings, wet fog settled on the basketball courts and on the fields and weaved through the goalposts. The seagulls were noisier, more noticeable, once the school year resumed, looking starved for attention. Especially when the trash mounted in the dumpsters. And the crows were all over the streets of the city until they got chased away by cars or children, or sometimes raccoons. They perched on wires and light poles and fences, the birds' heads-on-swivels, a state of hyper vigilance our football coach told us to keep in mind at practice. The birds made their horrible music while casually ignoring us, the baleful squall and frenzied squawks, a kind of music no one really likes but we use to stay grounded.

I walked through the Westlake Middle campus and found my friends and their sweaty game of 10-on-10 basketball. There were no rules in the morning and there were no real teams you could count on. You were able to defend anyone who had the ball

and try to steal it from them. And you were able shoot on any of the six baskets in the vicinity. We forged temporary alliances against really good players like Thor and Soph, and in fact by the time the school bell rung our perfect, free-for-all pickup games usually devolved into Thor and Soph vs. everybody else. They had the obvious talent and the rest of us had the energy to burn. I limped into my first period class exhausted, slick with fog and sweat, swimming in the euphoria of second winds.

Our classmates talked about the possible murder of the young mom and I declined to report that I lived down the street from her.

Playing outside at the old base was fascinating and terrifying and consumed by the thought that maybe the murderer lived by us, or was someone we knew or interacted with, and the tone in Ft. Corridor of course was exacerbated at night time. Each driver to pass by, who was probably either student or staff, was scrutinized and measured by their potential for being a psychopathic killer. Some cars we actually followed to the end of the block and we sprinted breathlessly over the ice plant covered hills to stay in view of the glitching car beneath us. And then we paused and hid in the bushes when whatever car turned onto a street, into a driveway, so we could maybe catch a glimpse of the killer rattling their keys in a devil-may-care way as they walked to the front door and were greeted by a wife and kids. We watched the shadowplay of their lives through illuminated kitchen windows. And we ran into the neighborhood watch who also roamed the old base in their yellow jackets and we eyed them up and down, then begrudgingly we noted that we were on the same side and went our separate ways.



After school one day Soph led Thor and I up to the roof of the cafeteria—the roof laid out in a grid of coiled space age pipes and electrical boxes. We could see a piece of the bay from there. We munched on the seaweed and dried fish and soda we stole earlier from the Asian market and sat back on the roof and watched the sun fade. The bay looked back at us like a blue frisbee, or an open window. The coastal universities and car dealerships and amusement parks grazed out beyond the sea mist. We'll sit and watch any body of water like it has something for us to see. Through the glare of sunset the ocean looked like a glittery spaceship stuck in another dimension, behind a waterfall. Maybe it was flying away or was a mirage.

We had successfully killed a lot of time when Thor's phone rang and he surprisingly said it was my mom calling. I said to just ignore it and he asked why. I told him it's because I know what she's going to say. Next it was his dad calling and Thor answered and said he wasn't ready to be picked up yet and his dad said, "What the hell am I supposed to do while you're hanging out with your friends?"

And Thor said to his dad that maybe he should go get something to eat because he knows that he's hungry and then they hung up.

Soph went ahead and told us that he knew the woman who went missing from the base. He was very coy about it and just said she was a family friend. He said the woman who got killed had a son and we might know him, implying that we might have seen the kid around the playground. We pestered him with questions but he kept his

cool and leaned back against the dull metal of the cafeteria's contraptions and white steam or smoke billowed out of a grate behind him. We didn't believe anything he had to say at first but we wanted to know what poor boy he was saying was wrapped up in this mayhem. Soph swabbed the little pieces of fish at the bottom of the plastic bag with his wet licked finger. The last vestiges of the dying sun erupted behind him and his face was engulfed in shadow and he looked into the empty bag.

"He's living with me now," he said. "It's my cousin."

His mouth glistened and his eyes were wide open and he crushed the bag into a piece of nothing and threw it off the roof.

"It's my cousin, Mario," he said. "He's gotta stay with us now. He was living with his mom. So we're sharing a room right now even though there's four people staying in the apartment already. My grandpa said we'll probably get a bigger place soon and get our own rooms. Now we don't have any privacy."

"I'm sorry man."

"It's good. But now they say she's gone or probably dead. She's young too, younger than your parents. We think maybe her boyfriend did something but there's no evidence. It's crazy. And she was fucked up on drugs almost her whole life. But that's not why she's dead."

"Then why is she dead?"

"Christian shut the front door."

Soph did not know for how long he was selling high end designer drugs for his uncle, when it had started, how old he was, etc. He just remembered that he was instructed to tote the Jansport backpack wherever, not look into it, and then come straight back home. No one ever sat him down to talk to him about what his job really was, his greater purpose, how he was paying his dues or at least paying for whatever expenses his uncle Jerzy thought were necessary, by his delivery of products, accepting of money, and running back home. And he never looked in the backpack.

It occurred to him recently during a weekend route to a neighboring apartment complex, when he usually felt like nothing more than a simple paper boy, that he also understood if anyone were to catch him with the backpack, ask him what was in it, he would be in trouble. Real trouble. Not the kind of trouble you get in at school. He didn't know how he knew this. It just hit him like garbage on the wind. How the school was hologram where students acted out roles to the cadence of teachers and hall monitors who are really government babysitters. They were also the first actual link to the police department whom they sometimes called to descend on the middle school when things got so severe beyond the realm of our hologram paradise such as a student getting stabbed with a pencil, a teacher being threatened, graffiti, smoking weed, all that. But even the cops were pulled into the unreality of it all and got exposed as actors in dark blue costumes and heavy belts, and they said that what they really want you to understand is that your own safety is their first priority over everything else, and you better personally listen to them very well if you want a chance for things to go okay and normal and bloodless, and the statement or anecdote seemed to hang there specifically for you, and everyone else in school who supposedly are your peers will be totally fine

and unharmed regardless of what you choose to do, but if you don't then things can go sideways quickly. The cops who walked around the principle's office were sort of hilarious, even when a cop hitched his heavy belt and looked down at you over the bridge of their nose.

This time when Soph delivered the backpack, the man's front door stayed open for a second, and Soph saw his friend, Devin, from school, sitting in the living room on a swirly patterned rug. The kid faced a flatscreen TV that rested on a metal entertainment rack and displayed explosions and screaming and orders shouted out from the TV and even flecks of mud sent flying from missiles and grenades and things and went flying and then got stuck to the 'camera', which was really the TV. A Playstation 2 controller in Devin's hands, he turned around and was plainly surprised to see Soph at his front door. He was conscious of not really being one of Soph's real homies, but he re-acclimated to the hopeful new reality.

He smiled and waved.

"Hi Soph."

Soph waved back. He had been to this apartment before but the TV was off before and the man had been alone, who was presumably Devin's dad. He returned from out of a carpeted hallway and gave Soph the backpack with a different sort of weight inside it.

Soph said, "Thanks," and left the boy and his dad and waited to hear their front door shut behind him before taking off at a mild sprint, the new weight in the backpack lighter yet heavier for all the context he was learning surrounded the small task given to him without even a thanks or any further comment from his uncle, and which he did unflinching regardless of the weather or how horribly anyone treated him.

The one break he got from delivering drugs was football season and the promise that was there for the ones who don the plastic cropped shoulder pads, or cheer on the sidelines with pom poms.

Both his uncle and his grandpa played high school football and since the day they first signed him up for the peewee football league, and he went to his first day of practice, he was known as someone with an actual chance of making it. He thought making it meant going somewhere straight and sophisticated away from leaning light poles and sagging telephone wires and squealing multicolored cars and two bedroom apartments and secondhand clothing, objects that punctuated his youth. But more and more he realized these objects from his hand me down life were the inventory for a rigged game that was designed to make him jump through hoops and eat broccoli, and he thought 'making it' was just the end of the game, that he could be one of the winners or not but he could live then with the result, because he at least would have made it to the end. Game over.

He walked through the door into his grandparent's living room and they were reading on the couch from letters and magazines in a pile lying between them. The tv on to the weather's weekly forecast. A plate on the table for him covered by a paper napkin. The table mostly used as storage for non-perishable food items, a radio player, hats and keys, and as a desk, but not for eating on. He went toward his uncle's room.

"We left you a plate. It's getting cold," said grandma.

"I know grandma I can see it."

“Don’t go into your uncle’s room,” said grandpa.

He went in anyway and closed the door behind him and he went to the closet and checked the backpack he had left there in the morning. He unzipped the bag and in it was a roll of money and little bits of notebook paper and pencil shavings like it was once used for school. He unspooled it and counted it up to \$5,000 of mostly 50s and 20s. He did not dare take a note of it. It wasn’t worth the risk. No obvious way to get away with it. His uncle played linebacker at Corridor High and he didn’t want to tempt him, at least not yet. He put the roll back. It looked sloppy but he put it in the bag anyway and zipped it. He figured that his uncle wouldn’t get mad at him just for being curious. He placed the bag back on the floor of the closet and tried to arrange it the way that he found it, because there was no reason to tempt fate and be excessively careless. Further in the closet was a plastic baggie with its insides glowing. It looked to him like gatorade or some kind of laundry detergent. He weighed it in his hand and then opened it and stuck his face in. He smelled the bag and it instantly smarted his nose and he jerked back and almost dropped it. One little crystal hit the carpet and he stooped down to inspect it. Noting nothing special about it he plucked it back into the bag and zipped it shut.

And for really no reason at all Soph wanted to rub the bag on his face just to feel the jagged edges of it. He started at his forehead and then his cheeks and he tried to get the smell of it through the plastic and then he rubbed the bag over his mouth and all around. He didn’t feel anything just the weight and crunchiness on his face.

He tossed it back in the closet. His face itched and he rubbed his nose. His nose was running. He turned on the radio on the bedside table and he mimed a little dance in the full-length mirror. His grandma called for him. Probably his grandpa told her to. He

yelled back but they couldn't understand each other. He left the radio on and exited the room and went down the hallway laden with pictures on the walls and he tried to get out the apartment. His grandpa stood in his way.

"Where you going?"

"I'm gonna play basketball with Warren and Thor," said Soph and tried to maneuver around his grandpa's large frame. His grandpa was in Vietnam and in the riots and still looked like he could fight and probably hurt someone. His grandpa grabbed his arm and held him steady.

"It's getting dark."

"I know we're just gonna play for a minute."

"Don't fucking you lie to me. You got good food waitin for you right there. And you wanna mess around in Jerzy's room. What the hell were you doing in there?"

"Nothin, man."

His grandpa tried to look him in the eyes but he looked away and shoved his grandpa's arm away and tried to head out the door but before he could take a step what felt like a rock hit him in the throat and lifted him off his feet and slammed him against the wall so that a picture fell down, one of his mom and his aunt, and for the first time in his life he could remember he looked down into his grandpa's eyes and they were locked on his.

He met back up with us at the teen center by the school. In front of the center was a roll up basketball hoop and a set of portable bleachers to sit and watch a game if there is one. Other kids milled around in after school haze, hopped on candy and soda. A pool table and a foosball table and computer lab in back made up most of the Teen

Center. It was the same kind of trailer building as some of the classrooms that were dotted around campus. Thor and I were on the bleachers and ate Cups of Noodles, and we were looking past the makeshift basketball court at the baseball field beyond where a group of kids tried to get a hit off the kid who was on the mound. He threw big time heat and no one could get a hit. Then, before we could react, Soph walked into our field of vision, blood spattered on the side of his face and neck. Shit, what happened to you?

“My grandpa ripped my earring out,” he said.

I looked at the crusty hole in his earlobe where the pretty fake diamond used to be. I felt glad that it was still attached.

“You should see your face right now,” he said.

I closed my mouth.

“What did you do?” Thor said.

“What do you think I did?”

“I’m asking.”

“Nothing! What the hell! Why do you assume it’s my fault?”

“Bro I didn’t say that. It’s okay. Everyone gets in trouble sometimes.”

“What do you mean, everyone gets in trouble? You don’t.”

“You’ve seen me get grounded before.”

“I’ve seen you cuss out your dad and punch him in the stomach and all kinds of shit and you get grounded for a week.”

Me and Soph laugh but Thor doesn’t.

“That’s only when you’re there,” said Thor. “When you’re gone it’s different.”



“Look at my face. This ever happen to you?”

No one said anything after that. We scrounged together some quarters for Soph to get a Cup of Noodles and we waited with him for it to cool down enough to eat and watched the kid on the mound.

That year I had my birthday party at a roller rink and a lot of people came. I was really happy. It was mostly boys and a few girls. And my family was there too from out of town. An aunt, an uncle, my dad, my grandma Donna. I was happy people showed up to my party. I was glad my mom had set it up for me and my friends to have fun. I was happy my dad was there and no one thought it was weird that they had never seen my dad before and now all-of-a-sudden there he is. My friends were nice to me, and a little distant, because of all the adults that were there.

We strapped on our skates and hit the wood. It was apparent many of my friends had been roller skating before and were much faster and better coordinated than I was. I was shocked when I first wobbled out there and it hit me, *I've never done this before*. I was so excited and nervous for the party it hadn't occurred to me that this was a new thing I was doing. It was okay. My friend Megan guided me along at first, slowly. I had imagined a roller rink from the movies and had just assumed that it would be the most natural thing in the world to go out there and skate. An Usher song came on and crackled through the speaker system. Then Thor and Soph grabbed each of my hands and told me to hold on and I was pulled with them as they skated backwards faster and faster, got their hips and knees working, and the three of us squealed madly, and we got

to top speed and they each pulled me forward so I glided between them and onward toward the curve of the rink, and I bent my knees and held my breath, and when I got around the turn I struck out with ungainly panache, again, pumped my legs, and I went.

Talia's body was found in August 2015 buried in a shallow grave, which had been dug and the body placed there, recently. The police could not immediately identify the body, the remains were too decomposed. There were defensive wounds. The cause of death was likely strangulation. Her clothing was generally intact. Each piece examined and processed to no avail. There was a shoe missing, the one which had been located in the woods at the time of her disappearance. Visible trauma to the head. She was missing for 11 years and that's how long she had probably been deceased. Some had assumed she was dead, others thought she could have just ran away, abandoned her child and started a new life. Although no one had heard from her.

