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TO THE READER,

Before you plunge into this book of stories, poems, and artwork, I ask of you to think about what you are about to do, and I urge you to take pride by acknowledging your role in the progression of literature.

Readers are essential players in the role of writing. It is a misfortune that the art of reading is often overshadowed by the craft of writing. Society spots gifted writers from miles away, and it honors them with its praise and prize. What society offers the diligent readers who follow closely behind pales in comparison, and unrightfully so.

Literature and art exist on a road that runs two ways: those who create and those who engage. The road is mutually shared. Simply, one may not exist without the other. Much like the talented author, the thoughtful reader’s practice extends beyond phenomenology: gifted readers occupy the space set before them. They walk around and feel the work intimately. They create frameworks, drawing on ideas and works of art that predate the collection that sits in front of them. The process of a capable reader, or viewer, is quite beautiful when you really think about it.

Like many professions, writers and artists are all fighting for their place in history. The goal is often just publication, but the most ambitious of writers fight for immortality. To judge strong art and to place it in our curriculum or anthologies, we use words like “timeless,” “universal,” and “the human experience.” These commentaries and debates are the reader’s gift to the author, much like the author’s present to his reader is his work. This is the value in all sorts of reading. Be it the casual reader or literary academics, the relationship is a beautiful cycle of thoughtful booklovers and gifted creators, dancing for success and enjoying every minute of their waltz.

An interesting part of the process is where the publishers come in. We editors like to think of ourselves as talented readers, but we also recognize the importance of understanding the authors’ intent. We debate merits of writing by the previously mentioned qualities but also balance our ideals of good literature with the circulation of our readers. We want to meet our audiences’ expectations, but we also try to push them to think outside of their experience. Editors can be the essential middlemen: the DJ’s on the dance floor of literature.

As you read this book, please be aware of the process in which you are engaging. Digest the words, balance your inferences with your projections, and make use of your life experiences. Without these tools you will be blind and writers will be mute; we will all feel small.

I cannot end this note without thanking the wonderful staff of the Santa Clara Review. A special thank you to Natalie Grazian and TJ Brown for stepping up to fill vacant slots. You both did a beautiful job.

Please enjoy the collection. It was made for only the best of readers.

JAKE LANS
editor in chief
Some legends die well before their last breaths.
Ten years ago, hung-over and hoarse (from raining verbal abuse down upon the Boston Red Sox for nine innings at the previous night’s Angels game), I got it in my head to pay my respects at the memorial of gonzo legend Hunter S. Thompson. I took a flight into Denver and rented a compact car for the three-and-a-half-hour drive to Woody Creek. There, at Thompson’s spread, Owl Farm, Johnny Depp would be shooting Hunter’s ashes out of a 153-foot-tall double-thumbed peyote-fist dagger-cannon, and I wasn’t invited.
I had no press pass, but sipping Kentucky bourbon over Monument Valley, I entertained pretensions I might inhabit a Hunter-style jester persona, and through subversive witticisms, I would make way into the courts of Aspen’s power-brokers thereby gaining entrée to the Thompson compound, and Jann Wenner would ask me to send him a feature article for Rolling Stone. Premonitions of my jocularity were fleeting, however; I was going through a soul-raping divorce and was weighed by guilt over asking my mother to care for my four-year-old daughter while I ran off for a couple of days on a Wild Turkey chase.
On the road over Independence Pass through the Rockies, though, my qualms were dispelled. The afternoon metamorphosed from dusk to twilight to night and along with it the mountains from jade to gold to ink. I sped through steep gorges, along rushing creeks, and past old mining towns nestled in valleys like toy train sets. Swigging beer, it became clear again that I was going to Woody Creek to celebrate freedom—not the freedom the politicians sell like so much snake oil, or light sweet crude, but the real, honest-to-goodness, do-what-you-want liberty to smoke herb and explore the world and the mind and drive as fast as the road allows while enjoying a beer, wherein your mistakes are paid in life-and-death consequences and not preordained by gutless lawmakers—Hunter S. Thompson’s freedom.
In the town of Leadville I stopped for coffee and energy drinks
and more beer to ward off the exhaust of my hangover. I grew impatient to celebrate freedom with some like-minded Earthlings and pushed the rental through the winding dark past deer grazing along lakes shimmering auburn beneath the enormous full moon. Passing the slow, doomed drivers impeding progress, I made Aspen in three hours, and drove through it without stopping, intent on finding Woody Creek. Where the hell was it? Several miles out of town I spotted a sign for Woody Creek Canyon and turned down that way. The moon had not risen above the mountains here and the road forked into the black night. A car came creeping out, and I rolled down the window.

“Which way’s the tavern? I’m down to my last beer.”

“Just keep going up that road and you’ll hit it,” came the reply.

Soon I came upon the tavern all lit up in Christmas lights in the middle of August. About twenty cars were parked in the lot. People sat drinking quietly at tables out front. A few more drank inside. Under the buffalo head, out of respect to the Good Doctor, perhaps, no one sat. I perched on one of the six stools at the bar and ordered a coffee and Bushmill’s. I was there. Now what? I just sat there and watched sports scores on the TV and looked through the local newspapers. Along with the usual items on war in Iraq, terror, religious fanaticism, and rising gas prices, an ecstasy lab had been raided, and deputies had been in a shootout at a local “adult store.” In the entertainment section of one paper was an advertisement for a big “Say Goodbye to Hunter” party at a bar in Aspen called Belly Up. The party was to take place after the cannon blasted Hunter’s ashes into the sky the next night. I ordered another whiskey and coffee, but with no coffee this time because they were out.

A short time later, the bartender announced last call. It was barely eleven o’clock, so I drove back to Aspen to scout Belly Up. I found a big saloon with many rooms and pool tables and dancing. I drank there a while and asked around for directions to Belly Up. I walked there. It was a spacious bar with a stage and dance floor where a few hundred off-season ski bums and grandsons and daughters of Aspen’s new rich grooved to a Dead-like jam band. I drank. I talked. I danced. Last call.

I walked down the street. A brass band was blowing danceable music out of an old building. In I went. As I walked back from the bar with a beer, a girl with bovine features grabbed me around the wrist and led me to the dance floor. I danced. I drank. I talked. Last call.

“Come with us,” she said. I followed her and her girlfriend and a guy to some place called Caribou Alley. They took me through a practically secret door, with only the word PRIVATE printed across it, down some stairs to a swanky-looking bar where a couple of large, unsmiling bouncers blocked access. This, I would learn, was the Caribou Club, with its $20,000 a year membership fee. “They’re with me,” said the dude I was with. Inside
was all dimly-lit Aspen chic: British racing green, Anasazi patterns, and
death-animal chandeliers. Music played over the din of conversations. A
surprising number of supermodels in short skirts giggled and jiggled on
the arms of jowl-draped men drooling single malt in long strings from their
hanging lips and belching the remains of their roast spotted owl.

In a nearby booth, Bill Murray and John Kerry held a powwow.
There I was. I had made it. This was exactly what I had been picturing,
but...I was hammered on beer and bourbon and exhausted and brain
dead. It was time, though. I needed to reel off a series of scintillating
observations which would evoke laughter and curious admiration from
those in my immediate vicinity and spread throughout the room so that
Kerry and Murray and I would put each other’s numbers in our cell phones.
Not a single witticism, though, squirmed out of my Broca’s area. Beside
me, slopping silicon all over the bar, two cougars stirred their cosmos and
compared their diamonds. “You can almost see the blood on them,” I said,
but I think the clothes I was wearing prevented them from hearing my
frequency. “Ever been to the Kentucky Derby?” No answer. There was
nothing to do about it but have another drink. “When the going gets weird,
the weird turn pro,” I tried, holding up my glass, but no one seemed to
hear me. I’m not sure the words coming out of my mouth were the ones
I was trying to say. I leaned against the bar and sipped my Turkey and
said nothing until my girl pulled me out to the dance floor for another go-
round. She was acting desperate for a stiff pounding I was in no shape to
give. When she went to the bathroom, I snuck away and sat in sort of an
anteroom in a big over-stuffed chair.

“Who are you?” sniffed one of the well-dressed bouncers. He had
the skull of a lowland gorilla.

“Is the wood in here sequoia or bristle-cone pine?” I asked.

“Are you here with a member?”

“That’s not important. Right now what I need is a bottle of your
finest Kentucky bourbon.”

We both knew I was in over my head on a number of fronts. I
wished to hell I had a can of mace or a bloody elk heart to throw at the
bastard. “Nevermind,” I said. “Just point to the nearest exit, and I’ll let
you get back to your stool so you can practice counting on your fingers
some more.” I don’t think it came out quite as smoothly as that, but he was
kind enough to show me the door.

I had not turned pro, but the going was still weird. As I stood outside
on the corner, contemplating my next move, a lithe-limbed lovely, skirt up
to here, bare-shouldered, clad in tassels and slits and lots of smooth skin,
walked past and said, “Let’s get a drink.”

Well, my mojo was strong as long as I didn’t try to talk. “Okay,” I
managed, and walked with her without saying anything to an 1880’s-looking
brick hotel. It was the storied Jerome, lodging of the rich and famous. I’d read about the place. John Wayne and Gary Cooper slept there. “Here, in the J Bar, Hunter Thompson ran his Freak Power campaign against the Greed-Heads for Sheriff of Pitkin County,” I gibbered semi-intelligibly.

“How?”

“Johnny Depp,” I said and dropped it.

She took me in through the stately lobby. The bar, though, was closed. It was a horrible, horrible sight. We stared longingly at bottles of booze locked up on the other side of an iron gate. The lobby was nearly empty but for—

“Is that Sean Penn?” she whispered.

“Arthur’s son?”

We watched a few seconds while Penn checked in. “I’m going up,” she said.

I got on the elevator with her. It was no longer clear that I was invited. I tried to think of something to say. “I heard The Eagles used to have legendary parties here.” I mumbled. With no drinks in our hands, our association no longer added up entirely. “Hotel California?” I said, but my new friend had grown distant. I started trying to boil my present circumstances down to their essence. Maybe she had her own room, and I would go in with her and we’d raid the mini-bar and take off our shirts and...? Or more likely she would turn me away at the door. It was a strange ride up the two floors in that elevator. No. This is about Hunter. I decided, probably stupidly in retrospect, that if I tried to spend the night in the Hotel Jerome, by the time I got back to Woody Creek in the morning, the Nazis would have the area cordoned off. I had to get as close to Ground Zero, the cannon blast, as possible. I stayed on the elevator when she got off and rode it back down. I drove my drunk ass back to Woody Creek.

In the dark, through the trees off the highway, glimpses of the cannon flickered past, fifteen stories tall and lit up by flood lights and a glowing peyote pellet. When I reached the tavern, I parked right across the street, reclined the driver’s seat and passed out.

When I came to the next morning, my car was blocked in by orange cones that said NO PARKING. Hmmm. I couldn’t very well move the cones now, could I? That might be a violation of some local ordinance. I didn’t know where I’d move it to anyway. I was dry and empty. I wished I could sit on the porch of the tavern consuming restoratives and keeping an eye on my car, but the tavern didn’t open until eleven. Though it didn’t have the kind of restoratives I’d had in mind, a gift shop right next door was selling coffee. I was drunk still and feeling the rebel spirit, so I lifted
a hat proclaiming GONZO POWER and a G-string with the peyote fist on front and “Hey, Rube” printed on the little triangle on back. I returned to my car with my coffee and ill-gotten gains and located the last of my beer. I drank it wondering how I was going to survive until the tavern opened. Just then a big four-wheel-drive pick-up blaring Arab music pulled in between the no-parking cones. A couple of dudes, one wearing a plaid keffiyeh headdress got out of the cab of the pick-up. They were white men. What manner of freakery was this? I got out of my car and stood up to examine them more closely. They climbed into the bed of the pick-up and unfolded a couple of lawn chairs and sat down, and one of them opened a large ice chest and produced a beer.

He must have read my aching look. “Want one?” he said, proffering a can. “We got vodka, too,” he said.

I took the beer, eying his headdress. “We’re insurgents,” he said and smiled. “We do Special Ops training down at Fort Carson for soldiers heading to Iraq. I thought it might add to the freak show I expect is going to be around here.”

One of them was Mormon and didn’t drink. “I still like to have fun, though,” he said. The other one gave me a fistful of mushrooms. Holy mojo.

A para-military sport-utility vehicle marked Sheriff drove past us, circled around and parked. The sheriff and a security guard got out. The Special Ops guys said they had been up around Owl Farm the night before poking around and that the guard who had shooed them away was the one now walking up with the sheriff.

The sheriff said to me, “Heard you guys might be a security problem.” I didn’t say anything. I still had a lump of mushrooms between my cheek and gum.

“We’re military,” said the shroomgiver. “We’re just like you. We won’t cause any problems.”

“Well, if you’re not invited, you’re not going in, and that’s all there is to it, so don’t even try. Whatever way you think you can get in, we got a guy there. I don’t want to have to put the cuffs on any of you guys.”

