

KIDRON ROAD AND OTHER STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Kidron Road and Other Stories is a collection of fiction that ranges from the soberly tragic to the magically real. The characters in each selection are molded by their choices, the choices of others, and the cruel whims of fate. I am fascinated by the way fatalism and free will intersect in the human experience. Therefore, my work often explores the paradoxical way lives are molded by past decisions while, at the same time, those decisions seem determined by outside forces.

For My Swinger of Birches

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KIDRON ROAD

The last night of July, my brother and I fell asleep to sirens mourning in the night and the smell of the prairies burning. Long after Lucky stumbled upstairs into bed, we lay awake on air mattresses in the den, jazzed by the commotion that was sweeping through East Texas. I spoke to Sketch in the dark until we were sure the old man was asleep, then we snuck through the sliding glass door to smoke Reds and drink Lone Stars Sketch swiped from the fridge. Foreheads beading sweat, we pulled ourselves onto the roof to catch a coastal breeze but it was useless. The sky-scorched shingles still radiated heat. We sat up there anyway, sipping beer between lungfuls of smoke, our shirts stuck to our skin. The neighborhood was quiet and dark except for the buzzing of night-bugs and the scattered boughs of lacebarks lit an electric green by the streetlights. The purple rooftops bulged like ocean swells in stasis and when Sketch stood and flung his empty bottle into the night, I imagined we were castaways tossing messages into the sea. Glass shattered somewhere in the dark and I looked beyond the canopy of manufactured homes to where the fire crowned the horizon.

Helicopters roared in from the east. The choppers ripped through the air, loud clusters of red and white lights flashing in the sky. We jumped and whooped like savages as the wind of the rotors tousled our hair. In their wake, the neighborhood went mad. Dogs snapped at their chains, lights flashed, doors thudded on doorframes. The helicopters disappeared. Quiet returned when the beer was gone and so we slipped inside again and rested, the swaying shadows of green-gray trees filling my eyelids with lead. I opened my hand and ran my finger along my lifeline until sleep took me away, the yellows and oranges of televised fire stroking my palm. Tomorrow, we would watch the world burn.

I awoke with ashes in my mouth and knew that the wildfire was near. I stretched out and relished the cracking in my spine. Maybe the wind hadn't changed direction after all. I tossed a pillow at where my brother had slept but he was already gone. Sketch wasn't one to let daylight waste. On the television, a newscast chronicled the blaze storming the highway. A silent wall of fire licked the power lines. A reporter gestured at asphalt melting into streams of tar. A wide angled shot of firefighters in battle formations. Then with a flash it was the weather and sports and a Cadillac commercial before an aerial view panned over firebreaks crisscrossing the backyards and ballfields of Corpus Christi like Nazca lines drawn by an errant god.

I showered, dried off, and pulled on some jeans and a *Metallica* t-shirt emblazoned with an electric chair and the words "For Whom the Bell Tolls." A note was stuck to the toothpaste splattered mirror. Sketch's scrawl was illegible but the message was clear.

Jeremiah, Hose down the house. Meet me at the bate shop.

Every morning since the fires started, I'd begun my day with a ten-foot climb up the trunk of a close growing Carolina basswood, balanced across an overhanging limb and dropped on top of the roof to hose down the shingles. Squinting up at me, the morning sun cast odd shadows upon Sketch's face as he paced below, his skull discernible beneath taut stretches of skin. My jeans scraped on the wet grit of the roof until I swung back to the earth to see my brother watching from behind a falling wall of gutter-water. That day the house would fend for itself. I loaded my backpack with some camping odds and ends, a couple of bottles of water, some beef jerky, my KA-BAR and an olive-drab field shovel Lucky kept in the back of the hallway closet. I slung the pack over my shoulders and pedaled my ten-speed down Kidron Road

in the direction of the fire. I saw the neighborhood as if through a cataract. Shapes without form, shades without color. Streets without destination in a skyless world.

Kidron Road was the yellow of bleached bones and sprang from the heart of Corpus Christi. Narrow and two-laned, it crossed miles of suburbs and rural communities beyond the Nueces County limits only to end in the desert, its fate foretold for miles by yellow caution signs jutting from swells of horse-crippler wavering in the sand. The road never swerved or turned and, though it was known by many names, when the pavement gave way to dirt a mile east of Leth Metal and Salvage, it was called Kidron to its end. On a clear day, I could follow the road to where it vanished over the horizon, but that day the path was lost in the smoke and I rode onward blind. It didn't matter. Everybody knew that Kidron Road went nowhere.

I followed the tracks Sketch left in the dirt, weaving carefully to mirror his path. I was alone with the creaking joints of my bike frame and the metallic whir of changing gears. The forest didn't rustle. The birds didn't call. Even the incessant buzz of insects was absent. The silence was aggressive. I knew that animals could sense when a disaster was coming, thought perhaps they all had fled and asked myself why so many people didn't do the same when destruction headed their way. It didn't matter. The fire would be here soon.

The bait shop sat on the corner of 27 and Kidron, the last stop if you didn't count the salvage yard and the CEMEX plant. Sketch was there already, sitting cross-legged in the shade of the wooden walkway, his arm elbow deep in the Coke machine, a flop-eared dog yipping and licking the back of my brother's neck as he tried to pull a free soda from the belly of the machine. I got on my knees and called to the mutt.

“EP! Here buddy!”

The dog stopped circling Sketch and ran to me. I wrapped him in my arms. EP stood for *Everybody's Pooch* which was what he was. Nobody's dog. Just a stray we found limping down Kidron one day after school, the victim of a hit-and-run we nursed back to health in an old tool shed nestled on the corner of Lucky's property line. Her fur was black and her body was stout like a pit bull but much smaller and with the face of a terrier. I splinted the leg with some sticks and duct tape like the diagram in an old Boy Scout guide and we fed her scraps we snuck away from lunch and dinner. I was happy to take care of the dog but it was Sketch who fell in love.

The soda machine clunked and Sketch clicked his teeth and pulled out a Dr. Pepper. He held it out to me and I popped the tab and drained half of it before handing it back.

“Nah. I had one. She's got ticks again.”

Sketch pulled out his Zippo and lit a Red, the smell of tobacco sharp even in the acrid air. He held another cigarette out to me and I lit it with his lighter. EP circled our legs.

“How you figure?”

“Slept in the woods. Probably got them sleeping in the fucking woods.”

Sketch looked up sharply at me as he said this and exhaled a cloud of smoke. His tone was no accident. When EP was well enough to walk, I convinced Sketch to set her free. Lucky would drown her or worse and Sketch knew it, but the idea of the dog being homeless still made Sketch angry and even if we did feed her table scraps most nights, I knew Sketch resented my reasoning. Ever since then, EP had been free to roam Kidron Road and neither of us knew where she spent her nights. She just bounded up to us on our way back and forth from school,

somewhere between the bus stop and Lucky's house, panting and wagging her tail as if this was exactly the life EP would have planned for herself if given the chance.

Sketch called to the dog and she jumped into his lap. He pulled the animal's ears back and flicked the Zippo open, holding the flame up to the bloated abdomens of the blood suckers. One after another they withdrew their heads and fell to the ground. Sketch let the dog loose. My nose wrinkled at the smell of burnt hair and my brother stood up. Sketch was wearing Lucky's belt and buckle. He saw me staring and grinned, tapping the pewter GOD BLESS AMERICA with his index finger. I understood why Sketch hated Lucky even more than I did. Antagonizing him made a sick kind of sense. When the beatings came, Sketch always got the worst. Even when I deserved it, Sketch would start in on Lucky and channel the old man's rage in his direction. Last month I overflowed the toilet and didn't clean it up fast enough. Lucky took the belt to me but Sketch called him a motherfucker and I took refuge in the bedroom. An hour later Sketch shuffled to the foot of our bed and lay down stomach-first on the mattress. His face was red and he was trying to compose himself.

Can I have some ice?

I left him there and tiptoed over the checkered linoleum floor and filled some Ziploc bags with ice. When I placed the bags of ice on Sketch's legs and buttocks and lower back, I lifted my brother's undershirt and caught my breath at the sight of bruises the color of beets, stripes from Lucky's belt three fingers thick. We were silent for a while, then talked about whether or not the Dallas Stars would have a team that year and if Brenden Morrow was a flash in the pan till we both fell asleep, Sketch stretched out on the bed and I curled up on the floor in a quilt I'd

dragged from the linen closet. I awoke and Sketch was gone and the bed was made, the water filled Ziplocs quivering upon the comforter.

“We need to get moving if we want to make it to CEMEX before the sunset.” Sketch was crushing EP’s ticks in the dust with the toe of his Reebok.

“It’s three miles away, tops. It’s two thirty at the latest.”

“I want to make a detour.”

“Where?”

Sketch shook his head.

An eastbound wind picked up and blew some of the smoke out to sea. For the first time in weeks I saw the features of the horizon and where the fire burned. No wall of flame rushed in our direction— it was still too distant for that. Instead, a pillar of smoke as tall as the horizon was long blackened the sky as it stormed its way to heaven.

We shared a Marlboro as we rode, EP panting behind us until our path was blocked by hundreds of yards of dirt piled upon Kidron Road. The mound stretched far in each direction and above the firebreak, I could see that the deep green boughs of the forest had shriveled and died. I imagined what lay beyond.

“The fire couldn’t’ve made it this far,” I said. “Hasn’t crossed 70 yet.”

Sketch and I stashed our bikes in some nearby brush, careful to cover them completely with palmetto fronds. We pulled ourselves to the top of the firebreak with juts of broken tree roots and surveyed the burn path.

“Jesus.”

We stared at the devastation. The wildfire had raged since the end of August, spanned Nueces, San Patricio, Bee, Live Oak, Jim Wells, Duval and McMullen counties and had absorbed the labor of their firefighting forces as well as the Army Corps of Engineers, fifteen helicopters and all the local reservists and Guardsmen available. Forty thousand acres. All reduced to a field of ash.

I wondered if the animals had been caught unprepared. The trunks of palmettoes still stood, nubs of carbon twisting from the earth. Nothing killed them. Rootless topples of pines leaned like spent matches. Mounds of powdered brush crosshatched the ground and riveted the obsidian plain. Sketch climbed down the way we came, grabbed our packs and heaved them up to me. I hefted EP over my shoulder and pulled myself back up the firebreak with one arm, the tendons in my neck straining. When we reached the top, EP had to be coaxed down the gentle slope on the other side.

We picked our way through the aftermath, cracking the hardened ash as we stepped upon the cauterized earth. Overwhelmed by smoke, we pulled our shirts over our faces to purify the air. Sketch grabbed a bandana from his back pocket and tried to fasten it to EP's face but the dog wouldn't have it. She kept licking Sketch's hands and he finally gave up and put it away. She'd have to breathe the poisoned air.

The three of us came to a ravine where the fire still burned. Piles of white-orange coals smoldered under fallen tree trunks. The violent pop of pine knots hurt my ears. Sunlight was lost in the smoke and the valley glowed a phantom orange. Isolated fires flickered in the distance, low bonfires of brushwood collapsing inward. We descended, holding out our hands as we negotiated our way to the bottom.

As soon as we'd crossed over, I scrambled up the other side, careful not to trip and scald my palms in the hot sand. Sketch ascended slower, his pack slung over his shoulders and EP cradled in his arms so the dog wouldn't burn her paws. We marched on, wiping ash from our foreheads. Ahead of us, the outlines of buildings appeared and sharpened. As fast as the gulley had vanished, a ranch house, a stable and a pasture appeared. The land was unrecognizable. At a split-rail fence we hung our packs from a blackened post.

"Think everybody made it out?" I asked.

Sketch shrugged and lit another cigarette, the orange ember in stark contrast to the wasteland. EP sniffed around our feet, her black coat an ashy gray that made her look like the ghost of a dog.

The house and stable were gutted. All was rubble and charred block and the timber of exterior walls. The roof was scorched but intact except where load-bearing studs had succumbed to the heat and fallen, twisting sheets of tin into black knots.

There was a sudden roar beside me. I whipped my head around. Fire exploded in the air. Sketch smiled. In one hand, he held a burning Zippo. The other hung at his side, clamped around the neck of a clear glass bottle as fat as a jug of milk. It was filled to the top with liquid, clear and beige like gasoline. Sketch held it to his lips and swallowed, his Adam's apple forcing the drink down his throat. He tipped the bottle upright again, filled his mouth and turned to face me, his lips puckered and his cheeks puffed out. Holding the lighter inches from his face, Sketch fountained fire from his mouth.

"Asshole." I smelled burnt hair, made and unmade my fist.

"It's Lucky's. High-test shit. Try it?"

I grabbed the bottle from Sketch's hand and held it before my face. Floating at the bottom was the milky body of a scorpion nearly the length of my middle finger. Some the legs had fallen from the exoskeleton and wavered in the alcohol at the bottom. I closed my eyes and spoke as I brought the bottle to my lips:

“Fire, fire everywhere, so let's all have a drink.”

I swallowed hard twice, held the bottle to my chest, then took another pull and signaled for Sketch's lighter. I flipped it open and turned toward Sketch who was already laughing and running away when the flames spouted from my mouth. Soon we were drunk and loud and stumbling, our faces blushing with liquor and fire.

“Let's explore.” Sketch slurred.

He gestured toward the stable with a flourish and I smiled in spite of myself. We wove crooked lines over the cratered pasture toward the fallen building, passing the bottle between us. When we reached the blackened steel troughs, I took another swig and felt a piece of the scorpion scrape the back of my throat. Sketch pointed at the remains of the watering stations as we crossed beneath the broken crossbeam at the entrance of the stables. EP wouldn't go in. She just sat outside the fallen building watching us.

The horses never had a chance. Their caretakers had failed them. When I was younger, I watched a documentary about the destruction of Pompeii, when burning mud closed the eyes of the city. Ashen mothers held their ashen children against their breasts. Ashen fathers curled upon the thresholds of the homes they could never have saved. I took a drink, felt everything spin for a moment, and then eased the door open.

A colt's face was twisted in the agony of its last hour in the scorched stall that was its tomb. Sketch took the bottle from me and drank with an unsteady hand as he walked away. I looked at the flame-flayed colt a final time.

The power lines gouged a path through the palmettoes that was easy for us to follow. We didn't speak, hushed by the majesty of the steel structures and rows of wires cutting through the air. The hum of the cables was sacred. Once in a while, we passed one of the massive trunks that held the power lines aloft, steel stanchions two men wide and a hundred feet high. I'd been sunburned since the first week of summer vacation and soon the tall grasses brushing my skin left welts all over my legs and I raked them with my fingernails. Sketch struck at clumps of milkweed with a broken crepe myrtle branch he found, severing their blooms and drawing white, sticky blood from the stems. Every so often, we started at the shriek of a siren or a revving engine that sounded closer each time. Ahead of us, a television tower impaled the earth, marking the edge of cement plant with red aircraft warning lights obscured by smoke, round and dull like the eyes of blind dragonflies.

We reached the tower as the late afternoon gave way to dusk. The mast extended from a square of grass. Caged by chain link, it disappeared into the smoke. Steel cables as thick as our wrists anchored the tower to the earth, spreading out in all directions. I struck one of the tethers with a stick and listened to the metal vibrate. I imagined snapping the cables one by one and watching them slingshot through the air as the tower wrenched and screamed and turned in on itself as it toppled like a slain giant. The idea made me feel powerful and in my vision, electricity

flashed when the mast ripped the high-tension wires in two and houses went dark all over Corpus Christi.

Galvanized links the color of gunmetal encircled the base of the television tower, the top rimmed by stainless coils of razor wire. Wild vines of grapes and kudzu wove through gaps in the fence like sutures. Bulbous knobs of brown fruit hung from the kudzu and were scattered on the ground, their tiny taproots clawing at the earth. I'd heard it called *the foot-a-night vine* and *the vine that ate the south*. Imported from Japan decades ago, it was planted by farmers on the eve of the Cold War to help control soil erosion. Now it choked the countryside with its life, smothering forests into mounds of green leaves. An aluminum sign drove the silent statement of the fence home.

No Trespassing. Letters the color of blood.

Two chain-link gates sagged on their hinges, tangled in kudzu and bound together with a heavy chain. I rattled the links and then let them fall silent, my hands greased in faint chemicals. The fence was nailed down by steel poles that would never decay, but endure summer after brutal summer. Security lamps ringed the sky, beckoning midges and lacewings and sphinx moths that came to halo the lights. The lamps splintered our shadows upon the ground and stained everything the color of rust.

I turned to where Sketch held EP in his arms and motioned for a boost. Sketch nodded, gingerly placed our dog on the ground and linked his palms together. I climbed the gate easily, stopping halfway up to straddle the pole that framed the top and reached for EP. Sketch hefted her to his chest and held her over his head on tiptoes. She wiggled in the air. I placed her on my

shoulder and lowered myself inside the plant. Sketch followed with our duffle bags looped around his arms. Together, we trekked to the lime pit.

We passed the old mixing station and the conveyor belt that once carried the dirt and fly-ash and sand sixty feet up to the mixer. Here and there, silos blotted out the sky. The silence unnerved me. Once this place roared with life. For thousands of man-hours— ever since the boom years after the war—burly workers shoveled cement into the mouths of mixers that rumbled down Kidron Road toward the interstate. The plant had laid the foundations of Corpus Christi, had driven the city deep into the bedrock as if immovable.