Soph never thought she was dead and never thought she was missing, because he had seen her. On the day she disappeared, at the time that she was supposedly abducted, he saw her at school dropping Mario off. It was just for a second through the open car door. He had left the classroom to get a drink of water, something he often did, and her car pulled up in the roundabout. Mario exited. Class was halfway over, it must have been 9am already. At 9:30am is when the only witness that the police had to go on supposedly caught a glimpse of Talia in the backseat of a burgundy sedan. The witness worked with a sketch artist and a hypnotist to come up with two composite drawings of the two men who were supposedly in the front-seats of the car. But that was an awful

quick turnaround for Soph and he never quite believed it. He saw her at what must have been right after 9am and less than 30 minutes later she's been taken and transported in another car? He could not bring himself to believe that something like that had happened to her.

5.

WE WERE IN THE BACKYARD figuring out what to do with the blue day. We had not slept. I was rubbing the clay handle on my fifth cup of coffee. The afternoon sun bleated at us in angelic echoes. The clouds were thin and fell apart. Construction noises. A network of slooping wires were above us. Soph smoked a menthol, while sitting on a white painted wooden fold out chair. He wiped his hands on the front of his jeans with the cigarette in his mouth and looked at me expectantly. I paced around him in an arc and his eyes followed me as I talked and talked about myself. He periodically petted Luna before shoving the big dog away. There wasn't another way to do it. She's too big, too needy, and too starved for affection. If you try to move her with your bodyweight she won't budge.

Soph said, "Let me ask you something. Have you ever in your damn life talked to somebody like this before?"

"I'm not sure."

He smiled and said, "Bro you haven't stopped. You've been going and going. Looking me in my eyes the whole time. Have you ever kept eye contact with somebody for this long before?"

"I don't remember, maybe," I said.

I knew what he meant. I hadn't felt that free and unabridged in forever. It was the euphoria of the cocaine. How sad. I knew he knew it too. But it didn't I guess bother him the way it bothered me.

"I feel like a kid again," I said.

“Bro its the white. Its pure. Its pure as fuck.”

“Really?” I asked, even though he had mentioned it a few times already.

“Yes. Are you gonna finally look at it so you know what the fuck I’m talking about?”

“I’m looking at it,” I said, my vision cascading back to me.

“It looks very impressive.”

“You can’t see shit from right there,” said Soph.

He beckoned me over and I followed and peered down at the smattering of white snow he had chopped up on the DVD case I had given him. It was the DVD for *The Informers* which was shot as basically a series of alarming vignettes and was based on the 90’s vampire shock novel of the same name.

I got a call from an unknown number and I answered because I always do that. Calls from unknown numbers are the only exciting ones I get, even if it’s usually a telemarketer.

“Hello?” I said.

“Yo Christian! This is Darren from the fields.”

“You mean from the vineyards?”

“Yes! You remember. I heard that you’re working tomorrow and I wanted to see...”

“I’m working tomorrow?” I said.

“This is the first time I’ve heard about it!” I screamed into the phone. Soph gave me a funny look and I walked around the corner to the other side of the house.

“Oh I thought you knew,” said Darren, with a laugh.

“I assumed you were in the loop,” he said. “I just got off the phone with the boss—with Robert—and he said you were working with us tomorrow. Maybe you should give him a call.”

“Maybe I will. Thanks Darren.”

“Yeah that’s not why I called,” he said.

“Oh right. Why’d you call? What’s this all about anyways, huh?”

“Well brother this call is about cocaine and the procurement of such. I heard from a little birdie you could help me out with that.”

“A fucking little birdie!”

“Hey take it easy man. My brother just said you and your boy Soph looked like you might be on deck that’s all.”

“We might be on deck, huh?” I asked. I was trying to transfer my initial surprise into overt enthusiasm.

“Yeah man.”

He was cool as a cucumber, the old devil, the old dog. Good ol’ Darren. He has a twin brother who also works the vineyards with us but they look nothing alike.

“There’s a little somethin on the other line over here. I’m gonna have to call you back—cool?”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Okay then. You’ll be hearing from me shortly Darren.”

“Hey! That’s great news,” he said. “That’s all I could have asked for. I’m looking forward to getting your call.”

“Great. Bye.”

“Talk soon,” he said and then I hung up. Darren and I had concocted a secret language rather quickly around our shared drug interest even though it was dumb and pointless but our little jib jab was inclusive to the two of us and that is what was needed. I told Soph what the deal was and shook my smart phone at him. He was juiced.

“I told you!” He said.

“You told me exactly what?”

“Bruh, don’t play stupid with me.”

“Okay.”

“I been telling you all day and all day yesterday. I know you know what I’m talking about,” he said.

“I know what you’re talking about.”

He just looked at me giving me the double arc of raised eyebrows. He had an expectant look. I understood that he was serious and wasn’t in a playing mood. Didn’t choose to go for any of the bait I was laying down. He was talking about selling drugs to my coworkers, which would turn our labor heavy job into a better paying one, with air conditioning, just driving around. But I felt it would be pushing my luck, because I kind of loved it out there in the sun-stippled rows of dusky grapes.

“You said that god was watching us and if we were open minded then he’d be there.”

“You just gotta see. You just gotta ask. And doors will open.”

“I can see that.”

I called Darren back and repeated what Soph told me the cocaine prices were and to meet us at the Market at seven.

Robert texted me to see if I could work the next day.

The next door neighbors smoked in their backyard like us and the smoke drifted over the fence and merged with ours, then got ripped apart by the wind. There were two brothers, a sister, and a mom. The younger brother was in high school. Soph told me the younger brother sold drugs. I wasn't sure if I believed him. The sister was well dressed and worked at a restaurant. We had never talked, just shared a few glances from our driveways.

The older brother fixed cars in front of their house and had a lot of business, always a new car in their driveway. He gave me a hand with my Honda a couple times when it had trouble overheating. It was ready to die at any minute.

I drove Soph homeward. He lived in his grandparent's duplex that was rented to them by the energy plant his grandpa worked at, by the base. It still looked like military housing where they lived and I noticed the whole town seemed to be an extension of Fort Corridor.

When the base shut down many soldiers and their families got transferred and moved away but some of the soldiers ended up staying, possibly because of the climate. These have been prosperous years for the town since the base shut down, with the expansion of the college, the downtown strip, the metro stations, the aquarium, the tourism, golf courses and hotels, seafood, roller rinks, stuff like that. In the 80's and



early 90's it was an area known for its rampant criminal activity, high drug use, proliferate prostitution, and grand theft auto. Thanks to the dedicated efforts of a strong neighborhood watch group, who called themselves the 'Yellow Jackets' for their bright, reflective uniforms, and the increasingly heavy military presence from Fort Corridor, all of whom kept in contact with and coordinated with the local police department, the town was able to quell the wild energy that permeated among the pre-aughts citizenry like a boozy wind. It's a shame that the former soldiers and their families aren't able to reap the rewards of the good will they had sown in the community.

Soph's grandpa happened to be one of the soldiers who stayed in Corridor after the base shut down. Then he worked at the energy plant. Soph's grandma worked as a mail lady. They might both be retired now I'm not sure. His grandpa met her on tour and brought her back here. When he was in the army. I'm not sure when he stopped, if it was when the base shut down, or what happened. But they had three kids together, two girls and a boy. Soph's mom is the oldest, his uncle Jerzy is next, and then Mario's mom, Talia, the youngest. Talia was still missing from a long time ago when I had just recently moved to Corridor.

Jerzy lived with them in their house by the base. He was a few years older than us. And his girlfriend was there a lot also.

Soph's mom moved away to Hawaii, which sounded like a dream, awhile back with his older sister and his mom had not been back in town since, but Soph's sister will come visit every once in awhile. I guess Soph's mom couldn't bare to look at the town anymore. After what happened to Talia. But the town is the town and I hoped that if we

faithfully kept it then it would welcome back the strayed children of Corridor from the ends of the earth.

We drove through the military style longhouses with their red trim and maroon gutters and pipes. I had never seen this part of the city. Tucked in the shadow of the highway that leads in and out of the base. It's not a real highway just a road they used to use for tanks, military trucks, APCs, and they started calling it a highway and it goes like five miles behind Corridor then leads to a handful of inland highways. I parked across the street from Soph's house so to keep it in view. A blue Saab was parked in front and behind it there was parked a new white Honda, which while it looked faster than my '94, the rounded contours of the newer models didn't look as nice as mine's boxy metal frame, simple edges, and the heavyweight nature of it and the more I looked at the curvy spaceship on four wheels the more it did not even look like a car but a well-manicured sea creature resting at the bottom of an aquarium.

"It's been fun, bro."

"It doesn't have to end. If you want to go home or do whatever don't let me stop you."

"I don't care. Why? What's going on in there?"

"Nothing. My grandma's inside. Probably my uncle and his girl too. I don't know where my grandpa is."

On the left side of the house there was an empty car port and a dusty looking storage unit with a metal latch and a lock on it. I wondered what his family might keep in there.

“Wanna come in? We probably got better food here than ya’ll got at your place. No offense.”

“None taken.”

We went inside and Soph heated up the leftovers from out of the fridge in a pan on the stove and it was just rice and fish with fish sauce, but it was the best thing I had eaten in months or maybe years.

His grandma was literally knitting on the couch in front of the tv, yelling in a foreign language. And then she said in perfect English: “Soph! What kind of animal you want on your blanket??”

“Grandma where’s Mario?”

“Who? Your cousin is living with his gay boyfriend in Greenfield,” she said.

“I don’t care what he’s doing I just wish he wouldn’t come by all the time and eat my food.”

She turned around to look at me as she said this.

“Hi grandma. Do you remember me?”

“I don’t forget people’s faces.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?”

“Who?”

“Mario.”

“He was here earlier with his gay boyfriend Ari. Don’t worry so much you’re gonna give me cancer.”

“Grandma! You don’t have to say his gay boyfriend every time.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to say? My friends ask me what’s Mario doing and I say he’s with his boyfriend and they say, Oh my god, your grandson is gay? So instead I say he’s with his gay boyfriend and it shuts em up.”

“Okay. That maybe happened one time.”

“What kind of animal do you want?”

We went through the side door to the carport to smoke in there before his grandpa got back. We sat on metal fold out chairs. Soph took out his pocket sized pistol and wiped it down and then placed it on his lap. The gun balanced easily on his thigh but kind of freaked me out. He leaned his head back on the thin wood of the carport.

There was a barbecue, the smell of meat and smoke, and loud yammering across the street.

“Is there still army people living here?”

“Everyone knows each other. Most of these dudes are ex soldiers who live out here. Some of them probably still are.”

“Why would they live here if the base shut down?”

“Just because the base closed doesn’t mean everybody got up and left. There’s so much money in this town. They want to make it big here. They don’t want to move.”

“Damn. So you really think we’re surrounded by a highly trained and armed killing force?”

“Shit, probably. My grandpa don’t really like em. But he’s always nice and polite when you meet him. You ever notice that?”

“Notice what?”

“About my grandpa.”

“That he has good manners?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah for sure.”

“You wanna do some more?”

He snapped a little white baggy in front of my face. It kind of looked how it feels, edgy, scattered, falling apart and coming together again. Don't think that I liked cocaine, it was just strong and pure, and it made an impression. It's almost humiliating for a drug to be so effective. Like it knows you better than you know yourself. It taunts you with its purity from the other end of the telescope, beyond the phosphenes of lived reality, like there's a separate reality where the unrefined essence of nature lives. Some of it can easily be gleaned from a rush of euphoria, the best feelings in the world, sex with a beautiful person, your favorite memory recounted to you by someone who knows, a scent that you catch only when it's most unexpected.

THE MONDAY AFTER we ran away from the cops we were cracking up outside by the 8<sup>th</sup> grade lockers, going over the events from the weekend, and this girl Ashley walked right up to Warren and punched him in the face and walked away all nonchalant. He grabbed his glasses as they fell off his face. His face bloomed and leaked. And then Warren rushed up behind the girl and pushed her so hard she went flying and she rode the concrete for about a foot. She got up to turn to us and bare her carnivorous teeth. Her flush complexion dripping a pink mask. She screamed at us and we ran through the school hallways and skipped down a flight of steps and the scream echoed into a growl that got louder in our wake.

“Why the fuck would you do that?”

“She punched me in my face and I just saw red” said Warren. “Why didn’t any of you try and stop her?”

He was trying and succeeding at holding back tears.

“I didn’t know what she was gonna do,” said Soph.

“She socked you with the quickness.”

We tried not to laugh. We went around the gym to where the 6<sup>th</sup> grade lockers were all beige and decrepit and rusting but they had those sparkling locks. We examined Warren’s busted up nose close up in the shade of the library awning and Soph held the flashlight on his flip phone to illuminate the opened capillaries, like stunned night crawlers behind his face. Thor determines confidently the nose was broken and that Warren should go to a hospital ASAP. The nose was shifted, although none of us remembered if it had been that way, and it kept leaking.

Soph told him it was not broken and to just get toilet paper to stuff in his nostrils. The idea didn't work for Warren because it would make it too obvious I guess. So for the rest of lunch he just wiped the streams of blood off his upper lip with the dampened cuffs of his hoodie.

After school a crowd gathered in the parking lot, which was what we did before we went to buy snacks at the teen center, but the crowd was more buzzy than usual. Thor flirted with his crush Jeanine, all of our crushes really, and Soph and I pretended not to watch. Warren was suspended earlier during class right along with Ashley for basically trying to brutally maim each other. The three of us were called up to the principal's office too but after a few questions got dismissed. Ashley said she thought we were making fun of her in the hallway by the lockers and laughing at her so that's why she punched Warren in the face.

Parents arrived to shuttle their kids home or to baseball practice or ballet or wherever and tried to maneuver and weave their cars through the mob of kids, and get out of the round about in front of the school. A few of the parents or guardians, who surely had other places they'd rather be, got the hoods of their cars smacked, or their windows tapped on.

For whatever reason those of us who were still left there were kind of circled around the two lovebirds who already looked dreamily into each others' eyes and ours were layered over them, even those of us who pretended not to notice them, so that we really saw ourselves in Thor and Jeanine and we let ourselves be redeemed in the presence of their new love because of how well we felt we know each of the two of them individually and because of the slight possibility that our little selves in the parking lot

could somehow be collectively represented in the broken spheres of the two doves, in the crashing of their terrariums.

Anyone was basically free to shout out advice or putdowns at the two of them to relieve the awkwardness we could feel like a box of moon gravity transposed onto the parking lot in front of the school.

*What are you doing with your hands?*

*Just kiss her,* said one of Jeanine's friends.