I swallowed my mushrooms. “How about a picture for the readers of Rolling Stone,” I said, and the sheriff and his lackey both posed and smiled.

Yeah. Freedom. Was this Hunter’s vision—armed gestapo smiling and threatening the rabble with detention on behalf of the rich and famous
who were hijacking his legacy?

Whatever. The tavern opened. I got some beer with Ralph Steadman drawings on the label and some whiskey-coffees and some spinach enchiladas and sat outside at a table around the side of the tavern. People were arriving in the ones and twos and wandering aimlessly about the front porch looking around and not seeming to know or see what they wanted. A friendly-eyed fellow sporting a mop of brown and gray hair ambled up trailing a man with a high forehead and his shirt tucked in and the doomed, earnest face of a journalist just trying to get a true story.

“Here’s a good spot,” said the former, and they sat down.

The other produced a pen and notepad. “Okay. For the record, I’m Jeremy Meyer of Denver Post and you’re..?”

“Jimmy Ibbotson.”

“And you were in the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band?”

“Off and on since ’69, for thirty-five years more or less, more on than off.”

“And how did you know Hunter Thompson?”

Ibbotson informed our intrepid reporter that he had been Hunter’s next door neighbor for some three decades. “It was like living next door to a thunderstorm sometimes,” he may have said. He went on to say he would be singing a song he had written called “Saints and Sots” at the blast that night.

“What’s something about Hunter that people might find surprising?”

Ibbotson took a deep breath. “Hunter believed in Jesus, which is not something many people know.”

The shrooms were starting to kick in; perhaps my head snapped back, or my mouth had begun to hang open, but for whatever reason their attention turned to me.

“Are you here for the blast?”

“Yeah, but they’re not letting in nobodies like me. Maybe Juan’s afraid we’ll steal the silverware for souvenirs, but look around. It’s a mellow crowd. These are true mourners of the American dream. Hunter wouldn’t stand for these greedheads. He’d storm the gates. It’s the Hollywood celebrities who have taken over his legacy and locked people out.”

Meyer scribbled in his notebook and asked my name (which he would misspell quoting me in the next day’s Denver Post—Sunday, August
and where I was from. “So you flew in from LA last night, rented a car, and drove two hundred miles to get here without gaining access to the official festivities?”

Ibbotson looked concerned. He said if they weren’t going to let people in, to hike up to Star Mesa. “It overlooks Owl Farm. You should be able to see the blast and the fireworks from there.”

I excused myself and wandered around drinking and talking. “How you doing?” I said to one silver-haired hippie fellow who’d clearly come of age during the freak generation.

“Any day I wake up and I’m still alive is a good day.”

“Really? After the way you plague-of-locust baby-boomers have fucked up this country, when I wake up, I’m like ‘Oh, shit. I’m still alive.'”

He beamed beatifically and ordered me a drink.

“What’s this?”

“It’s Chivas.”

“I’ve never had Chivas before. I only started drinking for the first time the other day, though.”

Things grew fuzzy. Morning morphed with sly speed into afternoon. A refreshing light rain began to fall and a six-foot-tall robot came scuttling down the street on treads like a tank. No one else really seemed to give it more than a passing glance, but it did not seem like a hallucination. Later I would wonder if I had invented the thing to gonzo-up my recollection, but I have photographic evidence. It had a breastplate with the peyote-fist-dagger displayed prominently and a motorcycle helmet for a head, and inside the clear visor was some kind of computer monitor with what must have had a closed-circuit camera broadcasting the robot’s vision to its master who controlled it remotely via two large antennae sprouting from its shoulders. It was mic’d for sound and had two speakers out of which it talked, and two arms powered by hydraulic pistons. I was smoking something and holding a beer in my hand and a notebook under my arm, and it seemed to make a beeline for me.

“Who is controlling this thing?” I said to it or thought I said. “Who’s controlling you? Is that you, fucking Johnny Depp? So afraid to mix with us unwashed ordinary people you come out to visit us through a robot? Is fucking Nicholson there with you? What? Are you afraid we’ll try to steal a lock of your hair, strip your clothes off you? No one here cares about you.
We just want to honor Hunter and good old outlaw freedom same as you snobs.”

“Can I have your beer?” the robot said in a robot voice.

I lifted my beer and it did a deft job of taking it. “Or is that you? Is that Hunter? Hunter, did you fake your death, and now you’re going out in public as this robot?”


An awkward silence ensued between the robot and me.

Then it said, “Here is your beer. Thank you. Can I have a hug?”

I pondered it over. Why indulge these fuckers? Were they just making fun of ordinary schmoes like me? Having a better-than-you prank at my expense? A girl walked by with a t-shirt on which smiled grimly the visage of George W. Bush over the words WORST PRESIDENT EVER.

“Hey,” I said to her, proffering my camera “Will you take our picture?”

Soon dark was descending over the Rockies. Neo-hippies strummed their gutters. Emergency vehicles and jeeps full of paramilitary personnel patrolled the street ready to fire upon any middle class American that got too close to Owl Farm. Apart from that, the atmosphere was not freaky at all, rather serene, with resigned discussion about not seeing the cannon blast. “Go up to Star Mesa,” I kept telling people.

“Who are you?” people kept asking.

“I’m nobody,” I kept saying, “just a pilgrim groupie dork rube,” and someone would put a drink in my hand.

The crowd in and around the tavern had grown to about two hundred. A news van showed up with a camera and reporter. “Why are you here?” she asked. She had nostrils like an asp.

“We’re all just celebrity worshippers,” I might have called out.

“You’d think Fear and Loathing was Catcher in the Rye. I wonder who here’s going to try to shoot the president or Michael Jackson or something,” said a mountain hipster with locks of wispy tentacles.

“I wouldn’t say that too loudly around here, man,” said a gloss-
eyed guy in a knit cap.

The news reporter asked, “Why do you think he killed himself?”

“Why don’t you?” One of us said. It might have been me. “Sometimes you just analyze your circumstances, and it’s not too hard to see that living is ineradicably no longer worth it.”

She turned and held the mic to my face. I shrugged. “Maybe he was just fed up with breadth and depth of venality that became the ‘American Way’ where success is measured in how much you keep away from others and the finality which had come of it in the wake of Bush v. Gore and Bush’s recent re-election. When you look at the stark divergence of where we could have gone and where we’re going…” On mushrooms I can always talk.

A fellow with a cowboy hat and a cheroot protruding from his apple cheeks shrugged and said soberly, “His hip hurt.”

“He was a publicity-hound even to the point of death. Better to go out with a bang, literally, than fade away into irrelevance,” someone said. It might have been me.

I was feeling pretty weird. I remembered with sudden intensity that I have a daughter which was the most important thing in the world to me. What was I doing here? To what time and expense had I gone to --what? Party and worship celebrity? No, I argued with myself, this is about celebrating freedom. I checked my phone. My mother had called. I peeled away from the gathering to the quiet of my car. As soon as my mother said hello I could hear my daughter crying in pain in the background.

“We had to come to the ER,” my mother said.

My stomach dropped sickeningly.

“She’s got an earache, and she’s in a lot of pain and we’ve been waiting a long time and she’s little and she’s miserable and she doesn’t know how to handle it and she’s got a fever and she wants her daddy. Why haven’t you been answering your phone?”

I felt that deep sad sobbing feeling that won’t come out. “I’m sorry.”

I noticed this unearthly, demonic-looking tree staring at me, some sort of twisted, self-embracing alien from the tropic desert that belonged nowhere, especially not to these alpine climes, and I wondered if it had anything to do with punishing me for my sins. “Jesus. I don’t know how soon I can get back. I’m three hundred miles from the airport. I’ve got to sober up. There aren’t any flights leaving until like ten thirty in the morning tomorrow...”
anyway. Jesus. I’m sorry. This is just Satanic.”

“Johnny?”

“Yeah.”

“Should I call her mother?”

“I was just wondering that. Has she asked for her?”

“She honestly hasn’t. She has been asking for you. I thought of
calling her mother, though, but I was afraid. She might use this to cause
trouble for you.”

“Yeah. She could try.” This is happening because I stole that swag
this morning. “I’ll call her and call you back. I’m sorry, Mom.”

I hung up and dug the “Hey, Rube” G-string out of my pocket and
gave it to the Mormon guy without explanation. Then I called my ex. She
deecided she would go to my house and pick up our daughter when my
mother got back from the ER with her. Then I would resume custody when
I got back to California. After I hung up, I just wanted to go home. I was
the rube. I stood in the street. It was dusk. Someone put a drink in my
hand. “We’re all going up to Star Mesa, just like you said,” someone said.
“We scouted it out. You can totally see the cannon.” I fell in with one of
the small bands climbing the steep chaparral-covered ridge. Down below,
the peyote-fist cannon stood tall like a rocket ready to launch.

“I heard Depp paid two and a half million for that,” someone said.

“Is he his executor or executioner?” I said.

“It’s taller than the Statue of Liberty,” someone else said.

“It has nothing to do with liberty,” I said. What should have been
a fun vigil and celebration of freedom had turned into a demonstration of
the power of the successful to keep out the doomed. “We, all of us standing
out here, we are the doomed.”

I was drunk, and shrooming, and short of the trifecta. “Hasn’t
anybody got any weed up here?” Someone handed me a pipe. I smoked.
I handed back the pipe. A couple of giggling young ladies wanted to flirt.
Doom had fallen over me, though, me alone. When the wave had finally
broken and rolled back, it had taken Thompson with it, even if he had held
out longer than most. The fist shouldn’t have had two thumbs; they should
have been shooting ashes out its extended middle finger. I decided to do
the honors. On behalf of the doomed, I flipped off the cannon, turned my
back, and grappled with gravity all the way back down the steep hill. I
went to the tavern and ordered water. It tasted like it was full of lead and
mercury. I sat there and heard a few quick booms that didn’t even echo off
the mountainsides. I gave the Gonzo hat I had stolen to the bartender. “I
stole this hat this morning, and now I feel like an asshole about it,” I said,
handing it to her.

I walked out to my car, got in, reclined the seat, and closed my eyes.
People were streaming down from the Mesa.
“J. Ladd! Wake up! We’re going into Aspen for the party at Belly Up.”

“You guys go ahead. I’ve got to sober up and catch the first plane out of here. My daughter’s sick.”

“Come on, man. It’s going to be an epic, once-in-a-lifetime party.”

“My daughter’s sick.”

I drove out of Woody Creek at four A.M. I touched down in LA at nine fifty-nine A.M. I picked up my daughter at my ex-wife’s at eleven thirty, and went home, and we played Care Bears.
DEAD UNICORNS AT THE CLOISTERS

NOAH KLEIN

poetry

I never expected that
when I woke up today
I would see dying unicorns.
I am no liar. I saw them
speared by men and chewed
by canines, each stitch of red thread
moving through gore.
The fear of the unicorns
was lust in the men’s eyes.
Is unicorn meat really that good?
How would purity taste
on a skillet? Did the fine
gentlemen of the slaughter
seek refinement in the
carnage? Grace:
worshipped, hidden
in tightly woven white strands.
Gentlemen! Don’t you know
that hunting unicorns
is like stalking for the clitoris:
elusive, gamey?
the wood was old, stained dark over
the decades, black lined grains
polished by spirits, speaking a steadfast
century or more of supporting barfly
prayers. a faceless elegy
rotten mouths express.

we all here understood that the wood
would not last. it was old, and we wanted
it to leave the way it lived. so we
kicked & smashed our boots across its face,
& spilled & spat & puked,
& cried & danced & laughed,
& drank & drank & drank.
we told the wood with
cacophonous cheers
‘we were here’ and by now
it understood its lines.

when your structure is a lie
planed and trued, sanded smooth,
forced to load bear boots and tears,
permanence erodes, taking
damnation and despair with Him.
My mother calls,  
her voice like a whiney child  
complaining  
of a stomach ache.  
My grandmother  
is dying, has been  
for some time now  
withering slowly  
fat falling  
her dresses  
(flowery and dank)  
around her like a large tent  
surrounded by bored nurses  
maybe a window and  
a crucifix on the wall.

I’m sure she’s ready  
to go, that old bear.

For my mother  
it’s a tragedy,  
another robbery.

She asks me if  
I have any ideas for the service.  
I find this to be an absurd question.  
“How much do you care  
for your grandmother?” she asks.  
I don’t  
know.
We hang up.
The temperature is warm
and I listen to
the death of winter
as icicles drip
open a window
rub at a knot in my neck.

Outside the walk will be slick
and wet and my body
hurts bad enough
so I’ll stay in
and think about what
color flowers
they or someone
will choose for the casket.