The edge of the lime-pit was like the edge of the world. The powdered walls of the strip mine striped the lip of the quarry before fading into black. More than the absence of light, the nothingness had substance. Sentience. We made camp just inside the plant's perimeter, throwing a tarp over one of the steel cables that tethered the TV tower in a makeshift tent. When the demand for new homes in Corpus Christi died, CEMEX shut the factory down and moved the trucks and equipment to Galveston. Only the ironwork remained. Rusting cylinders and metal spires twisted from the feldspar and dust. I hacked at the sand with the field-shovel we'd brought. Sketch filled the hole with branches and dead vines and soaked it all with butane. Soon we sat cross-legged beside the pit, EP resting on his side between us.

There was flurry of movement from the corner of our eye and EP dashed away from us into the lime pit, barking all the way. Sketch and I hurried to the edge. She was down there somewhere, barking at something in the darkness.

“What do we do?” I asked.

Sketch shook his head and tightened the laces of his shoes.

“I’ll get her,” he said.

Sketch stepped into the void, holding out the field-shovel for balance. He vanished piece by piece. His legs. His body up to his chest. His arms and shoulders. Only his head was left, bobbing over the pit. Finally, Sketch was gone. I listened to his tennis shoes scrape along the side of the quarry until it was silent except for EP’s barking and I gazed into a black that went on forever and ever and ever. EP stopped her racket and the scraping of shoes and the crashing of rocks returned and grew louder until Sketch stumbled back to the surface with EP in his arms. They were grey all over with ground limestone, the features of their faces erased by the quicklime.

We returned to camp and traded swallows alcohol. Soon the sun vanished and we grew obnoxious and loud. EP left us again to wander the plant. The sirens were constant. Emergency vehicles blared as they flew in the direction of the wildfire. How many miles? Two? Three? I’d heard that fog did funny things with sound and wondered if smoke could do the same thing. Sparks streaked upward. I craned my neck to where the steel lattice of the television mast vanished and wondered how high I’d have to climb to see the stars. Thunder groaned in the east, lightning silvered the smog, the air cooled. I closed my eyes.

There is no sound in the world like a dog in pain. When we realized something was wrong, it was too late—the rattlesnake had already set its fangs in EP’s jowl and pumped her full of venom. On his feet and screaming, Sketch knocked the snake from the dog’s face with the shovel and cut it to pieces in the dust. I rocked EP in my arms and listened to her cry as her face swelled.

I dug in my pack for my KA-BAR, slit EP's cheek, and sucked on her wound. We took turns spitting poison into the dirt until the cut scabbed over and our faces were black with her blood. We carried EP back to camp and lay down beside her beneath the tarp. She shivered and whined between us as we fell asleep. I awoke at midnight, cuddling her cold body. Outside the tent, ash fell like snow. Sketch writhed in a nightmare so I grabbed my brother's hand and squeezed it until he was still. Then I crawled into the darkness. I'd hoped the storm had cleared the air, hoped the grace of God undid the night before but the smoke was thick enough to taste and EP was dead. I threw back my head, parted my lips, and let ashes fill my mouth.

FOOTHOLD

The boy grips a fencepost and vaults his body over red lines of barbed wire. He pretends a monster is chasing him, some foul smelling beast terrifying in its lack of countenance and definition. He zigzags down hoof-beaten deer trails, crisscrosses through drooping fields of flowered weeds toward the water oak spreading at the end of their property, a jagged darkness ahead of him scratching at the sky, blotting out the sun, making him choose between its skeletal arms and The-Thing-That-Was-Behind-Him.

At the end of his wind, he slows and stops and takes deep draughts of cold air and lets sticky threads of spit fall between his bended knees. His lungs burn with October and his eyes itch and his nose runs. Standing up straight, he wipes snot away with a flannel sleeve and walks again, Arms held above his head, he meanders in the direction of the oak. In minutes his breath is caught but now it's phlegmy and scrapes his throat as he strikes at the low hanging boughs of crepe-myrtles twisting from the earth, slapping clumps of dark, waxy leaves with a bent branch he'd cut from the grove itself. As he gets closer, he realizes that the arms aren't devoid of life. Though leafless, the trunk and branches of the water oak are covered with green mosses and lichens and wood ants trundling over its course skin on noble insect duties. And the branches aren't clawing at the sky, just rustling in the wind, rocking back and forth in the crisp fall air.

He remembers when he learned the old oaks name: *Quercus nigra*. He'd asked if that was a bad word and his father chuckled and said that people made too big of a deal about things like that nowadays. His father was in blue jeans and a thick flannel coat, and ear muffs that matched the pattern of the jacket. He lifted the boy on his shoulders and pulled out a Boy Scout knife and

showed him a circle of weathered wood with four sets of initials etched into it. The man told him that four generations of Brady men had carved their names into that tree and that he was going to be the fifth. Then he placed the knife into the child's hand, and tucked that hand into his own and helped him scratch the letters *J. B* deep into the wood.

They'd walked the length of the easement back to that house, the boy asking questions about this and that and the man answered best he could, shrugging his shoulders and suggesting that the child look it up when he was stumped. Back at the house, Grandma greeted the two of them at the door and said was making a bonafide-West-Virginian-breakfast like she used to when his father was little. The house was full of smells: baking corn bread, green beans simmering in chicken stock and bacon fat, turnip greens stewing in a brine of vinegar and peppercorns, coffee brewing beside the cedar deacon's bench, and a five pound ham glazing in the oven.

Grandma told the two of them to scram and have a seat and so they sat down at the table with a beat-up pack of Hoyle playing cards and played a couple games of War and then a game his father had to teach him called Hearts which was a lot like spades but without the books and where the Queen of Spades could be your best friend or your worst enemy. Grandma bustled in with steaming iron pots clenched between grease spattered oven mitts, so many that he thought the table would run out of room, but then Grandma returned to sit down herself, the apron-with-the-ducks-on-it that the boy liked so much slung over one of the empty chairs. His father wanted to know where his wife was at, and the child wanted to know where his momma was at, and Grandma said she called up three times and hadn't seen her leave her room since noon and the two of them exchanged a look the boy had seen before. His father left the table without a word and climbed the stairs.

Grandma asked him what he was learning in school that week and the boy replied *the sevens* and proceeded to count them forward and backward, *seven, fourteen, twenty-one, twenty-seven, no, twenty-eight*. Grandma smiled but looked nervously around when she heard loud voices coming from upstairs. “*What’s going on,*” he asked but Grandma smiled a tight-lipped smile and said “*Don’t worry yourself over that.*” and asked “*Do you know your eights?*” The child rattled off his times tables till his father returned grimly to the table told him that his momma was going to be a minute and that they should go ahead without her. He asked the boy if he would like to say grace and Grandma said of course he would and, starving, he blurted out the prayer in record time: *Blessusolordfortheseourgiftswhichweareabouttorecievefromthyheavenly handsthroughchristourlordamen.*

The three of them passed the dishes around and loaded their plates high with food, but dinner was quiet except for the tinkling of silverware the squeak of the Amish carved dinner chairs. He was working on his second plate and his father was dishing out his third when Momma came downstairs to join them. Her lips were bright red and her face was made up like she was going out but she still had her bathrobe on. Her soulful eyes softened when she looked at the child and she sat beside him plucking pricklers from his hair as his father scooped her some of everything onto her plate. Grandma excused herself, saying she had dishes to do and Momma thumbed through a magazine called *People* and hardly ate anything at all. The boy asked her if she wanted to grow up big and strong, and she smiled but didn’t say anything and then looked at his father and ask if she could be excused. His father sighed and Momma climbed the stairs again and the child didn’t see her again the rest of that night and most of the morning.

Today is no-school and Grandma went to town to get some *pro-bait* so the child is free to explore the scrub brush and forests and valleys surrounding his new home. Tired from the run, he tosses the branch between his hands and walks. Stripped of bark, it's warped and knotted and cured bone white by a month of sun. His father gone, he moved into his Grandma's house so she could take care of him and soon the child spent most afternoons wandering the West Virginian countryside. Grandma nagged him morning-noon-and-night about diamondbacks and how one of these days he was going to get bitten running round the woods in nothing but shorts and tennis shoes and he best at least get himself a walking stick in case he has to shoo one of them away. After a close call by the slag pit he'd finally listened. He cut one from a tree with a hacksaw wrestled from the brambled metal rusting in the toolshed and skinned it himself, peeling away its skin until the whole thing was sticky and smooth. He swings the branch and cuts down a swath of dying milkweed, watches the stems bead with white juice and wonders how a walking stick could fend off the fangs of a rattlesnake anyway. He turns the stick in his hands to where he slashed his initials into the curving wood with his father's pocketknife. The boy's father had pressed the weapon into his palm during a camping trip and told him every boy should have a knife as if he was confiding to his son some hidden secret of manhood. It was the same knife they'd held together at the water oak. The child spent the rest of the week stalking the lizards that swarmed the state park, the blade held before him like a talisman. A day before the trip was over, he finally managed to swing fast enough to chop a lazy lizard in two and watched its cloven body breathe and twitch and die bloodless in the leaves. He cried when he buried the animal in a mound of sand piled beside a utility road near their campsite. The child stuffed the knife in the

bottom of his pack and hadn't touched it again till after his father was gone and Gramma started in about the snakes.

Up ahead there is a sudden noise and the child pauses. A rustle in the stiff brush. Harsh panting. Ragged breath and a high pitched whine. A patch of dogwood sags with autumn rain and somewhere in the golden growth something hidden is in agony. He runs. He follows his ears. His feet pad over a gray-green carpet of deer moss until the black branches of the oak vein the sky above and he spots the auburn fur of the fox among the stalks of wildflowers.

In colder months the countryside was filled with traps hidden by men seeking pelts. As soon as the child was old enough to roam the wilderness alone, his father showed him how to recognize a trapper's crude camouflage—the light brown rows of branches that striped the mouths of pitfalls and the dead brush used to conceal footholds and wire snares. Most of all he taught the boy to suspect every footstep taken in the fields and forests. But the animal's pain drowns out the child's inhibitions and he takes long, reckless strides toward the noise. He steps over a rotten log blooming white and orange with poison candle snuff and jack-o'-lantern, and stomps a path through the vegetation in his approach. The fox whimpers when the child nears. *What's wrong boy? What's wrong?* It growls and digs its muzzle into something that he cannot see until he is standing above the animal and looking in its rolled, white eyes. The dull gunmetal of a foothold trap digs into its flesh and meat and maybe bone, four inches or so above its paw. Rowed with fatal teeth, the trap is far too big for catching foxes, large enough to trap bobcats or black bears or even the child himself and fastened to a spike impaled into the earth. The animal growls again, gnaws the flesh above the trap and tries to pull free. *I'll help you, boy.* He drops to

his knees and scrambles through the weeds and his heart beats hard as he claws at the dead grass and dirt for something he can use to set the creature free but there is nothing there.

After dinner, his father walked with him outside and they climbed a rickety ladder made of two-by-fours up to something they called an *azervitory*— a crooked deck attached to the red brick chimney with studs and bungee cords— and it was there he showed the boy the West Virginia night sky for the first time. It wasn't as if he hadn't looked into the sky a thousand times before, but up there with him was the first time he recalled really seeing the stars. His father showed him Andromeda and Aquarius and Pegasus and a couple others like Old Hotdog and The Giant Biscuit that the child was pretty sure he made up, told him how to find the Big and Little Dippers, taught him how to use the big one so he could find the North Star if he was lost.

His father stretched his hand out to the east and pointed to the sky above a dark swath of trees where distant lights flashed warning to low-flying planes. That was where the new coal mine was, he said, one that was going to ship coal all the way to Huntington and Knoxville and Lexington and even to boilers outside of Washington D.C. and help power the lights in the White House. They were hiring soon, his father said, and even though Helvetia and the Arch Mining Company switched to driverless trains, they couldn't all do that, could they? Lots of people needed those jobs and the three of them could move out of Grandmas house and into their own like they did before just as fast as the foreman read his resume. He asked his father if it would be the same house or a different house and he promised it would be bigger than before, with a walk-in closet where the boy could put all of his toys and a wraparound porch he called a veranda that would have a swing for the family and an herb garden for mama.

Lifting the boy upon his shoulders, he mapped that whole side of West Virginia from the eyes of a coal man. Over there were the Alleghenies, which had been around for a couple gazillion years or more. Deep beneath those hills and mountains, where no light has ever reached and the only thing you've got to see by are these little lights strung from the top of the tunnel. There men would break the coal into teeny pieces with the *ogger*, something like a giant Dewalt power drill, except this one rolled on railroad tracks. "*Men like me,*" his father said, "*help guide the coal carts to the light.*" Pointing to the rolling hills between Old Hot Dog and Pegasus, he told the boy that the Greenbrier River, as wide as two football fields and the color of red clay, will carry the coal to Shavers Fork and then the Cheat River and then all the way to sixty-five in Morgantown. "*And from there, the rest of the world?*" the boy asked and his father said "*Yes, something like that,*" and then he hustled him down the ladder and into the house again before Grandma could holler up that they would catch their death of cold. He tucked him in that night, and kissed him on the forehead, and the boy fell asleep like that, his face still red from the night chill.

The boy reaches toward the animal but it snarls and bites and he draws his hand back. The fox bares teeth crimsoned with its own blood and then goes to work at its leg again, chewing and moaning with a half-howl as it jerks its head back and forth and rattles the chain against the oiled coilsprings. He doesn't think it's mad. He recalls the signs his father taught him to look for the summer before last when rabies struck the county hard. No white foam drying on its lips. Its alert. Even though it snaps at him, the boy senses a fear that defies hydrophobia. No, the fox is hurt and scared. Nothing more or less. Its paw is limp and flaps from the mouth of the trap.

He knows he cannot take a chance with a thing like rabies and takes off his t-shirt. He moves slowly toward the fox with the shirt spread out like a net. *Come on boy, don't you want to be free? Don't you want to get better?* The fox hurls itself at him but the trap jerks the animal backward and it yelps and lays prostrate before the child. *Hold on boy. Be strong. It'll only hurt for a second.* He wraps his shirt around the animal's head and pulls it taut so it cannot bite. It growls and fights but he holds tight. *Almost done. Almost*

The boy straightens and stands above the trapped animal and steps on the release blades until he hears them click and they part a bit. He wedges the tip of his walking stick between the jaws and pries hard with the crepe myrtle and his free hand. The blades are sticky and warm and when they pull out of its muscle. The fox flinches, then it stills. *Doesn't that feel better?* He lifts the broken animal in his arms—so light, so fragile. The fox fights him but the boy holds tight till it relents. He feels its life pulse against his neck as he walks from beneath the canopy into the open field and heads toward home where it is safe, where they'll be safe. *You're almost home, boy.*

The child makes a bed for the fox in the cellar from an empty cardboard case of Lone Star and places it on the far side of the furnace where it's warm and Grandma won't see it when she comes down to do the laundry. Now that she works the second shift in the Sunnyfield processing plant, she's gone before he gets home from school so there's no chance of her stumbling in as he dresses the fox's wounds. He lines the box with tissue paper and sets the fox down and unwraps his shirt from round the animal's head. He pulls his tee back over his head and ignores the blood of the animal's wounds. The fox looks around. Flares its nostrils. Blinks. Tries to make out its surroundings and licks the blood seeping from its injury. *It's okay. You're*

safe now. The boy takes the stairs two at a time, trips halfway up and scrambles over the rest on all fours. In the medicine cabinet there is gauze and Bactine and his mother's old hairbrush and he grabs them all but thinks about the fox licking its paw and replaces the antiseptic. Downstairs, he wraps the dressing tight and cinches it with a safety pin. *Isn't that better?* He rummages through the kitchen and returns with bologna and an empty Country Crock container filled with water. He lays them both before the fox and waits for it to eat or drink but it just licks the cold cuts and stares at its wound until it sleeps. The child pets the animal for hours. It shudders with each stroke. When the time nears for Grandma to come home, he heads to bed even though he doesn't want to leave the animal. He falls asleep beneath a galaxy of glow-in-the-dark stickers and he dreams.

One day, just like that, Momma was gone. While he and his father dozed in the living room beneath the television's pale light, she stuffed a suitcase with her clothes and some jewelry. Took the wad of cash his father had been saving to take them all to Disney World. Emptied their scrapbooks of every picture of her and the child that existed. When he woke up early the next morning to watch cartoons, her wedding band was resting in the center of the kitchen counter, ember red in the dawn. Clutching the ring in his hand, he awaked his father and asked where Momma was. He took the ring and told him that Momma had just gone to the store, told him everything was fine but the boy knew it wasn't true, he'd never seen a look like that upon his father's face before, and even though he sent him back to bed, he stayed awake beneath the covers, listening to the muffled voices of his father and Grandma grow louder and louder, a feeling kind of like being afraid and kind of like a stomachache making him want to throw up.