*Say something. Stop laughing.*

Jeanine was pretty and athletic and enthusiastic in general but also not opposed to talking about disgusting things on the internet and she giggled with Thor at some inane thing and wasn't making sense at all or she had just whispered some stuff I couldn't hear. They whispered and kissed, or actually, made out. They looked funny like fish out of water with their mouths open like that.

Jeanine's friends and relatives were in the parking lot somehow and so was her best friend Mario, Soph's cousin, who was gay and a year younger than us. After Jeanine and Thor were done tonsil banging, Mario hovered around the two of them like an annoying gnat and joked with Thor and they both were laughing and he tried to give Thor a hug. But before he even embraced him Thor winded up a looping punch and made contact with the crown of Mario's head. Mario screamed, and tried to hide his face with his hands and walk away. And Thor followed him and punched him again twice. Jeanine got between them and wrapped her arms around Mario's head and held him like that and said, "Get the fuck off," and Thor pulled his arm back and turned around and left for the edge of the street.



The kids in the parking lot just went nuts as it happened but I think they were probably as stunned as much as I was. A couple of the girls said, “Oh my god” and “Aren’t you gonna defend your cousin?”

The girls wrapped their arms around Mario who was sobbing on Jeanine’s shoulder and they calmed him down and held him and we watched their group hug gracefully sink onto the oil stained road and their jeans got dirty and they cried over each other.

Scientists say that God—or whatever—possibly lives in our brain, and many of them have returned to their Christian and Buddhist and Muslim and Hindu roots. They say God is real to us because we are the ones who can perceive it as an entity and a being. Whenever we need a new religion the old god just has a child and takes a backseat on creation for awhile. And then the god child comes along to tell us that we’re not really living. We’re barely half-alive, and what we’re doing is simply role-playing at being human. We prostrate and we pray for forgiveness because we are not worthy of all the cuteness and ambition and marvel that’s in the world. And the godchild forgives us. Its most amazing achievement is in the bringing together of all the nay-sayers, the doubters, the haters, the unbelievers, and the malcontents, bringing them together and many more together under the tent of the blistering sky. It says we’re simply wearing man-suits and lady-suits, and boss-suits, and worker-suits. We’re simply living in doll houses and riding around in toy cars. That the ether of our souls has been scooped out of its grail and thrown in the sky to hover above our lives like mini gods, mini devils, mini

giants, archangels, watching us, looking down at us, observing. Watching ourselves live these lives, at one remove from the moment: a worldwide vacation we paid for to save us from the pain of embodiment. We're half-alive. Psychologists might diagnose us with dissociative identity disorder if they had a chance. Like, for example, I should have really snapped out of this a long time ago, but I don't know if I'm ready to take the plunge.

Historians say that the ancient Greeks controlled their people by feeding them moldy bread that they knew would have psychoactive effects. Many of the citizens, aristocrats, and their slaves were part of secretive mystery cults that were run by the wealthy and powerful families at the time. They grew the grain on their land and buried it underground for months until it was nice and fermented. Around October they would dig up the grain and then sow the seeds they had gathered for the next year. The rituals and psychoactive journeys were coordinated around these harvests, and they would take place in caves, in glens, by a grove of trees, or in a lair built underneath the house of one of the family members who had inherited ownership of the cult. Each member had to undergo these initiation rituals. Being a member of the cult was to participate in a community whose laws and morals existed outside of the government. It gave people order, something to do, and perhaps most importantly it was how many people were able to sublimate their weird and sexual desires through socially acceptable performance.

What's crazy is that social control through the dissemination of psychoactive drugs is a practice that goes back thousands of years, even before the mystery cults, who must have gotten it from somewhere. And a more recent example of this happened at

the end of World War 2 when the U.S. government brought over Nazi scientists to run our brand new mind control program. One astounding result of the collaboration was the manufacture and dissemination of LSD for the purpose of damaging a person's brain without any superficial after effects occurring. And with the hippy culture and the summer of love, the government experiment was a total failure, and to paraphrase a well-documented cultural icon: 'The CIA invented LSD to control people, but what they really did was set us free.'

and so on.

My heart beat like crazy and I dreamed I was simply a wet computer floating in the Pacific somewhere.

Soph heard his grandpa's truck from down the street and he stood and slipped the gun into the front pocket of his jeans. We evacuated the carport to make room for the truck. His grandpa got out slowly.

"What's up old man?"

"Hello to you, old man. You got more white hairs than I do."

"Damn!"

"You got me there, Grandpa."

"Oh my lord! Look who it is. I haven't seen this boy in a minute!"

"Hi Grandpa. How's it going?"

“You remember his name old man?”

“Do I remember his name? Do you think I’m stupid? Of course I remember little Christian. All grown up I see.”

“I’m trying.”

Soph’s grandpa towered over us, squinting at us from behind wire glasses, his broad belly extending from his belt like a shield.

“What you doing with him out here anyways Soph? I thought you got a job doing labor in Los Gatos?”

Soph was looking around not paying attention.

“We do,” I said. “We just don’t have a set schedule. We’re working tomorrow.”

“Yeah I’m a have to see about that,” said Soph.

“Soph hasn’t had the best experience so far but, you know, I think it’ll get better.”

“Not with fuckin Robert crackin the whip.”

“Don’t worry about Robert. I’ll handle Robert.”

“Well it sounds like you two have it all figured out,” said his Grandpa and he gave us a raucous, thundering laugh as he walked into the house which was like the jolliest and the meanest thing in combination that I had ever heard.

I drove home, took a long, room-temperature shower. I took Luna for a walk to the sloping patch of grass behind the church close to our house. We were in sight of the water tower which is off a beaten path from the highway. Heading south & east the highway goes into Greenfield and splits off, multiplies around the bushy fields and the

pile of mountains. I let Luna off her collar and let her run freely through the yellow, unkempt grass behind the church. There's planter boxes back there with scarecrows guarding them. Luna sprinted in a curved line back and forth, her mouth open and pink tongue flagging. I was scared she might take off toward the road so I quietly walked over and wrangled her with the leash.

And the guy who lived by the church had a gun and he told me he's not afraid to use it. I saw the thing from a distance one time. It's either a old school shotgun or hunting rifle. While I was messing around with Luna back there he called from over the patchwork fence he had made from fragments of chainlink, rotted balsa wood, shrubbery, some roses, and corrugated sheeting that guarded his property from the church or vice-versa.

On the other side his house is wide open to the dirt road that goes up the hill behind it to the top of the hill where his neighbor's house sits looking out over the city and over the Teens. He told me his neighbor got robbed the week before and the son of a bitch is lucky he wasn't there to see it or else he would have been ready to demonstrate his constitutional right to bear arms in defense of property and the American way. I told him I already knew about it because it was my friend Chip who was his neighbor on the hill and Chip had told me all about it, how they managed to only get inside the double-wide garage and weren't even able to steal the motorcycle that was in there which was like Chip's father's prized possession.

"So you do know them?" he said, eyeing me.

"Oh yeah. Me and Chip have been good friends since high school," I explained.

And it was true we used to have a good time in theater class together when we would hangout backstage and he'd play his guitar. Or we would sit in the back of the woefully decrepit and gothic theater, in the plush red seats that snapped back when you stood up. We sat back there away from everyone except for the lights people. We imagined that the things we made with our words and our creativity were as important if not more, than whatever was going on on-stage. After school some nights we would head to East Corridor Coffee and perform for mostly strangers. If we stayed late the owner might comp us a beer. The owner lived above the lounge in what I can only imagine is a gorgeous-smelling apartment.

Most days in high school I wanted to be a musician that I am not and Chip wanted to be a kind of offbeat poet and that sums us up pretty well.

The guy on the other side of the fence said: "Well, keep your eye out for any of the criminals that live around here. If I see em I'm shootin first and asking questions later, you get me."

He looks back up the hill toward Chip's house. Luna was eating from a bush protruding from the guy's property. I yanked her away from it.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

"Yeah and another thing," he said, while we continued walking away without looking back.

He said, "I'm not aiming to shoot someone in the legs, you get me. I only shoot to kill."

Around 7pm I went back to Soph's to pick him up. He also had showered and smelled good. We went to go meet Darren at the last gas station in Corridor before the seaside suburbia meets the valley and the farmland. The sun went down in fits, smothered by roaming clouds, and created a strobe effect on the tall sign of gas prices. And there's a great green Dinosaur on the roof of the gas station like the one from The Land Before Time. We moved past the gas tanks and around the side of the building where Darren's car was. We pulled up on him and waved at him through our windows. He got out of his car and climbed into the backseat of the Honda. He looked like Hurley from the primetime Emmy award-winning tv show Lost, burly and hairy and barrel-chested and a tumescent innocence radiating from him.

"Hey fellas," he said. "What's up Soph. Oh man is Robert pissed at you."

"Why?"

"Everyone thinks that you and Christian destroyed James' water canteen!" said Darren.

"I guess he really loved that thing. But personally I was glad to see that motherfucker get his comeuppance," he said.

"I didn't even do it!" I said. "I don't know why someone would do that. It's pretty fucked up if you ask me."

Soph looked at me, nothing registered on his face.

Turning round to Darren, he said, "Yeah I did it. Who the fucks gonna do anything about it?"

I stared at the silver stud in his earlobe like it was a grounding totem.

“I don’t know dude. Robert’s fuckin mad. And James is crazy. You know that. If I were you I might not wanna go back, you know, sit out this season. And then maybe when the season ends in November you can see what’s up with apple picking.”

“Man, fuck apple picking.”

“I know.”

A woman and her daughter walked behind our car to get to theirs which was parked in the last parking spot at the last gas station leading out of Corridor, or it could be the first parking spot at the first gas station as you drive into town.

“This right here is what I got for you,” said Soph.

“Thank you guys so much for this,” said Darren.

“It’s no problem,” I said, looking out the window trying to will time to go faster. I twisted the keys in the ignition and rolled the window down halfway. I twisted the keys back to off.

We drove under blueish night skies to different people’s houses until like 2 in the morning at which point Soph ran out of the drugs in his bag. The radio station bit-crunched its way through the tame speakers with the dull thump of the bass +1. I was scared out of my mind that we might be arrested or killed. Crazy sick looking people had clamored at my car windows and Soph reacted to them with a cool sensitivity. But I was pretty much done. He called his uncle Jerzy to get some more of the stuff but Jerzy



wouldn't answer. We ended up with a few hundred but only 20 for me, which I thought was fair. Soph suggested we go back to my place so I could sleep for a few hours and then go back to his place to get more of the product. I reminded him that I have to actually go to a job tomorrow. I said that I'll see about getting him back out there too. He doesn't seem to care about the job in the vineyards anymore but the two days we were out there I think he enjoyed himself a bit and if it weren't for a handful of missteps things could have gone smoother. With a few adjustments things could be righted again.

I was lucky we had a late start time to the day. I was able to get nearly eight hours of pure, unromantic sleep. I met the other workers at a coffee shop in a beach town to the north, sans James. From there we carpooled into the Los Gatos mountains to meet the heavy, drooping grape clusters, that are grown there on the private properties and fully flowered vineyards which grow the green and purple fruit, and that cover the Los Gatos mountains with the perspicacity of lichen on river rocks.

*Apparently in the mountains there are bobcats with a predilection for hunting down the dogs of the town thus the name.*

I made the case for Soph to resume working, and Robert had plenty to say about how terrible a worker Soph was the last day that we worked. I said there were extenuating circumstances. He said he knows James can be difficult and he might be taking some time off, because we are far from the only ones to have had problems with him. He said that we'll have to see, but there's a chance Soph could come back to work sooner rather than later.

On my way home I rocketed right through the turns on Highway 17, partially distracted by the phone in my hand and the fact that my dick was out. I was rushing so I could get out of my clothes covered in dirt and vine sap. I was on the backpage website searching for an attractive prostitute to pay to fuck me and playing with myself. I found one I liked. She was shockingly beautiful. I knew I was prone to get catfished if I engaged in suspect activities, but looking at the prostitute's pictures and short video I determined that if she looked anything at all like her pictures then it would be a decent investment. I made it through the highway and sped down the fallow lowlands that jutted over the bay. The ocean water reflected a pink visor, its sweet light laid across my dashboard. When I got closer to town I texted the number from the ad on the website. I don't remember her name. It could have been Chanel or Angel. I received a call back, surprising the hell out of me. She sounded really nice and pretty and exactly how she looked in the pictures, and she told me what her prices were. I told her I intended to stay for 30 minutes. It was settled.

I parked at a hotel which is on the same street as the offramp as you're getting into town. I have never paid attention to or even noticed the hotel before. I didn't have time to change my clothes or clean myself up and I hoped she wouldn't mind. I texted her when I arrived as she told me to. I looked in the rearview mirror at the second story balcony of the hotel. The doors were blue. All but one of them were closed. 23, 25, 26, 27. . . .

I heard banging, shouting, and possible yelling from within the walls. The room was open. I was supposed to wait for her reply text back before knocking. I put my dick away and zipped up. There was sweat all around my collar. I got out of the car, the bleak sun's rays passing through me, and I sheepishly climbed the cut stone steps. I checked my phone but there was no response from her at all. On the second floor a man was sent hurling out of the open doorway and bashed his head against the iron railing of the balcony. Another, heavier set man with a tattoo on his shoulder stepped out of the room and looked down at the crumpled man beneath him. He reigned blows down on him, intermittently cursing him in Spanish, and I ran back down the stairs. A woman yelled, "Don't hurt him!" And there were the stunned gasps of someone being pelted. I got back in my car. I hoped the big man wasn't paying any special attention to me. Hopefully he understood I was there like him, under a similar circumstance. Adjusting the rearview mirror I saw the big man kick the other one in the ass and he limped down the stairs and away from the hotel. I considered leaving and going home and taking a long room-temperature shower. But I connected myself to the center of my gravity, and stayed put. I checked my phone. There was still no reply. So I scanned the backpage website again and found another model-like prostitute with reasonable prices, and to my sleazy fortune she was located at the same hotel I was currently parked at. Her pictures were blurry and there was a simple beauty to how she didn't look at the camera that captured her posing. She was two doors down from the other one. Her lingerie was delicately chosen in muted nude tones. The photos were obviously taken by someone that she knew, inside of a hotel room. The other prostitute's pictures from the first ad seemed to

be taken by a professional, in the bedroom of an artificial looking house, like they might have been online stock images.