And I think,
yellow
would be nice.
poetry

(solve for x, or doodle)

distance \( D_1 = x \) is nothing when the shine\(^1\) breaks apart enamel and you feel nothing but the rot of your teeth infected at the root\(^2\). the time that used to belong to you stirs in flakes of light\(^3\) along the path laid forth from the sun to the end of the song\(^4,5\). the needle breaks its track, then a sudden rush of lifeless breath gags on the particles of dust mites.

distance \( D_2 = y \) is the painful consumption of melancholy because the one person who would forgive you is so close, but your stomach revolts in guilt at the sight of such grace\(^6\). the agony of impossible outcomes attests to the confusing nature of that mad and idiotic thing they call love\(^7\).

\[
\begin{align*}
1 \quad & (C_2H_6O)=u^2 \\
2 \quad & \text{where tooth root symbolizes physicality of life so that: } \frac{u^2}{tR^2} = u_2 \\
3 \quad & \text{light}=u^2 \\
4 \quad & \text{after the diminished fifth finishes, a ratio of } 3:2 \text{ finds it’s way into your non existent soul.} \\
5 \quad & \frac{\text{song (S)}}{\text{soul(s)}} = v_2 \\
6 \quad & u_a = \left( \frac{\text{guilt}}{tR^3} \right) \text{ forgiveness} \\
7 \quad & \frac{\text{love (v_4) x madness}}{(\text{nature+desire})}
\end{align*}
\]
distance \( (D^3) \) is a reality when you’re face down with a lump in your throat and the sun beams offend your existence\(^8\). You turn over into submission a prayer that your mouth cannot form to the thing that should not be Who\(^9\) has left you here as a reminder to all who choose not to see the unbearable truth\(^10\) that this is what will happen.

distance \( (D^3) \) bombards images in your mind to marry the thoughts of others with that unacceptable form of existence you call life. But you are too stupid to realize what is happening. It is when you’re dumb and alone that the pleading words for the life you once had begin to mouth themselves along dry cracked pale lips\(^11\)\(^12\).

\[
\int \frac{v^2 - v}{tR^3} \approx u_{iii}
\]

\( 8 \)

god

\( 9 \)

is dead\(= u_{iii} \)

\[
\iiint D^4 = \frac{D^y \cdot D^x \cdot D^3}{tR^3 + 1984 \sin u^2 \sin u \cos v^2 \sin v}
\]

\( 11 \)

see: appendix A

\( 12 \)
PRAY PRAY OR THE OPPOSITE OR THE SAME
ELIAS ISHIBASHI
digital
WILD WILD EAST WEST II

ANDREW PURCHIN AND MOHSIN SHAFI

photo collage on oil
16"x12"
UNTITLED
SARAH KATHARINA KAYB
photography
Un fableux destin

She invented her past because, as she rasped in her cigarette-refined voice, “You don’t owe anyone an explanation.” Exhale of smoke, tap against crystal ash tray. “Least of all do you owe the truth.” The aunts who beat her were actually Cistercian nuns who swung brass chains, not leather belts. Her parents died—her parents were as good as dead. “The worst thing about marriage,” she said to the man she would love above all others, “is the couple.” He concurred. They had, perhaps, an ideal partnership: monthly meetings in Paris, above a staircase that spiraled down a wall of refracted mirrors that multiplied images but concealed her presence at the landing, or posing as a normal couple at dinner, where she always corrected any garçon that gave her an obliging Madame with Non, Mademoiselle. She had no words when he had a car accident. The last time they saw each other, they were planning a month together in Deauville and that December morning she had run out into the street, grey from its stones and the trampled frost, in white silk pajamas with black piping, no robe. Black and white like the habits of the nuns. Her sandy skin gleamed beneath, cheeks enlivened by the winter, chocolate curls up to her chin. And bright onyx eyes. There would be no more dances in a seaside casino, its chandeliers playing upon her contracted pupils. But there would be an empire. Hers. It smelt of jasmine and musk, clothed in jersey and stripes and straw hats. An empire where sunbaths served bronzed vanity and vitality, where form followed function, where the superfluous was eliminated to distill the clean and essential. To be simple was to be irresistible, harmony thriving in absence. She would say, “If it doesn’t please you, then create. Elegance is to not give a damn.”
Boy

He pretended that he had no past before he met her. He was self-made. So was she. “Explanations are little more than excuses,” the Englishman said in agreement with the Frenchwoman. During their first few encounters, she spoke little, would press her hands into her pockets, and ducked into corners. Another degenerate, she thought of him. But like any other pauper, he had grown without coffers. No pence for debauchery. They understood each other: no money, no title, no birth certificate legitimacy. Only Britannia’s Channel divided a poorhouse from an orphanage. When the man who called her mistress interrupted their tête-à-tête, the Englishman responded, “I am admiring her simplicity.” She dressed like a feminine boy, refused to ride side-saddle, and was, first, his match in polo. “Charme anglais,” the man who kept her muttered. I belong only to myself, her mind thundered. The Englishman, however, had no issue belonging to her. One evening, she asserted, “I want to work. I want to earn my freedom.” “Don’t be absurd,” the aristocrat interjected. She answered, “I don’t compromise.” Leaning in, the Englishman whispered, “I will help you.” “Think that you’re impressing me?” she snipped. He replied, “Would it make you like me more?” She motioned between their two flat chests, “Two garçons,” then in sotto voce, “But remember that I do not serve.” He smiled, said, “I know.” Then ten years of fondness. Partnered cosmopolitans stamping through the rue Cambon. Then the black leaked from her dresses. He went missing before Christmas. The Frenchwoman searched the hospitals. Then she had to drive out to a sunken roadside turn. In an interview from her later years, speaking of femme and financier, she noted, “Yes, he was my sponsor. And my second self. I never liked Sundays, before or after. That’s the only day I don’t work.” She paused, hardening her face to flint, “I had to tell myself: Either I die as well, or I finish what we started together. Here I am.”
No. 5

Five for the purity of spirit, for perfection’s essence. Five in the circles of the convent’s paths to the cathedral, the rings toward prayer. Five petals of the garden rose. A number as the name of a woman’s scent. A perfume to designate rendezvous for lips to meet skin. An amber elixir stoppered in transparency. Cut the rectangle as though it were a diamond and slice past predecessors of decanter and cologne. Fashion the glass into masculine delicacy containing the unchanging feminine. Teach that austerity is sobriety is eternity. Extravagance excludes fuss and frills in favor of discipline. The richest ornamentation is minimalism. Daily libations should shed tears onto ankles and wrists and the hollows of hips. Necks and earlobes are not exempt. At its best, artifice is a private ritual. Ylang ylang and sandalwood layer upon tonka beans and orange blossoms layer upon baskets of jasmine until the contents of the vessel resist deciphering. What began as an ideal now endures. Just a few drops will do.
When prodded, 
   ignite.
You are the conclusion of thermal energy and carbon.
You are
   a forgotten god in a furnace,
   one fucked up phoenix,
feathers trashed      blinking through the placenta.
The placenta is blood boiled down to a paste.
And you know what they say—
haste makes
an ash heap.
   So.
You end up churned into the earth
dumped into the river
released into the air.

You grow as poppies.
You fall as snow.

(The river is my favorite.)

It allows you to cool,
condense.
Like a star.
Or like dough
   without yeast.
You are broken. Partaken of.
They chase you with wine
and empty the sanctuary,
let the masses pour out.
Ever since they were born, when they first budded in Hailey’s puberty years, they were rivals. Bonnie was always jealous—Clyde grew faster, and although Hailey never noticed, it was obvious to them that Clyde was the taller one. Bonnie could never quite fill the C-cups that Hailey grew into, so Clyde peeked out just a slight bit more in pride. Bonnie scolded him every time he tried to brag about being bigger—besides, what did size have to do with beauty? Bonnie was the real favorite. She was slightly closer to Hailey’s heart—she was the boob that the doctors felt, the boob with all the shirt pockets over it, and the boob Hailey touched in the pledge of allegiance. No, she certainly didn’t let Clyde’s size run over her pride, not when she was the favorite.

That all changed when Hailey had her first deep kiss. They were in the back room of a sorority party, and Bonnie was nearly cheering the boy on when his hand went up Hailey’s shirt...only to go for Clyde! Clyde winked over at Bonnie smugly, and Bonnie fumed. Was it because Clyde was bigger? Was it because Clyde was on the right, and “that made him right,” as he usually bragged? Was this guy just left-handed? It was impossible for Bonnie to not let it get to her. Being the favorite in the pledge of allegiance wasn’t going to be enough. She needed to show Clyde up.

But the next boy came, and he went for Clyde first as well. Clyde’s arrogance was unbearable now. Even after all the time Hailey spent with him, he hardly paid any attention to Bonnie. Boy after boy, Bonnie was neglected—it wasn’t like these boys could tell she was smaller, right? And even when the boys did pay attention to her, she never got as much love as Clyde. Did Hailey just have a thing for left-handed guys?

After many years of frustration, Hailey met Scott. He was another leftie, but it was hard for Bonnie to resent him for it. Scott stayed with Hailey. He was nice to her. And after a few months, Bonnie decided that, for Hailey’s sake, she would have to tolerate Scott. When they got married a year later, Bonnie admitted that she had no choice but to like him. Even
if he was a leftie.

Hailey and Scott had a daughter together soon after. Bonnie was so thrilled that she forgot how much she hated Clyde—she was born for this moment, this was her purpose in life, and at long last she was going to...watch as the baby decided to nurse from Clyde first. Bonnie nearly exploded right off of Hailey’s chest. Oh, but she couldn’t begrudge the baby for this. She was Hailey’s daughter—she would blame the child’s preference for Clyde on Scott. Goddamn lefties.

Two years later, Clyde started to feel ill. At first Bonnie took it as an opportunity to sass at him without getting a comeback, but she stopped when she realized that Clyde wasn’t getting better. Bonnie had spent so long hating Clyde that she wasn’t sure what to do now that he was too sick to argue with.

Hailey eventually noticed as well, and before long all of them were feeling ill. Hailey forced poison through her veins. Her hair fell out from the effort it took to help Clyde fight. All Bonnie could do was watch, and lend her moral support to Clyde. “Hey, you really are the bigger one, right? You got this, Clyde!”

Bonnie didn’t even get to say goodbye. Hailey fell asleep in a hospital bed surrounded by doctors, and when Bonnie woke up with her, Clyde was gone. There was nothing left but stitches in place of where her brother had been. Bonnie was empty. Was she the better one now? Did this mean she won, outliving him? Is this what she had been hoping for all along—solitude and loneliness?

Several weeks of painful healing passed before Hailey finally had the courage to take her shirt off in front of Scott. Neither of them moved for a moment, but then Scott stepped forward and kissed the spot where Clyde had been. “I love you now more than I ever have,” Scott whispered into Hailey’s scars, “Because now I can see you, the amazing woman I married, and I see your strength. You’re a survivor, love. And you’re even more beautiful than you’ve ever been to me.”

Hailey and Scott embraced and kissed. Bonnie held back her tears as best as she could. Eventually, she huffed and forced herself to smile, humbled. Damn right. Hailey was far more beautiful with just Bonnie.
Everyone has his own story of 1968. For me, that story was just a beginning. 1968 was the year I started running.

In 1968, I was 17 years old. I had dropped out of school to pursue drugs and women. My brother Jackie had been fighting in the war for too long. We couldn’t afford a television, so I heard the news from my older brothers—all five of them, if you counted Jackie, which I both did and didn’t. I trusted my brothers when they reported it was bad over there. Real bad.

Hell, in 1968 my family was so poor, we still did our business in an outhouse and patched the holes in our shoes. Newark was tucked away in the countryside where the foothills of Appalachia crept up on the industrial North. Just as our town perched on this dividing line, we were divided inside too. The train tracks cut Newark into east and west where it chugged up north to the fiberglass factory just outside of town. The families of tomorrow lived west of those tracks, with their shining appliances and dads who worked in second-floor management offices. On our side, to the east, daddies came home drunk from third shifts. Mamas stretched the money leftover after booze to feed us kids. Our boys got drafted; West End boys didn’t.

In 1968, I lived at home. On that spring night when my story began, I shivered under a threadbare blanket in the room I used to share with Jackie. All my brothers rented their own apartments downtown or crashed at their girlfriends’ houses. Ma, my little sister, Kim, and I shared the rickety farmhouse in near silence. Dad spent most his time at work or at the bar. We never said it, but we were all happier that way. Quiet loomed in place of my rowdy childhood. It left me restless.

Sleep dragged on my eyes when I heard Ma downstairs opening the back door. The specific creak of the floorboards between the hardback chair where Ma smoked and the clicking lock on the backdoor induced instant nostalgia. Those noises had once been so routine. Footfalls thumped
halfway up the stairs before I realized why they now seemed so strange. Those were the sounds that heralded Jackie’s return home—from a date, from drinking at the quarry with his boys, from a late shift washing dishes at Tony’s. No matter how often Jackie begged Ma to just leave the door open or give him a key, she’d always wait up to let him in. It made sense that these were the sounds Jackie made when he came home from war.