Then it was quiet for what seemed like forever until there was a soft knock on the door and his father asked if they could talk to him. Grandma and his father sat at the edge of the bed and the boy sat up and looked at the red circles around their eyes. The man told him that his Momma would be gone for a while, that she left a note that explained everything, and no he couldn't read it right now but maybe when he was a little older. They held the boy's face to his chest when the tears began to come, and Grandma leaned in and wrapped them both in a hug. She was crying too, and then they were all crying as the man rocked his son back and forth and whispered in the boy's ear that his mother always was a city girl, not tough country boys like the two of them, and of course she loves them. Didn't she take all the pictures of you and her that there was, and of course she'll be back soon to see you and of course we're still going to go to Disney World, just you and me and yes son, you can sleep with me tonight.

For a week or two, things seemed like they were alright. His father got up at dawn, shaved and showered and while the sun rise made his son breakfast, packed his lunch and looked over his homework before the child got up and got ready for school. Every morning after breakfast they drove to the bus stop together in the Ford pickup, popping cassettes of Johnny Cash or Bob Dylan or Emmylou Harris into the tape deck and singing with the steel guitars in the dark until the bus arrived. Afterwards, the man drove to the mines looking for a chance to chisel his living from the guts of the Earth. Momma rarely came up in conversation, and if she did, they always spoke about her in future tense and not the past, of things she would be doing, as if her return was just around the corner. His father had gotten a few phone calls from Momma, this he knew for sure because he'd snuck into the living room long past his bedtime when he heard the jangle of the phone coming off the receiver and the whir of the rotary. He couldn't hear what they

talked about, but his father's voice sounded different, higher and softer, like someone asking for a favor.

That night father didn't downstairs for dinner. He asked Grandma what was the matter but she told him that he was sick, and that he'd be better in the morning, and that he should pay it no mind. Long past midnight, the boy awoke to what sounded like dishes rattling in the sink. He swung open his bedroom door as slow as he could, to keep it from creaking. He stepped across the old wooden floor as slow as he could, to keep it from squeaking. He followed a quiet blue light into the den where his father slept. He'd burrowed into the couch cushions with his back to the screen. A muted wedding video played on the TV and the boy watched. His father was clean shaven and young again, wearing a white tuxedo. Momma was beautiful wrapped in a stunning gown. They pulled one another tight against their bodies as they twirled across the half-lit dance floor of the Elk's lodge. There were smiles and raised glasses. A bouquet arced over a crowd of gathered bridesmaids. Hands clapped and the cake was cut and Momma laughed and smeared cake on his father's cheeks for fun.

The child sat in the rocking chair and watched the man's body bulge as he breathed. His hair was thin and whitened with cement dust. His back was freckled from hours in the sun. Along the wall, hunting trophies stared straight ahead, eyes glazed over with Technicolor. Beneath the smiles of their family portrait, his Father's shotgun hung cold and black like the crossbeam of a crucifix. He rolled over in his sleep and the child looked upon the slitted whites of his eyes before covering him with a blanket Grandma crocheted last Christmas. The child walked to where the television still played. There was a passionate kiss. He turned the switch and

the screen went dark and the boy crept upstairs and looked at himself in the mirror and saw his mother's lips and cheekbones and, set above them, his father's hazel eyes.

The child awakens to the sound of the fox crying somewhere downstairs. He sits up and rubs the sleep from his eyes as he stumbles downstairs. He looks down and wrings his hands. The fox is curled in a tight ball in the middle of the basement floor. He lifts its frail body in his arms and sets it back in the makeshift nest. Stacking cardboard boxes full of clothes, the child builds a barricade around the fox to keep it from crawling away again. He grabs one of his father's old grey work shirts and holds it up before him. It's still smudged with coal dust and bears a patch embroidered with the Brady name. The boy swaddles the animal and feeds it milk with an eye dropper. It lets him near the bandage and so he carefully unwraps its foot and throws out the soiled dressing, Taking care not to touch the open sores, the child squirts some of the eyewash stuff that Grandma uses for her contact lenses into the wounds and although the animal winces, he does not wriggle away. Taking a fresh strip of white linen, the child wraps the fox's leg again and seals it with a safety pin.

He bring some books and things down stairs into the basement, and though the animal's in no shape to play, he reads to him from some of the books, a Goosebumps book, a Hardy Boys, and a musty paperback of *Watership Down*. "Because we both know you like chasing rabbits," he chuckles to the fox as it dreams the dreams of wild animals. He knows that Grandma will be looking for him soon, so he leans in close enough to kiss the matted fur upon its head and says goodbye, walks up the cellar stairs, and shuts the door.

The last day of summer his father woke him up with cooking food and a gentle shoulder nudge saying “*Wake up son, it’s almost noon.*” His father was full of energy and smiling and alive and before he opened his eyes, the boy smelled the bacon frying and his father’s cologne and when he rubbed away the sleep he could see the man’s freshly shaven face looking into his own, telling him to come downstairs, that he had eggs and bacon and pancakes all laid out, asking if he still liked grits because he went and cooked them too.

The boy got up and dressed and soon they were both downstairs and laughing as father poured out cups of orange juice that overflowed onto the tablecloth. They swallowed forkfuls of scrambled eggs covered with ketchup and hot sauce and scoops of salsa. The smell of coffee filled the room and the man topped off a huge pair of mugs. His father’s cup was black and he asked his son if he wanted cream and sugar and told him not to mind what Grandma thought. The boys said he wanted to drink coffee just like his dad and so they gulped down the drink between sweet bites of bacon dipped in syrup and ignored the bitterness.

White clouds like a fleet returning home floated in the azure sky and there was a warm breeze blowing in from the south. As they crossed the backyard into the field to toss the football, his father told him about an interview down at the Palafaax steel mill that he thought went pretty darn well, that for a man with his experience, there still are plenty of jobs. The child smiled and asked a hundred questions about the job and ran loops around the man as they walked. His father reared back with the football and told him to go long and the boy did. The football arced in a perfect spiral and the child reached out for it but it bounced against his chest and into the sawgrass growing beside the pasture.

The man jogged toward him and said good try, let me show you something, told him to go after the ball. *“Like this,”* he said and made his son mimic the motion of his arms and then the child went long again, the wind blowing in his hair, the sun high and bright in his eyes but still he came down with the ball in his arms and his father lifted him up and carried him around the tiny field like a champion. Before the sun set, they hauled lumber to the half-built tree house they’d begun when they went to live with Grandma. His father promised that they’d get it done by winter. *“You and me son, you and me,”* he said. *“Before the first snowfall.”*

The child opens his one morning eyes and rolls over, hoping to see the fox sleeping or maybe even eating and drinking. The animal’s head is twisted inward and its whole body shakes and its bandages are unraveled and the color of scabs. It is not yet dawn. The soft scent of death loiters in the air. He runs his hands over its matted fur and the fox feels stiff and dead except for a quiet growl deep inside and shallow breathing. *What did you do boy what did you do?* He whispers the words to himself as he tiptoes to the medicine cabinet and grabs the whole roll of bandages, the Bactine, the peroxide and rushes back down the stairs. He unwinds the gauze. *You’re gonna hafta let me do this boy, you’re hurt and sick but I’ll make you better.* He tugs at its wounded arm and it growls again but doesn’t fight him and when he picks it up he sees the nest is damp with fresh blood *o god he’s chewing on it again what do I do what do I do?* The child pours on the peroxide and watches it fizz and sprays on Bactine and feels the fox flinch and rewraps the gauze tight talks sweetly to the animal *you’re okay you’re better now you hear, you hear? Don’t do that again don’t do that again.* He places his hand on the fox’s side and feels the rising and falling of its breathing and its brittle heartbeat. He touches the place where it is

wounded and it stirs a bit but does not resist. Taking his mother's hairbrush, he combs out the burrs and knots in the fox's fur until it is smooth and soft as down. He places the brush beside the nest and places his arm upon the fox so it doesn't have to heal alone. The child lays beside the fox's bed and stares wide eyed into the black ceiling, the sound of blood rushing in his ears till he falls into a fitful sleep and dreams.

He remembered that it took a while for his father to break. If the child had been older, he might've learned something from his stoicism. Instead the boy learned only how to fade away. Six months after the child's mother left, almost everyone in Canaan was laid off when the Sago mine collapsed and swallowed whole a dozen souls— each one a son of Canaan. Rescuers and earthmovers clawed at the dirt on live TV, their efforts all for naught save one limp form pulled from the fallen tomb. There was hardly any work in West Virginia at all, let alone in Upshur County. The dream job his father promised him he'd get never worked out, so the man looked for something steady in the factories that smoked on the horizon. Nothing seemed to pay him close to what he made in the mine. When his severance pay ran out he was reduced to breaking his back on daylabor crews a few days a week, casting concrete road barriers at the CEMEX plant in Atlas. Eventually, the man gave up looking for better jobs altogether and took to slaving over the concrete daily and drinking nightly. His body thinned. His eyes sank. Six days a week he used to return home near dusk, his frame frosted by limestone dust and barely enough energy to heat up a couple of Hungry Man dinners. He would ask a few soft questions about school before showering and drinking alone in his bedroom until he slept. The gap beneath his father's

door was stuffed tight with linen sheets and sometimes the child thought he heard someone sobbing in the night.

One day he found a black-eyed Susan growing beneath the water oak and picked it special. He remembered it was named *Rudbeckia hirta*, and that his father joked that the scientist who named it must have had a rude daughter named Rebecca, and that it was Maryland's state flower. He headed back to the house where all the shades were drawn shut. Grandma was at work and inside everything was dark except for a lamp glowing in the den. The child latched the front door and walked down a black hallway to where his father sat on the couch, leaning forward with his head in his hands. Photographs covered the coffee table and his mother's face looked at him from a dozen angles, smiling and white and beautiful.

"*Is that you?*" he asked the child, and the child said that it was. The man said he wanted to talk to him, so he stepped to his father's side and noticed a letter on the armrest stirring in the air conditioning. Even in the low light, the boy recognized his mother's handwriting. His father looked up and the child smelled the alcohol and when the man spoke the child withered. He asked him where his Momma was and the boy said he didn't know, reminded the man that she was gone and that he said she wasn't coming back. His father growls the *bee word* and takes another drink from the tiny glass next to the bottle and the child tried to stay perfectly still. His father looked up at him, his irises swimming in alcohol. "*You know you look like her?*" he said. The boy didn't know what to say to that so he held out the flower he'd picked for him and said "*Here Daddy, this is for you.*" and his father told him to get that fucking weed out of his face.

The child backed out of the den and ran upstairs and into the bathroom and pulled a footstool up to the sink and examined his face in the mirror, turned his head this way and that,

and though he pulled and mashed his face like clay, he could not find her there to save his life, saw only his father's eyes, so he cried and cried and ran into his room and covered his face with his pillow and closed his eyes thought about how the darkness there is darker than the night outside.

The child hears it before he sees it, awakened by the sound of the fox wild with suffering and gnawing and growling and spitting at its wound. He sits up and clutches at his shirt, unsure of what to do. The smell is worse. The Bactine is empty. The peroxide is gone. The bandages are too frayed and contaminated to make a wrap and the child pulls his knees to his chest and covers his eyes and weeps until his tears are spent. His hands fall to his sides and he leans back against the water heater and gazes down at the animal. Powerless, he watches the fox eat itself alive and can only whisper *don't don't don't* and dozes in the blue light of dawn creeping through the narrow cellar window overhead.

The airbrakes on the school bus hissed, the STOP sign withdrew and the bus sped away. The child coughed in a poisoned plume of smoke and then made his way down the dirt road toward home, weaving between foot deep wallers opaque and pregnant with mud left by a noon thunderstorm. Above him the sky was the color of slate and ready to burst again. The boy traced patterns in the dirt with a broken twig that dragged on the ground behind him as he hurried home, trying to beat the rain. Less than a mile and he was there, his feet muddy from the walk. He stomped the dirt off his boots the best he could. The screen door rattled in the wind and so he latched it shut and looked back and scanned the yard. The Ford was parked out front and that

meant his father was home. Even though he did not answer the boy's cries, the child smelled Old Spice and knew the man was near. The wind blew harder. Another storm front was moving in, mounting thunderheads above the land that swallowed all the light. Raindrops stung the child's skin as he walked through the backyard. There ahead, he saw his father cross the field in the direction of the water oak.

The man's head hung low as he stumbled down the winding easement through the weeds and the boy cried out. "*O Daddy, o daddy.*" The man turned for a moment, but long enough to see his son far off in the distance running down the same path. Then he turned away. Impaled his eyes into the earth. Walked faster. The child saw the long black barrel of the Mossberg gripped in his his hand. "*What ya huntin Daddy?*" he called out. His father dropped to his knees beneath the oak and vanished in the weeds but the child thought he saw the top of the man's head just above the ryegrass whipping in the wind and then he heard the gunshot and ran faster and faster and faster down the path toward his father.

The child yawns and stretches in the morning light. He turns his head and sees the fox, freezes for a moment, and lets everything sink in. The pallet, clotted crimson. The taste of copper. The smell of blood. Lying on the bare cement is the fox's severed paw, small and pink. When the boy finally moves, he pulls himself to the animal's bedside and runs his fingers through its fur and it is still warm, not stone cold like he feared. The fox looks into his eyes and the child aches at what he sees there.

The shotgun is buried in the cellar closet. Grandma said it was cursed. She hid the weapon deep behind boxes of his father's things mildewing on the other side of the basement but

the boy had always known where it was.. He climbs over his father's work clothes, his baseball trophies, a scattering of scrap books and photo albums that are now lime green with some kind of fungus. There, wedged between an old refrigerator and the water heater is the Mossberg, matte black and still oiled from the last time that he helped his father clean it. The weapon is too big for him to lift with one hand so he grips it with both. He breaks the gun open to see if it is loaded, just like his father had taught him when they went hunting wild boars last February. One barrel is empty, one is not. He breathes in the gun oil, hefts the black steel on his shoulder and feels metal caress his neck. He stands over the bloody cardboard nest and picks up the broken animal. The fox is gaunt and light. The creature's shivers in his arms. "*It's almost over boy,*" he says.

Out the door and down the path, he plods beneath flawless skies a shade of blue as clear as glass. Blind in the light, he holds his burden to his breast and when the animal shifts its weight, he can feel its blood stick to his skin. His arm grows tired, so he holds the weapon to his side, He grazes the gun barrel against the earth as he walks toward the water oak, dragging his shadow behind him, and leaving a deep rut in the dirt so that anyone who was looking for him. Past the unfinished treehouse and its fragile frame of rotting wood. Beyond the field now overgrown with thistles and briars and burr plants. All the way to the edge of the property where the deer moss squishes under the soles of his shoes and the black branches of the oak stab into the sky after all. He lays the fox down and the ground receives its weight. It whines and folds its ears back and looks up to where the child stands stained with blood. He looks once more into its tired eyes and grits his teeth and clicks the safety off and nuzzles the barrel against its tiny head

and tries to go dead inside but when the fox starts to softly lick the mouth of the shotgun, the child has to turn his face away.

COUP DE FOUDRE

—*Je vis, je meurs, je me brûle et me noie.*

—Who taught you that, Jona?

Ash mouths my words, lights a cigarette. Rolls her eyes.

—Jona.

We don't speak for a while, just sit and sip coffee. The patio is almost empty. A few women in suit dresses drinking wine and talking loudly. A waiter in a long black button-up sweeping the cobblestones. Sparrows pick at a bagel left on an empty table. She plays with her phone and I try to remember what the guitar player looks like, if I was the one who introduced the two of them. I look toward the airport where the jets bank over water shimmering in the midday sun, hear their engines rip at the sky above us and Ash laughs to herself. I turn and watch the breeze toy with the red yarn of her scarf. The shadow of a swaying palm crisscrosses her face. She looks up.

—What?

—Nothing.

—What then?

—Are you really going to do it?

Ash looks away. Puts on her sunglasses.

—Are you?

—I don't know.

—You don't know or you won't tell me?

—If I knew do you think I would have called you?

I woke last night to the sound of Ash choking on tears on the other end of the phone, her words stumbling out between sobs, something about being so alone and then she was gone and the room was quiet and though I tried to call her back, she didn't answer. I got up and walked to the window and watched bats fly low over the lake in the dull orange of the streetlamps before lying down. I fell asleep to the sound of traffic from the freeway and dreamt of things I could not recall. She phoned me that afternoon, cool and composed. After we agreed to meet, I half expected her not to show but Ash was waiting for me in the parking lot with the Sebring's top down, smoking a Camel and rubbing suntan lotion on her shoulders in the sun. Now the salt of a fresh sea breeze mixes with the smell of coconuts and I start to say something but cleared my throat instead and look away toward the pier.

—What?

—Nothing. Just an idea.

—What is it?

—I was thinking that the fair was in town. Look, you can see the Ferris wheel from here.

I pointed to where the steel wheel turned slowly on the horizon.

—So?

—We could go to the fair and then watch the fireworks from the beach.

—Why?

—Why?

—Why.

—Because it would be fun. It would be fun and maybe you won't think about it anymore.

I finish my coffee and Ash takes a deep drag on her cigarette.

—It? Or him?

—What ?

—You heard me.

I push my chair out and stand over her but I can't see her eyes behind her shades.

—You can think about whoever the fuck you want to.

I turn to go but she catches my arm. I pull away and lean against the railing.

—I'm sorry.

I tense and stare hard at the airport again. Ash wraps her arms around my waist and presses her cheek against me.