I looked back at the second story and the door to room 24 was shut closed. I slunk back up there and walked past room 24. I stood in front of room 22 and raked my fingers through my filthy hair. I made a beat on the door with one knuckle. It opened nearly immediately and the woman was already walking away from me into the darkness of the room. The lights were off but the sun bludgeoned in in banded wedges. She wore socks, sweats, and a bra, the same one I saw in the photos. And another woman in the room was fully dressed. She stood there looking at her phone, smoking a blunt, and ignoring me. It smelled strongly of weed and something more perfume-y. I remembered the spliff in my pocket. I turned over the money I had just been paid by Robert for a half day's work.

"Do you mind if she stays here?" asked the prostitute, nodding her chin over to her friend, who finally looked up at me smiling, not in a sarcastic way either, but in a way that acknowledged the awkwardness of the moment while shyly holding the promise of a furtive excitement.

"No not at all," I said.

"Do you mind if I smoke this?" I asked, and pulled the spliff from the pack of cigarettes in my pocket.

"Does it look like we mind?" said her friend.

I lit up. Her friend retreated with her phone in hand to the bathroom. The door stayed propped open. I was disappointed to see her go, I thought maybe she was gonna watch.

The woman I had paid took me to one of the twin beds. She set me down and leaned over, allowing me to feel her. She unzipped my pants and brought me out and I smoked while she sucked me up. It was a feeling I remembered from college before I dropped out. Peace of mind. Then I realized I was paying to recreate what was supposed to happen organically, but I didn't care, because that would mean risking an even starker absence of love in my life. Looking over the horizon of her hips I knew it was her from the photos, that she was real. She got on the bed and pushed her sweats down to her knees, and reached over to the nightstand to grab a condom. Her ass flinched in the dusky room. I lifted up my shirt.

SOPH HAD CALLED.

I texted him back from the road saying that Robert wanted us to work.

He replied saying if he could come over to my mom's place and he would bring his cousin's PS4.

It reminded me of the time I stole Mario's shoes from out of their apartment. I was in their neighborhood randomly after school when we were kids. Neither Soph nor Mario were home but I didn't know that. I knocked on their door for awhile, getting ready to leave, before their grandma answered and I couldn't understand what she was saying as she walked back into the living room. I ran up the stairs to Soph's room but he wasn't anywhere I could see. As I made my way back down the stairs I noticed the pair of worn,

but stylish skate shoes that had a cute emblem of a pigeon on the side of each ankle, laying by the door among a pile of footwear. I knew they were Mario's because he was the true skater in the family. And I knew they were rare. I felt the pull of want, and glided down the stairs. I snatched up the pair of olive colored shoes without saying anything or looking back and just kept going, not even closing the door, just taking off at a sprint as soon as I felt the driveway under my feet. It wasn't until I got home I realized the shoes were too big for me anyway. Mario was already taller than me and it would stay that way until the last people on earth, who have know us in our short time here, have croaked and melted away.

Arriving promptly, Soph set up the Playstation 4, and we played NBA Live. I hated when people took forever, like I usually did. I told Soph he could sleep in our guest bedroom if he wanted to. I wasn't sure what the sleeping situation was like at his grandparent's place, what with them and his uncle and his uncle's girlfriend living there, but it did not seem ideal. Luna slept in the guest bedroom at our house sometimes and she had got her fur everywhere, so we'd have to find the clean bedding for him to use. Soph said he would be happy to stay the night and didn't mind the dog fur, he didn't need that much sleep anyway. He might not sleep at all, he said. He assured me he was getting his EBT tomorrow, and he would compensate me in good food, for the past and the future nights spent at our house. He didn't appear to be acting a part, and I thought for a minute that we could really support each other, really go for it. My mom loved him too. He's just someone I admired and I can't stop admiring him no matter what.

Soph had about a hundred short gray hairs sprouted from his head. He had a few grays in high school when I saw him at the last of his football games. We'd always been cool with each other, but I just didn't make the time to keep up with my old buddies. I guess I resented that I had to go to a different high school than them, and that it wasn't even a real high school. And I thought the gray hairs on Soph's head were from the pressure that he put on himself, or that his grandpa put on him, to succeed athletically and get a D1 scholarship. But I may have been way off in that regard. I didn't know what was going on with him at home. I didn't know that a home could be an illusory thing that shifted with the angle which you looked at it from. And just because I had fucked my own little life up, I felt that I wasn't so fucked up that I couldn't help my friend.

I wish I knew what the hell was wrong with me, if there was anything wrong, or if there was a cure. I was hypersensitive, and plagued by a hopelessness that was cyclical and seemingly never-ending. I remembered what George had sent to me and I tried putting myself in that frame of mind again. I just couldn't find it. I had lived in this malaise for awhile, but I had to think of it as transitional, and that what they say in the Dark Knight is true, *it's always darkest before the dawn, always brightest before night*. But I felt trapped. In a room with a disco ball and an Elliot Smith-inspired emo playlist.

Soph's grandpa called him and they bickered for a short while. He hung up with his grandpa and dialed someone else. They didn't answer and he dialed again to no avail. He looked at me exasperated. I had switched the input to a football game and bristled in the sound of crunching pads, a stadium roaring from out of the tv.

Soph said, "This bitch turned his phone off."

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“It probably died,” I said.

“We gotta find this boy,” said Soph.

“Find who?”

“My cousin dummy. Weren’t you listening?”

“No.”

We drove to the last gas station in Corridor and found Mario’s Saturn parked off to the side of a road nearby. My cd player told us it was 7pm. There were blankets and clothes piled up in the backseat of the Saturn. We couldn’t really see if he was in there or what. We pulled in front of the car and got out. The road is by the highway but it wasn’t very busy. We saw movement in the backseat area and then Mario’s wild, smiling face. He recognized me and he thought it was hilarious, which was a reaction I was getting more used to. Of course that was so much better than the apathy, the judgement, and the condescension I ascribed to people in my life before I came back home. There was something very new about my presence being a cause for laughter and surprise. Mario climbed out of the Saturn and gave me a hug. He wore a loose gray sweatshirt.

“Christian!” he yelled. “I haven’t seen you in like 5 years!”

“Yeah it’s been forever,” I said.

I was out of things to say.

“How’s your mom?” he asked.

“Same ol’, same ol’,” I said.



“She still with the same boyfriend she had?”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“You remember your birthday when we went paintballing?”

I could have said: *Yeah, Mario, it’s one of my most cherished memories.*

But instead I went with, “Yeah I remember it because I had Saturday school that morning before my party.”

“Oh shit!” said Mario.

“What’d you have Saturday school for?”

“I kind of attacked somebody,” I said.

“Well we can sit around all day and reminisce about our childhoods,” said Soph.

“But we gotta figure out how to get this car the fuck outta here.”

“You said it,” said Mario.

“What happened to it anyway? You leave the light on? Are you livin’ out of this bitch?”

“Hell no. It’s laundry day,” he said.

The sky was an electronic wound.

Mario told us his Saturn died while he was out running errands. Luckily I had jumper cables I hadn’t used before. Soph knew how to set them up, hook them into the engines. We juiced Mario’s Saturn and he tried to start it up, but it wouldn’t take. He gave it gas to no avail. We huddled back up in the middle between our cars, where the cables ran.

“Your shit is dead, bruh,” said Soph.

“Alright, I ain’t trippin. I talked to Grandpa already. He said he could come get the car later after him and Grandma are done with bingo.”

We left Mario with his car and went home.

We stayed up late and Soph told me about the case he almost caught.

“How much do you know about that double-murder case?” he asked me.

And, “What did you read in the news?”

I told him all I knew from the online articles.

“That’s just the basics,” said Soph. And he told me about the day in question.

Sand whistled off the dunes like panes of broken glass flying over the two of them, the grains dispersing and falling together. He was working out with Warren, which they had picked up the habit of doing. Soph was beat and the sweat dropped off his chin where there were a few dozen wild hairs that constantly went at each other. His and Warren’s lower legs completely dusted. As he reached the top of the dune a shriek of wind slapped across his face and he turned around to cough the sand out of his mouth.

Waves hit the beach and pulled floaties and boogie boards into the swell.

Warren ran up behind him. “Watch where you’re at,” he said, pushing him aside and getting atop the shifty sand pinnacle first. They caught their breaths looking down at the surf and watching the beach goers watching an otter or sun bathing or boogie boarding or further out surfers lurked like sharks or plunged over the crests of waves. Soph had the goal to work out his lower body to play wide receiver for CCC in the

upcoming season, and he'll god-willingly play well enough to get a serious scholarship offer from a Division 1 college.

It was only two years earlier that he played quarterback for Corridor High and led them to the small-school state championship but he didn't get the major scholarship offers that he hoped for, so he went to community college. And even though he was the skill player with the most talent, coaching, refinement, most heart, experience, and potential on the team, the coaches asked Soph to redshirt his freshman year as the team's quarterback of the future, that way the coaching staff could give another player, name Derek Rhodes, the best opportunity to get a D1 scholarship they had been working with him towards since last year when he was CCC's starting quarterback and it was speculated that Rhodes would have a fair to middling chance at a scholarship with one more year of experience. Players on the team know Soph is a leader and they had a hard time accepting him as a backup to an inferior guy. The players said so themselves at practice and made the case for Soph to the coaches who would not budge on their decision or their idea of fairness. In response Soph decided to forego his redshirt year and play wide receiver instead, trying to contribute the most he could to the team, basically what a leader does. And the coaches couldn't do anything about it.

Soph drives them to Warren's mom's apartment and they take showers. Warren makes a sandwich of turkey and tomatoes and mayonnaise and jelly and Soph sees it and makes himself one. Soph searches the fridge for juice and finds apple. He wipes the jelly off his mouth and washes his hands. They play a game of Madden, which takes too long.

They show up at a party attended by a gallery of entrepreneur types, in a hotel room, with bottles purchased from CVS. Soph drove and parked down the street from the hotel due to him being paranoid and they had to walk a whole block and climb a flight of stairs to get to the room. The tv is on to Everybody Loves Raymond and is loud enough to hear intermixed with the bass of a speaker, which can be infuriating for some people. The ones at the party talk over the show and comment on the characters they like or don't like based on their clothes or their mannerisms, which is basically the same thing, or it's not, but it could be.

Ricky, older than the rest and a dropout, stands a heavy presence in the middle of the room between the twin beds and holds neatly in one hand a globular black speaker attached by wispy cord to the silver iPod he holds in the other hand, which pumps out J. Cole at first and then switches to Drake and then Lil Wayne and Gucci Mane and Flo Rida and Currensy and Andre Nickatina and Wiz Khalifa, and he rotates through the songs so quickly and gives them only 30 seconds apiece that you can't get ahold of what the song is trying to do or what it's about, and he leans back against the bedside table most likely content to beckon forth many partial worlds on a whim. His eyes look closed but his lips move rapidly and he makes these weird faces so that he must be part of a conversation happening somewhere in the crowded, increasingly claustrophobic room, though Soph can't see anyone looking in Ricky's direction.

Girls are on the twin beds with tights, very nonchalant. They have phones and lighters and bottles. Maybe Ricky is not a part of one conversation, but he is responding to every piece of conversation he's able to pick up from his position in the room, too overwhelmed to just sit and concentrate on one face, so he's talking to everyone in the

room at once. Soph decides to believe that this is what he's doing, and he laughs to himself at the thought of it, leaning against the doorway of the room and keeping it propped open. No one looks at him for a number of minutes. Warren goes around the room giving people hugs and making fun of them and in return gets offered drinks from not cold bottles, and once he makes it back to Soph there's a cheeky grin on his face and he doesn't need to drink anymore. Soph glares at him, amused, then looks away. Making fun of people lets them know you take them seriously.

Soph for the most part knows the people in the room and what they do which is rob and occasionally shoot at people, or else work their mundane jobs. Most have guns or knives expertly tucked away in their jeans or jackets or purses, except Warren doesn't because he's a pacifist by nature, and Soph has his oversized handgun bulging out of the pocket of his windbreaker, it looks like the kind the police use. The party drinks and does drugs and occasionally a couple will dance but no one wants to be dancing at the same time. There's not enough room and air for all that. Soph sees his ex Jeanine across the room coming out of the bathroom and their eyes meet and he briefly wonders who she's with before he mentally cauterizes this train-of-thought before it can really get going and looks away. Good ol Ricky relaxes on the floor between the two beds, leaning back against the night stand, the party happening around him and headphones in his ears. Someone else is using the speaker he had to play A Kid Named Cudi. Probably one of the girls.

Warren and Soph leave the party and as they're walking down the street Ricky calls from behind them and says to hold up. He jogs over to them and hunches over to catch his breath as he easily weighs over 300 pounds and he pulls a headphone out of

his ear. He's mostly deaf in one ear even though he's barely 20 years old from the incessant, high decibel rap music that he plays every waking moment of his life (and also in his sleep), in his headphones, in any car he's in, and in his bedroom, where a moment of silence is as uncommon and horrifying to him as a never ending day of constant sunshine.

Ricky reminds Soph of the move they've been in the process of making which involves significant money and risk and says that Soph shouldn't leave the party so early because things are constantly evolving at an arrhythmic pace which he emphasizes with the slow snap of his large fingers and then a barrage of quick snaps. He says it wasn't even supposed to be a party it was supposed to be a business meeting. He says they've been in contact with the Fresno boy but he won't be around til later and they have to wait on him. That's why they got the hotel room. He says not to worry, everyone's getting kicked out of the room as they speak. Soph looks at Warren and tells him he'll see him tomorrow, he's gotta go ahead and deal with this, because he's been anxious to meet the boy from Fresno who sells these guns, no one knows where he gets them, for reasonable prices. Warren says he'll grab an Uber and then jokes saying something suggestive and motivational to Soph about them meeting the next day very early for their workout so he shouldn't overdo it tonight. Soph laughs and says, "alright", and heads back to the hotel room with Ricky.

There are three others in the room when they get back, Ricky puffing again from the flight of stone stairs: there is Jeanine, Sunjay, and Riordan, all known to Soph from living in Corridor for most of his life and finding the ballsiest and most ridiculous people

to hang out with and in Jeanine's case, make romantic love to, although he realizes it's beginning to feel more and more like worship, but in any case maybe people are like this all over the world and in all different kinds of friend groups, and the lot of them in town are not so much rebels to society as they are just scared of each other and not comfortable or at ease in public, so they come up with increasingly dangerous activities to participate in so they can be seen and heard enough to feel worthy of being in one another's presence.

"You got the piece, right?" Sunjay says from his sitting position on one of the twin beds, which are both covered by aqua comforters and flamingoes and pale pink pillows. The curtains are closed so they can be seen for the horrible and scratchy looking things that they are.