Jackie nudged the bedroom door open and sat at the foot of my bed, just like always. With his back to me, he lit a cigarette. Sitting there with the moonlight striking his high cheeks, he was as handsome a man as I had ever seen. I remembered how girls slid notes into his locker at school. Jackie was the brother closest to me in age, but I don’t think that was the only reason we had always been tight. Jackie gave me the most to look up to. He was smarter than my other brothers. It was as if my parents just needed practice making babies. Each one was born a little brighter, a little better looking, a little healthier. (That’s why I harbored such great expectations for myself. As the youngest boy, I knew that school and work and all the normal things in life were just holding me back from that fuzzy, undetermined greatness I knew I deserved.)

And, of course, Jackie was brave. He enlisted on his eighteenth birthday. Shit, he visited the recruitment station every day before then too. On the East side, there was no anti-war movement yet. Protesting felt like a luxury we couldn’t afford. Who had time to hold up a sign when you had to hustle for every meal? As the rest of the world fretted over ping pong balls stamped with birthdates drawn out of a lotto, our boys marched down to claim those dates. We took pride in what we couldn’t control. What other opportunities did we have? Our dads and granddads and uncles and brothers had served and we would too. Opposing the war was like fighting gravity. Why fight the inevitable?

Jackie took a deep drag off his Lucky Strike and turned to me. “Hey, Champ,” he said.

“Hey.”

Jackie blew more smoke, building a cloud around his face. “How’s school?” he asked.

I propped myself on my elbows. “I quit,” I said.

“Hm.” Jackie nodded and gazed out the window again. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

I couldn’t tell if Jackie’s next exhale was smoke or a sigh. “Just don’t turn out like me, kid,” he said, patting my ankle.

I flopped back onto my pillows. All I ever wanted was to be like Jackie. I wanted his easy laugh. I wanted his way of talking to old people and girls and policemen like they were all the same. I wanted the Chevy Impala he used to race down 21st Street.
Instead of telling him that, I answered, “Okay.”

We must have talked until I fell asleep. A knock on the front door downstairs woke me. I wiped the crust from my eyes and remembered: Jackie was home!

I pictured a line of neighbors at the door to welcome him back. Old ladies would bequeath him with pies and handmade jam. Hunched men would grasp his shoulder and say, “You made us proud, son.”

I didn’t bother with pants or a shirt. I bounded down the stairs in my underwear. I couldn’t wait to see him again. I rounded the corner to the front hall as Ma opened the door.

The officer was silhouetted in morning light. He clasped a folded flag between his two outstretched hands. Even from the hall I could see the sweat on his brow and the way his eyes darted from Ma’s face to the floor. The officer’s lips moved, but I couldn’t hear the words. Ma began to sob. I heard Dad fold the newspaper in the other room and his heavy tread on the floor. Kim appeared at Ma’s side and took her hand. Kim was dressed for the day in a sky blue dress. Her composure broke my heart even more.

I sank to my knees. I had long understood that Jackie might never come home from the war. The fact that he had come home made his death so cruel.

Later, I would learn that a sniper hit Jackie during what would be known as the Tet Offensive. A sniper’s bullet burst through the helmet that was supposed to keep him safe. Later, I would also understand that it took the Army weeks to count the dead, to identify the bodies, to locate the family.

I would come to understand that when Jackie visited me that last time in the spring of 1968, he was already long dead.

That evening, I grieved the only way I knew. I borrowed my brother Dale’s Firebird from the backyard and Dad’s six-pack of Schlitz from the refrigerator. I picked up my girl Amy. When I told her about Jackie, I thought I saw her wince. She whispered, “I’m sorry,” and gazed out the passenger window. When we arrived at the quarry, I led her by the hand to the limestone boulder just beyond the trees.

We engaged in a more deliberate detente than usual. When my hand searched the clammy flesh of her thigh, she tugged down the hem of her skirt. Her socks sagged below her knees. The rock scraped my knees through my torn jeans. My shoulder dug into Amy’s collarbone as I maneuvered my hand more completely up her skirt. Her kisses persisted and so I kept searching, searching. Looking for something to fill me up. But, instead of melting, I felt Amy tense.

“Ow! Geez, Alan.” Amy squirmed from under me. She crawled to the side of the boulder, her legs dangling over the side. Pebbles and leaves stuck to the back of the peach fuzz of her sweater. A piece of maple bark
tumbled from her brown curls as her shoulders shook.

I scooted to Amy’s side and rested my chin on her shoulder. My breath rasped, “What’s wrong, babe?”

Amy flailed against my arms. I let her go.

Amy stared out into the shadows like she expected some mythical beast to appear. Her eyes were fierce. She was lovely. “I don’t want to talk about it. Not today. Not after all that has happened.”

I plucked grit from my palms. Even an opaque reference to Jackie opened a pit in my gut. “Then you shouldn’t have brought it up. Just tell me now.”

“No.”

“Damnit, Amy.”

The stone beneath me radiated cold. I could still taste the hot cinnamon of Amy’s mouth. It fused with the mineral scent of the rock. Amy’s sigh might have been the wind in the undergrowth.

“Fine. I’m late, Alan.”

“Shit, Amy, I didn’t know you had somewhere to be tonight. I can give you a ride.”

“No, I mean, I’m late. Like my period,” Amy spat.

“Oh.”

Somewhere, some carefree soul whooped and splashed into the quarry. A woodpecker rapped against a tree. The sunlight slipped between the leaves and Amy shook her head.

“Oh?” she repeated. “That’s all you have to say? What about ‘Oh, I guess I better get a job’ or ‘Oh, don’t worry, Amy, I’ll take care of you?’”

I knew, right then, that I didn’t want to take care of Amy or that baby. If I wanted a conventional life, I would have stayed in school and faced senior year with all the hemming and hawing about the future. I didn’t want to work for the Man. I didn’t want to serve as another cog in the machine. I wanted to make love and smoke dope and listen to rock records. Somewhere along the way, I wanted to learn what it all meant. I wanted to know why this baby was alive inside Amy while Jackie was dead.

Amy watched me, waiting for me to save her.

I exhaled. “Maybe you don’t have to keep it.”

“Maybe I don’t have to keep it? That’s interesting. Why, because you’re going to raise a child?”

“No, I just mean...”

“I know what you mean.”

“My brother Max’s girl, Melanie, she went to this place down in Cincinnati.”

“Alan, no.”

“Amy, it’s just not part of the plan.”

“And what plan is that, Alan? When have you ever had a plan? I
I wished then that I could hit her. It wasn’t rational. None of it was her fault. My face burned with a degree of anger I had never known before. If only I could just swing my fists. If I could just make someone else hurt like I hurt. There was no one to aim for, so instead, I ran.

As I hopped off the boulder, Amy scrambled to her feet. “Where do you think you’re going?” she demanded.

I shielded my eyes from the setting sun. Amy loomed above me like a vengeful goddess. Palms upturned, I implored, “Amy, I just can’t.”

I walked away. Behind me, I could hear Amy shouting. I don’t remember the words.

The next morning I woke with a headache and a sense of purpose. Sometime in the night my anger over Jackie and Amy had merged on a single point.

I could avenge Jackie’s death.

I could go to Vietnam. I could track down the asshole who’d shot him. I could kill him and put almost an entire planet between Amy and me.

I could get killed. I didn’t know if that scared me, or offered me relief. I just needed the U.S. Army’s help getting there.

I rolled from under the covers, pulled on my jeans, and laced my boots. I left without a word to Kim or Ma. They would try to talk me out of it. I already had to contend with the long walk downtown. Every step either stoked my anger or made me feel like more of a fool. I remembered Jackie’s words: don’t turn out like me. But what did that mean? How could I trust a ghost?

A bell chimed when I walked through the door of the recruitment station. Two jock-looking guys in fatigues sat behind a folding table. Both had their sergeant’s stripes. One cased me with steely eyes, while the other wore a dumb, slack-jawed gaze. In addition to the card table, the entire decor consisted of a filing cabinet, a row of folding chairs, and a potted palm.

“Can we help you?” asked Sergeant Steely Eyes.

“I want to enlist.”

“Are you eighteen?” Sergeant Slack-jaw asked.

“Sure,” I lied.

“Fill this out,” Sergeant Steely Eyes said, pushing a clipboard toward me.

At the same time that I was signing my life away to the U.S., another part of me was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the three guys out front holding “We Won’t Go” signs. Somehow I thought this double-consciousness would shield me from the reality of war. I thought I was
different. I wasn’t just some Army goon; I was seeking my revenge.

I filled the form quickly, pausing only at my birth date. I caught myself right before I scratched the “1” in 1951 and curved it into a “0,” moving my life forward by one year. The lie would stick with me the rest of my life.

My friend Don lived in a van on top of Horn’s Hill. Don had been Jackie’s friend, though when Jackie shipped out to Vietnam, Don quit school to ply his trade. No one understood how Don drove the van up the hill in the first place. Brambles and oaks encased the van on all sides. No one else could drive up the hill to see him either. There were no roads. Instead, you parked across the street at the base of the hill on the riverbank and climbed. Even when the dope suppliers came down from Detroit, Don made them walk, heaving the entire stash through the woods in duffel bags.

Don sat on a beach chair on top of the van. He wore waders and a fishing hat. He cast a line into the brambles.

“What’s up, Don?” I called out as I approached.

“Fishing.”

“Can I join?”

“There’s beer in the cooler.”

I grabbed a can of Pabst and climbed the ladder up the rear of the van. “Jackie’s dead,” I said, as I cracked the can.

“I know,” Don answered.

“How do you know?”

“He came to see me.”

My heart stuttered, but I didn’t press it. Some things are best left unsaid.

“Amy’s pregnant.”

“I know.”

I wondered if Jackie told him. I wondered how Jackie would know.

“I’m going to Vietnam.”

“No you’re not.”

“How do you know?”

Don reeled in his line as slow as if he were pulling against the weight of water. “Catch anything?” I asked.

Don’s pupils were like looking down a well. “Grab that net and see for yourself,” he said.

I crawled to the edge of the van and pinched the line. The resistance surprised me. A leather pouch emerged from the brush, dangling from an iron hook fit to catch a shark or whale.

Don shrugged. I unhooked the pouch, dropped it in the net, and threw the line back out to sea.
Don retrieved his kit from the pouch: a small bag of marijuana, rolling papers, and a lighter with the suggestion of a woman etched into the metal. “Smoke?” he asked.

“Sure,” I answered. “How do you know that I’m not going to go? I signed all the papers today.”

Don separated the buds and flaked the herb onto the paper. He licked the paper, rolled it through his fingertips, and lit the joint. “Here,” he said. “Take a drag off this.”

The weed tasted of spring, fecund and sweaty. When I exhaled, gravity crushed me with more force than usual, but thoughts floated up out of my head like a helium balloon.

I passed the joint back to Don, “So?”
He took a toke. He inhaled as he said, “You can’t go to Vietnam.” In a rushed exhale he added, “I need you here.”

Don slumped in his seat. I waited. The sun spilled behind a cloud and a chill crept through the forest. Colors drained from trees and flowers. I spotted a rabbit crouched in the brambles. I wondered if it found Don’s stash down there. I wondered what the world looked like to a rabbit.

“What for?” I asked.

Don didn’t answer. “I think we have another catch. You want to grab it?”

“Go to hell, Don.”

“I just grab it for me.”

I pulled up the line again. Another leather pouch danced on the hook.

Don shook the contents of this pouch loose. Sheets of miniature postage stamps slid into his palm. Each one smiled up at me with a purple cartoon face.

“I’m going to need you here,” Don said, “because business is about to start booming.”

Our operation moving dope from the top of the hill to the town of Newark below was the one thing that gave my life purpose and my days structure.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Lysergic acid,” Don answered. “LSD.”

I pinched one of the sheets and flipped it over. “What does it do?”

“Opens your mind,” Don said. “Take this down to Moundbuilder’s Park for the rally next week. I’ve already spread the word. Just let people know you have the tickets.”

“Tickets to what?”

Don slapped the rest of the sheets into my hand, “To a new world.”

The official event at Moundbuilder’s Park was a rally to support the
troops sponsored by the Licking County Jaycees. Indeed, at the center of the Great Circle mound a beer-gutted Jaycee manned a grill. From there, concentric rings of war protesters, motorcycle clubs, and ladies’ luncheon clubs selling raffle tickets spiraled out to fill the park. Children darted like comets across the orbits of an otherwise orderly universe.

I shuffled into the crush and spotted a group of young hipsters. “Do you need tickets?” I asked the man closest to me.

He flashed a handful of the Luncheon Ladies’ red raffle tickets. “No man, I got some.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “No, man. Like, tickets.”

The man’s friends squirmed and he inched away from me. “Um, we’re cool.”

I pushed my way further towards the center of the circle. Among the aromas of scorched Kielbasa and trampled dandelions, I caught a whiff of reefer. There, among the war protesters, was a cluster of hippies passing a joint. I knew the telltale signs: hunched shoulders and loosely fisted palms. I caught the eye of a guy with a long beard and gave him a nod. He nodded back.

“Do you need tickets?” I asked.