—I'm sorry. Let's go somewhere.

—Where?

—I don't care.

There's not a lot of traffic on the strip and we cruise past blights of empty shops and the signage shouting from dirty windows. We buy a bottle of merlot and some fireworks near the outskirts of town. The buildings fall away from view until the roadsides are smears of dying grass and the colors of the sky. I watch the dark waves of her hair tumble in the wind from the corner of my eye, concealing and revealing the scarf knotted around her neck until we pull into the old drive-in and get out to stretch.

Our feet send gravel skidding across the asphalt as we walk the broken parking lot, zigzagging over ruptured slabs of cement with premeditated steps. The setting sun tinges everything with a hazy red that will soon deepen into the blues and purples of night. Beyond the

drive-in, the fields are stitched with sagging power lines that follow the highway like varicose veins, pumping electricity into the near-empty industrial complex, powering a collision center and a few offices contractors carved out of empty garages.

The lot is empty and broken, sun-wiped white and crosshatched with spaces all but faded away. The screen stands sentinel and casts its long shadow over the dimming land. The drive-in was built in the forties, right before the fad really took off and it first showed newsreels of sailors kissing fresh brides after VJ day, their smiles white and huge on the crisp screen before flashing back to scenes of western gunslingers or Buck Rogers or Sam Spade. The next decade the theatre budded with new families nearly every night during the warm months, their cars and vans and station wagons bustling with tinny sound and life. But when business contracted, and so many of the other theatres went dark, the Neptune started showing pornography, bathing the lot and a few steamy parked cars with boiling pink light until early morning.

Ash pulls herself up on the ledge beneath the screen and dangles and kicks her legs. I take a swallow of wine and we share a cigarette in silence and stare across the field of cracked cement. Precise lines of crooked speaker boxes jut from the weeds. The ground was splattered white with used condoms and empty douche bags that littered the lot like dead fish. We lay back and look into the sky as azure bruises into violet and the light grows distant. The clouds redden with the countryside, pregnant with shapes both beautiful and terrifying. A jet cuts across our vision and leaves a contrail like a white scar across the sky.

Noise bursts nearby. Startled, we sit up and watch a murder of crows descend from a power line to pick through the refuse. A sticky tube of rubber sways from a clenched beak as another bird dabs at its contents. Ash hops down and flings a chunk of asphalt at the birds and

sends them squawking to the top of the screen above us. She turns to me and her skin and hair are dark and she is like a shadow standing there, untethered and defined by the failing light.

—Maybe if we—

—No.

Ash cuts the question from my mouth and takes off her sunglasses. Light pinpricks her eyes. She squeezes them shut, leans on the ledge and runs her gaze up the movie screen to the top where the crows, untouchable, look down in judgement. The screen is streaked with their shit and holes mottled the threadbare edges. She looks at me again.

—I'd destroy you.

She says this matter-of-fact, grabs the merlot out of my hands, and puts the bottle to her lips. She drains the rest of the wine in one long draught, a dark streamer of juice dripping from the corner of her mouth and down her chin. She smashes the bottle to pieces beneath our feet. Shards of glass flash like razorblades and the wine soaks into the earth.

I drive us back with the top up on the Chrysler and the ride is silent and black except for our headlights and the carnival that blooms in the night ahead. The lights of the Ferris wheel turn slowly, an arc of stars revolving above the glowing fairgrounds in the distance but I say nothing and soon we're on the strip again, the streets brought to life by the streetlights and neon signs lining the avenue. A little farther and the road darkens again and I pull into the parking lot of an inn and shut off the ignition. We listen to the click of the cooling engine and watch the whitecaps unfold along the shore, our skin the sky blue of the marquee and after a while Ash begins to cry. I roll the window down to smoke and study the rhythm of the tide as she sobs beside me and

when I can ignore her no longer, I flick my cigarette away and turn in my seat to where Ash is crumpled in the passenger seat.

—If you're gonna do it, then do it.

She cries harder. I turn my face to the sea again.

—Why are you doing this to me?

My words are guttural. I grab her by the shoulders and shake her until she stops.

—Why?

—I don't know.

—Why now?

—I don't know.

—Everything's ruined.

Ash wipes her face with her sleeve and looks out over the waves. I search for another cigarette. When she feels for my hand, I push it away.

—How are you going to do it?

I can't look at her after I ask this, though I want to. She doesn't answer for a long time, just takes deep, meditative breaths.

—I haven't decided.

—Why tell me?

—I don't have anybody else.

—That's a lie.

When Ash leans in, I catch her by the scarf and twist it in my fist, pulling her against my body. We shared a rough kiss and I can taste her tears. Our lips break apart and we turn away,

looking out the window at opposite shores, following the white strips of beach to separate vanishing points.

The door closes behind us and the room is black and we are blind and fumbling with each other's clothes. We have sex while the fireworks burst outside and I hear faint booms beneath the creaks of the mattress. The flashes anoint us with reds and greens and blues and she asks me to choke her and I won't but as we come I give in and wrap the scarf around the tendons of her neck until her eyes turn white. When we are done, I walk to the bathroom and wash my face in the dark. Ash stands nude at the window and the city's glow outlines her body I can see her hands pressed against the glass as she watches the end of the display. When she feels my eyes on her, she puts on her dress and sits on the edge of the bed. I cross the room and slide the door open. Stepping out onto the balcony. I gesture toward the light.

—Come on. It's still open. They have a merry-go-round and funnel cakes and you've never been on a Ferris wheel before.

Ash says nothing, sprawls out on the bed and plays with her phone. I can see the line of red fading from her flesh. The smell of sulfur wafts in so I close the door and draw the shades and lay on the opposite bed until she speaks.

—I dreamed of you last night.

—Of what?

—Your face appeared above me and you told me how I feel about you.

—What did I say?

—Then it bled into another one where everything I touched caught on fire.

—What did I say?

—I had to wade into the ocean and watch the people from the sea.

We walk the white sands to where the boardwalk rises from the dunes, weaving between green-gray piles of seaweed and holding hands until we stand between the wooden stanchions. Scales of reflected light race along the bellies of the planks above. Each pillar is inscribed with names and dates as far as hands could reach, the authors numberless as the tides that shaped the beach beneath our feet. Together we mouthed the names and dates, ran our fingers over symbols locked in time as if in amber. We climb a staircase and walk a little ways down the pier and pause to look out over the water.

—Let's just leave. Pack up everything and go. Drive somewhere far away.

Ash tugs on my sleeve as she says this. I spit into the breakers swirling below, bottomless and laced with white. I close my eyes and shake my head.

—Why not?

—You can't.

—Why?

—You can't. You have the babies.

—You never loved me.

—What did I say in your dream?

I reach toward her but she turns away and I follow her to the end of the pier. We climb a rusted turnstile and I take her hand when we reach the furthest point from shore, pressing it against my chest. We lean against a wooden pillar sunk deep into the bay and watch the silent

lights of fishing boats bob miles offshore. When Ash pulls out the fireworks, I search the trash for an empty beer bottle. One by one, we set the rockets off, lighting them with the ember of a shared cigarette, the fuses shedding sparks upon our hands. The rockets soar, they leave white trails among the deathless stars, they pop and light the beach with their finality and fall empty and unnoticed in the surf.

Ash and I take off our shoes so we can feel the silt between our toes. Circles of sputtering light dot the shore for miles, fountains of red and green and orange that gush from the sand and cast long silhouettes of families on the dunes. We walk toward their light. I trip on something in the sand and grab my foot and cuss but Ash joins me on the ground where we laugh and dig around something like a taproot made of smooth stone.

—What is it?

—Glass, I think. From a lightning strike here on the shore.

I know the name but it feels ugly in my mouth. I lift the glass from the beach and wash it off in a tide pool nearby, sending moonlit shorefish skipping through the water. Dark and hollow and outlined in blue. I give it to Ash and she turns it over in her hands.

—Must've happened in the storm. I bet they're all over.

I rub my hands over the base and she traces her fingers along its points.

—It's still warm, I swear, feel it here.

Ash places her palm next to mine, shakes her head.

—It's just warm from where you're touching it.

—I barely touched it. Feel it again.

—It's dead cold. It's only your imagination.

—It's warm.

—You don't know what you're talking about.

Ash sets it down and turns away and walks out toward the sea. When I touch her shoulder, she undoes her scarf and places it in my hands, walking farther and farther from the shore until I can't make out her features. I close the distance until I am knee high in the surf. This close to the waves, our voices are faint and so she cups her hands around her mouth and calls out to me.

—I wonder how deep it is.

—Why?

—Because I wonder, that's why

—Deep. I don't know, pretty deep. Let's go to the fair. We can probably walk there in a half hour.

I point to where the carnival glows like emeralds and jaspers and sapphires and amethyst but the wind gusts in my direction and she does not turn her head. If she hears me, I cannot tell. I watch her walk away from me and step farther into the sea.

—Come with me.

She turns and shouts the words. The wind carries her voice and I can tell she's laughing. Her smile shines like pearls in the darkness. She beckons to me and backs deeper into the breakers and I feel the tide sucking me seaward as it recedes. I call her name again but Ash is too far gone to hear me.

—Come with me.

Ahead, Ash looks as if she's walking on the surface of the sea. Her mouth opens in a shout again but the hiss of the returning tide drowns out her voice. The silvered line of our footprints vanishes behind me as I crash through the breakers, turning my shoulder as they approach and knifing my body through the waves. The water creeps up my body and the seafloor drops away. A swell the color of shadows rolls over her and she disappears. I thrash to where she went under and when I'm near, she emerges from the black water, her clothes ghostly and soaked to her skin, the angles of her body jutting out like bones. I squat down in the water and watch her roll in and out of the waves. I know she cannot swim, and that there's only so far she will go. Part of me still wonders, though. She splashes on the surface for what seems like hours, but just as I expected, she eventually makes her way to shore, her sundress sticking to her skin as she rises from the waves.

The carnival is much farther than it looked from the boardwalk. My feet are tired and raw from seashell cuts. The seawater has all dried up and left behind salt and sand that chafes my skin with every step. Ash gives up on being modest and, shouting with relief, strips down to her bra and panties, throwing the dress over her shoulder like a cape. Ahead of me, the lights still spin in the dark, the colors recombining into hues I've never seen before and I swear I hear calliope music carried down the shore by the coastal wind.

—It wasn't all bad was it?

Ash shakes her head and laughs before answering

—Of course it wasn't. It was never about *good* or *bad*. That was always your problem.

You can only see the world in two colors.

—I hate it when you talk to me like that.

—Like what?

—You know what.

—Enlighten me.

—Fine. I hate it when you speak of me in terms of what I *can* and *cannot* do.

I spit the last of these last words out and Ash sighs loud enough to be heard over the breakers.

—Fine, Jase. You see the world in two colors. I get the distinction. I just don't get the point.

I almost tell her about the carnival lights but decide that would be pushing my luck. I watch the dark sand just below the sand dunes for a while. Adjusted to the dark, my eyes spot couples rolling on blankets tucked secretly away, and madmen wandering the shore alone.

—It was good, wasn't it? Especially in the beginning?

—It was *great* in the beginning.

It is January in Nashville again and you're only days from falling in love, though you do not know it yet.

—Stop here. Beneath the streetlamp.

—Why?

—I'm scared of the dark.

She laughs at this and stops walking and steps beside you. The parking lot spreads out in all directions, split asunder by the sun, but there's no sun now, or the moon, just the orange haze

of the city rising above the black outlines of low buildings. As you watch the wind tease her hair, the corners of your eyes play tricks on you and the pavement seems to swell like the surface of the sea, something vast and uncrossable. Beyond it lays the thoroughfare, a strip of light blurred by morning fog blowing in from the Cumberland River.

—I love your eyes.

You say this and regret it right away because what you meant to say was that you loved the way the color of her eyes was like nothing you had seen before, like the color of the lamp-lit fog, Ash leans against your chest. She smells like cigarettes— you both do, really. She hates this and she always will, but you won't. Later, you will think things like this: Surrounded on all sides by darkness, you stand upon a circle of light.

You park your car near the railroad tracks just as slashes through the night. Steel on steel and sparking wheels, you watch bright loops of graffiti streak away to somewhere else. The lights are far behind us. The fog has settles on them like down. Pillars hold the highway far above you, tires, sweeping northward to Kentucky, buzz upon the pavement. The sound echoes in the car. You lean in to kiss her and she turns away.

—No.

—Why not?

—You know why.

You can see each other's breath. The outside of the windows frost, and everything is obscured except the two of you inside the car. She grabs your hand and traces her finger along your arm and you are aware of each tiny hair as it gives in to her touch.

—Are you happy?

She rubs her palms against the window and stares out at the train tracks.

—In a way. Something's missing.

—What?

—I don't know. Everything.

—You know. You know and you don't want to say it.

—Maybe.

You lean over and wipe away more of the window and join her in watching the tracks.

Far away, a whistle blows. You roll the windows down half way to let out all the steam.

—Train's coming soon.

—I know.

—It's getting late.

—I know.

You lean in to kiss her again and this time your lips meet hers. Warm, playful. Then they part and she turns away. She says something but you never know what it is because another train rolls by, scratching the night with light, and all you can hear is a rushing wind and a thousand tons grinding metal against metal.

It's April and you're following an abandoned railroad spur into the woods of outside Gallatin, the sun stretching the shadows out even as it drops below the treeline and ignites the gaps between the birches and poplars. She walks the rails like a tightrope

—Take care on those tracks. Wouldn't want you to catch your foot and lose your leg when the three-fifteen rolls through.

—Bullshit.

—I've seen it in the movies.

—The movies are bullshit.

—Suit yourself. You're free, white, and twenty-one.

—I will, thank-you-very-much. And I haven't seen twenty-one in a decade.

—Could've fooled me.

The sun goes down and the stars come out by the time you reach the clearing that you told her about. You stretch out a blanket and pull out a bottle of wine and a corkscrew from a ratty backpack that you brought along. You promised her a meteor shower and there it was, darting above overhead, four, five, six a minute.

—What do we do now?

—First things first.

You kiss her hard and lay her back on the ground that's soft with fallen leaves. Her hair falls around her and you make love there beneath the Lyrids, her body moving with yours, her eyes closed so she's in total darkness, her lips wet and slack against the tendons of your neck. The dainty ends of her slender fingers press into the flesh of your shoulders and then your thighs, Then you come too, and stay inside her for a while, listening to the sound of your own breath and the spring peepers singing in the tall grass. You lay beside her at last and hold hands and watch the fireflies floating in the dark woods.

—What if we didn't meet?

She smiles at your question.

—We did, though.

—But what if we didn't?

A flurry of stars zip across the sky. A firefly lights on her bare knee and you both watch it flashing there before it takes off again.

—You're being ridiculous.

—No, I'm not. What if we didn't?

Ash sighs and sits up and you can see her backbone shifting beneath her skin. She grabs a leaf from off the ground and picks at it as she answers your question.

—I don't spend a lot of time with *what ifs*. What is, is. What's happened, has happened. We met. The chances were astronomical. Maybe it was fate. Maybe its more common than we think. I don't know why. I don't pretend to. Can't you just be happy that it happened? Like me?

—You don't have to get mad.

—I'm not mad. I'm the furthest thing from mad. Really I am.

Ash leans back and rests her head on your chest, runs her lips over it, breaths in the smell of your cologne and sweat and the sour scent of alcohol seeping from your pores. She bites the spring hairs with her narrow, whitened teeth. You both start counting the shooting stars out loud.

—For whatever reason, we've met. I won't argue that point. But so what? *Five*, no, *six*.

She stretches out an elegant finger and pretends to count the couple you both know. Her wedding band glows dull in the starlight.

—Angie and her man? They've met. Dina and hers? They've met, too. Some, *most* of the unions we see are doomed to destruction. The rest are doomed to mediocrity. I don't know what's worse. How can you logically claim that you and I are any different? *Fourteen*.

—Pick one out for us. *Fifteen*.

—What?

She's bewildered. She always is when she gets on a roll and you change the subject.

—You heard me. Pick a star. Any one. There goes *seventeen* and *eighteen*.

—In case I go somewhere you can't follow.

—Like where?

Ash takes a swallow the wine and hands the bottle to me. I take a long drink before speaking again.

—I don't know. Somewhere else. *Twenty*.

—Are you planning on leaving or something?

—Of course not. But who knows what the future holds. I could be kidnapped.

—Kidnapped, huh? Nice. *Twenty-one*.

—Shanghaied by a band of gypsies. Real ones, not Jimmy Hendrix's back-up band.

—Is that even a word?

—If it wasn't, it is now. I'm a writer. We can invent new words by fiat.

—Why can't we just use the moon? It's easier to find.

—Everyone has the moon.

—So? *Twenty-two*.

—If everyone has it, then it won't be ours. Besides the moon changes all the time, and some nights you can't see it at all.

Ash stops counting the shooting stars and instead sits up and rests her chin on her fist, her brow furrowed. You can tell she likes this line of thinking.

—You can't see the stars all the time. If it's cloudy. If you're near a big city.

—True. But they're always there. Even in the daytime. Fixed in the sky. You only have to wait for the sun to set. When it's day time, the moon is on the other side of the world! That's no kind of guide for us.