Sunjay is Jeanine's cousin. Soph feels easy now knowing she's only there because it's her cousin's party and hotel room. She doesn't look at him apparently ambivalent to his answer and his potentially bad decision making and just pulls something out of her long, full bodied hair. For an instant he thinks of the camping trip they went on together with her parents and sister, then he lets it go, or rather he sets the memory on fire with the vitriol of self loathing and also loathing for every living thing that walks the earth. The feeling passes through his mind and under his eyelids, into the room.

Soph hands Sunjay the handgun and he puts it away in the navy Macy's shopping bag which he got crumpled from the back pocket of his jeans.

“You got something stuck in your hair? Aren’t you gonna say hi to me?” Soph says to Jeanine.

She sits on the other side of the bed where the door to the bathroom is shut and the light’s on behind the door.

She says, “There’s been sand in my hair all week,” and laughs.

“I thought you were leaving?” she says.

Her shiny brown hair covers half her face when she turns and says this. Big Ricky is laying out on the wicker chair by the tv, facing the beds. His purple Vince Carter jersey is long enough to be a dress, and a conservative one, reaching over his belly and ending at his knees. He scans through hundreds of songs with whirring clicks from his iPod that glowed with the genius of hundreds of years of advancement and brutality. He taps his foot and crosses his leg and continues to tap and then he wipes his brow.

“I’ll leave if you want me to,” says Soph.

“I thought you wanted to see me.”

“No I’m gonna have to ask you to leave,” she says.

Soph is afraid she means it but laughs it off and she pats the bed next to her for him to sit down. She’s the only one who can make him stumble. The room starts to feel better and someone suggests more shots of harmless looking vodka and 10 minutes later they have finished the handle. Soph has one shot. Jeanine has no shots. Riordan is wasted looking and crashes into things. He plays defensive lineman for CCC along with Soph, who tells him to try offensive lineman this upcoming season, so they can play at the same time. Riordan doesn’t hear him and he flops onto the bed knocking the pillows to the floor and he yells and rolls over and pulls the pistol from the back of his



jeans. He says he almost shot himself again and laughs. Ricky snores in the chair.

Jeanine goes to the bathroom but doesn't shut the door. Soph follows her in and looks at her in the mirror. He puts his hands on her hips and then his arms around her. They talk quietly in the voices they used on the camping trip, in the tent at night, so no one would hear them. And it was the same voices they used in public. They learned to talk so low so as to be imperceptible to the world that had raised them.

"I thought you were selling that thing for good?"

"I am selling it. But I didn't say I'm not getting a new one."

"Why in the hell are you keeping on with all of them and their stupid fucking ideas? You know what will happen will ruin everything you wanted for your future."

"My future isn't real, it's just some idea you have."

"..."

"What? You think I'll be in the NFL? I don't think you know me that well, Jeanine. What future are you talking about?"

"You can do whatever you want dummy. But my cousin told me you want to do a robbery."

"What? Sunjay?"

"Yeah man?"

"Why did you tell her what we been doing?"

"She's my cousin bro. You can't keep shit like that from your family."

Sunjay, who is an idiot, crushes pills on a magazine on top of the tv for him and Riordan to snort. He has on an oversized black t-shirt, skinny jeans, a flat silver chain necklace, and has a light mustache. He lives with Jeanine, knows her as well as maybe anyone,

her terrible cooking, her daily routine, her soft fun side curbed by the strange malice she wears on her sleeve. Jeanine and Sunjay were childhood best friends and when she wanted to move out of her parents house Sunjay's dad, her uncle, offered her a room at their house to stay in free of charge. Whenever she's there it seems like she has the house to herself, which is what she remembers so fondly about her uncle's house when she would go visit Sunjay as a kid. She would sit in awe of the wide open rooms and high ceilings, the plush gray carpets and the big chandelier and egg painted archways, the soft armchairs and organdy table cloth, the enameled plates and red cloth napkins. She remembers feeling perfectly alone in the dining room and the "family" room where she sometimes did her homework, and those rooms felt like the start of a new life. Now some mornings as she gets ready for work at the grocery store she gets that feeling again that her life is a house with a mortgage and garage and backyard big enough for a fire or overground pool. Her life has windows which look down the street, and accept any neighbor or fleeting animal in the area.

Sunjay and her uncle hardly exist in the living room or the kitchen and they leave all the lights on when they're asleep. Sometimes they'll roam the house at ungodly hours. She doesn't know when they're actually home or not and will often get shocked by them emerging at night from their rooms, or showing up at the house in the morning.

Soph wakes up with Jeanine's arm slung over his ribs, he looks at the top of her head, at the part in her hair, the gray mottled flesh of a chicken wing.

He says, "Hey, Hey," over and over.

She wakes up and says, "What the fuck do you want?"

It's still night and the curtains are barely cracked showing a little orange light from the dingy bulb, outside the room, encased in wire so no one breaks it, or steals it. Ricky sleeps fitfully in the wicker chair his chin resting on his chest and his hands on his belly. The tv gives a dark reflection of their presence. Soph realizes Riordan and Sunjay are in the bathroom chopping up more lines, giggling, talking in low voices. He rolls over on top of Jeanine and just stays there awhile and expects her to elbow him or scream or something. He readjusts himself in his pants.

To his surprise she takes his head in her hands and kisses him fiercely. His full body weight on top of her should be crushing her but it is not. She pulls her knees up into his armpits. He watches her face move for a little while as they kiss and then he closes his eyes.

He says, "I'll call you later."

She says, "Don't. I don't want you to regret it."

Soph leaves the room with Ricky, Riordan, and Sunjay and they walk down the street toward Soph's glittering black Lexus. They whip out of there with bad intentions.

The plan is for Soph to buy a gun that is more convenient and easier to conceal than the one he had, which he already gave to Sunjay in the hotel room, who had set the deal up for him to purchase the new one. Sunjay helpfully offered to buy the old gun off him in exchange for being the middleman. And Sunjay has this connect from Fresno who has serious weaponry, like for armed robberies and stick ups and all that. Also self

defense, but by then it's probably too late anyway. This new one is small enough that no one knows you have anything on you with that kind of kick. The gun he had to give up for less than he paid for was pretty obtrusive and over the top.

Tonight it's gonna happen all because some rich Big Sur folks are on vacation to Mexico or Portugal or the Caribbean. Riordan's mom is an employee at FedEx and she knows which families are going on vacation and who will vacate their homes for a weekend or more. Sunjay arranged to get the gun for Soph, because people were tired of riding around with him when he's got this big hunk of metal conspicuously hanging out of his belt. Sunjay told Soph, the guy from Fresno is his cousin and into all types of shady shit. The guy is driving the three hours to meet them at a campground in the middle of the night because he wants to see the ocean, and also the money, and because Sunjay told him there was going to be a hotel party afterward. Sunjay wants to meet on a narrow road by the entrance to the campground. They've sent text messages back and forth to each other for days, since the last time that they saw each other, which was at a party in Fresno. When they finish with the transaction Soph has to drive them all to the rich folk's house somewhere in the pine trellised hills that overlook the campground. Then they will assess the defenses and prepare a plan. After they're done with the job he can drive back to the hotel room where Jeanine is hopefully still sleeping in the itchy bed.

Nothing goes according to plan of course. For a long time Soph's life has been a fight against falling apart, against rending and evaporating, and sundering and the driving deeper of the architecture of cracks and faults and flaws, the innumerable

mistakes and everyday affronts that plague him, until the life finally eats itself, spontaneous combustion, his life evaporated.

They show up first at the campground. Soph pulls up on the side of the road next to a field full of wildly flowering lemon trees waving at them, and also shallow effusions of sage and lavender interrupted by clutches of lanky angelica, and further on the bushy mountains with their peaks and cliffs and waterfalls that contain the wells of property and luxury and status within the gated communities. Coyotes in the brush out there whine away on the otherwise calm and assuring wind. Houses made of wood and glass and adobe in the distance. Beneath the blanket of creaturely sounds a dull crash of ocean water fizzles when there happens to be a lull in the convo, and the guys are just faintly listening to the lyrics coming out of the stereo while actually paying attention to their immediate surroundings and all the danger out there. And right when they might get ahold of the sound in the mind they have to let it go and fadeaway, and relocate themselves without the experience of crashing and drowning and the fizzing bubbling waters in the unlikely event that none of it mattered one iota to begin with. This could be your backup—your life without the background noise, the ambiance of the city—without the unregulated gaseous emissions, the blood and placenta, so you can see your life for the glowing skeleton that it is.

There's a cadre of bats hanging around a fruit tree and someone thinks aloud that it would be fun to shoot the bats for target practice.

Each one of their guns is a reflection on their personality and operative lifestyle. In a fanny pack around his neck Ricky keeps a short revolver that has a wood handle and eight chambers and a loud, obnoxious hammer and there's a self-cleaning kit that

he keeps in the fanny pack as well, more style than substance. Riordan pats his silver automatic .380 in a sweater pocket that he had kept his hand on as they drove through the forested part of the city. Now while they wait in the car for the guy from Fresno to arrive with the acclaimed gun, he shifts over in the back seat, and hiding it from view but looking down at it and inspecting it, he puts bullets into it which he had got from out of nowhere, probably from his jeans' pockets. And Sunjay has his little gun in a shoulder bag like Ricky but he won't show the gun to any body and has a few to choose from back home stashed away hopefully where no one will find them. He has a penchant for sneaky concealable weaponry which is what prompted Soph to go that route when he decided to buy the upgrade.

Sunjay says "Fuck this shit," and gets out of the car, closes the car door behind him. He sits on the hood, the engine rumbling underneath him maybe warming the back of his legs. Soph shuts it off then sprays the car water from the aqueducts at the windshield and flicks on the wipers. Sunjay doesn't look back at him, is just glooming ahead at the eerie empty road. A lantern thing warbles off a pole or a wooden post somewhere over there.

*The money, the car, the gun* Soph thinks to himself. *It has to all add up* or else they wouldn't be here, doing this.

Probing headlights emerge from the dark coming toward them slowly at the rate of a farm field tractor and then the lights pull up in the dirt 10 feet ahead of the bright moon

tinged Lexus. They keep the lights blaring and Soph can't get a read on the make of the car. It could be a Corolla.

Riordan exits the car to join Sunjay, the automatic returned to his jacket pocket. Ricky remains in the backseat directly behind Soph who checks him out in the rear view and notes that he doesn't make a move of even an inch to grab or unzip the fanny-pack turned into a necklace / gun holster. He definitely won't get out of the car though and neither will Soph. But Soph starts to catch the vibe that his three friends and partners in crime are operating according to another plan that he for whatever reason can't be made privy to. A huge fucked off problem if he ever saw one that had been impossible for him to see coming, although he should have know that something like this was always capable of popping off when you mess around with outcasts and outlaws. For example why is Ricky remaining in the backseat directly behind the driver seat when he can easily move over to the middle to allow for any small talk that might occur between them which in all likelihood would be beneficial and reassuring and calming for the both of them? Like out of nowhere Ricky is now the guard and Soph's Lexus IS the prison no matter how many horsepower it can fit in the hot front compartment or how far he really wants to drive the beauty, when in fact in reality the only thing he knows is that he's a hostage in the beautiful car he once paid for out of the handy work he found out he could do and an Almost Too Small To Even Mention no-interest having loan given to him by his grandparents. And his frequent confidant and wingman - Ricky - is showing himself to be an erratic sycophant intimidated no problem by relatively menial weaponry toted not by the enemy or by any huge problem from up above looming down over all that we do, but weaponry toted by a brother who should have his back even when

things get fully illuminated that way the truth of the matter can be had out and processed. And then there is no more room in the increasingly claustrophobic car for any further reflections.

Riordan and Sunjay are talking it over with two brightly tinged and glimmering shadows outlined in the gleam of the headlights. The guys aren't carrying anything but they might have it on them tucked away in a jacket or someplace. Then Sunjay exchanges the stack of crumpled bills from out of his jacket for the little dream of a firearm the other guy takes out of his sweater pouch and holds out to him handle first. The four of them shake hands with each other and say their farewells. They turn around and Sunjay and Riordan make their way back to the Lexus. They pause. Riordan turns his head slightly as if he hears a disturbance like a coyote or an owl. Maybe they did hear something but Sunjay zips around his gun in hand from out of the hidden place and he kind of sits down on the hood of the car in front of Soph, partially blocking the view, and starts spraying his automatic. In a blink of an eye Riordan is armed taking a few heavy steps back toward the other car the headlights still on and his shoulders hunched like a police man. The gun is tiny in his hands but he holds it like a longsword. He's shooting for just a second and then he stops, lowers the gun, and ducks over into a bush on the outskirts of the meadow. They're getting shot at now, return fire, and bullets are flying from the direction of the gleaming headlights, and the bay water is hissing now as though they have found themselves in the midst of a rushing river, getting louder and more resonant almost drowning out the bullet pops. One pierces the windshield of the Lexus. Soph hits his head on the steering wheel trying to get away and almost knocks himself out. The horn beeps accidentally and then horrible silence.



He's looking down at the blankness around the pedals and he sees stars and dancing lights. A heavy weight jostles the car, someone is yelling.

“Just drive or I'll leave you here too,” says Sunjay.

After he got rid of the car Soph went away to college to play football in Colorado and the mountain air he felt he easily adapted to because of the home field advantage it provided for the team. He took to the new environment like a shark in the bay. He started at the bottom of the depth chart but in a week he was the starting quarterback. He liked his classes because he didn't have to go most of the time. The tutors that were assigned to him ended up being extremely helpful in getting him prepared to write papers, and getting the papers into his professors at a reasonable clip. English and history were the simplest for him but economics drove him up a wall and happened to be his main source of stress while in college. When presented with certain economic problems he found that his mind would go into strange places and come up with arcane and ridiculous postulations that had nothing whatever to do with the subject of the class. As a result he didn't turn in any homework and completely skipped the midterm.

Money wasn't a problem for him there due to the fact his uncle Jerzy was regularly Fed-Exing him loads of whatever he needed and was trending in the college sphere. He had a old Corridor High teammate there, name Jose, who actually helped him secure the scholarship at the school, which is a D2, not necessarily a joke football-wise. Jose was a walk-on on the football team and more than happy to direct the aloof coaching staff toward the YouTube videos of Soph playing quarterback in high school. They were

in awe. He let them know that Soph was redshirted at a community college, then had decided to play wide receiver, so the coaches in Colorado were within their power to go ahead and offer Soph a full scholarship to come play QB for them, if he could manage to get himself and his stuff over to campus before the regular season started. He obliged and had the time of his life for a few months in the mountains. Often Soph found himself at a house party directing the action of the party, and what everyone was doing, or talking about. He was getting attention from white peers he wasn't used to yet. They admired him from a distance and laughed at all his jokes. Sometimes they were interested in getting to know him, not just emulating his mannerisms. It made him feel unique and alien. When he spoke they all stopped to look up and listen. A couple of the houses he partied at ended up getting raided a short time afterward.