“Depends. Is it a good trip?”

I couldn’t admit that I was afraid to sample the product myself. I’d heard stories about the walls breathing and friends turning into tigers before your eyes.

“It gets you where you need to go,” I answered.

“Well then, all aboard,” he answered, with a gesture that encompassed his group of friends.

I pulled the sheet out of my pocket and tore off the tabs. Just as I reached to make the pass, I heard my name crack out across the park, “Brown!”

My bearded friend turned his back.

“Brown! Are you going to ignore your brother in arms?”

I recognized the voice of Sergeant Slack-Jaw. I glanced at my upturned palm. Four purple faces smiled at me. I panicked and slapped the tabs into my mouth.

I faced the Sergeants from the recruiting station. “No. I mean, no sir.”

“Goddamn, Brown, you’re a squirrelly son of a bitch,” Sergeant Steely Eyes said as he slapped me on the shoulder.

Slack-Jaw looked me up and down, “Don’t worry, they’ll beat it out of him in Basic.”

Steely Eyes leaned hard on my shoulder. “Yeah, they don’t like squirrelly bitches in Basic.”

“No sir,” I answered.
“No sir, he says,” mocked Slack-Jaw. “That all you know how to say, Brown?”

“No sir,” I groaned.

The Sergeants exchanged a high-five.

“I don’t know what it is about you, Brown, but I’m going to find out. I don’t trust you.” Slack-Jaw declared.

Steely Eyes assumed a stand-at-attention posture. “They won’t tolerate you hanging out with a bunch of degenerates at Basic either,” he said, cocking his chin towards the bearded man.

“Lay off, man,” Bearded Man spat over his shoulder.

The Sergeants shifted their attention to Bearded Man.

“Lay off? And what have you done for your country lately, my friend?” Slack-Jaw challenged.

“I don’t make friends with baby killers.”

Beard provoked the Sergeants enough for me to sneak away. The crowd grew thicker. I had to fight my way toward Mound Street, which bordered the park’s northern edge. I wondered if the hum of bees in the air was real, a hallucination, or paranoia.

I crested the top of the Great Circle Mound just in time to catch Amy marching into the park. I ducked behind the cusp of the mound, hoping she hadn’t seen me. At ground level, the grass danced. Each individual blade swayed to the pulse of my heart.

The acid was working.

I floated to my feet and backed through the crowd, towards Hebron Street to the south. This time, the crowd parted before me. All the people participated in the same undulating dance as the grass and the leaves.

I summited the southern curve of the Great Circle Mound and shielded my eyes. The sky burned the thick orange of the sun. I traced the glow down to its source of origin and found it radiated from the crown perched upon a girl’s head. The crown melted in strands down her back. I drifted towards her. The vision flickered and the crown disappeared. A normal, but beautiful, girl with thick red hair and a round, moon-like face sat on the curb with a friend. She drank a milkshake from a straw.

I plopped down on the curb beside her. Sparks shot from her skin. I looked into her wide eyes and caressed her arm. “Your skin is on fire,” I said.

She snapped her head toward her friend, looking for support. The friend shrugged.

“Well, I hope not!” she laughed.

I laughed too. So did the pavement and the sky.

“I think you are my queen,” I told her.

“How can that be? We haven’t even met.”

“I don’t know. I think we’ve known each other the whole time.”
Just then, Amy rose over the mound, like a messenger from the normal world. Her grimace bore the news all over again. Jackie was dead. She was pregnant. I had enlisted.

The girl at my side slurped on her straw. I touched her wrist. “Will you pretend that we’ve met?”
“Okay...”
Amy drew nearer.
“Pretend to be my girlfriend.”
Amy stood above me with her arms folded. “Are you seriously running from me, Alan?”
“No. Amy, it’s not...”
“I know exactly what it is, Alan. You are such a pussy. You can’t even face me like a man.”
“Now is just not a great time,” I said, trying to sound diplomatic.
“Well, when is going to be a good time? We have to talk. You can’t avoid me forever.” Amy noticed the girl next to me. “And who is this?”
“I’m Alan’s girlfriend,” she said, reaching out to shake Amy’s hand.
“Excuse me?”
The girl draped her arm around me. “Alan and I are together now.”
Amy’s cheeks turned crimson. Her trembling body sent ripples through the air. The child in her womb burned like a bright light.
“Are you playing with me?” Amy asked.
The girl edged closer. My heart raced. I never imagined she would be so game. I didn’t even really have a plan. I don’t know why I thought a new girlfriend would fend Amy away. I didn’t even know if I wanted Amy to go away, but before I could think that through, the girl pulled me in for a kiss. I never felt a kiss like that before or since. Our lips moved in perfect harmony. My soul crawled through my lips and down to her heart. I saw all of her. She tasted sweet like milkshake and smelled of oranges.
“What’s your name?” I asked.
“I thought we had known each other the whole time,” she teased.
“I don’t remember anymore.”
“Helen.”
“Helen.”
Then, I remembered Amy. I looked up to where she had been standing, but she was long gone.

When I reached the top of Horn’s Hill that evening, Don was packing the fishing gear into the van.
“What’s going on?” I asked.
“Going on a business trip,” Don answered.
“Oh,” I said, flopping on a beach chair. I had hoped to stay the night on the hill and wait for the acid to wear off.

Don looked over his shoulder at me. “You’re tripping.”
“A little.”
“Hmm.”
“Yeah.”

Don surveyed his soon-to-be former domain. He rested his hands on his hips and stretched his lower back. I still hallucinated. Ashes were falling from the sky.

“Well, I guess I can’t leave you here,” Don said.
“No.”
“You want to come with me?”
“Where are you going?”
“Detroit.”

I had never ventured further from home than Bellair, the one stop-sign town on the Ohio River where my father’s family lived. My insides roiled with nerves. Here was my escape.

“Alright. I’ll come.”
“Great. You can be my chauffeur,” Don said, tossing me the keys to the van.

I climbed into the driver’s seat and gripped the wheel. The engine coughed and sputtered, but turned over. Don clicked on the radio. A Canned Heat song, I can’t remember the name, played. Don lit a joint.

The trees pinned the van on all sides. We were trapped. The longer I hesitated, the more the van sunk into the earth. Roots and loam lined the crater that swallowed us. Fathoms of darkness stretched below us, but I wasn’t afraid. I sensed Jackie somewhere down there. I sensed his love. The van sunk faster, but I wasn’t ready to hit the bottom. Looking up, I thought I saw a girl with a golden crown peeking down over the rim of the hole.

Don tapped out the beat to the music on his thighs. The movement shot up little sparks. He said, “If you start sinking, drive out.” I hit the gas pedal and the van flew back up to the surface. The trees had caught the beat of the music too. They waltzed into two lines, clearing a path between.

I put the van in gear and turned to Don. “Are you ready?”

Don nodded and kept singing, something about a girl named Annie. The van cut through the shrubs and undergrowth like water. We accelerated as we ricocheted down the hill. Our asses flew up out of our seats and crashed back down again. Don sang like a demented beast. I kept both hands on the wheel, but barely moved them. The van knew where to go.

We bumped out onto the blacktop of the road, and the DJ cut to a slow song. Don quieted and looked out the window toward the black curve of the Licking River. Above us, the stars twinkled. Everyone always talks about the damn things twinkling, but I had never seen it until that night. Swirling spirals and arcs of stars shed tails of cerulean and fuchsia.
I drove due northwest into the night. Don dozed. I glued my eyes to the stars like an ancient navigator. I know it sounds strange, but all night I talked to a bright blue star that hovered on the horizon, always right above the midpoint of the road. I told the star about Jackie, about enlisting, about Amy and the baby. I told the star about green-eyed Helen with the golden crown. In exchange, the star told me everything, my whole future. It told me I would never go to Vietnam. I would never hold the baby girl that Amy gave birth to, but I would see Helen again. The star told me everything would be all right, but not for a long time. The star told me everything I’m about to tell you.
I arrive back at the house in time to take a shower and drive Andre Jr. to school. Andre Sr. has already left for work. His work car is not in the driveway, just an empty space on the polished stones.

“Junior?” I call.

“Up here, Momma,” he calls back.

I put my head around the door to his room.

“Hello,” I say.

“I’m in my underwear,” he says.

“I’ll take a shower,” I say. “Have you had one? Do you want to come with me?”

His pale cheeks flush and he smiles, shaking his head.

“No, Momma,” he says.

I have a shower and change into daywear. I am not really tired yet, but I can feel my head start to ache.

Last night Andre was entertaining. His guest was an American realtor, tall and thick set, with a long, abrasive accent that reminded me of dry rocks and hard earth. Even in my room, blindly turning the pages of fashion magazines, I could hear the American’s voice through the floor and feel his laughter through my skin, intruding, coarse against my bones. I decided to go out. I washed and dressed. As I passed the archway between the hall and the living room, at the top of the two stone steps that lead up from the seating area, Andre gestured towards me with his palm open. The air was thick with the smell of cigar smoke. I was standing above them on that raised floor while they slouched in armchairs below me, a half drunk bottle of tequila on the glass table.

“Look at that,” he said to the heavy American, whose eyes swam all over me. “Look at that,” Andre said again.

“Found some black gold,” the American said. Maybe he was from Texas, I thought.

I smiled. It’s my job to flirt with the American. It’s my job to be
wanted by, but unavailable to, Andre’s friends and business associates. I am there to show them that he’s won whatever competition existed between them, in exactly the same way that his first wife was.

“Where are you going?” he asked me when I finally reached the door.

“Dinner with Isabela,” I told him, both of us knowing that I was lying and neither of us really caring. Andre could only ever have a trophy wife. He sulks like a baby. He’s afraid of me because he knows that I have life outside of what he wants from me. He still argues about being given incorrect change when he buys cigarettes, still complains that his gardener does not respect him. He keeps a gun beneath his pillow, and another one in his safe.

I dry out my hair and come back to Junior’s room.

“Are you ready?” I ask him.

He puts on white socks, bold white, and then slips unscuffed leather shoes over them. He ties the laces carefully, slowly, while I watch from the bedroom door. His hands and fingers are pale, their movements delicate. Once one shoe is fastened he moves to the next, repeating his ritual. They are not tight enough, so he pulls the knot apart and ties the laces of his right shoe again. Once he’s finished he raises his eyes to mine and smiles, pleased with himself and pleased that I am there with him. He looks like his father, and also like the mother he had before me. I want to slap him across his contented face, with all the power my arm can summon, hard enough to mark my palm on him forever.

“Come on, Andre,” I say, smiling, nodding towards the street. He stands up and looks around for his satchel.

I met his father, Andre Senior, three years ago. He could not dance, but he had money. The lighter that sprang up to light my cigarette was golden, with a pattern like fish scales on the body. The watch next to the lighter was an Omega, black face with diamonds at the three, the six, the nine, and the twelve. The hand that held the lighter, and the wrist that slotted through the band of the watch, were light-skinned. I held his hand steady and lit my cigarette. I read the engraving on the lighter and knew that I would have to get bloody to win the day.

I danced around him, making him look good. I danced like a snake, slow and hypnotic. I met the knowing looks of the musicians with a blank mask of happiness. They would insinuate with smirks and winks, but they would be careful and stop there. I recognized one of them from St. Marta. They knew which lines not to cross. Men have done crazy things for me.

I lead Andre Jr. to the car. The bottoms of his slacks are slightly flared and swish around his thin ankles. He is wearing a sky blue silk shirt beneath a tangerine sweater.

“Are you driving, Emelda?” he asks me.
“I thought I would,” I say to him. “It’s nice to spend time together, no?”

He nods enthusiastically. I don’t know how it works with boys as well as their fathers, but I was able to make sure that there was no resentment when his mother disappeared. I say she disappeared; she’s still wealthy somewhere, and she doesn’t have to look after this soft boy, or sleep with his soft father. I do not blame her for leaving the boy, as he would only remind her of the past, and I hope she settled well to let him stay with Andre. No hard feelings. I won my battle and she won her war. If ever anyone was smiling through tears, it was her. So I would not call her departure a disappearance. Not around here, where disappearance has a different meaning.

I am not as patient as the first Mrs. Andre, and now it is time to cash in my own chips.

I drive through Botafogo and then up into the hills. Andre Jr. asks where we are going and I touch his knee, making him embarrassed, telling him it will be a surprise. We are pulling close to St. Marta, my home.

The absence of police. The absence of blank walls. The absence of tarmac. The absence of weakness. No child over three years old cries here—perhaps today things will be different. The dust and rock of the nameless street, glassless windows deep with cool shadow along its length, black and tanned faces leaning on the cement sills. The shouts you hear are slow and full of purpose, from men and women out of sight. Electrical cables are tapped and routed, threads that loop from rooftop to rooftop. On quiet days you can hear the humming of the wires, like the sound of scurrying bugs. I remember sitting next to the open windows, the car horns in the near distance, the rain hissing down. Sometimes there were gunshots, or shouts of anger and fear that would pull you awake. Those sounds filled you with gratitude. Made you careful about where and how you stepped.