She thinks about this for a minute. She slips her skirt back on and pulls her blouse down over her head. You take the hint and put on your jeans. She turns to you with her eyebrow raised.

—So it's supposed to be our guide, eh?

—Yes.

—How so.

—Maybe it's not a guide. Maybe it's something else.

—Like what?

—A temple.

—How can a star be a temple? It has no walls. There's no way in. Even if there was, it's light years away. Plus we'd burn up. You sir, are not making sense.

—A temple. Not in form, but in function.

Ash smiles at that and turns squarely to face you.

—Explain.

—Temples are meeting places. Places of communion. For what is seen to palaver with the unseen.

—What's palaver mean?

—To meet. To converse.

—Why didn't you just say that?

—Because I like the sound of it. And I like finding a word you don't know once in a while. They're few and far between.

—Ha ha. Go on. Communion. Palaver. A temple.

—Wherever you and I are, we can become one if we fix our gaze on the same point in the sky.

Ash narrows her eyes, smiles slightly— one of her patented *faces*— and cocks her head to the side.

—Okay, you convinced me. I'll pick one.

Still smiling, she studies the sky and taps her chin and you watch her eyes skip across the expanse above. She points.

—That one.

—*That* one?

—That one.

—That's an airplane. You mean *that* one?

Your hand covers hers and they waver there like divining rods. You feel the hard lump of her diamond pressing into your palm. Finally, your hands stop on a star in the east and Ash turns to you and nods.

We're a hundred yards from the carnival when the lights shut off. First the *Ali Baba* and the *Double Shot* go dark. Next, the *Fireball* and *Gyro Tower* and all the smaller rides and game booths. After that, the Merry-go-round stops turning. Finally, the Ferris wheel, a clone of the *High Roller* in Las Vegas, winks off light by light and, aside from the giant shadows blotting out

the stars, it's as if the fair never existed at all. Ash kicks at the sand and screams. Then she pulls her swimdress back on and stomps in the direction of the darkened carnival.

“Fuck it. I walked this far. I'm going.”

I catch up with her and don't say a word. It was my idea after all. We reach the gate of the fair but it's locked, no surprise. I lift up the heavy links of chain and let it fall limp beneath the giant padlock. We walk the length of the carnival looking for a way in. Ash picks up a stick and drags it along the galvanized fence, making the metal ring. Finally, toward the rear of the lot, there's a section of fence loose enough to pull up. I bend the corner like the page of a book and crawl behind Ash on hands and knees.

The carnival is creepy without all the noise and lights. The stuffed animals hang sightless and still from the ceilings of game booths, their color muted in the dark. The rides tower above us, freakish shadowshapes in the moonlight, jabbing into the sky at grotesque angles. When we reach the Ferris wheel, I half-heartedly fiddle with the control box, imagining the whole thing coming alive with music and flashing and movement. Nothing happens, of course. The ride stays mute and motionless. Ash and I stand beneath a low-hanging carriage and I give her a boost inside. Grabbing the base of the ride, I hop up and pull myself up, the muscles of my back shaking with the effort.

—You're such a *fatkid*.

I laugh at this. Ash pulls out a cigarette and looks out over the sea, lighting up and smoking in the darkness. The tiny ember at the end of her lips is probably the brightest light for a mile in any direction. I look up at the carriage above us, swaying slowly in the wind.

—Want to try to climb into the next one?

—And then what?

—Try to get up to the one after that.

—You know how insane that sounds, don't you?

I shrug and stare at the waves as they crash and crash along the shore. We weren't hardly off the ground, but I could see all the way to Flagler Beach from here, maybe further. White lines like these striped the coast for miles, I suppose. All the way until the sea ran out of seashore. Ash clears her throat and asks a question:

—Remember the night by the railroad tracks, when you asked me to pick a star?

—Yeah.

—I did, and I looked it up later. Smart phones are amazing things. The star was Vega. It's part of Lyra. There's a story behind it, if you want to hear it.

—Tell me.

—Orpheus was betrothed to Eurydice and they were pledged to be married, but Eurydice was bitten by a serpent and taken away to Hades.

—Go on, I'm listening.

—Orpheus braved the trials of Hell and came before its King and Queen to beg for the wife of his wife.

I put my arm around her and she shifts in her seat and put her head upon my shoulder. She flicked the cigarette away and continued with her story.

—Now Orpheus was no ordinary man. He was the lovechild of a king and of the muse Calliope. When he sang and played his lyre, even the stones were charmed. And so he begged for the life of his wife, and by his words all Hell was silent.

She looks at me intently. Forgotten is the star, the movie theatre, the carnival, the ocean, the entire state of Tennessee.

—What happened then?

—She was free of course. How could even the King of the Underworld deny such a request? But on one condition.

—What was the condition?

—He could not turn his head to look back until he was completely out of his dark kingdom.

—Did he look back?

Ash laughs out loud at the intensity in my voice. She flicks away her cigarette and meets my eyes.

—Of course. A sidelong glance of love. She fell back into the abyss. He had to watch her die twice.

—That's terrible.

—All love stories end in tragedy.

—Not all of them.

—The ones that don't are fairy tales.

We help each other climb out of the carriage and to the ground below. Ash laughs about our ride upon the Ferris wheel.

—Even though the ride wasn't turning, we still ended up in the same spot.

—The irony isn't lost on me.

We exit the amusement park, and start the long trek back to the car, our footsteps on the return trip twice as heavy, having nothing to look forward to. We walk into the wind, our faces stung by bits of sand. Ash wraps her scarf around her face like a head dress, the hem flaps behind her. I cup my hand around my eyes and turn my face to where the beach is whittled down to nothing by the vanishing point, the beach-beaten grasses flattened by the gusts. Try as I might, eventually I look back, checking to see if the carnival is lit up again before we're too far away.

OUR LADY OF SORROWS

Cradles stir in sterile light. Doctors pace white floors and speak harsh words to harried nurses. Their bellows rumble beneath the shriek of cold and hungry babes. Metal rods and rubber tubes prod new skin and make it blush. Narrow eyes make calculations. The doctors shake their heads and leave heavy women to hold the tiny bodies against their pastel breasts, feeding them one by one in creaking rocking chairs beneath the empty viewing window. A baby girl twists in the glare, the women mourn over her crib “*Queda en nada, Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, Queda en nada.*” The sound of steel locks snapping shut and the cooing of nurses. The girl reaches toward voices and broken skylights, is wheeled with the rest of the newborns down darkened halls past huddled families and old bones giving up their ghosts. They make awful sounds, each one screams to the world *I am, I am, I am, I am.*

Outside the children run and meet the sky, boys and girls break through blooms of dayflower to where the power lines jut dead from the earth. They pull stickers from their socks and hair and watch convoys of soldiers rumble toward *la ciudad*. Some run through the dust and shout and cheer the fighting men who stare at the receding road and puff on cigarettes. Onward they travel the way of all flesh, toward ashes where the skyline fills with smoke.

Dressed in white, the children trace their fingers over the rough faces of the tombstones and breathe the dates that mark birth and death, each human being in one day erased. The sun grows hot and wilts the grass as the children play hide-and-seek among the tombs. Crowds gather at sanctuary doors the graybrown of dust. Suits and ties and cotton and lace and commotion, they hear elders call their names and so the children hide in the shadows of graves,

they lay down and stare at sun-swept skies and mouth *la Doctrina*. “¿Dónde has estado, Ninita? Estropeará el vestido! La primera communion, Venga aquí, venga aquí!

They step one by one toward *el Padre*, hands outstretched, cameras flashing in the dark. His voice echoes in the rafters. “*en el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo.*” The crowd chants and the shadows grow long as the mass carries on.

“*Alma de Cristo, santifícame,*”

Ancient faces wrinkle in the dark, their cheeks carved with lines set by wind and a thousand suns. They clench their calloused hands like stone martyrs. All the young men have vanished, their strength swallowed up as if in times of war, killers of men marching into the west where the daylight ends.

“*Cuerpo de Cristo, sálvame.*”

Above, stained portraits of saints refract the sun and bathe the aisles in blues and purples and golds. Images fashioned by the hands of men twist the light until it drips upon the people like quicksilver. The old ones look upon the children and pull their arms tight against their breasts as if they could embrace the rites themselves. Evil times have made them nostalgic and they long for days gone by as if those days didn't have evil of their own, but they did.

“*Sangre de Cristo, embriágame.*”

They take the flesh and blood upon their tongues and swallow hard and pronounce the names of God. There is applause from the pews and wind in the rafters and the children smile and blink and are mute. Soon all file outside to talk and pray until thunderheads rush in from the mountains. Scourged by storm-whipped sand, they run for the shelter of their automobiles. A few stray women light candles for the lost in hidden corners of the barren land.

Lines of cars shudder on the broken highway, from a mile long chain of idle steel, the children peek at roadside shrines to *Santa Muerte* draped in lingerie and rosaries. The road signs here are scrawled with *100% Zeta*. They enter the aegis of the narco-cult and old women make the sign of the cross in the rusted light. The red drains from the clouds like blood as the traffic jerks toward the city. The sky is the color of bruises when they finally reach the tumult of lights and sirens and policemen directing traffic with unsteady hands past an awful shape. Bathed in flashbulbs, a dozen jumbled faces gaze dead from beneath a black tarp before the bus is again speeding toward *la zona marginal*, sheared walls of blasted stone looming over the road as if their path were hewn by the finger of a fallen god. Lying on a pallet of coats and blankets and newspapers, the children cry themselves to sleep while *abuelitas* light candles to *la Virgin* and tell them it was all a bad dream.

They shape their *calavera* from chicken wire, wrap it with papier-mâché, dip headlines into flourwater all morning “*fifty headless bodies found in Tamaulipas death toll rises in Mexico massacre thirty dead in underground horror.*” They slather wire with violent pulp and let it dry, whitewash it the color of bone and paint with grease a stitched mouth.

The parade coils through the streets and the people follow. Glittering pickup trucks roll through the slums on chrome spokes that flash like knives and honk their horns in celebration of the Day of the Dead. Sunglassed men, their eyes obscured, pour corn and wheat into the outstretched arms that flood the streets. Lavished with praise they bow, heavy tattoos bulging with muscle. Plaster skeletons hang from poles like banners, held high by shaded men grinning into the crowd. Little boys weave through their feet, chasing one another with sticks, Crayola

teardrops still wet on their cheeks. Their faces hidden behind masks, they breath in sulfur from Blackcats popping in the alleys and scoop up handfuls of candy skulls that cover the sidewalks.

Tributaries of children join the exodus and they flow as one past empty waterholes jagged with sun-bleached bones, past the sunken *adobes* of maddened exiles forking evil eyes. *La gente* pool before fallen jungle temples hidden like fever. A pyramid rises from the canopies and obscures the sun and the people revel down the path of captive Aztec offerings, climb the broken stones and celebrate with viscous draughts of *pulque* until dusk. As the night falls, the people head home by way of the cemeteries and light candles for the dead until the hillsides are afire. Their tribute paid, they return to stunted urban spires and are received. They jostle through gates turned makeshift gallows now sagging with fresh cartel traitors and read the inscriptions:

abandone esperanza.

Street fires rise with the dying of the light and the valley is flooded with mountain air. Marigolds the color of sparks rain from open windows, fall upon the mob where flashing jaguar warriors sworddance to the beat of heavy drums, wraiths on stilts stumble and leer at death-masked women twirling in dresses the colors of birds of paradise. Flesh beads with sweat, flames swirl in the dark, altars are erected to the slain where mothers weep at the feet of neon shrines. The children fall asleep in the flicker of candles lit for the fallen and the bitter smell of marigolds and the sound of women crying in the dark.

The morning comes and with it the sun and all the idols of the dead have been swept away. The children awaken to the smell of dew and tortillas and diesel fuel from the highway. In ones and twos and threes, they make their way down to the river's edge and splash into the shallow water where refuse rustles against the husks of cars abandoned in the mire. Soon all their

flesh is burned and they smooth mud from the riverbanks on their shoulders like a salve. Huge ships traverse the span of water before them, hulks lugging cargo toward the border, barges heaped with garbage heading inland, their massive decks haloed with gulls. Skiffs drag their wake for bodies, taunt nets sending the crew scrambling starboard to haul in their grim prize.

The children emerge from the water streaked with mud and wander on dirty feet to the edge of the boroughs. Their hands entwine the chain link stitched upon the hillside. The structures before them are marked for demolition and crowds of people wait to watch the destruction. Sheets are laid upon the grass and bread is broken and soon muffled explosions fill the valley and all rush toward the steel boundary to watch the city fall. Hushed by the distance, building after building disappears with a sound like rain in the forest, a rumble and a hiss. The dust clouds the sky.

The years pass one upon another until today the children are *Quinceañera*, today they are given away. They close their eyes as women paint their faces with short strokes, light their cheeks with blush and shadow their eyes the blue of evening. Lips are sealed bright pinks that match the flush of their bodies. Nude, they step into their slippers and pull their gowns over her head. “*Eres bella mi niñita, eres bella mi Quinceañera.*” Sequined and white, they arrive at churches across *la ciudad* to meet cousins and mothers and aunts, their *damas* and *chambelanes* and people from town. Their entrance is applauded and mass begins.

The daughters denounce the devil and all his works, hold hands, and pray to the saints. Priests bind their necks with amulets of *la Virgen*, heavy things of pewter passed down through generations. Their heads hang low. They lay their hands upon the girls and speak blessings and then eat the Body and Blood of Christ. They are crowned in silent sanctuaries and leave bouquets

of fresh flowers at the foot of the altar. The children dance, the *damas* and *chambelanes* revolve slowly over warped plywood in humble reception halls, the floorboards creaking beneath the music. The ancient ones look on with wet eyes and hand out gifts and usher everyone toward banquets that stretch on and on, piled high with bright fruit glistening with juice, dozens of breads baked in stone ovens by hand still hot enough to melt thick dollops of butter, steaming pans of *enchiladas* and *fajitas*, thick slices of meat piled high, *pollo* and *carne* prepared a dozen different ways and at the center of it all the cakes, some pink and some white and some yellow, all layered and frosted with delicate flowers and crowned with figurines in immaculate dresses.

All eat and have their fill, those who take little do not have too little and those who take much have just enough and the children depart and pair off, lay down in twos on lawns and hills and shores tinted with twilight and breathe in cool ocean air. Above the clouds revolve and dance and join together and break apart again and disappear over the horizons to someday fall to earth. The couples kiss, entwine their arms and hearts, lay still on the dew beading in the cooling air and watch the sky thin like watercolors above them as their fingers trace smiles and glowing flesh fades in the coming night.

The children arise and walk hand in hand to the seaside, stumble to the edge of the cliffs, stand and face the darkness. To the right and to the left a line of light marks where the city's glow washes into nothing and the night sky thrashes with thunderheads. The children try and find their footing in the dark and lose sight of one another and descend alone through the beach grass. They follow the sound of the waves and strikes of distant lightning until they cross the dunes to the tidal flats.

Their flesh breaks out in gooseflesh where their clothes have torn, dresses drag over the sand and shirttails flap in the growing wind. Their eyes adjust to the dark and they can see white breakers spreading over the shore and the children find each other again in the black, half-blind they embrace to keep away the cold and prostrate themselves and together sink into the silt. The clouds rupture and fat drops of rain dash themselves upon the ground and soak them to their bones.

The tombstones have toppled, the graves are now shadowless with faces turned upward to the sky. The dark turns into dawn turns into day and swallows the night and the daughters carry flowers to mark the places of the lost, kneel in the grass that sprouts beside resting places. The dates are obliterated by rain and light and time; all that remains are names, one after the other into the horizon and they run their fingers over the etched stone as if blind. They let dahlias fall to the ground and inside of them children stir as they are woven into being and the daughters fight back tears and run toward the empty sanctuaries of their youth. The smell of swollen prayer books and rotting wood. The outlines of stolen crucifixes. The paintings, the candlesticks, the altar, the bowls for incense— all the pretenses gone. Singing was sold for silence, beauty for ashes. Colored glass crackles beneath their feet and they stare through the broken windows and see the clouds revolve and dance and join together in the white light above.

The daughters follow the ancient ones across the failed state, use secret paths that rebels cannot follow and cover their ears from the shelling and the sound of men slaying and dying. They cross *la ciudad* as the sun crosses the sky, picking their way over broken columns. The old faces turn toward them and smile, wave them into upper rooms spared in the assault. The storm comes and the fires of war light the night outside and all can hear the thunder and sirens and

gunshots muffled by the rain. They are with child, they stretch upon threadbare mattresses. The ancient ones attend to them with coos and beaming faces, the old men collect rainwater falling outside and bring it to their bedsides while the old women light candles and caress the daughters and speak soothing words and prepare the way. Water falls in huge drops and splashes in puddles on the floor and in agony they reach toward the candlelight and toward the firelight in the windows and toward the light in the faces above them and pray their children are not born in the darkness. Their backs arch in the beginning of birth pains as the world falls down.