His good friend Jose had played tackle for Soph at Corridor High, protected his strong side. In Colorado Jose was buried at the bottom of the depth chart, playing tight end or some such nonsense that wasn't a good fit, and competing for minimal playing time on Special teams, kick-offs, and punts. But he really excelled at being Soph's wingman whenever they were off the field, not suited up and playing, but on campus, in the dorms, at house parties and in social situations. Jose allowed him to move easily between the differing social strata within the college sphere, so that they could create an expansive network of influence, and rake in more money than they ever had in high school in California. They became best friends and it was looking to be a terrific four years. Then they realized someone was talking and the police were onto them. The college town had been hit by a wave of drugs somewhat unprecedented in volume and

efficacy. The good times he felt couldn't last — like nothing does. As such things like that go he was bailed out of the frying pan only to land in the fire.

Soph's Lexus was found in Chico a few months after the slaying of the two young guys on the side of the road. There had been witnesses at the crime scene, who saw the vehicle. The police inexplicably traced the Lexus back to him, and him to Colorado. On a Saturday before a home game an assistant coach approached Soph at his locker as he was listening to music on his headphones trying to get hyped, and he told him he was wanted in the head coach's office. It was the way the dude said it, or the funny vacancy in his eye as he looked past Soph's left ear, that let Soph know the police were there, and it was all him from sea to shining sea. The two cops escorted him to the airport so he could catch a flight to San Francisco, where two more cops would be waiting for him to arrive so they could take him to jail. He was accused of double-murder.

He only spent a night in jail. The next day he told it how it happened and the investigators believed him over Sunjay and Riordan, who both claimed that he was actually the mastermind, the shooter, the robber, and the getaway driver for the whole thing, and they were simply there, witnesses to the bloodshed. His two former friends were arrested on other random charges, which allowed the investigators to piece together the case, and they were the ones to bring Soph into it. Soph's real story, the truth of it, the way he told it, saved his life, and also changed it irrevocably, concurrently chain linking him to the past in an impossible diorama without origin. Was it when he went back to the hotel party without Warren? When he decided to stay in Corridor for another year? Or when he started treating Jeanine like shit? Yelling at her in the

hallways about what she was wearing, grilling her in front of her friends about what she did the night before, who she was with, etc.? I think he knew he was being horrible at the time but he was so convinced that he knew how people worked. Was it when he failed to protect Mario from the ridiculous homophobes at school? Or when he started running designer drugs for his uncle? When his aunt disappeared? and it became clear the killer wouldn't be caught? When did it start?

When he emerged back into our town, having spent time enjoying a college experience, and then the rigors of being lassoed into a criminal investigation for a few weeks, he had a target on his back, was labelled a snitch. He found it very difficult and bad-for-his-health to be out in public, particularly to go to the places he had frequented in the past. I don't know how the rumor started that he was a snitch, who told who, nor the ways that that information circulates, but I do know the result of it can be soul crushing and teeth-breaking. Soph described to me the various times he was either: attacked, insulted, or threatened while he was in public trying to mind his own business. It seemed that everyone who knew him before, even friends and girlfriends, now knew him as a snitch. He became isolated from the community. Even people who were cool with him, and gave him the benefit of the doubt, still felt the social pressure to not associate with him as they had, so that long-tested and true friendships got to be less so, and they got to being superficial.

While he spoke, I looked into into his eyes as he looked through me and down and away. I'm a good 5 inches shorter than him, but we could meet eye to eye and it felt like a great expanse opening in my chest and I thought to myself, *I don't wanna know what*

*this man knows*. But I looked and listened and it is easier to make eye contact while you listen than while you talk.

Around midnight Soph took my car and was gone for hours. I was really freaking out. He showed up again at five in the morning just as I had to be off to work. I was so high off cocaine I woke up and thought I was asleep and still dreaming. I was half-alive.

When I was in college my cousin would funnel me pounds of weed to sell on campus. I didn't make a lot of money doing it, only a couple hundred in total over a semester. I was barely able to cover my \$900 overhead, but I smoked as much as I wanted.

One weekend my cousin visited me from Sacramento and brought over a friend and a coworker to party for the weekend and crash in my dorm. The coworker was a waitress at the restaurant where he also waited tables and they were both very charming. I imagined them over a shift competing to see who got more tips. We had a fun time when they came over, but a couple days later I got a text from him asking if the girl he had brought had forgotten her credit card in my room. I was perplexed by this question although I didn't think twice about it, and texted him back right away, and went on with the morning. Turned out to be his girlfriend who had texted me from his phone, who he shares a daughter with, and who was pretending to be him. She caught my cousin up in his lie and used my naïveté against him. I should have learned something that day, and if I didn't then you really know I'm fucked.

I paced the house and listened to the street waking up and I tried to figure out if Soph asked me to borrow my car in real life or did it happen in my dream. Luna watched me, coffee bubbled. I wondered if he just stole it and was already halfway to Vegas. Then he walked through the door looking tired as shit and I gave a big sigh. My mom was thankfully asleep and undisturbed.

Coffee in hand I took the car keys from him and told him have a good day, take a nap for god's sake. I stepped outside to a moldy coagulating sky.

I got to work and it almost fulfilled me, and for certain moments it actually did. I appreciated it all the more for the intense emotional turmoil I was going through. The sun, leaves, and overall nature got dissected in my microscope, the keyhole into the locked room. I imagined the liquid and water and blood and oil in the things I saw and in my own body. I imagined the origins of the universe and of language. I imagined how it might end in 2012. I imagined what love might feel like, if it was the secret cheat code of the universe.

I met back up with him in the afternoon at Adamberto's and we got carne asada fries and I got an horchata. There were burgundy tiles and dirty grout all over the floor. The chairs were wooden and looked hand carved. Two TVs played different soccer games with announcers talking in Spanish. A man sat eating enchiladas by himself. Two girls waited by the door for a to-go order. No one else was in there, except the cooks. The horchata and jamaica glistened in their clear tanks on the counter, and sloshed

around icily. The interior of the glass fronted restaurant was viewable from the parking lot. My boots, jeans, shirt, and hair, were covered in dirt and grape juice and I hadn't even washed my hands. My face felt crusty and I left a whitish-yellow film over things I interacted with. Light Mexican music emanated out of nowhere then disappeared. Our order was up and I got our food. Soph was drinking from a Fiji water bottle. He said the water passed through some crystals that were consequential for his birthdate and astrological chart. So he drank only Fiji. I didn't question anybody's personal wisdom. I could only make snide remarks that eventually end up going too far, or not far enough, depending on who you talk to.

I asked Soph how he had got here at the Mexican place. He said he was driving around his uncle's car. I thought that was rad, although I knew the underlying motive for it. I couldn't believe that he'd been working since he was ten at least. I wanted to help him stop I guess so I wouldn't have to worry, but it wasn't quite that. It felt like if my friend couldn't be happy then I couldn't be happy. He said his uncle is very pleased with how the dealing has been going lately, and is starting to trust him more. Hopefully, he said, he'll be fronting him more product soon. And the next order of business would be to get a new car.

We left Jerzy's car at Adamberto's in Brayden and I drove us back to where we last saw Mario which was right by the last gas station in Corridor. Apparently by the time their grandpa had gotten over there to give Mario a lift and hitch his Saturn to the truck, the kid was nowhere to be found. Nobody knew where he went. And then today their grandma got a call from Mario and he was unspecific on the details over the phone, but grandma was pretty sure that he was now in jail. We had a look. We found the Saturn

sitting there on the side of the road and we parked in front of it just like we did the day before. We got out and took a peek in the windows. The blankets still piled in the backseat in a soft acrylic pyramid. We knocked on the glass but nobody was there. It appeared that Mario had really been arrested and the Saturn abandoned on the side of the road. Grandpa wasn't able to tow it without the key to unlock it. Soph figured to just call up the boyfriend about the spare key and then we could see about towing it back to their place where it would be safe. He texted Mario's boyfriend who texted back shortly after saying the key was at their apartment but that he was presently at work and would not be back until the nighttime. And then after that their uncle Jerzy called Soph up and told Soph not to bother with the spare key — he would just come by in grandpa's truck a little later and break into the Saturn and tow it himself.

“Alright then,” said Soph.

He pressed the red circle on the screen of his phone. I mentioned to him that Jerzy would still need a key to take the breaks off and he said, “I know.”

I showed Soph the new album I was working on. I called it, *Distant Communications*. He nodded approvingly and rubbed his chin hairs and wouldn't say much else about it, and I thought that possibly it wasn't very terrible. I looked over the track listing and explained to him how I recorded them all on my terrible MacBook laptop microphone and used the distortion as a guiding principle for the aesthetic and motif of the album. I said, “I know it's very cliché but I'd say it's also very hip-hop.” Soph just laughed at that.



He asked me if I could hear myself.

"I know what I sound like," I said.

I guess the track wasn't his favorite but he said,

"The lyrics are good."

I didn't want to accept that. He was probably just being nice.

From my bed Soph said that he was worried about his cousin, he didn't know what had happened to him. I was confused by that, how he couldn't know. His grandparents had explained to us the story, filled in the gaps of what we couldn't see ourselves. They said he was arrested, for god knows what, really.

"Exactly," said Soph.

"Christian think about it," he said.

"Why did Mario get arrested? What for?" he asked me.

I could not tell him because I didn't know. But I was going to see what I could do to find out about it. I had a vague idea that his cousin had been sleeping in the Saturn when he got rolled up on. I felt it was a very odd oversight on my part. To just assume that Mario had been arrested and was now in jail and that all of it happened under completely legitimate circumstances. I should have questioned it earlier. It felt like Soph had warned me about this already. About not seeing right. But also he had just waited awhile after the fact to mention something fishy might be going on as if that was how long it took him to formulate the conspiracy in his mind.

"So if Mario didn't get arrested then what happened to him?" I asked.

"I don't know. That's what I'm scared of," he said.

“What’s there to be scared of?”

“I don’t know. That’s the scariest part. Not knowing,” he said.

I got on the computer and looked around for a few possible jails which Mario could be getting held at. Because of where we found Mario’s car, on the border of Greenfield pretty much, we had to expand the search a bit. I wrote down three numbers to jails in three different cities on the back of a used envelope that has the small rectangle of clear film on the front so you can see the letterhead or who it is addressed to. I gave the envelope to Soph and he walked out of my bedroom with it. I could hear him getting stonewalled by cold hearted telephone operators.

I rolled a spliff and took it outside to smoke. Luna was lying in the dingy garage drooling onto an oil stain.

“Hey girl,” I said, and she lifted her massive jowls to look at me like she hadn’t noticed or heard me come in. She put her head back down. I walked around her then checked the laundry in the dryer. Damp still. Go again.

We stood in the living room facing each other and Soph told me that he called the three jails but couldn’t find him.

“God damn.”

I told him there was also an online database I saw that we could check.

“Show it to me,” he said.

“Alright I will. What’s Mario’s full name?”

He said he wasn't 100% sure of his cousin's real name which seemed like it would have been annoying for the people at the jails who had picked up his call.

"Well I know his real name isn't Mario."

"Oh shit. You remember that?" he said.

"I remember a lot. I remember when your aunt died Mario started getting called that. But I forget what his name was before. That's funny. I can imagine that's a good way to feel like you're starting over."

"Could be," he said.

"I bet you didn't know Mario's got like seven different names, huh," he said.

"I bet you didn't know that... Did you? Did I tell you that?"

"You might have told me but I forgot. What if every time something bad happened to you, you got to change your name?"

"X marks the spot," he said.

"Maybe when you use the same old name over and over again it begins to take on a lot of weight you can't shake off."

"You are one optimistic motherfucker," he said.

He slapped me on the shoulder. I was flattered. I did want to be that. Had to give him credit for noticing that about me. But then I was sad because what the fuck. Careful what you wish for I thought. I feared that keeping faith in our tiny coastal town so I can see it and appreciate it all the more, and in particular my friendship with Soph, will end up leaving me thirsty and alone. I didn't want to be reminded of myself so much. Only in this town with a friend like him am I an optimistic person. Not only was I experiencing a

harkening back to reality when on rare occasions I hung out with people, unlike anything I had before, but I was also in the enviable position of being able to act on it. I got relentless with my friends. I wanted to know them but was also scared to, figuring some way to bash in their planetariums without them noticing. I wanted to lose myself in them.

I couldn't imagine him being confrontational with anyone.

There's a part of him I didn't or would not see and I wanted this to be the best part about him, not the worst, but I also thought, how easy it is to give in to fear of the unknown. I feared that I was reaching for the worst conclusion about him and everyone else.

*No one teaches what I need to know here. More life means understanding more about loneliness, so that we can meet lonely people in the places they feel most comfortable. The safe place is so small now I should jump on its back and ride it up to an overlook on the jagged ocean lined road. And then set the feeling free and watch it glide over the land of yearning oaks and laundry wash bay water, like a vigorously compacted aerosol, that will hook and slide in jagged gales until eventually it falls and kisses the cheeks of otters and dolphins and walruses and babes and teenage sociopaths, the old and the young, the living and the dead, and on the evil-doers and the saints alike.*

Soph's eyes went wide and he said he remembered Mario's full real name: "Victor Michael Arboles, the third."

I wasn't about to question how Mario had strayed so far from his given name. We scheduled a visitation to go and see him the next day. He was being held at Greenfield County Jail.

The following afternoon I picked Soph up at his grandparents place and the place contained a sinking yet bottomless depth within its parameters, the sturdy maroon door, the light glinting off the shingles, and the squat carport. On the corner beyond an oak tree: a fire hydrant and the stripe of a red painted curb and a wobbling clothesline. It might have been impolite to honk so I didn't. In the middle of texting him to come outside Soph propped his front door open with his knee and was holding some sort of container and two sodas. He shouted over his shoulder to someone in the house before the door closed behind him. I flicked my phone off and put it in the cupholder. He got in and handed me a Pepsi and I thanked him.

"You're welcome, Christian," he said with a mock serious face.