There is a group of men standing at the edge, where the tarmac meets the dust road. One of the men, Sebastian, wearing shorts and a red shirt, steps towards the car as I slow and stop.

“Emelda,” Andre Jr. says, panic in his voice.

“Emelda,” Sebastian says, smiling at me through the open passenger door.

“Emelda!” Andre Jr. says again.

“You have a new school today,” I say to him, unclipping his seat belt. “Be a good boy and don’t cry,” I say, knowing that the words alone will make him cry.

Sebastian has Andre Jr. under his arm and is laughing. He closes the car door. I light my own cigarette and pull away. I drive home and get some sleep, ready for the night.

I help Andre put his jacket on. We take the car to Hotel Santa
Teresa for cocktails. Andre’s phone rings and I slide my hand onto his crotch, whispering into his neck to leave it. He is important, I tell him; he is at no one’s beck and call. They will call back. The shacks in St. Marta are all arranged across the dark hillside like lanterns above Botafogo, following the waves of deep contours and jutting, arrogant ridges. I know the men that live there; the set of the chin, the chest pushed outward. The hands, like my father’s, calloused and tan—the fingers widened with time and strength, and all grips are firm. They are hands for holding on. They sail the favela like a ship that could sink below the city if untended, uncaptained. The wind carries the smell of salt, and the sun sinks below the straight black line of the ocean. Where is this place I live now? When it drizzles here they open umbrellas.

Once we arrive I lean in and straighten Andre’s tie, then kiss him. I lift his phone and slip it into my purse. It is not time yet. Maybe I am hoping that Sebastian gets mad. Maybe I am teasing him; seeing what he will do to the boy.

Sebastian and Felipe will have taken Andre Jr. into the hills, to the old barn. No one will find them there. They will be calling Andre, explaining how disappearances go in St. Marta. Naming their price. My part is almost over; all that’s left is to take the money off him, but I don’t want it to end yet. I want to see his eyes when he takes the call.

I can feel his phone buzzing in my purse. Felipe will be getting angry. The time between impatience and violence is a slender thing with him, and I can picture Sebastian trying to keep him calm. With the phone in my purse, I am in control of everything and everyone.

The bar at Hotel Santa Teresa is full of westerners and white Brazilians. The hotel is in the hills and looks down into the cradle of lights around Lapa. To get to the bar we walk past the outdoor pool, glowing blue, surrounded by empty sun beds and straw umbrellas. A lonely, dark figure is running a net across the surface of the water, and the blue glow catches fire as the ripples sparkle, golden in the hotel lights. In the bar there are some seats, but under the balcony awnings there are small divans set up, four-posters with empty frames. I sit down on the edge of one and smile at the same bloated, tall American from the night before. He greets me, but I am already slipping away from the conversation.

Andre hands me a cosmopolitan. The inhabitants of the city churn below us, like two armies that have forgotten the war they were fighting. I could tell them, but most would only shrug. The truth is in code, images and words sprayed on the sides of buildings. The truth is subliminal, largely forgotten. Some remember that they are soldiers and these men I admire. The rain and thunder hit like the voice of God. All over the city young boys hold out their arms like Christ and hold their faces up to the sky. You can feel the divine in your muscles like a dance that your body remembers but
your mind has forgotten. There are old women whose knees are calloused through contrition and prayer, but this never did anyone any good. I did not follow the music. I danced like a snake, slow and hypnotic before the strike.

The lightning cracks and flashes, but now it is not God at all; it is a camera flash, bleaching the red carpet that runs from the club door to the waiting cars. I stay beneath the balcony awnings, my skin dry and my cosmopolitan unspoiled.

I feel something heavy disturb the divan I am sitting on, and I smell sweat and tobacco—underneath, the aroma of milk left for too long in the sun.

“Where in the city are you from?” the American asks me, and I turn around. “You are a dark and mysterious woman,” he says.

His eyes are bloodshot and the veins in his nose have broken. His skin reminds me of the soft white flesh of earthworms.

We move on to the restaurant, also up in the hills. We drink in the bar and then move through to eat. The American puts a flabby hand on my thigh. He is already drunk and when he starts to forget where we are I move away from him.

Strips of pin-sized lights have been hung in curtains between the bar and the restaurant. The seats are white moulded plastic. The floor is white stone tile. The tables are white painted metal, draped with white tablecloths. I become increasingly afraid that I will stain the things I touch. I am fetching a cigarette from my purse, looking around the room, and my hand touches the phone. As I turn back to my companion his lighter sparks a foot away from my face. The flame eases slowly towards me. I cup my hands around it—inhalen—exhale. My view mists and fades pale for a moment.

Someone drops a glass behind me and a woman gives a high, sharp laugh. The black-skinned bartender is watching me. He has a scar cutting through his lower lip. I do not recognize him. At the bar is a woman in a white, backless dress, drinking a white Russian. The ice in her drink cracks and flashes like lightning.

A man cannot make you feel safe if he does not know you. A man cannot make you feel safe if you know him entirely. A man cannot make you feel safe if he is not strong.

I look across the table at Andre, buttoned up in his suit and weak, misty skin – a thing only for show. I feel the purse, resting on my lap, start to vibrate; someone calling his phone. Not yet.

I wait.
THE BEST TIME TO PLANT A TREE WAS 20 YEARS AGO

JOSEPH COTTER

My friend Randal
died on his birthday
in a motorcycle accident

I found out stoned the next day
Parked my black car in my black place
and cried as it softly rained and got blacker

I looked up through a future
of suspended droplets and noticed
for the first time in my life that
the crescent moon looks like a
fucking fingernail clipping
DREAMS
ZHANNA SLOR
oil
4" x 4"
UNTITLED
DEVIN BRATSET
screen printing ink and spray paint
HEDY LAMARR, BLUETOOTH

SUSANNA RAJ

mixed media
8.5" x 10"
VALENTINE
DON FRITZ
silkscreen print
Weezer’s world was a block long. He worked at the Leaning Tower of Pizza shoveling pies. Across the street, his best friend Shiv sold bongs at the head shop. Just outside his door, next to the trash bin and the free newspapers, his pal Lou set up camp. To make life even sweeter, CondomNation with its sexy sales girls was only two stores down.

But things were far from perfect. For one, the university campus, where the partying started hours before each football game and ended days afterward, was a ten-minute drive away. He’d brace himself every time a BMW pulled up to the curb.

“Ca-ca...can I help you?” The AC was set on seventy, but each time the door opened, a glut of South Florida heat would ooze its way in. Weezer would slide his eyeglasses up the bridge of his nose. “We have th-thin crust, th-th-thick crust, g-g-garlic crust.”

A pie and four brewskis. And move it fast, kid. We’re in a hurry.

Weezer was well into his thirties with a comb-over and a paunch but still he was pelted with Hey Kids all day long.

“Bu-bu-bu...but there’s more. Our pregame sp-sp-special. We have ba-ba-ba...barbeque wings, sp-sp...spicy wings, s-s-sweet and sour wings.”

The college guys would laugh. Double over and hold their stomachs.

Fernando, Weezer’s boss, sat on a stool in the corner. He’d glance at the TV hanging from the ceiling then back again at the guys. Rubbing his thigh. Nodding his head. Enjoying it. Like the onsite entertainment was better than anything on the screen. “The folks are in a hurry, But-But. Get them their pie for Christ’s sake.”

Weezer would stare with his mouth open. He’d grown up an hour north in Miramar—a town so desolate it looked microwaved. You knew where you belonged in Miramar. The all night diner was its big claim to fame. He’d count the change the way Fernando taught him, laying the bill on the top of the register so no one would shout, It was a twenty moron, not a ten.
Hey kid! Can you speed it up! We’re trying to make a goddamn game!

It was a typical Sunday night when Weezer found himself alone, sweeping the floor. The customers had long gone and his best friend wandered by to help. Shiv was college-educated, in his twenties, from an orthodox Jewish family on Miami Beach. He adapted to life in Coconut Grove like one of those lizards that turn brown on the sidewalk. Dressed in jeans two sizes too big so his boxers inched out. Spoke like a white man’s version of a black rapper. Since his head felt naked, Shiv wore a backwards baseball cap indoors and out.

“I don’t care how much free pizza you get to eat, Weez. Fernando disrespects you. Those frat boys, they disrespect you.”

Outside, they nodded to Lou. As usual, he was busy rearranging the stuff in his grocery cart. Lamps. Books. A cat.

“We’re talking respect,” said Shiv. He hiked up his pants and readjusted his cap. “A man needs respect. What do you think, Lou? Don’t a man need respect?”

“Fuck my soul,” Lou replied.

They looped the block, pretending to inspect the jokey rubbers in the window, watching a few plays on ESPN in the bars. That night, like every night, they finished up in the same spot.

Skin Deep made its money piercing the lobes and nostrils of rich high school kids. Entering the salon was like stepping into a soothing bath. Somewhere a chime sounded. The scent of vanilla candles and the hum of new age music seeped into every pore. Towards the rear of the store, past the jewelry displays and the tie-dyed shirts, a sign read Mike Wachovsky, Body Art.

It was their favorite place to hang out. Sitting in comfortable chairs, enjoying the air-conditioning, Weezer and Shiv leafed through the photo albums and magazines. Usually Mike ignored them. But that night he was hungry enough and sober enough to offer them a proposition. Six foot five. Bald head. Tank top. When he stood up, he blocked the light.

“I’ll make you a deal,” said Mike. He poked Weezer in the shoulder. “Free pizza for a free tat.” Then he turned to Shiv. “Cop me some dime bags and I’ll make you beautiful, too.”

Shiv turned from pale to green. “You’re a real pro, Mike. Like your tats are phat, sick, you know what I mean?” His words raced like he was high on crack, or fear, or a combination of both. “But I like have this eczema condition. Whole patches just crust over and flake off in lumps.”

Mike was covered from head to toe in ink. When he got angry, his face, neck, and arms became a spin art blur.

“And my parents would kill me,” said Shiv. “Honest. I mean my brother Gabe is a dermatologist and Jason’s a heart lung surgeon and my
sister practically runs Facebook. That’s why they call me Shiv. Cause I’m
dead to them. Cause they’ve been in mourning since practically forever.”

Mike turned his stare to Weezer and narrowed his aim. “And what
about you, But-But?”

“My na-na-name is n-n-not But-But,” said Weezer. “And I’ll give
you a s-s-slice every day for a month if you give me this.” He held up the
photo album and touched a picture of a dollar sign. “This is what I w-w-
want... right here.” He rubbed his right forearm back and forth like a
genie’s lamp. Then he smiled. He could already visualize the tattoo on his
skin, its magic working its way past his biceps. He needed to shake things
up, shuffle the deck. A tattoo, he reasoned, would earn him approval, win
him women, and change his life.

It almost happened. A few weeks later, Weezer was enjoying a day
off. Like a tourist, he wore sunglasses, a Marlins hat, and Bermuda shorts
that showed off the whiteness of his legs. The sidewalk sparkled. The sun
was so bright it hurt to look. He never did see the vehicle coming. One
minute he was sitting on the bus stop at Grand and Mary and the next
minute he was bulldozed by a Pepsi truck. The truck didn’t smash his knee
but the concrete bench did. He never lost consciousness.

“I’m p-p-pretty sure I need an ambulance,” he told Shiv on his
cell phone. “And m-m-maybe the jaws of life, too.” Just as he heard the
siren clearing the street, he looked up. A billboard the size of a house
blurted huge red letters. Been in an Accident? Ever Been Injured? Call
1-800-LAWSUIT.

Turns out the driver had been in five other accidents, the attorneys
told him. Today’s your lucky day. You ever hear of punitive damages?
They shoulda pulled that guy’s license ages ago.

Call it kismet or cosmic sleight-of-hand, but six months later
Weezer had a new knee and three hundred thousand dollars. He bought a
condo in Kendall plus a forty-eight inch plasma TV. To celebrate his return
to work, he and Shiv spent a day at the mall, dropped a thousand bucks at
The Gap and bought a dozen pairs of hundred dollar sneakers.

Usually they ate at the food court. But that day they decided to
splurge. A new place had opened up. A guy on the cooking channel owned
the franchise. The concept was to eat at a communal table, pay ten bucks
for a burger, and be totally ignored by the wait staff.

“It’s not that I don’t ’preciate it, bro,” said Shiv. Their shopping
bags flanked them. He picked up a fry and waved it around as he spoke.
“But before we go through any more of your green you should, like, make
an investment.” He dialed his brother Mookie, the financial consultant,
and put the phone in Weezer’s hand.

Before long Weezer owned an interest in the Leaning Tower. He
bought out Fernando, and now Weezer got to sit on the stool. He tried to
share his good fortune with all his friends but a few were resistant.

“You w-w-wanna job?” he asked Lou.

“Fuck my soul,” Lou replied.

Each night Weezer went to bed on his new Tempur-pedic mattress and rubbed his dollar sign tattoo. No longer did he think it as just a talisman or a lucky charm. Instead he considered it a hotline to God.