The rainfall hushes waking noises of the city outside. The light of dawn grows brighter, fills the rooms where the mother and child rest. The ancient ones rejoice and laugh and buzz with life and look upon new life and are content. The fires have died and the day is here and outside the clouds revolve and dance and join together. Awakened, the children gaze upon their children, smile as small hands reach for fingers colored with blood. Their small, still voices crack into cries that shout to the world, *I am, I am, I am, I am.*

TALES OF A THIRTEENTH GRADE NOTHING

“Foreign invaders, hidden in the population,” says Reagan, “Tens of thousands waiting on marching orders— exotic, contemptuous eyes hating our freedom and the old rugged cross as they change our tires, bus our tables, pick our fruit, dump our garbage. Call centers across the country tits deep in H1B insurgents waiting for an encrypted headline in the *New York Times* to green light a fire sale. The billboards are coded messages to infantry on how to take down the Republic city by city— the one off the interstate that says PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD? GPS coordinates for a garden of Minuteman 3’s in Arkansas. I used a cipherwheel.”

Reagan, the ether huffing foreman who smelled like a two-cycle engine, mushrooms out of his cargo shorts, shirtless, brown belly spilling over his belt loops like leather jello. He could be the bastard son of Rodney Dangerfield if the comedian had a recessive pituitary gland like a busted hydrant. He tramples dandelions in steel-toed Doc Martens. Jacked on Four Loco and Foxy Methoxy, with one hand Reagan points a pistol at your head and with the other, he teases a German shepherd mutt with a turkey leg, dangling it just out of the dog’s reach as he takes Shrek-like bites of poultry.

Just so you’re straight, it’s *Ree*-gan like “regal,” not like the conservative iconoclast. And when Reagan has a twenty-two pointed in your direction, it’s *asshole* as in “*quit pointing that goddam gun at me, you asshole.*” Regan shouts “*What did you say, what did you say?*” and you tell him that he heard you, and call him a mongoloid. Reagan guffaws like a Bronx ogre, “*huh huh huhh,*” the big goon. You’ve known Reagan since grade school. New to the gifted program, you and some of your friends, all accomplished rejects yourselves, teased him mercilessly— *I’m*

Christuhphuh Reeese-gan, I'm a New Yawwwkuh— until he was crying in the workroom and the teacher chewed out the whole class.

Fast-forward through the last decade: Middle school. Reagan wedged into a graffitied desk, a lumbering youth that would one day grow into alcoholism the way Samoans take to pass blocking, leaning backward in his chair to pop his back and chuckling “*You believe in God, right?*” before whispering the lyrics to Reznor’s “Heresy.” Freshman year, the two of you crammed in the back seat of a school bus, clad in stinking cleats and shoulder pads, headed to your first football game, Reagan alternating between “We Are the Champions” and “Seek and Destroy.” Sophomore year, watching Reagan cruise to school on a yellow moped, ridiculous as a circus bear, stumbling up to you in the quad wearing a novelty helmet emblazoned with heavy metal stickers, fresh from the factory and smelling like a six-pack. Junior year, Reagan egging you on to beat up Rich LaTourette for talking shit (and you did it too, didn’t you? Whaled on his head with a fistful of pennies in front of the school). Then Reagan was gone, graduated early, no one more surprised than you, only to resurface again in your first year of community college at gas station parking lots, sausage-fest house parties, and overgrown driveways like the one you’re standing in this very moment.

And what of this moment? It’s 6:31 on New Year’s Eve, Buffalo Springfield is playing from Reagan’s busted stereo and what you’re feeling is as clear as the winter sky. After turning left at the Foxhead Lounge and speeding into the lungs of Osteen, after digging up Victory Boy’s front lawn with a poorly executed handbrake turn, your youth is burning down to the bone like white phosphorous. Reagan holsters his gun and you check your pulse with one hand and your phone with the other, waiting for Factory Girl to respond to your cryptic question— *bonfire?*—

but it's the year 2000 and your reception sucks so you send it again, this time with more question marks.

Victory Boy emerges from beneath the I-ROC like a bridge troll, wearing an Iron Maiden tee splotted with brake fluid. "*We give hugs around here*" he says as he clutches you in an awkward embrace. The yard looks like a David Allen Coe song. Windowless junkers velveteed in coughbrush cluster his property like rustic, avant-garde sculptures. Power lines sag from sun-splintered poles tilting from the rezoned marshland. Dirty, diapered children poke their blonde heads through holes in a screen door from which the smell of frying food escapes. You and Reagan are waiting for Victory Boy to replace a master cylinder or some damn thing on his car so you can cruise Deltona looking for discarded Christmas trees to throw on the Patterson's bonfire tonight.

"How much longer?" you say.

"Just gotta hook the thing to the thing, and then attach it to another thing." says Victory Boy, or at least he might as well have. One time in auto-shop, you called the oil cap a 710 cap.

"In a coordinated sneak attack by a foreign invader, you'd be useless, Hoon," Reagan says to you, "as unskilled as you are. You'd have to give militiamen blowjobs by the dozen just to get enough clean water and MREs to survive. And the second they found out about your mixed blood, they'd use you to fertilize their survival gardens." Reagan was convinced you had Jewish blood in your veins for some reason, even though you were mostly Irish.

"Maybe he could write battle hymns for the marauders to sing as they take potshots at the Chinese-Mexican coalition?" Victory Boy says, sliding back under the Chevy on his creeper.

“High-larious,” you say, “a Bachelor’s in English is going to be invaluable in the post-dollar American wasteland. Someone’s going to have to rewrite the Constitution. And as if you won’t want your war exploits lionized in verse. Who asked whom to update their resume?”

“I only asked you to do that because Walmart is so damn picky. In a survival-slash-economic-collapse-slash-patriot-uprising situation, the liberal arts would be relegated to the scrap-heap. Any academics that don’t die of exposure will be forced to toil in saltpeter caves to keep the Republic flush with 19th century gunpowder.” Reagan tosses his turkey leg to the dog and wipes the grease on his shorts. “And to your first point, I plan on memorializing my battles with *Anthrax* lyrics.”

“*Megadeth* would be better,” you say.

“Only before Friedman left,” Reagan says. “Anything after *Youthanasia* lacks panache.”

“What about Victory Boy?”

“I’ll be worth my weight in ammunition,” Victory Boy says, ratcheting something underneath the car.

“How you think?” you say. Victory Boy goes for dialysis once a week, twice if he’s been drinking.

“Easy,” says Reagan. “With the blood of the worker repurposed to the battlefield, the wheels of capitalism will grind to a stop. Marauding cannibals in super-charged hotrods won’t be able to stop at AutoZone when their alternator goes caput. Mechanics will be as valuable as captive nubile. Haven’t you ever seen *The Road Warrior*?”

“You’re wasting your breath,” you say. “We’re all gonna keel over chained to a lathe or a cubicle like the extras in *Ben-Hur*. Our only legacy will be our student loan debt. Wall Street won’t even notice.”

“I’m paying as I go,” says Reagan. “But if the markets are going to tumble, maybe I ought to leverage my Social Security number to the hilt.”

Dusk is passing but no one except you seems to notice the autumn orange wasting away behind the scraggles of sand pines than circle the five acre plot. Victory Boy pops the Camaro’s hood and the three of you inspect the engine, nodding and whistling as he explains the complexities of the motor even though you don’t have a clue what the hell he’s talking about and you’re ninety-five percent sure Reagan doesn’t either. You are, in fact, so busy watching out for pigmy rattlers that you fail to notice the mangy German shepherd gnawing the turkey leg behind you. When you mistake a mottled coolant hose for a snake and jump back, the dog snaps at your calf and pulls one leg of your cargo pants clean off. You scream while Reagan and Victory Boy roll on the ground in stitches. The dog sits down beside the car and lolls its tongue as if to say: “Yeah, that just happened. Fuck you.”

On Halloween, you got a letter from Edie saying that she was coming back to the states. A knock-kneed ballerina and the girl next door, the two of you grew up watching TGIF reruns and playing Dungeons and Dragons until high school when you, high on testosterone and cool-kid hubris, blew her off to go your own way. You ascended the Olympus of varsity sports and its pep rallies, performance enhancing drugs and tribal arm-band tattoos while Edie, a Persephone of the Tori Amos variety, sank into the Goth crowd that gathered beneath the clock tower. The

last time you saw Edie, she was on winter break from Sarah Lawrence. Her hair was different, cropped close to her head like a boy, and she wore horn-rimmed glasses without lenses, but she was the same Edie you grew up with, elfin features, dark Pollyanna eyes, still obsessed with *The Cult*. A month later she disappeared studying abroad in Prague. No one had heard from her since.

Later that year, Reagan turned eighteen and his first act as a legal adult was to purchase a subscription to a porno mag. As the beneficiary of your friend's newfound liberty, you should have been thrilled to be rewarded with trickle-down smut, but Reagan was twisted, like, for real. Instead of *Club* or *Cherie* or a hundred other magazines full of flyover-state variety porn, Reagan chose a Czech fetish rag called *120 Days in Sodom*. It was as if Hieronymus Bosch overlaid *The Garden of Earthly Delights* with vellum stills from a blue movie— pillories and cock-cages and malnourished ex-Soviets scourging each other. But any port in a storm, as they say— eventually you peeled open the mag for fresh jerk-off material and there she was. Edie, in screenshot after grainy screenshot from what looked to be a snuff film. Edie's stage-lit breasts surging from a vinyl corset. Edie's fishnetted thighs taut upon a brutal pair of stilettos. Edie standing astride a statuette of Baphomet, legs rising above his diademed head like the Colossus of Rhodes. Edie's razored heels digging into the backs of two prostrate gimps. Edie pointing a .44 at a submissive who kneeled, hooded, at her feet. Her name wouldn't have crossed your mind if the caption hadn't said: Edie, the Factory Girl, aims pistol at slave in mock execution. You pored over the slick pages till you found what you were looking for, an ankle tattoo of *Hello Kitty*. Stretching from Edie's hip to just above Kitty's hair-bowed head, a quote from Marques de Sade was inked in typeface: *The only way to a woman's heart is along the path of torment.*

“Eddie won’t give you the time of day. It’s clear she’s got different tastes now. She’d look great on the back of a salvaged Harley, arms in the pockets of my tactical jacket.” Reagan says.

“I doubt it,” says Victory, putting away his socket wrenches. “Who’d want to give up dominatrixing to sire your slack-jawed brood?”

Victory Boy mounts the black beast with a step ladder and cranks on the *trar*. Half-truck, half-car, *Big Johnson* is decaled on the windshield of an I-ROC mounted on the frame of a jacked-up GMC Jimmy. It sports forty inch Super Swampers and a seven foot exhaust snorkel that rises matte black and erect from behind the driver side door. Mounted on the front grille is a chrome ram bar and the bleached skull of a six-point buck. Victory Boy beams behind the windshield. Each time he revs the gas, the monster shudders with torque and he whoops. He climbs out the window Dukes-of-Hazzard style, blathering to you and Reagan about cams and manifolds and headers and you remember that Victory Boy smashed his brain up good racing the New Smyrna Speedway.

You check your Nokia again, nervous about what Edie might text back. It’s been a year and a half since you awkwardly dated the summer after high school. After you saw her in the magazine, you wrote the editor, the photographer, the publishing house— anyone vaguely connected with *120DIS*. A month ago, a postcard came in the mail with a photograph of Gebauer’s bronze statue *Pond* on the front and a phone number scrawled in crayon on the back. After a pint of Jägermeister, you walked the needle-littered median of Providence Boulevard to slur across seven time zones from the Winn Dixie payphone.

You spread high school gossip: Who broke up. Who was pregnant. Who was locked up. Who had overdosed. She spoke in low tones about the Czech Republic, the cobbled streets of

Prague, the stunted art scene emerging from beneath the Iron Curtain like an eyeless cave fish. Neither of you mentioned the magazine, Sarah Lawrence, or the summer before college. You asked her if she missed Deltona and she laughed.

“Car’s coming,” says Victory Boy.

It’s Spaceghost in his Monte Carlo, John Deere green, three of his children in tow. A self-proclaimed Haitian Jew, each child was nearly a clone except for one exotic feature inherited from their different mothers: Spraynard’s pale, Icelandic skin. Young-II’s bright blue eyes. De’Mon’s high cheekbones. Last week you’d split a handle of Seagram’s with Spaceghost but his mind was somewhere else. The girl he was messing with missed her period. You’d asked him if he’d ever heard of a condom.

“They just don’t *feel* good.” he’d said woefully.

Reagan’s primping himself for Edie’s arrival, picking his teeth with a hangnail and popping painful whiteheads in *Big Johnson*’s side-view mirror. He’d been crushing on her since you told him she was in the magazine, doing god-knows-what to her in his sewer of a mind. You could hear him rehearsing icebreakers, mumbling one-liners to himself about Democrats, chemtrails and the Bilderberg Group. What everyone had hoped was a phase he picked up from gun show leaflets had burrowed deep within Reagan’s personality like a tapeworm. Right-wing conspiracies spilled from his lips with the conviction of prophesy. The basic structure was always the same, only the players seemed to change. During the height of the Lewinsky scandal, Reagan believed Bill was telling the truth because Monica was a really a Chinese agent copying MIRV schematics tattooed on the President’s scrotum. Princess Diana was murdered by MI6 to keep her from revealing a smoking gun that connected the Jonestown massacre to MK-ULTRA.

Jay-Z was a time-traveling vampire. Years later, you will see Reagan in handcuffs on TMZ, arrested in Travis County, Texas for breaking into a boathouse that belonged to Alex Jones.

Reagan and Victory Boy used to scour magazines and periodicals looking for Masonic hand gestures and hidden triangles in *The New Yorker* and *Tiger Beat* but Victory Boy seemed to lose interest in the Illuminati after his three week coma. And now Reagan, who's taking eighteen credit hours at DBCC, doses Foxy daily and calls you at all hours of the night with secret intrigues mutated in a stew of designer drugs, hundred-level Poli Sci courses, and insomnia.

“A dynasty of Manchurian Candidates,” says Reagan. “Indoctrinated with the Codex Magica and locked in cryogenic stasis. Enough to usher in the New World Order.”

He arches his eyebrows at you and snorts a bump of white powder from his comically overgrown pinky nail. A shooting star streaks over the red-black horizon. Reagan flings a chunk of asphalt in its direction and it bounces off the hood of one of the junkers with a thud.

You wonder if Edie is really on her way to Deltona or watching the tide crash in at her Dad's condominium in New Smyrna Beach, sipping glamorous cocktails and ignoring her phone, dreaming of new fetishes to indulge in. You wonder if she wished upon that star.

The weekend before she left for college, Edie's parents had let her have the condo to herself and you drove drunk all over beachside looking for it, doubling and tripling back until you arrived at the doorstep of Oceanwalk with a half empty gallon of Moscato and a large pizza. Edie greeted you in a coral swimdress and was a little tipsy herself, having drank a couple washes of vodka and Hawaiian Punch. Her brow was furrowed, her finger was wrapped tight in a blood-soaked washrag. Natasha, their pet cockatiel, was lying on the rug behind her, its wings splayed, its head jutting at a weird angle.

Together, you wrapped the bird in window sheer and walked onto the beach. The scene was comically romantic. The stars were legion, bright scatterings like daylight streaming through sackcloth. Bonfires burned along the shadowed shore. Far away, a casino cruise ship floated at anchor, its passengers no doubt dizzy from cheap booze and the lure of quick cash. You and Edie walked a little ways into the surf and buried the bird in the sea, the makeshift shroud ghostlike in the current before vanishing in the black water.

That night you laid down in the white sand, watching single-engine planes twirl above you like seraphim taxiing around heaven, trading swallows of wine until Edie was mixing up her words and the sky was full of squiggles and your head hurt.

“I leave on Monday,” she said.

You were too drunk to take the hint, you didn't notice her finger tracing the smooth bulges of your shaved forearms. You rambled about the time you visited Bronxville for a funeral, fumbling to connect with the powerful current that would sweep her away even as you tried to shore up your bruised ego. Soon Edie would be studying at one of the best colleges in the nation, leaving you to sleep off benders in the back rows of DBCC. Amused, she fielded your questions about Sarah Lawrence, her dark eyes boring holes into the side of your oblivious face, the gleam of your high school glory, fading though it was, intoxicating her.

Soon Edie tired of subtlety. She stood above you and let her swimdress fall around her feet, her body lithe and goosefleshed in the steady ocean breeze. You stripped off your sea-stiffened board shorts and pulled her down beside you on the blanket. You mashed your lips against hers, your fingers flopping upon the soft hair between her thighs. She tried earnestly to get you hard but you were as flaccid as a sea cucumber. That's not what you'd tell everybody, of

course. With the toxic mix of machismo and selfish disregard that only eighteen-year-old boys can muster, you told everyone who would listen that you fucked out Edie's brains on her Daddy's bed. With a deep exhale, Edie gave up and laid back down beside you, covering herself with her rumpled swimsuit and swigging the last of the wine. She met your excuses with monotone, one-word answers and watched the cruise ship disappear over the horizon, carrying its gaudy promises away.

When it's fully dark, the three of you pile into *Big Johnson* and start humping over potholes the size of hog wallers en route to the bonfire. Reagan won rock-paper-scissors fair and square so he's gunning all six-hundred horses down the dirt road trying to catch air. Reagan turns off everything but the parking lamps and chugs another Four Loko. You watch the scenery fly by, eerie in the low light. The eyes of unseen critters dart beside the vehicle, tiny orange-red dots that lope along the dried canal before disappearing into the palmettoes. Victory Boy chatters on about a sixth sense he thinks he got after scrambling his brains against the backstretch wall.