"We gotta stop at a gas station."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you never have gas in your car."

We pulled into the last gas station in town. The big green dinosaur glowed in midday sun, its scales sparkling.

Soph popped the lid off his Tupperware container and released the oily aroma of home fried food. He held the container out for me full of rice and tender chicken neatly packed in there. I took it, my mouth salivating.

"I made this earlier. It's bomb," he said.

He pulled a fork wrapped in a paper towel from his sweater pocket and handed it to me. He nodded at the food, said, "You eat half of it, I'll get the gas."

"Are you sure?" I said.

He laughed, got out of the car, shut the door. I dug in and tried to fit huge amounts of rice in my mouth and then I got to the chicken. The grains spilled over and tumbled off my grimy clothes, but I was oblivious. I still wore my work clothes and had not showered for a couple days. Soph leaned on the car while it filled with gas, and shifted it slightly. The handle on the nozzle clunked free and was returned to the holster on the side of the pump.

At the jail we spoke to a receptionist in a waiting room. She called ahead to someone. A guard in a green uniform entered and then directed us to follow him. Another waiting room this one with low benches made of polished wood slats that were bolted and sat firmly. We sat on one of the benches against the far wall and looked at our phones. We were there on time. Soph got called into the visitation room. I wondered if it would have the shatterproof glass partitions between the inmates and the visitors and the hardwired phones to talk through or what.

A chubby woman with a cloth head band in her hair sat next to a skinny little girl, arm around her shoulder, tucking the girl into her side on the bench ahead of me. The girl turned to look at me and got scared. I thought of the other time I went to visit an inmate in a jail or prison as it well might have been, and I had gone with my grandma Donna to see my dad, who was locked up in Nevada. It had been a 10 hour, air-conditioned road trip to get there. To the right of the mom and daughter in the waiting room was the door that Soph took leading further into the jail, and a blue-barreled water

fountain. I got up to wet my cottonmouth which felt like it was coated in dust that accumulates on wood shelves and in garages, then sat back down.

When we visited my dad we had been escorted through quite a large and thoroughly carpeted room that had long desks and some computers. I was confused as a kid by what a room like that might be doing inside a place that held human beings against their will. And the next room was a narrow walkway. On one side were the prisoners behind the glass partitions, and in-between them along the walkway were thick, square pillars so you couldn't look over and see how the people next to you were doing. The tan clad guard walked briskly ahead of us as if it were his job to usher us through this process. I squinted about and felt a rush to grab the filmy Spiderman mask from my pocket, the one I got for Halloween, and pulled it over my head, feeling instantly protected. I glanced at the men sitting behind the clean glass, passed behind their loved ones sitting there, while they fumbled with telephones in their shackled hands, or they opened a hand up to the glass like in that painting of the Veteran's Memorial. Not many of them had shaved recently. They followed me with hooded eyes, not twisting their necks, only to get in return the blank of my Spiderman mask. The guard further ahead of us turned around sharply and gestured with his hand to the chair in that particular stall. He had a reserved yet friendly face if I remember right. Some of the men didn't have anyone sitting in the chairs in front of them, just waiting — telephones hung up, for either their loved ones to arrive or a guard, to summon the man back to wherever he came from. I realize the worst part about imprisonment is waiting for something that won't ever happen — life to go back how it was. When I saw him my dad was cheerful but quiet as the gray scrubs he had on his body. The guard went to

get us another chair and I sat in the one. I took the receiver and my dad said he wanted to see my face. My grandma and I passed the telephone back and forth, keeping a lively conversation going, almost distracted away from the reality of the colossal distance separating us from him, blind to the clear hard truth.

We left and Soph was hiding beneath his hoodie, cinched tight around his face, but in the open air he took off the jacket and wrapped the arms around his waist, and tied them in a knot. He was bugged out.

“How’s Mario?” I asked.

Soph examined the parking lot a moment.

“Bro,” he said, “I went in there to talk to him and the dude looked like Mario but he was old as fuck. He had the same face as Mario and for a second I thought, what did they do to him? But I knew it wasn’t him unless they got a time machine in there.”

I unlocked the car. We got in. I rolled the windows down. The coke had canvassed through the phantom channels of his system and gone back into the great world and I felt I was there to witness it.

“So I sit down with a confused ass expression on my face right.”

“And he’s mugging me like he recognizes me from somewhere.”

“And we’re both trying to figure out how we know each other.”

And dude says, *‘Wouldn’t ya know it. You’re Gigi’s boy, ain’t ya?’*



He's like, *'I read about you in the papers. You boys won the state championship.'*

He asks me if I recognize him and shit and I'm like, 'Are you Mario's dad?' He says he is.

He asks how my mom and my sister are doing and I don't tell him anything. I ask him what the fuck he's in there for. This bitch won't even tell me. So I told him we been looking for his son, that Mario's gone missing, we found his car at the gas station, and the whole thing. He thinks he can help us find him."

"How's he gonna do that."

"It's family so he's gonna call up some of their relatives. Ask them if anyone has seen or heard from Mario."

"What do you think their answer will be?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to know?"

"I was asking what you think."

"Bro. Just don't crash the car goddamnit. Take a right."

"He was telling me he has a brother who knew my aunt Talia before she died and was friends with her in high school. That's how Mario's dad got to know her, because his brother introduced them. And they were all happy and together and shit. He said he talked to her right before it happened, the day she died."

"He talked to her that day. Is he really Mario's dad?"

"Dude looked just like him..."

“...He was over at their house remember they used to live like two streets down from you on Hellam. He was there with my uncle Jerzy and little Mario.”

“Yeah.”

“Get in the left lane. He said he usually went to their place with his brother Mike who was a big dope fiend he said. Some mornings they would drop Mario off at school. But his bro Mike was knocked out somewhere trying to find nirvana or some shit. Big dope fiend like I said. Holed up in a hooker’s hotel room, haha. He said him and his brother were pushing their own designer drugs back then. Talia and my mom and my uncle Jerzy were all in the loop. But I guess my mom didn’t want to push anymore. ”

“She didn’t?”

“It was all her and my aunt had done since they were kids. Just like us.”

“Family business.”

“Family, yeah. You’re good. Stay here.”

“That’s why Talia lived by you and your mom in Fort Corridor. You remember?”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where all the students were. All the parties,” he said.

“All the fiends. In the family student housing. And Victor had pulled up to her apartment and saw my uncle Jerzy was there. He said it was sus because my uncle Jerzy was never there when he was. He went in and things I guess were kind of hectic, with my aunt and uncle. He offered to take Mario to school but Talia said she would. He left and that was the last time he saw her.”

We got back to the house and creaked through the door in the pale moonlight. We were thirsty sycophants in the afterglow of stimulation, in our clothes bought from Target and Ross. I guess we felt pretty wicked. For what was in our hearts. Figuring out how to make up for it.

My mom was watching TV. We walked past her into my room. It felt like we were plotting. Plotting was afoot. Accusations were made. Luna slept on my bed, the bristly white hump of her curled in a ball so her tail was in her face, a dog eating itself, a giant embryo. I turned on the light. Soph sat on the edge of the bed and began tearing up another gram of weed on the dvd case, mixing it up with the coke dust. He licked a square patch of tobacco leaf until it was like wet seaweed in his hand, and then he pinched it into a mini upside down tunnel. While he rolled I swiveled in my desk chair. What were we plotting? To set Mario free. Soph had a crazy idea that Mario wasn't in jail or missing at all. And he had a really bad feeling which he picked up from the air and the ground. The way the world encroached upon us until we were life-sized replicas of ourselves, walking talking mannequins.

He said Mario had been kidnapped. That he was probably snatched up from the location we previously saw him at, and he might be getting held against his will in the shed outside of their grandparent's house. Because if you think about it the only likely person who could have done it was Jerzy. Who had the family under his thumb, everyone working for him, even grandma. Everybody was born into a game they had no chance of competing in, hardly had any stake in.

That's why Soph's mom had to get out of Corridor, and moved all the way to Hawaii. Something must have gone wrong those few years ago when his aunt died. And

a hole got punched through the family they all had to crawl their way out of. Or what else was there to begin with? How did it start? Was the center of their creation a myth passed down to hide a secret? Or to hide a nothingness? Those many lives must have begun somewhere with good intentions, as they would go on to lead to Soph and Mario, there must have been a blur or a whorl at the intersections of their family. A booming, gregarious black U.S. soldier stationed in Vietnam, flown to Thailand, meeting his beautiful and hilarious Thai wife who was nearly half his size. Soph and I imagined there was someone overseeing these transitions, the effect one life has on another, that we're not flying blind. But the precarious position that a belief like that puts you in, the seductiveness of this wiggly world to suddenly pull you in, its capability, the conspiracy of good and evil intertwined, bled into the fabric of life. And we didn't know what to protect ourselves from, at least I couldn't imagine what was even out there.

Maybe we started from these secret places, the products of underground markets, human trafficking. People like us. I don't want to say that we come from somewhere that is similar, Soph and I, but there could be a lineage, don't you think? A lineage older than the world we've made, what transcends borders and color, like in our distant past we were united nations of many colors. Bright mirrors to capture the movement of mechanical beings.

But I was so alone I would have believed anything. Even Soph. Especially Soph. Knowing better. Resistance. Truth. Just tattoos I had got from another time. I got them for nostalgia's sake and so I could remember.

Soph called Jerzy and we went to pick up more designer drugs from him. The streets which took you from one end of town to another, numbered 7th to 19th street, in ascending order, the Teens. Downtown shopping and industrial scenes by the beach, limestone, sandstone, marble. The shape of the bay, the different coastal cities, the mountains which capped the north and south ends, a watery bowl to tell our fortune. Our neighborhood described by its own youthful precarity.

We drove to the outskirts of Corridor, to Soph's grandparents house, on the same tract of land as the base, but just the other side of the highway. We parked across the street on the opposite curb. We were out of the range of any light poles and it was just the moon that refracted through the Honda's back windows.

Soph said that while he was in there he was going to find the key to the shed outside by the driveway of the carport. He was going to distract his uncle, or wait until he was distracted by the business of their exchange, some small favor his uncle would be willing to do for him, and then while his uncle's back was turned Soph would open the door and toss the key out to me. I thought of the nightmarish task it would be to try and locate a key in the dark, metal clattering, and then kneeling in front of the shed to quickly and quietly unlatch the padlock from the short wooden doors which have been bolted heavily for who knows how long.

I wasn't ready to save anyone. I was too nervous, my hands gripped on the wheel. But Soph's crazy idea had sort of enflamed my paranoia. What if Mario was trapped in the shed? How did he get in there? I wanted to be a part of what was happening, what my friend was going through. And find what I didn't know, what I didn't want to know,

and what was possibly hidden. To weave myself amongst the leaves and grass and hang on to that. I caught the flying silver key wobbling in the silent dark. My hands shook as I lodged the key in and swung the shed door open. There was only dust, and some dusty ass clothes in there, older than time itself.

Soph was a mountain moving through water I couldn't get ahold of, and maybe I did know that and I was going to prove the things I knew to be wrong, because he was essentially the Titanic, and it hardly mattered if I was there to save him or not, because I couldn't do shit about it. And then I can arrive at a world which overlaps with this one but I haven't been able to see.

6.

I'M IN A FETAL position on the bathroom floor. There's a bath mat scrunched up beneath me. I'm crying and thinking bad thoughts and kicking the toilet and I consider hopping in the bathtub. The 6th grade has been a disaster. In reality it's not so bad, but for the first time I've let myself down and felt I've disappointed my parents by getting Cs and Ds. My dad waits outside after driving from Sacramento to pick me up and I just can't understand how I was so disinhibited throughout the school year that my grades suggest some terrible outlier in my personality, in my life and willingness to succeed, in my capacity to do the hocus pocus.

My mom knocks on the door.

"Is everything okay son? Your dad really wants to see you. He's outside in his Nissan waiting for you."

"Why!?" I wail at the door, knowing full well exactly why. Feeling simultaneously unworthy of anyone's attention and too good to be shuttled around the state like a family heirloom everyone wants a piece of. My grandma's wanna see me, my aunts and uncles, my cousins, she says. I know all this. I get in the tub and watch a daddy long leg nested by himself in the corner. The wall of the tub, the chipped sliding door, and the various bottles are grimed up. Twenty or thirty minutes in there. She knocks on the door again. I exit the bathroom my face waxed in nervous sadness and grab my Nike duffle bag that just has some dirty clothes and a Darren Shan novel in it, and go to my dad's Nissan to spend another summer with him and my stepmom and siblings.

June and July are indistinguishable. We have Rock Band, the microphone, and the soft fake instruments that go with it. There's no dog. There's an over-the-ground pool taking up most of the backyard and the dull plastic tub stands 5 feet high with a little metal ladder to climb in on the far side by the fence. An efficient garbage disposal. An ice making fridge. My grandma Donna and her ex husband have moved in with disastrous results. They can be polite enough when they need to be but are constantly complaining about each other behind their backs to anyone who will listen. There's a treadmill and a benchpress in the garage and protein powder on the kitchen counter. There's a chart done in neat pencil magnetized onto the fridge displaying a strict yet light workout regiment on a week by week basis which is fit for any young man wanting to put on bulk, and detailed with the proper amount of protein powder to take before and after the workouts, but also made for me and my brother to pay attention to or follow if we really are up for it. Also on the fridge various kinds of art done by my siblings.

I idle away the hours and days in front of a square black box of a tv that could fit at least 10 of me inside it. I live in a movie theater where someone in my class would likely have their birthday party and have it catered by Domino's or PF Chang's and them and all their friends can watch any films that have been released and also the films currently being shown and advertised on the outsized silver portraits that cover the walls of the theater. Or seasons of almost any tv show. My dad has shown me how to pirate entire discographies of rap artists I like off the internet, such as Eminem, Mos Def, Nas,



and all the movies and shows I want. It's a loophole in the law of intellectual property but it does serve the needs of a creative commons in my opinion.

When I get tired of the oily posture of a TV consumer I like to drift out to the backyard and throw my shirt off, climb the ladder to the pool, and let myself fall in sideways the water's greeting a friendly punch, the gravity and collision and the liquid tunneling up my nose and welcoming me. I get out and sit in a chair and then drag it out from under the shade to let the sun dry me off while I think about video games or some dumb triviality like that. I think of a video game where you play a human-being on earth, a veritable nobody, and all you have to do is decide what you want to be. You have a choice of a Jet Pack, an Invisible Coat, or X-ray Goggles. In game you can talk to animals and be friends with them. You can grow crops or make potions. Or you can be a rogue and rifle through others peoples' belongings. Or you can kill them.