“I want another one,” he told Mike. During the summer, business was slow. Mike was so bored he was tatting his own fingers. It looked he was brushing on nail polish, the way one hand swooped over the other, his chin down, singing to himself.

Weezer held up the photo album once more. “I want the h-h-heart-shaped one. The one with the a-a-arrow.”

It was a girly tattoo, the type they sold to coeds smitten with guys on Harleys. But since business was slow, Mike nodded.

“I figured that since my dollar sign b-b-brought me money,” said Weezer, “maybe a va-va-valentine will bring me love.”

Mike snorted. “I’m sick of pizza. My cholesterol’s sky high.”

“I can p-p-pay you cash.” Weezer held out his left forearm. “And I want it r-r-right here.”

This one took longer to heal. Little bubbles popped up under the red ink. Blisters bloomed and festered. It itching like hell. But sure enough it brought him good fortune.

For weeks, Weezer had been staring through the glass at the latest CondomNation employee. Cece had long blond hair and legs that were endless. Marv the owner had them wear next-to-nothing to work. Tight, low-cut t-shirts and the shortest of shorts. The trashier they looked, said Marv, the more condoms they sold.

But Cece stood out. She was a real blonde, not some dye-job. Her eyebrows, eyelashes, even the down on her arms, was blond. She flitted from customer to customer like she had wings, Weezer thought. And when she spoke, her voice was soft and sweet, airless.

It was Shiv’s idea to give out coupons for free slices to all the local stores. But instead of doling them out to the tourists, the employees ended up using them. The girls at the condom store ate there almost every day. Weezer sat on his stool like a king on a throne in his newly pressed Gap jeans.

All it took was ten minutes. Even though Cece would run in, grab a slice and run out, Weezer lived for those ten minutes. For the rest of the day those ten minutes were saved in his head like a snapshot, turned upside down and sideways. Her hand on his wrist lingered. She flashed perfectly white teeth.

*Looking handsome, Weez. I just love your tattoos, Weez. This place is spotless, Weez.* While her eyes swept the ceilings and the walls, her
chin would nod in approval.

One evening after closing their doors, Shiv launched a pep talk. He hiked up his jeans, swiveled his baseball cap, and did a little chicken dance in front of the empty tables.

“Take it from me, Weez. You’re a babe magnet. Your car’s cool. Your crib’s off the chain. Call her. Get her number and call her.” He aimed his iPhone at Weezer and told him to lean in and smile.

Weezer stared at his feet. “She w-w-won’t give me her n-n-number.”

“She’s in hibernation,” said Shiv. “She’s just waiting for you to wake her up.”

They decided they needed a third opinion. Outside Lou had surrounded himself with sheets of cardboard for the night. Shiv leaned over and pretended to knock. “What do you think Lou? Should he make a pass at Cece?”

“Fuck my soul,” he replied.

On a slow Monday, Weezer worked up the courage to walk two doors down. Cece was alone in the store, skimming her cell phone behind the counter.

She looked up and a big pink chewing gum bubble billowed from her mouth. Slowly she sucked back in. “We’re having a big sale, Weez. The rainbow six-pack. One size fits most.”

Marv bought second-hand merchandise off logoless trucks. Stuff made in China. Weezer grabbed three boxes and dropped them on the counter.

“You w-wanna go out, Cece? You know, maybe some place nice on S-s-s...South Beach.”

“Gee, Weez. I really can’t.” She started rearranging the pyramid of Trojans displayed near the cash register. Weezer tried to avert his eyes. *Fire and Ice. Tingly Warmth. Arouses and Intensifies.* The packaging alone made him blush.

“You see, I live with my mother.” Still not looking at him, her hands playing with the boxes like they were Legos. *Ecstasy Ultrasmooth. The Pleasure Pack.* “Mom’s real sick... every night I rush home to cook her dinner... she really has nobody else.”

Images from old black and white TV shows surfaced in Weezer’s head. He pictured Cece on a couch next to her mom munching popcorn and pointing to hijinks on the screen. Tucked inside a handmade afghan. Giggling.

“I’m opening a T-Twitter account,” said Weezer. “We’re gonna advertise daily sp-sp-specials. Expand the menu.” It was Shiv’s brainstorm. Another one of his brothers was in public relations. “We’re having m-m-m... meatball subs tomorrow,” said Weez. “S-s-stop by.”
The next afternoon Weezer gave Cece the whole tour. The back alley where the trucks dropped off the fresh produce. The office where he added up the day’s sales and ordered supplies.

“There’s a lot of b-b-b...bookkeeping involved,” said Weezer. He stuck a key in a drawer and extracted a large zippered case. “You wouldn’t believe how much cash we collect,” said Weezer. “I c-c-count it five times every night to get it right.”

From that point on, instead of rushing her visits, Cece made herself at home. Weezer couldn’t believe his luck. At first they’d have lunch in his office, the two of them alone with the door locked, the papers on his desk cleared. One minute they’d be talking and the next her hands would be darting in and out of his shirt, his pants, his pockets. It didn’t take long. Weezer’s eyes would roll up like he was having a seizure and then his whole body would do a wet dog shake. Afterwards, while he’d excuse himself and head to the restroom, Cece would wait in his office. Five minutes later his return would be greeted with a toothy grin and a kiss on his cheek. “See ya tomorrow, Weez. Thanks for lunch.” Then she’d flutter off.

The first day, ten dollars was missing from the zippered pouch. The next day, twenty. Soon Weezer figured he was about fifty bucks short every afternoon Cece dropped by. He confessed to Shiv.

“If she n-needed the money, I’d wished she asked, wh-wh...what with her sick mother and all.”

Shiv hitched up his pants. “Let me ask you a question.” He inspected the walls like they had all the answers. “Is it worth it?”

Weezer smiled.

“So who’s the moron now?”

Weezer decided to expand his horizons and explore the neighborhood. Around three blocks away was a Ritz Carlton. The closer you got to the hotel, the nicer the shops and restaurants became. Instead of grabbing a slice of pizza for lunch, he and Cece would walk arm in arm in front of the storefronts. Sometimes Weezer would spring for a fancy lunch. Sometimes they’d shop.

“Wow,” said Cece. She fingered her ear lobe. “Would you look at that! Aren’t those earrings something!”

The jewelry store catered to high-end customers. Just to get inside, you needed to walk into a glass booth, get scanned by a security camera, then be buzzed in by an angry-looking guard.

“They look j-j-just like the ones you have,” said Weezer.

“These are cubic zirconium, Weez! I’ve never had a pair of real diamonds.”

An hour later a pair of single carat studs was hers.

A leather goods store stood on the corner. Handbags, briefcases, luggage. All with names that Weezer vaguely recognized from ads in
magazines.

“Geez,” said Cece. She fingered the strap on her shoulder. “Must be nice to own the real thing instead of buying a knockoff.”

An hour later the Louis Vuitton purse was hers.

The day of their biggest spree, loaded with shopping bags and totes, they somehow found themselves inside the hotel. Gazing at the crystal chandelier in the lobby, Cece spun in circles.

“I feel like a princess,” she said breathlessly. “Like a goddamn princess.”

Fifteen minutes later they were in a room.

In the beginning, Weezer thought his life couldn’t get any better. For a precious hour every day, he and Cece honeymooned. And ever since he expanded the menu, the business had taken off as well. The college students were back in town. Instead of closing at nine, Leaning Tower stayed open until midnight. Shiv would walk over and together they’d mop and Windex until the place gleamed.

“So let me get this straight, Weez. Cece quit her job. You’re paying rent on an apartment you’ve never seen. You don’t have her phone number or her email address. And she just waltzes in here like she owns the place and helps herself to pocket money and free food. Even the portabella mushrooms, man! And the organic arugula! Do you know how expensive that shit is?”

Weezer had to admit that there were a few wrinkles in their relationship. Each afternoon when the clock struck five Cece seemed to disappear. No matter how much Weezer pried and poked, she kept her afterhours life private.

Even the glow of a five-star hotel was beginning to dim. Cece stopped emptying the mini-bar and ordering room service to go. She used to cram souvenirs into empty shopping bags. Ashtrays. Ice buckets. Towels. But how many bathrobes could one person use?

She seemed to be losing interest in Weezer as well.

He knew he was shy. It always suited him to do it with the curtains drawn and the lights off. So he reasoned that when Cece kept her clothes on, she was being bashful, too.

Weezer knew he was inexperienced. And he realized that passion in the movies was different from real life sex. There were no serenading violins. The walls didn’t buckle and the bed didn’t shake. But sometimes when they made love, she looked positively bored. Weezer would catch her glancing at the TV, her eyes fully open, her face lit blue green by the screen. And afterwards, she’d stare at the ceiling with hands tucked behind her head and sigh. A pink bubble would balloon from her lips and, like a jellyfish, slowly contract.

Weezer felt trapped. When they weren’t at the hotel, Cece lingered
more often at the restaurant. He was at his wit’s end supervising the kitchen staff, manning the ovens, and keeping track of Cece’s manicured hand as it dipped in and out of the cash register. Soon he had locks on everything and a safe in the back as well. Suddenly Cece lost her appetite for pizza and for Weezer as well.

“Sometimes, Weez,” said Shiv, “cupid’s arrow takes a wrong turn.”

Weezer decided his mojo was out of alignment, his karma outawwhack. Once again he visited Mike at the tattoo parlor. He knew just which design would turn his life around. It was Cece’s favorite. She had seen the picture in the photo album. Pointed to it and smiled. It had to be Cece’s favorite.

Mike looked him up and down. “This is a big one, But-But. Three sessions at least.”

The stencil spread clear across his back, covering his shoulder blades like wings. The pain seemed endless. When they were through, Mike stood Weezer in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror in his studio, twirled him around, and put a smaller mirror in his hand. “Whaddya think?”

No matter how hard he tried, Weezer could only see bits and pieces of the tat. He pivoted right and pivoted left but it was no use. He made out parts of the yellow diamond, a sliver of the red S. Still he couldn’t figure out how to get a dead-on look. Instead he called Shiv on his cell phone and asked him to run over. Minutes later, he walked into Body Art with Lou trailing behind him.

“Whaddya think?” said Mike.

“What do I think?” said Shiv. “It’s hardcore, man. Slammin’. It’s a bird. It’s a plane. It’s Superman!”

“Fuck my soul,” said Lou.

As soon as he left the shop, Weezer felt his whole torso tingle. Electricity was working its way from the crown of his head to his toes. Fifty yards from Skin Deep was a gym. Magic Muscles prided itself on five machines, a wall of weights, and a local discount. Weezer felt drawn in like a magnet. It was like walking into a club that for some unknown reason had invited him to become a member.

At first they put him on the treadmill just to get his heart pumping. They slapped a band on his wrist that kept track of the calories he burned and the food he inhaled. The secret to success, they told him, was to lay off the carbs. No more pizza, no more pasta, no more garlic bread smothered in butter. Instead they plied him with protein shakes morning, noon, and night. Our secret ingredient, they told him, never fails to work.

The results happened in weeks. Soon he was pumping iron and bench-pressing two hundred pounds. By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, Weezer’s shirts were bursting at the seams. No one called him But-But anymore. Sure he still had the stutter, but there was a lot less need for
talk. He moved quicker and took up more space. And by the time people were tossing their Christmas trees into dumpsters, he was a changed man.

Instead of being just a mild-mannered restaurant entrepreneur, Weezer learned how to throw a punch. He didn’t hesitate and he didn’t stumble. He drank everything in big gulps. But even though women gave him second looks and tossed him their hotel keys, he still ached for Cece. And there was no doubt in his mind that once she saw him, that the minute she was introduced to this newest version of himself, that she’d fall in love again.

New Year’s was circled on every calendar he owned. He bought a ring and spent weeks planning the surprise. Once he convinced Marv to hand over the address on her W-2, the plot was ready to unfold.

At eight o’clock in the morning he headed east towards Little Havana and parked in front of a small white concrete house. There were bars on the windows and a padlock on the chain link fence. Weezer hurdled it in a single bound.

When he knocked on the door, he expected to see a little old lady. He had practiced his speech in front of the mirror dozens of times. “These flowers are for you,” he would say. And in his dreams Cece’s mother would bend over and embrace him, the smell of freshly baked churros in her hair.

Instead a large man opened the door. He towered over Weezer, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers. A carpet of black hair ran up and down his arms, his legs, and his chest. Weezer’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. He was nose-to-nose with the hairiest person he’d ever seen.

“What jou want?” said the man.

“Is this where Cece l-l-lives?” asked Weezer.

“Jou bet your ass she live here. She live here with me. I’m her friggin’ husband.”

Weezer stepped back like he was hit with a fist. He glanced to the side and saw rows and rows of concrete houses. When he gazed at the sky, layers of blueness tilted like plates. Cece stepped into the doorway. She was wearing a man’s t-shirt and nothing else.

“What jou want?” asked her husband.