"It's like Christopher Walken in *The Dead Zone*," he says, struggling for a way to explain it. "I can't tell the future, but it's like sometimes I know what you're going to say before you say it, just not soon enough to say it first."

"Does Edie even know you're coming?" Reagan asks.

"When we talked on the phone, I told her everyone would be there," you say.

"Does she even know where the junkyard is?"

"Of course. At least I think so. She dated Brad freshman year."

We reach Deltona and Victory Boy trades seats with Reagan. He drops *Big Johnson* into low gear and you gurgle down side streets and alleys under orange halogens and a harvest moon, looking for discarded Christmas trees. When a tree is spotted, you and Reagan leap to the pavement and hoist it into the Camaro's open trunk, then climb back into the cab. After half an hour, your thighs are burning from scaling the sides of the *trar*, your forearms are pricked raw and bloody by dying pine needles, and Victory Boy has nearly gotten himself lost. Three right turns in any other town brings you back to where you started, but in Deltona there's no telling where you'll end up. It's rumored that the city planners threw cooked spaghetti against a zoning map and started naming the noodles that stuck. Years later, you'll blame the town for your faulty mental compass and the way cardinal direction baffle you in any place that's not adjacent to the sea. When the trunk is full, Victory Boy makes a couple of lucky guesses and soon you're redlining down Howland toward the junkyard.

Reagan pops *No Life 'Til Leather* into the cassette deck and the outro of "Motorbreath" blisters from the blown speakers. It's the only Metallica you'll listen to after learning how the band did Mustaine dirty on *VH1's Behind the Music*.

"You can really hear Dave on there," you say. "Can't miss his style. I'm sure that he was probably a prick to work with, but he totally got screwed."

Reagan and Victory Boy nod in agreement. Ahead of you, a beat-up import putts its way down the road at ten miles under the speed limit, the type of car that chokes the intersections of Deltona and makes you late for work— early nineties Honda Civic, obnoxiously loud aftermarket muffler, and a cheap *Maaco* paint job the color of a carnival tent (in case you still weren't sure the car was full of clowns). Something about being proud to be Boricua decaled

garishly on the back window. Victory Boy has to slam on the brakes to keep from smashing it flat with *Big Johnson*.

“I’m going to fire one across their bow,” says Reagan. “Just a little ‘*Hello*,’ from us to them.”

He squeezes his torso through the passenger window as Victory Boy revs the engine and cuts around the left. Reagan lobs a half full Four Loko end-over-end a foot from the Honda’s windshield. Energy drink fountains from the can like a sprinkler toy and the passengers in the car begin flicking you off and shouting what must have been threats in unintelligibly fast Spanish. Victory Boy slows down until you are even with the other car and for thirty seconds or so, everyone’s hurling profanity and fast-food trash across the double yellow like a suburban line of battle. Finally, an oncoming car forces *Big Johnson* to retreat behind the Honda until you reach a stoplight and everyone piles out of their car.

When you get to the bonfire, you will describe the melee like this: three burly Puerto Ricans wearing flat-billed Yankees caps and baggy tees emblazoned with *La Monoestrellada*, came at you, Reagan, and Victory Boy with golf clubs. The three of you beat them into the pavement before the light turned green, old ladies and soccer moms watching with open mouths from the Shell station parking lot. In reality, it was more like three against two— a father and his pre-teen son— and neither of them could have been more than a hundred and sixty pounds. As you near the junkyard, you help invent the first version, throwing in a detail or two, the image of Reagan stomping on the old man in synch with “No Remorse” playing over and over on the back of your eyelids. No one seems to remember that you didn’t throw a punch.

At American Auto Salvage, the party is in full swing. In the glare of the light towers, stacks of junkers ring the clearing— pillars of iron branded by the signets of the Rust Belt and arranged like an industrial Stonehenge. Chevilles sit on blocks beside Mustangs swaddled in winter-withered bramble. Dozens of anonymous trucks, vans and compact cars languish in various stages of cannibalism. At the center is the bonfire, circled by twenty or thirty people stumbling in various states of inebriation, eating pulled pork sandwiches, and drinking keg beer from red Solo cups. Reagan and Victory Boy leave you standing by the smoker to get a beer and you scan the crowd, looking for Edie. Dusty, the youngest of the Pattersons, splashes a mixture of old gas and motor oil onto the Christmas trees piled by the fence. His older brothers are standing in the massive bed of a Caterpillar haul truck, tuning their instruments and doing a mic check as *Immoral Empire* prepares to play. Brad, in a Kaiser helmet, overalls, and nothing else, picks at his banjo and croons a mashup of John Denver’s “Country Roads” and *Slayer*.

“Raining blood, raining blood, from a lacerated sky, bleeding its horror, creating my structure, now I shall, reign in blood.”

In the back of the crowd, someone holds up a lighter. It’s Edie, her face haloed by fire and stadium lighting. No jackboots, no fingerless gloves, no severe leather lingerie cutting into her flesh. Gone was the long blonde hair and dog leash and thick eyeliner and black lipstick, Edie stood alone in a *Peace Frog* hoodie and jeans, drinking from a silver flask and watching the band tune up. The bangs of her boyish bob brush her face as she nods her head to the beat. You shout her name but she doesn’t hear you. You wave both hands above your head but she doesn’t see you. Cliff rips the intro of “Faded Oblivious” and you lose sight of her behind a dervish of teens frenzied by the death metal. You’re halfway across the mosh pit when you fall to the sugar-

sand on your hands and knees, shoved squarely in the back. You look around and Reagan's standing above you, his hand outstretched to help you up.

"You're the reason I couldn't get an auto loan, you and all the other Jewish conspirators," he says, smiling in the firelight.

"For the last time, I'm Irish," you say. "We don't conspire. About. *Shit.*"

You lunge at Reagan's solar plexus and send him windmilling into the pit, his goofy laugh audible above Steve-o's double bass. He challenges you to slug it out with him— "*just the body, bro*"— and soon you're throwing haymakers to each other's ribs and kidneys. Suddenly, there's a flash of light and something in your jaw gives way as Reagan, not surprisingly, breaks his own rule and connects a right hook to your chin. You retaliate with a flurry of angry punches but the damage is already done. You can't even open mouth to call him a motherfucker. Reagan guffaws and joins the thrashers and you slink off to the edge of the clearing, pouting in the passenger side of a powder blue Chevy coupe sitting on blocks and nursing your wound.

"Tell me, don't I know your name?"

Eddie smiles and sits down in the driver's seat. She touches your swollen cheek. "Poor baby," she says. She hands you a cold PBR for you to hold against your jaw. Your eyes are wide. You try to say something clever, but you cannot open your mouth. Outside, the band switches to *Iron Maiden* covers and a group of metalheads chuck a gas-soaked pine onto the blaze. It explodes in a mushroom cloud and everyone cheers. Through the spider-webbed glass of the coupe, the whole thing looks like a mosaic, as if you're watching a twisted drive-in movie

through the end of a kaleidoscope. In the guttering light of the burning spruces, Edie grips the wheel tight and tells you about the last year and a half.

No one had kidnapped her, like everyone had thought at first. Her parents knew where she was the whole time. On a day free of classes, she'd met a Czech photographer named Serj. He was taking a break from being a roadie for *System of a Down* to finish his photo essay on Prague sculpture. She talked to Serj for about an hour and a half and that went well, so they were in love. She didn't elaborate. She trusted you to fill in the blanks. What started out as an adventure into the culture of Eastern Europe, ended in the basement of a burned out Orthodox church just outside of Cesky, her ankles screaming in a sharpened pair of double-stacks as she pointed a handgun at a gay prostitute who was only there to keep from starving that week. The tattoo was fake. The wig was horse hair. Even the statue of the devil wasn't real. Just some chintzy plastic knock-off they'd picked up at a gypsy market.

"He told me it was art, and I believed him," she says. Outside the car, another Christmas tree goes up in flames.

By the time she found out what Serj was really up to, he was long gone, coordinating the stage lighting for *SOAD*'s European tour. Somehow the magazine had made its way into the hands of the dean down at Sarah Lawrence and that, as they say, was that. She'd been hiding out in New Smyrna the last six months, trying to scrape together enough cash for DBCC in the spring, so she could get the grades to apply to Stetson in the fall. No one knew she was back in town except for you, and she'd appreciate it if you kept that way. And the nickname? Serj said her name reminded him of Andy Warhol's muse.

“My 19th birthday present to myself,” she says, pulling down her bottom lip to reveal a small tattoo. *Factory Girl*.

Eddie unscrews her flask and you both proceed to get smashed. She gulps down Smirnoff but you have to suck it through your teeth. The wind picks up until it's about as cold as Florida can get, so the two of you sit close and huddle under your leather jacket, people-watching through the empty windshield. The band winds down, ending with a sludgy rendition of “The End” before packing up their gear in the back of Brad's souped-up hearse. The last of the Christmas trees erupts and burns to ash. People stumble away in twos and threes, starting their vehicles and swerving away down South Shell Road. A small group of guys huddle around the fading fire, warming their hands and finishing what's left in the keg. Reagan's still here. You can hear him shouting pronouncements about the consequences of quantitative easing and hostile organisms planted in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. Sometime during all of this, the clock struck twelve and it became 2001.

Eddie lets go of the wheel and places your hand under her shirt, warming your fingers between her palm and the soft flesh of her breasts. She goes to kiss you but you can barely unclench your teeth, let alone slip out your tongue to meet hers. She lowers her head and presses her lips against your neck, sucking gently along the length of your pulse. A thousand hours of pornography later between you and that embarrassing night on the beach, you're ready to meet her with everything you've got. You popped a Viagra secretly between sips of vodka, and now you're hammerheading under your Levi's. You run your hands from Eddie's tits, to her ass and back again, muffled moans escaping through your frozen jaw. You place her hand upon your diamond-plated crotch but she pulls it back and asks if you brought any protection.

Shit.

But it comes out as “*hmmmt*,” and Edie sighs and bangs her head against the headrest. Exasperated, she pulls down her waistband and clutches the back of your head and shoves your face into her lap. “*Go down*,” you hear her say, and even though you’d love to do that, and have seen it done hundreds of times on the internet, and actually did it yourself a few times that fall, you’re locked up so tight you couldn’t lick a stamp.

“Goddamit,” she says. Wide eyed, you paw at the upholstery as Edie pulls up her pants and checks her makeup in the rearview mirror, all the while muttering no-so-flattering things about her luck, your manhood, and men in general. The two of you don’t move for fifteen minutes. The air tastes sharply of burnt evergreens. The black horizon gives way to a slight blue dawn, but it will be overcast the rest of the week. Birds that have flown south for the winter begin to sing and it occurs to you that there are people all over the world who can name the birds those songs belong to. You look over at Edie, but she’s staring in the direction of the road, thinking, perhaps, of a future where she’s forgotten all about this. Neither of you can know that you’ll look back on this experience as not half-bad, given the alternatives. And from that place of future wisdom, you’ll long for days like this, when you were radiant with youth and had decades left to burn. The last thing Edie says to you before storming out of the car? “*Keep your mouth shut.*”

She strolls across the junkyard to where her car sits parked outside the perimeter fence. Reagan sees her walking and begins to stand and rag on her with “*Look what the cat drug in*,” or some such nonsense, but she screams him back into his seat with a mighty “*Fuck off.*” Then she starts her car and drives away. You will never see Edie again.

You get out and walk bow-legged to the fire, an absurdly large erection testing the limits of your denim pants. Three hours or so to go. Reagan points at your bulging crotch and asks if you're happy to see him. You've never wanted to tell someone to go fuck himself more in your life, and you never will again. A few yards away, Victory boy cusses at *Big Johnson*, jamming the key angrily into the ignition in an effort to get it started, but the engine won't turn over. The starter just keeps going *ruhrrrr ruhrrrr ruhrrrr* or the pistons misfire or the battery's dead or maybe it's one of the hundred other things that happen when cars don't start. Reagan gets you a beer as a gesture of apology and sits on a cinderblock beside you.

"I figure you've got seventy-two hours tops to get out of dodge once the grid goes down," Reagan says. "The *kanban* principle of lean manufacturing will be our downfall."

You gesture for him to continue.

"Massive power failures, followed by the water supply and disruption of food distribution. The collapse of law and order— violent exoduses from prisons all over America, fires, and full-scale looting. Finally, a mass out-migration from major cities."

"Where you gonna go then?" says Victory Boy. He sits, defeated, on the ground beside you. *Big Johnson* is useless, unless you count the stereo. The radio buzzes out *Bachman Turner Overdrive*. Reagan explains the purpose of a bug-out bag and the Rawlesian tenets of survival to Victory Boy, drawing diagrams in the dirt with a bent tie rod. Mute, you imagine them with the faces of old men, sitting at a Deltona bar and talking of the coming economic collapse, a hand-built jalopy rusting in a shopping center parking lot, the jukebox blaring "Taking Care of Business." In your mind's eye, you look into the glass behind the bar and see your face too. You

notice Reagan's pistol sticking from his back pocket and you pull it gingerly from his pants. He swipes at you from his seat but you jump back and trot to the other side of the burn pit.

“Sheesh, you had that thing this whole time and you never fired it?” says Victory Boy.

Reagan shrugs and watches you take aim at a bird sitting on a power line just above the horizon. You steady your hand, line up the sights, and pull the trigger. The hammer falls with a *thud*. The bird chirps out a tune and then flies off.

“Did you guys hear a robin?” Victory Boy asks.

ALL-AMERICAN ANTICHRISTS

“I was made in America, and America hates me for what I am. I am your shit. You should be ashamed of what you have eaten.”

—Marilyn Manson

Fifteen days ago we split a line of crystal cut with Drāno and sleep excommunicated us latae sententiae. Wandering an uncut reel of daynight, we hotrailed batches of METH for days, dirty stuff that Victor shake-and-baked in swastika-scratched bathrooms but now Victor is checking out in a tidepool of Haldol and Ativan in the dungeons of Padre Behavioral so our hook-up is gone and the agonies are here like prophesy. Emptiness and hallucinations and METH mites jabbering under our skin. The curse seeps from our bones like oil and we’re crazy with it, fleeing afternoon sun pouring from holes in the ceiling. With no METH and no way to score, the only option we have left is to GET AT THEM but our fingers are chewed to the quick and it’s like dry humping when you want to fuck. We improvise. Hairbrushes. Brillo Pads. We scourge our bodies with boxcutters we find in the rectory.

Sketch and I have scavenged the Heavenly Homes development since the day we first squatted in Our Lady of Sorrows. It overlooks acres of subdivision rising from the desert hardpan across the street. Ten thousand new homes have been planned. Light security. It’s a bonanza. At first, my brother balked at the soiled mattresses and switchbladed Stations of the Cross, but I reminded him that we could see everything that came and went—pallets of sod, bundles of sheetrock, precious copper. I waved our last Ziploc of METH in his face until he gave in. Now we make our beds beside the altar and wait for our fate. Squinting through a socket of plate glass, I pray for flatbed trucks stacked high with pipe. Convoys of vans heavy with electrician’s wire.

Showers of aluminum siding falling from heaven. Hours go by and I watch the shadows twist in the passage of the sun.

Sketch lights fires at dusk to ward off evil, soaking the slick pages of pornographic magazines with butane in a baptismal font we wrenched from its foundation. We cower in the pale orange of abused and airbrushed flesh. Once, previous squatters hoarded boxes of books and magazines like monks gathering generational knowledge before a coming cataclysm. I poke through the heaps of pulp and pick out texts that will burn bright and long. Beyond Good and Evil. Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. The Descent of Man. Cosmopolitan. I eye chest-high reams of pornography and grab a bundle of German smut. I throw everything into the fire.

“Germ.”

Sketch calls my name from a cocoon of overturned pews. He’s wrapped in comforters and mad with fever. I soak a washrag in a stoup of rainwater and place it on his forehead, sopping up whatever streams into his eyes. Stretch your arm out, I tell him. I unwind his bandages and he winces. You can smell the sepsis. I’ve done my research. *Staphylococcus aureus*. Active intravenous drug users have a higher rate of colonization with *S. Aureus* than the general population. The next step is bacteremia, endocarditis—maybe the infection will seed itself into his bones. I spout isopropyl alcohol into Sketch’s wound and he writhes. I wrap him with the rest of the gauze, pat his forehead dry and read him Burroughs from a mildewed paperback.

“Read that part again,” Sketch asks, his eyes wide. “The Algebra of Need.”

“The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product.”

“I wish we used H. I miss being a consumer,” he says wistfully.

That’s not the point, I say. He just sighs, pulls the blanket over his eyes, and seizes on the floor. Seven miles of copper wire rolled in before sundown and we are waiting for Corpus Christi to settle in for the night. I keep reading. Burroughs was the Magellan of addiction, but his math is flawed. I scrawl equations in the margins of the book with a ballpoint pen and ponder the Calculus of METH.

If METH is a constant, then $(x) = 0$.

If METH is a constant, then $(\text{identity} + \text{humanity}) = 0$.

If METH is a constant, then $(\text{dust} + \text{the breath of god}) = 0$.

“Burroughs was an amateur.”