I waste days away and raze my mind in whimsical digital fragments. I really can't plan out or dictate or assign any conscious motive to my thoughts. I remember the hero's journey that leads to enlightenment and the one about the man who sold the world, and wonder which could be me. The hero urging me past the chaos and fear, past politics and philosophy and love and art, past reconciliation and integration. Past the threshold, the point of no return, past the judge, jury, and you, persona non grata, habeas corpus.

On a hike we take a bit north of the house my dad goes ahead and as he's trying to cross a creek with my younger sister on his back he goes and sprains his ankle and my sister goes tumbling into the water, but my dad manages to break her fall. I imagine

her getting washed away down stream and deposited into the murky ocean her gold hair bobbling on the rocks. I run to pick her up, though my stepmom gets there first and hitches her on her hip, and she's crying although thankfully she's really mostly fine and unharmed just surprised at getting dropped into brilliantly cold water. My dad yells and cusses with passion I only ever see when he's busy fighting with my grandma Donna over some trivial matter or when he's watching basketball so we know that the pain is real and we need to get to a hospital. My stepmom hustles us down the hill back to our car while her and I proffer my dad our shoulders to lean on to gently get him over there.

Once he gets home from the hospital my dad takes the pain meds he's been prescribed but they're not as effective as he'd like. My step siblings stay over for the week. They switch off staying at their dad's house and our house. We play Rockband and swim mostly and watch YouTube videos at night. While we lay in our bunks waiting for sleep to reach us I tell them stories about my friends back in Corridor and how wonderful they are and how they're going to grow up and be famous. Much more substantial than what we're doing here in our insulated summer.

*But I'm more isolated than my sibling are. Their whole lives are here. When they leave our small hologram and go reengage the world at large, they will find a position among their peers that they can make into a path. The path my siblings make is the only one I'm able to follow. It becomes the easiest way to get to them is to watch them from across the fields and highways and valleys. How they maneuver a life through so many quadrants of perception. One day they will have to drag their lives from somewhere else to plant them in new soil, fertile or not. And have to prune, curate, cauterize the*

*outgrowths, lookout for bugs, and let dry in a cool-aired environment to prevent bacteria, mold, degradation of life.*

My brother is so tiny sometimes I'll throw him around the room when I get mad at him or he beats me at a video game we're playing and then I watch and watch him go spinning and screeching into a couch or bookshelf or bedpost or sometimes the TV. When he beats me at a game I get so mad I instantly become convinced that he's cheating and that he plugged in some cheat code when I wasn't looking. I'm so sure there's no way he could have beaten me fairly. I get so upset I stand up and pick him up by the shirt and shorts and fling him as far as I can trust him. And I can't believe it every time that he so obviously beat me without using any cheat code and why isn't it so obvious at the time when it happens? That the obvious thing is true, but I haven't been able to realize it when it matters.

I show mercy and pray he isn't hurt.

My dad misses work due to his ongoing ankle fracture injury which doesn't seem to get any better with time. It actually seems to get worse whenever he walks on it or takes a walk anywhere, to the mailbox or garbage can or bathroom, and when he's done with his exhausting trek he'll sit down with us kids for a bit and pull off the walking boot and show us how aggravated and swollen it makes his ankle, just the daily habitual tasks we all apparently feel are necessary for him to accomplish even because of and despite the bad sprain. We expect him to perform at a modicum of self-possessedness

and authority, for him to fit a mold and plaster cast of sincerity, a flexed identity point that he is unwilling to concede. He stays angry and limping, his ankle purple and broken.

My grandpa cracks open old canisters of Vicodin to give to him.

My grandma Donna says the old man has prescriptions for everything.

My grandma has in her room a painting of a Vietnam War memorial also known as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. I stand next to her and I can talk about anything with her and she swivels in her computer chair and is flushed in the screen glow. She's playing some game with crashing jewels. They explode and shatter. I reach up and move dust around on the glass of the painting, which shows a man very nicely dressed and well-groomed placing his hand on the giant black monolith that is the memorial, made of glittering stone with a blaze of electric light going across it. Etched on are many of the names of people, or really the Americans who died over there. Looking at the painting I get anxious and upset at the old man with the liver spots in the next room over, for what I don't know, but only for what it means to my grandma. And in the painting the nicely dressed man is leaning against the memorial and looking somberly down at the leather shoes on his feet, although you can feel him looking right through his feet down at the center of it all, as he meditates on the memorial's heaviness, looking back at him in the reflections off the huge memorial rock are his brothers in arms in their green uniforms from 30 years before, helmets agoggle, standing huddled up with dirt and grime all over them, and smiles nearly too subtle to notice that are barely emerging from the fleshiness of the young soldiers' heads. I see them as a rogue's gallery of family members and possible selves. More interesting though is the nicely

dressed and obviously grieving man's own reflection looking back at himself as a happy lean youth in dingy Army fatigues. He can't look his younger self in the eye and his younger self forgives him for that.

The sad, well-dressed man from the painting happens to be a spitting image of my grandpa, but much younger, at least in my mind's eye the man from the painting and my grandpa happen to be replicas of each other.

My dad goes ahead and takes to the Vicodin my grandpa gave him like a bloodhound at a murder-fest and he eats them all up. After that he goes to a local N.A. meeting at the high school gym and during a coffee break he inquires with the man drinking coffee next to him where he might score high end designer drugs. The man tells my dad directly. My dad's path is laid out before him and he doesn't see any sign or light or marker before him to stray him to another path, or to tell him if this even is a path.

When he had got out of prison he did well enough to give me all kinds of things. Anything I asked for he would get for me. And it can seem like none of the other stuff ever happened. What I'm not sure of, is what he may have lost.

7.

HE LIKED TO WAKE UP and do something before he had a chance to do nothing. He put on his old grey running shoes and took off toward the water tower that peaked over the seaside town. He was in better shape than he was when in high school. He put the water on to boil for his tea before he left his house, really his parent's house, giving himself a reason to come back home, or a timer to motivate him to run faster.

He came panting down my street in a sweaty huff, his grey shirt sticking to him, the sun on his shoulders. I was smoking a cigarette on the front porch where there was a wooden seat with cushions and the yard swarmed with potted, thorny succulents—from very tiny, fuzzy green puppy paws to succulents that reminded me of alligators. The small patch of packed dirt in front also had a few plants, a short rose bush, an animal sculpture here and there. I sipped my coffee and stared at Chip, and tried to keep the smoke out of my eye. He had a cool sheen on him. He said he just came by to say hello. He was in the neighborhood. I thought of course he's in the neighborhood because he only lives two streets away. I asked if he wanted a cup of coffee and he said he did. We went in to get it for him. We had met in high school and were friends, but it wasn't until after I graduated college and moved back home that we became best friends. We started hanging out a lot and he showed me songs he had made with his band, and songs he had made by himself, and he asked me my opinion on them and what kind of music I did and didn't like. I was very annoyed by him most of the time, but I couldn't help being drawn into his self-centeredness, like gravity, or it could have been charisma but that doesn't seem right. I'm not trying to give the impression that I want to

figure something out about Chip, as if the act of writing would give me a key to access who he is. No, I'm under no illusions about this man, I just want to explain a curious gift he gave to me once, and what that meant to me. The gift was not a thing, and neither was it a feeling or an idea, but I guess you could say it was a concept. And not a philosophy, or a way of thinking or being. You could say it was an abstraction. He gave me space.

He drank his coffee black, while we chatted about the weather, politics, conspiracies.

Then he said, "Why don't you swing by my house tonight? You busy?"

"No, yeah, I was going to. I was gonna call you when I'm done with work."

"Good. Right on, man. I'll see you tonight then." He left with a few gulps left in the cup, where the sediment floated.

I got off work around 9 or 10 pm and wanted to call Chip like I did almost every night when I got off work. First I stopped at the liquor store where there's always something crazy happening, arrests, petty thefts, and loud, ostentatiously polite conversations between customers who don't even know each other, probably drunk, but still have made the convenience store their own. And made me feel like I was excluded from this nocturnal community, and thank god for that because they weren't a very beautiful lot but they did have moxy. I thought this over while I waited. I brought my 40 oz. of beer to the cashier, a squat middle-eastern or European woman, who looked me up and down and having decided something smiled at me. I paid with cash and clutched tightly the tall brown paper bag wrapped around the cold bottleneck.

As I drove toward his house I wondered what Chip had done with the rest of his day off, if he recorded anything, or read anything, or if he had hung out with his girlfriend.

I drove up the 100 foot gravel path that lead to his house. The property was called 'Old Heaven Hill', it says it right on the wooden gate, which was always left open, but you can see on the side of it a sign painted in blue and gold. Their house was small, but nice, and there was a double-wide garage that also served as an effective recording studio for Chip and all his friends to make music in. I wanted to be one of those friends who made music there, but it seemed like he was relying on me more for personal reasons rather than musical ones. He saw me as a confidant. Or I don't know what he saw me as but I like to think there was something different about our friendship. Our friendship was special compared to his other friendships. But I just thought that he didn't want to include me with what he was doing with music. With his band and his stuff. Not anymore at least. And I also couldn't afford to pay him anything for recording my own songs with his equipment at his parents house. I wasn't sure if I should pay him or if he wanted me to give him money for his time and the use of his equipment. I was aware of other artists who recorded with him and would pay him. Also friends. But we had already made a mixtape together using beats he had produced so I probably felt we were past that point of owing and debt that existed between people. So we stopped making music together. We just drank and goofed off mostly. Sometimes we busted the camcorder out and made silly, absurd little movies.



I tapped on the glass of the door to his room, which had its own entrance, and its own bathroom. I think Chip's parents may have designed the small house themselves, because it was sort of fancy and had all the amenities. He answered the door with a lit pipe in his hand, which I don't even know why, because he didn't really smoke like that. I played along and hit the pipe, but unlike him I inhaled it. I blew the smoke at the wind chimes that dangled from the porch in front of his room. I looked over the wood steps I stood on. Chip walked out on the porch.

"What are we doing wrong?" Chip said.

"With what?"

"With life, with everything," he said.

"We're not doing anything wrong."

"Yeah but we're also not doing anything right."

There were little orange pots on the porch's bannister with dead plants inside them. There was a large seashell covered over in spider webs. There was a rusted pistol nailed to a post through the trigger guard. Chip's room had its own side yard. And the house was protected from wind by dozens of blustery, overgrown pine trees. His dad had planted them. Their branches were like dragon tails swooshing in front of us. The night just was what it was. Mostly outlines, traces of yesterday.

A near infinite morning. A September morning that sat longways and peeled back to wrap you in it. A messy bed and the window cracked for cold air. Sunlit room with

wood floors, and the shades drawn downward like resting monks. The room plant-less and covered in dog hair.

My mom's old scratched up wooden desk from college was in the corner and held my hefty aluminum laptop. The thing was always hot and steaming like a gargoyle growling in the corner protecting the secrets it held within. I scrambled between my room and the kitchen and carried big cups of coffee that occasionally slopped over the side. I was careful to mop up any spills with my socks. I took a couple sips of the sweet coffee and then I set it down on the old desk. The screen had squares and bars. I hunched over the aluminum beast and played my music back again, for the 10th time, the 50th, the 100th. For I don't know how many times. Losing sense of time and place in the din of my voice's recording. For as many times as it would take, it seemed like.

I wrote down lyrics to a beat my friend made. The beat went *dun, dun-dun, dun, dun, dun dun*. I wrote, *I'm alone, but I'm not by myself*. I felt better after writing it down. I heard the neighbors on both sides of me talk and laugh in their yards. My mom had gone to work and I was alone. My free time was precious to me so I piled it onto my computer trying to make something. The dog clacked in. I could hear her by her rock-like nails. She jumped on the bed, laid down. I wrote another line into my notebook, *they said I wouldn't be shit, now I really see shit*. I opened the camera-app on the computer and looked at myself for a little while. I mouthed the lyrics to myself and then I switched on the beat and I tried to sing the lyrics in rhythm and I was only moderately satisfied with that so I hit the red record button on the Photobooth app and I sang the lyrics again and continued on with as many mutations of those lines as I could think up, until the beat got to the end of the bar and ran out. I replayed the video and tried to imagine I

was another person listening to it for the first time. Most of the things I was saying were idiotic. A couple of the lines were satisfying.

As the cadence of the words slipped through my mind like a sieve I became aware of the origins of many of these images and phrases I had been repeating to myself. There was a common story that held all this ephemera together, a tapestry of remembered times of younger days and the bad judgements we had of each other back then. I took the best lines I came up with from the video recording I had playing on repeat, and I put them down in a pleasing order in my notebook so that they looked like a poem. I remembered in high school when I would be in class listening to music on my headphones, and writing down the lyrics from my favorite verses, and the utter surprise I had at how those words would fit together. On the page the words held some kind of mystery or power that I wasn't able to pick up on from the songs themselves. When I wrote them down in my notebook the lyrics didn't look like any poem I would write, or even could write (this was before I knew how to write lyrics). The raps I copied into my notebook actually looked more like the poems I would read for English class. They were full of enjambments and pauses, and crazy line breaks. They weren't predictable at all, but still followed a coherent progression of ideas. They told a story. I wondered why we didn't study rap in English class, but then again my English teacher was over 70 so that would be a lot to expect. And it might have been her who had inspired the urge in me to focus on the words in these songs, and to focus on my own ideas instead of school.

I became very interested in the crime history of the city. The murders and disappearings and other bad things. Soph's case came up almost immediately and with several lofty headlines applied to it. I read all I could without paying a subscription. The

articles laid out the basic facts of the case, who was involved, how it went down, this and that. The motive wasn't given. Another piece explained how they got caught. How they might have got themselves caught. And a lack of empathy or any humanity throughout. There were a few comments from the killers, a few from the survivors.

I found a more in depth report which stated that one of the rulings from the original case had been challenged or something like that. The writing and the website it was on were more legal oriented. They went into the case day by day and explained a lot. They said what the evidence was, how the police made their determinations, and how they made the case. They gave a breakdown of the robbery and the killings. How it played out in trial. It was educational at least. But they still didn't really state a motive. I guess it was so cut and dry that no one had to report a motive, there was no need. Yet there was an interesting quote from the prosecuting lawyer.

He said, "I would not recommend that you, ladies and gentlemen, look for a motive in order to judge this case. One isn't needed here. The truth is that criminals are stupid. And they do stupid things, that we can't explain."

THE END