METH leans against the sanctuary wall and scrapes dirt from beneath his fingernails with a credit card, his face hidden in shadows.

“Maybe,” I say. “He was right about junk being big business.”

“That’s what I mean. His paradigm is all wrong. The only way to understand addiction is to think of it as a god.”

“What, you’re supposed to be holy?”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

METH examines his reflection in a broken shard of glass. He’s wearing a Dormeuil Vanquish suit. Givenchy cufflinks made of steel extracted from firearms seized from African

warzones. He adjusts the Eldredge knot in his tie and lights a cigarette. His face pales in the darkness.

“You Westerners are all the same,” he says. “No theological imagination. Think Ziggurats scabbed over with blood. Molech’s brazen arms. The Ammonites would have loved me.”

“They didn’t have Sudaphed,” I say.

Sketch moans and the blanket distends.

“He doesn’t sound too good.” METH takes a drag and nudges the quivering lump with his Berlutis.

“Fuck you.”

“If a drug becomes your god, then addiction is your religion. Getting high is an act of worship. Sobriety is blasphemy. Recovery is apostasy. Withdrawal? Penance. I think Marx knew more about opiates than the Beat Generation.”

METH grinds his cigarette on the floor and tosses me a bottle of Tylenol. He cups his hand to his ear as if he’s listening.

“Are those bugs I hear beneath your skin?”

He is gone and I am on the floor again, scratching and scratching and scratching till the darkness lights the streetlamps and the traffic dies.

Sketch and I leave a trail of sparks upon the shadows of empty homes, dangling a pair of bolt-cutters that scrape light into the street as we walk. I spot the wire from the curb, red blooms of plastic hidden behind crisscrossed wooden frames. We sprint over the littered dirt and squeeze

between aluminum studs to where the knee-high spools are chained one to another. A quarter inch thick and wound tight. Even after burning off the insulation, they'll bring in a couple hundred bucks. Sketch flays plastic from a loose end with a lock-back knife. The copper light pricks our eyes with light.

We load the wire into the wheelbarrow and stack it in the back of the Econoline till the shocks bottom out. Sketch pulls away and in minutes we're on the highway, making the short jaunt to Kidron Road. Bright green signs scream directions to those lost in the night. I rub my hands together to warm my fingers and the calluses of day-labor scrape in fast succession. When I open my fists, my palms read like those of an interstate prostitute. No love line. A lifeline cut short. I look ahead to where fast moving clouds billow in the sky and ask Sketch if he believes in god and he says there is no god god is dead.

In a blighted lot half a mile from the interstate, Sketch chews a handful of the Tylenol and weaves between the husks of Maytags and Chevys that jut from the ground. He kills the engine in the center of the dumpsite and puts the highbeams on. The clouds smother the stars and moon and sky and I whistle. It's a perfect night to burn.

Together, we drag a metal grate from the fieldweeds that edge the clearing. Sketch's bad arm swings limp in the van's light as I stack wooden pallets onto a circle of scorched earth. He soaks the wood with a bottle of Kingsford he scrounged from behind the passenger seat.

"The shadowpeople were thumbing for rides all along Kidron."

Sketch's voice is flat. He doesn't look at me, just fumbles in his pockets for a box of matches. I tell him that we're crashing. I recite the Five Mysteries of the METH Experience. The Rush. The High. The Binge. The Tweak. The Crash.

"I picked one up. It told me I was going to die."

I tell him it's all in his head. Still, I can't stop wondering why METH didn't go with a double Windsor knot in his tie.

"That's what it said you'd say."

"We're all dying," I tell him.

"It said you'd say that, too."

Sketch strikes a match against his teeth and flings it into the pit and then there is a whoosh and a plume of white and orange rises into the sky. I smell chemicals and burning hair. Our faces and flesh, the jagged glass of shattered TV screens, washer-dryer combos rusting into the earth, cars stripped of anything of value and then stripped again— everything glows in the fire.

The first bundle is always the hardest. The insulation takes forever to light. We circle the swirl of dioxin smoke and spurt accelerant on the pile until the plastic drips, then streams, then pours into the coals and the fire perpetuates itself. After that it's easy. Turn the coils of copper on the fire with metal pipes till the wire is bare and black. Roll them one by one onto the ground. Douse them with paint cans of rainwater. Load them into the van. Soon it's dark again and the metal is ready for Leth.

Cars line the road for miles in both directions but we get lucky and find a spot near the entrance. In the belly of Leth, subwoofers boom, samples squelch, spotlights bend to the beat of EDM. On weekends, Leth Metal and Recycling opens its smelting floors to ravers from all along Texas's gulf coast. We stuff the wire into a heavy canvas bag and drag it across the gravel to join a line of Millennials thrusting through the factory's cement walls. Clumps of Kandi kids rainbowed with beads mingle with the bent shadows of addicts laden with copper pipe, catalytic converters, batteries— anything that can be melted down. A rave bunny in fuzzy boots and neon fishnets turns and waves at us, her LED gloves wiggling in the night. Sketch and I wave back, our palms black.

“P.L.U.R?”

The girl holds out a fluorescent bracelet.

“Plur?” Sketch's face wrinkles. He extends his infected arm.

The rave bunny slips the plastic jewelry over his fingers and it dimples his flesh. He breaks off a twist of charred copper and offers it to the girl. He's always had a way with women.

She smiles and steps closer, takes the wire and wraps it around her pinky.

“You ever seen Junkhead?” she asks.

“Who's Junkhead?” says Sketch.

“I saw Junkhead in Galveston. I was rolling tits in Galveston. You guys seen Molly?”

I ask her who Molly is and the rave bunny pouts her lips and bounds back to her friends. Soon they all vanish into Leth. Sketch stumbles away and doubles over the median to vomit chunks of Tylenol onto the cement.

METH stamps hands at the gates of Leth. A dreadlocked bulge of dark muscle jigsawed with tattoos, he regards me coolly. I hand him a crumple of fives soiled with polymeric ash. METH glances at the scrap, then at Sketch swaying beside me. As he binds my wrist with a black band, I study his ink. The emaciated faces of men and women cover his thick arms and I see myself among them, howling from the crux of his elbow. Sketch's swollen skin won't take a band so METH marks him with a black X and waves us through the wrought iron gates where there is heat and noise and a thousand bodies rejoicing as the DJ drops the beat.

*

Leth stops for nothing. Its open-air foundries burn round the clock. Everything is tinted red-orange by melted ore or fluoresced by spotlights of ultraviolet light. Neon flushes of dancers part for gas-masked men hauling pig-iron, then bead together behind them like mercury. Welders rain sparks from catwalks. Sketch's lips form words but I'm deafened by the music. We follow a tendril of dope fiends twisting through the Day-Glo crowd like a dead vein and climb a mesh staircase round a crucible three stories high. Whitewashed with a cartoon smile and X'd out eyes, the cauldron leers at the crowd below. The line inches higher. A tapestry unfurls from a rickety scaffold and shouts jUNKH3AD! To the crowd. The trancers scream and Junkhead takes the stage below, the Xs on his stockinged face nodding at the ravers as he bludgeons them with bass.

I cover my mouth at the lip of the cauldron and gag. Sketch stands up straight and swells his chest with breath. A goggled man in black coveralls and a Balaclava hood beckons to the next person in line— a transient who turns and pulls his lips back into a grin but his teeth are gone and his mouth puckers in an empty oval instead. He unburdens himself beside the lake of

fire and the Scrapman lays the offering on a digital scale. The readout glows green, the scale spits out a card stamped with a number and the man takes his card and disappears. The Scrapman kicks the junk into the crucible and summons us to the edge. Sketch and I step forward and open the canvas bag and the Scrapman peeks inside and when he looks up, it is METH that stares back from behind that grim mask. He points to the scale.

“How much do we give?” I ask.

METH’s eyes marble with fire.

We drive in silence, slouching toward a New Bethlehem to be born. Corpus unfolds like the stretching wings of Dantean devils. Single engine planes swirl around buildings stabbing into the void. We turn where San Padre Drive parallels the business district. Beneath the halls of the moneychangers, the streets twitch with vice. The shades of lithe merchants contort upon pavement the color of fire, blurs of sleight and gesture sell death to the dead, their buyers prostrate like devouts of a cruel religion. Mounds of donated clothing steam in the cold, hands stretch out for a gram of an apostate host— *this is your body this is your blood*— they groan down blind alleys toward secret rites of transfiguration. Here, children are disciplined by the night. Their eyes already hard and cold, they laugh and play at the feet of dealers and bag brides forever paying their brideprice. Car alarms shriek at thirstmonsters in search of the devil, gunshots sound in the distance as Salvadorian army ants carve the righteous and the wicked from Corpus Christi’s underbelly, blood-splattered *ojos de dios* swing sightless from awnings in Little Mexico. A sign bids us farewell as we leave the City of Sparkling Lights.

Everything is black except the van's highbeams and the cloud of brakelit dust reddening the night behind us. The final stretch of Kidron Road is a pale ribbon striped by moonlight and the shadowshapes of stunted trees. I flick my cigarette and watch the ember spin end over end into darkness that goes on forever and ever and ever, where the night feeds on itself and coyotes gnash and pop their teeth.

When Sketch and I climb from the van, we're all fluttering eyes and headpieces of straw, leaning together against the DEAD END sign nailed into Kidron's shoulder, backpacks heavy with supplies for the Cook. We ditch the truck and follow a cow fence across a star-splashed graze of orchard grass to the mouth of a valley splotched with cattle. Rawboned creatures left to graze wild, they have no fear of man and do not scatter when Sketch and I approach. Holding our breath, we push our way through the living maze lowing all around us. My brother leads me by the arm from beast to beast, our skin scraping against the shifting walls of hide. We emerge from the herd rug-burned and reeking of dung and walk toward a teardrop trailer glistening like a topaz. The door swings open and METH greets us with a yellow Haz-Mat suit and a smile.

Sketch and I hunch over a coffee table, scraping red phosphorous into a little pile from the strike-pads of matchboxes. It's small inside the trailer— two men could spread their arms and touch the sides easily. The floor is covered with empty boxes of Sudaphed, bottles of muriatic acid, cans of Prestone starting fluid and Lone Star beer. METH cooks behind a mountain of glassware stacked upon the kitchen counter, the black biohazard sign on his suit warped by light bent by jars and flasks and cylinders all twisted together with rubber tubes.

"I want a cigarette," Sketch says.

I point to the THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING sign taped to the wall and shake my head.

“METH took our light. Our lighters.”

It’s the ether, of course. We’d blow straight to hell. I’m dizzy from the fumes and already thinking funny, words jumbling in my mouth. Sketch can barely hold a matchbook in his infected hand so I tell him to take a break and watch TV. Behind me, the wall is stacked floor-to-ceiling with old box television sets piled upon one another, all on different channels, all silent. The Astros game. Dora the Explorer. Nuclear Iran. The Real World. Texas Chainsaw Massacre. I keep scraping phosphorus until the matchbooks are gone and carry the pile to METH, careful not to sneeze. He tells me it won’t be much longer, and then returns to his work. I lean back in the couch and watch Congress shuffling from their seats and, besides that, a montage of Presidents addressing the nation, their hands emphasizing talking points as if conducting an orchestra. All around them, reality TV stars drink and fuck on prime-time. Children murder their parents and parents murder their children. Movie stars strut upon red carpets. Police beat men to death on dashboard cameras. Rioters burn cities to the ground. Masked men spill the blood of innocents into the sea. I look to the ceiling where an American flag hangs upside-down and let the ether carry me away.

METH leads me up a mountain thrusting from the Texas plain. I chase the train of his robe until Corpus Christi jewels the ground below us. He stretches out his hand to me and I kiss and suck iodine from his fingers. He dangles a baggie full of crystal above my head.

“All this I give to you if you will fall down and worship me.”

“O METH, Scourge of the Big Sky Country, thy will be done, from purple mountain majesties to sea to shining sea you reign, you rule the souls of one-light towns and trailer parks, you drag men into the shadows and the shadows into men, O Batu Kilat, thy will be done, Blind Piper of the Shining Rock, high upon Mount Kinabalu, your nighted throne exalted, you call to the simple and tread them into buzzard dust in the alleys and broken streets of Kuala Lumpur, O Batak you curl within a thousand throats, a thousand lungs and live within a thousand young, O METH thy will be done!”

The van rattles and stops on a strip of dry seaweed piled thick beside the dunes and we listen to the engine cool and the Gulf hiss. We know this stretch of seaside well. No one will find us here. Sketch cooks METH in backwash poured from a crumpled Dr. Pepper can, heating a tablespoon with a tampered lighter until the mixture bubbles and pops. I pull out a used slammer, suck the black syrup into the belly of the syringe and motion for Sketch's belt. He slips it off and holds it out between us where it hangs limp like a dead snake, notched all the way to the buckle with a crooked line of ragged holes ground out with pocketknives and the dull edges of our eyeteeth. We shoot up one after another, tying off our arms and slapping our flesh until blood bulges, making fists till ravaged veins surface. Jabbing the needle into the cruxes of our elbows, we dig around till the syringe flushes red and the drug is burning in our veins.

Cold sweat like great drops of blood gums my forehead. METH surges through the capillaries that marble my grey matter. Sketch seizes in the driver's seat, looking ecstatic and in deep, deep pain. The world kaleidoscopes. I see orange ashes jutting from the jaws of men smoking cigarettes deep in the hulls of hulking tankers ten miles out to sea, hear white froth

gurgling behind cruise ships half lit by bedside lamps both port and starboard. On my fingers and toes I count the fishing boats hauling in their catch along Florida's western coast and twice number the fish dying on their decks. The shoreline of Corpus Christi stretches out in the corners of my eyes. To my left and to my right the land falls into the sea and I catalogue each grain of sand along the Texas coast by color and by size and by clarity of quartz but still my high climbs up up up until I apex with the hangnail moon glistening on the surf eating the boardwalk a splinter at a time. Red skinpops purple into bruises, the needle falls from my arm.

We stumble from the Econoline, shoes removed and jeans rolled past our knees. We lean against the grille of the van and watch a winter storm a hundred miles offshore slash the horizon with lightning—thunderheads, soot black, ten thousand feet high, muted by distance but fast approaching. We step away from the seawall and across the field of seagrass and into the wind and onto the beach until white sand squishes between our toes and the bottoms of our feet are sticky with silt. When the first gurgles of icy seawater touch us, we cling to each other like lovers.

The Gulf swallows us. Saltwater rises past our waists and shrinks our penises and makes our teeth chatter. We crash through the waves until the seafloor disappears and then we kick our arms and legs to tread the lightless water. Far from shore, we choke on blind swells and crane our necks to watch the sky thresh the sea until we almost drown. I swim back and Sketch dog-paddles behind me, the ocean shoving us from behind until we are spat onto the shore, trembling, wet, and knifed by the wind.

Rejected by the sea, we walk back to the van and strip, squeezing the water from our clothes. Sketch spreads them out on knee-high chunks of rock that jut from the sand. I sop water

from our bodies with rags I find in the back of the Econoline. Noxious strips of denim and cotton, I grease our skin with spilt diesel fuel soaked off the Ford's vinyl floor. Sketch digs a pit with his feet on the leeward side of the vehicle and stacks some driftwood into a twisted pyramid, binding it together with brittle strands of sea petal. We douse it all with gasoline and there is a snap and a hiss and the brief scent of sulfur mixed with salt and soon a tiny fire wrestles with the breeze. We shiver naked under a couple of threadbare beach towels and the American flag Sketch stole from the Cook.

“Do you think we're evil?” Sketch touches his swollen arm.

“No eviler than anyone else.”

Sketch considers this and shakes his head.

“What's the difference?” I laugh and look in the other direction, at the distant point where the white strip of beach disappears into nothing.

“Does this look infected?”

I turn back and glance at Sketch's swollen arm.

“Yes.”

Swaddled with the stars and stripes, I chant:

“Them bones, them bones, them dry dry bones, come down to the locker of Davy Jones.”

Sketch spits into the flames and pokes the fire with a piece of driftwood. A flight of sparks streaks into the sky and is swept away.

“You're a writer to the end, aren't you?” His voice is flat.

We stare into the flames. I think for a long time before I answer.

“It's what I was born to be.”

Sketch tosses the stick into the fire. He turns to me and, in the firelight, shadows pool in the sockets of our eyes.

“Little too late to talk about beginnings, don’t you think?”

Wrapped in the thin fabric of the flag, Sketch and I stand. Our clothes are dry and stiff on the flat slabs of coquina. We set the banner aside and dress in the cold, our stomachs sour with seawater. Gritty grains of sand grind on gooseflesh like shattered glass as we force our limbs through the rigid denim. Cold clings to my hands even as I rub my palms over the embers. Sketch holds the flag aloft in the firelight. Alternating bands of red and white spattered opaque. A field of stars clotted black. He throws it into the flames and squats beside the battered light. The flag burns and disappears. Wind smears its ashes on our foreheads. The ocean washes away all trace of us from upon its shores. When morning strikes a violent red spike between the coming storm and sea, the sun-stained sands of sunrise kill our high and we flee the beach before the dim dawn blues and pinks give way to day and white. Ruined pilgrims, we drive ourselves into the land that gave us birth.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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