“Never saw him before in my life,” muttered Cece.

It only took a second. Weezer tucked in his head and rammed Cece’s husband. Lamps flew. Cece screamed. Tables were knocked over. Finally the man lay on the hard terrazzo floor with the wind knocked out of him. Weezer pulled back his hand, clenched his fist, and poised to let it fly.

“Stop!” yelled Cece. She lunged at Weezer like a wild animal, clawing his shoulders and drawing blood. His shirt flew off in pieces.

“Oh my god!” she screamed. “The tattoo!”

Weezer’s hand stopped midair.

“It’s changed. Your muscles. The tat’s all pulled and twisted.”
She sat upright, cocked her head, and appraised Weezer’s back. Her chin angled to the left then it shifted to the right. Then she started laughing. She laughed so hard she rolled on the floor. Cruelty came easy.

“You’re no Superman anymore, But-But. That S looks more like a noodle or maybe a limp dick. That’s it. It’s a limp dick. You have a limp dick on your back, zonzo.”

Ask any superhero. Words can be kryptonite, too. Weezer fell to the ground. Tears stained his cheeks and his body crumbled. For the first time he had doubts. Perhaps the magic that had courséd through his body had deserted him.

Cece’s husband got up, disappeared, then returned to the foyer. Weezer felt the coolness of the gun muzzle against his temple. Somewhere he heard a dog bark and a fan swish. He remembered his parents and his childhood and the way they cooked scrambled eggs at the Miramar diner. His whole past was distilled into a single drop, his entire future proffered before him.

*I’ll make you a deal,* said Mike.

In a flash he saw his funeral and an *Under New Management* sign. The earth bounced away like a beach ball while the clouds loomed close enough to touch. He could swear he heard angels sing. If he could only tell Shiv. When he blinked, fireworks burst.

*I feel like a princess,* she said breathlessly.

Weezer’s life had congealed, throbbing, pulsing, beating like a fetus in a womb.

*Fuck my soul!* said Lou.

A blanket of faith comforted him. So this is what it’s like, thought Weezer. To see everything, to hear everything, to feel everything. To have powers he never knew existed. If he could only tell Shiv. Then it would have been perfect.
As he walks into the Paper City Package Store for his daily bottle, saliva puddles around his tongue and a tingling of anticipation stirs in his stomach. He can already taste the booze. The narrow aisles are cramped, but Billy has no problem finding his way past dusty bottles of wine—the Malbecs and Rieslings and Riojas, beyond the vodka, gin, and whiskey to the tequila aisle where he grabs a pint of Jose Cuervo, enough with a six-pack of Corona to see him through the night. Someone has broken a bottle of booze and released its unmistakable stinging scent into the air. Billy’s ten-year-old Air Jordan basketball shoes plop against the sticky floor. The sound reminds him of what his ex-wife said about beer piss just before she threw him out: how she could always smell it around the toilet no matter how much she cleaned. He doesn’t believe in beer piss. It was just her excuse for taking up with that half-wit Roland Baker.

Armed with the night’s drinking provisions, Billy approaches the counter, where the store keeps cigarettes, lottery tickets, nip bottles, and the rolling tobacco he asked the manager to carry. This is his package store, the closest to the apartment where he lives. Even though all the paper mills closed years ago, a flashing sign hanging from the ceiling says, “Holyoke MA, the Paper City.” The only paper Holyoke is known for now is the litter on the sidewalks, in gutters, and in weed-filled lots where it mingles with empty crack vials.

Gary, who looks like he works out every day at the gym, tends the cash register. When Billy and Gary went to Holyoke High School, Gary was a jock who collected second glances from the girls like they were trading cards. Now, his hair plugs look unnatural, like someone stuck in patches of hair with straight pins, and his contacts scratch his eyes red. He’d be hard pressed to attract even a blind girl now despite all the exercise.

“Who the fuck asked you?” Billy takes his card and stuffs it in his pocket without bothering to put it back in his wallet.

Gary throws up his hands in a surrender gesture. “Don’t blame me. I’m just saying.”

A thin man with a slow gait passes behind Billy. Turning, Billy is about to say “Hi, Grandpa Bill. How long has it been since I’ve seen you? A year?” The words die before reaching his lips. Something is off. The man is dressed like Grandpa Bill. Even though it’s a hot, August day, he’s wearing that moth-eaten woolen hat Grandpa Bill wears all year to cover his thin hair and keep his head warm. His face is gaunt. But, it can’t be him. The old codger died when the door of a bus closed on his leg, causing him to fall and crack his head on the street pavement.

The man says, “Do I know you?” and it sounds just like Grandpa Bill, who said those exact words to Billy ever since he was a kid. When he was young, Billy would say, “It’s me, Billy,” then giggle. Now, he says, “Do you?”

Billy was named after Grandpa Bill because he was born on his birthday. He looks hard at the woolen hat. Grandpa Bill was cremated, and Billy never saw the body. Now, he wonders if it was a mistake, if someone else’s ashes are in the urn buried at St. Jerome’s Cemetery. Suddenly, there’s a pain in his chest, and he can’t breathe. It is as if the man with the woolen hat has sucked in all the air. Billy’s throat is prickly as dry pine needles, and it closes. The nip bottles on the shelf behind the counter quiver. He staggers toward the door, pulling at the neck of his T-shirt. The man who looks like Grandpa Bill is staring at him. There’s a smile on his face and a glint of recognition in his eyes. He smacks his thin lips, making a popping sound.

Billy hugs the tequila bottle, hoping the familiar shape will ground him. Outside, the sun shines, hot as Desert Storm, and for a second Billy imagines he is back there, gunfire erupting all around him.

The patches of grass poking through cracks in the parking lot are wilting. Billy’s tongue is so dry that it scratches the roof of his mouth. He hurries to the side of the building, steps behind an overflowing dumpster, struggles to open the bottle with a weak, shaky hand, looks around to make sure there are no cops in sight, looks around, and takes a long, French-kiss swallow. The liquid burn flows down his throat and settles in his stomach. The shaking stops, and Billy opens his eyes.

The bottle screwed tight and back in the bag, he returns to the front of the store. The man, a look-alike or the one he’s named after, comes out of the building. He stops a foot from Billy, holds up a brown bag shaped like it contains a half pint, and salutes with it. His arm is stiff but his shoulders are hunched, a stance so familiar Billy feels it in his own muscles. The man spits out a wet mess of chewing tobacco—Grandpa Bill chewed the stuff.
The man opens the bag, pulls out a cookie, and takes a bite. Billy thinks of vanilla wafers and ginger bread.

Years ago when he didn’t make the softball team and again when he broke his arm falling off his bike, Grandpa Bill taught him to feed his disappointments and pain with cookies and sweets. Billy was fatter then. Now, he soothes himself with liquor, but no amount of alcohol can stop the hurt in his belly, not since he read Joyce’s marriage announcement in the *Springfield Republican*.

Billy hurries the half mile home, passing a boarded apartment building, the canals lined with empty paper mills, a second-hand store, several cars in a vacant lot, some without tires, and a pawn shop. Everything feels as vacant as his life. Someone, scraggly as a wild cat, comes out of the Franco-American Club and asks for a cigarette. “I don’t have any,” Billy says. He wishes he did. The poor bugger could use a break.

In his two-room, fourth-floor apartment, Billy puts the six-pack into the refrigerator next to a half-full gallon of milk and a package of Oreos. There’s nothing else in the refrigerator. He turns on the 36-inch television purchased at the pawn shop. He can’t stand the sound of silence; it creates a vacuum that sucks thoughts from his brain. He wouldn’t mind if it took away his emotions, but his thoughts prove he’s alive. There’s a show on the television about primate behavior and chimpanzee violence. Billy drinks from the tequila bottle and watches the show. The bottle lasts until 3 a.m. He follows it with the last Corona. His stomach burns so he drinks a glass of milk and reads from Walt Whitman’s “A Noiseless Patient Spider.” He falls asleep contemplating “the vacant vast surrounding.”

The next day, it takes two hours to find his bank card. He can’t go to the Paper City Package store because he doesn’t want to run into Grandpa Bill. He goes out of his way on foot a half mile further to spend his disability check. It’s 11 a.m. A horn honks, and a dusty green Jeep with a dent in the driver’s side front fender comes to a screeching halt inches from him. A man shouts “Asshole” out the window and gives Billy the finger before driving around him. Billy thinks about chimpanzee violence and shouts, “Fucking ape.”

He lost his license for good following his third DUI conviction. Now he goes everywhere on foot except when his brother or his niece give him rides. Some days, he walks ten miles. His unregistered motorcycle is garaged six miles away, at his brother Jerry’s house. Jerry is married to the bitch of all bitches and has one college-aged daughter. He’s the perfect head of household with the perfect family. He has the perfect job, 9 to 5, as a hearings officer at the courthouse, but he couldn’t or didn’t want to do anything to keep Billy from losing his license. “You could lose your life or take someone else’s,” Jerry said at the time. Jerry coaches Little League. Billy is the black sheep of the family, the drunk, like Grandpa Bill. But
what’s wrong with drinking? It’s as good a hobby as anything else.

Billy inserts his head in the door of Jubinville’s Package Store and looks around. No sign of Grandpa Bill or anyone who looks like him. He inches his way into the store and scans the aisles. There are no other customers. No lurking ghosts.

After grabbing a handle of Jose, Billy heads for the register. A man with Grandpa Bill’s cataract-fogged eyes rings up the purchase. He can’t be Grandpa Bill because he’s not wearing the hat. Billy swipes his card and signs the electronic reader. The cashier hands him the bottle in a bag and his receipt. The man winks.

“Do I know you?” Billy didn’t mean to shout, but the words erupt from him as if they’ve been cooped up and have been wanting out. Sometimes, he goes days without speaking to anyone, and words build up inside him until his teeth ache.

“Do you?” The man’s voice is mocking. The words beat against Billy’s head.

Backing away, Billy thinks about a line from his favorite Woody Allen book. I am being followed or I am following someone. Something like that. It’s the story of his life.

Back home, he strips down to his underwear. They’re bleach-spotted long johns. His t-shirt is a dingy gray. Billy searches the kitchen for a paper cup but can’t find one, so he retrieves one from the garbage, rinses it, and, convinced alcohol will kill any bacteria, fills it with tequila. He drinks half the bottle and talks to the television as it grows dark outside.

Leaving the apartment later that night, he walks out of the Flats to the section of Holyoke where his brother lives. That neighborhood is made up of single- and two-family homes. He takes one wrong turn and scolds himself for being stupid. It takes Billy an hour and a half to reach his brother’s house. The lights at Jerry’s are out, but Billy rings the bell and pounds on the door. “Double jeopardy,” he yells. It’s the punch line from a shared joke dating back to when they were kids, but he can’t remember the rest of it. A light goes on, and Jerry’s round face appears at the picture window. Jerry shakes his head, disappears, and then unlatches the door.

Jerry looks like their father, his namesake. Only Jerry smells of aftershave, something musky like moss. Their father, a welder, had smelled of steel. His skin had been gray with metal dust that wouldn’t wash off. Jerry’s skin is office worker pale. When Billy worked, he was a carpenter and smelled of sawdust and pine tar and apples plucked fresh from the tree. He no longer remembers those scents, but he can identify brands of beer and types of hard liquor from smell alone.

“What the hell are you doing in your underwear?” Jerry asks.

“What are you doing in pajamas?” Jerry’s pajamas are blue with white stripes. He has bed hair, and Billy feels good that he doesn’t look his
“I was in bed. I sleep in pajamas.”
“I sleep in my underwear.”
“Whatever.” Jerry turns and walks away. Billy follows him into the kitchen.

“Who is it?” Jerry’s wife calls out from the second floor. Her voice is full of sleep.

“It’s Billy. Go back to sleep.”

Billy no longer remembers why he wanted to see his brother. He searches for the memory, but it’s gone. “Got anything to drink?”

Jerry looks at Billy with the same expression on his face that he had when he was ten and Billy was twelve, and their dog Snuggles had to be put down. “I’ll make coffee.”

He makes the coffee, pours Billy a cup with extra cream, extra sugar, the way he likes it. Billy is pleased his brother remembers. Jerry puts the cup down on a slate counter that divides the kitchen. Above the counter where Billy sits on a stool, some kind of long feathery plants are drying. They smell like pickles.

When Billy and Jerry were young, they played at their father’s Park Street welding shop after school, the dry dust smell of metal heavy in the air. Rods sparked silver stars from dull gray iron, and the grinding stone exploded into fireworks. Nuts, bolts, and pickets lined shelves, a Disney World of metal. The green eyepieces of welding helmets swung on hinges like prehistoric animal eyes, and oxygen tanks were stenciled with threats of danger. Dressed in a green uniform—shirt and pants, Industrial Welding and Iron Works on one pocket, Jerry on the other—their father was a star-maker. The two boys drowned in the magic and believed in the illusion of their own private theme park until the day their father plunged to his death from the fifth floor of an apartment building where he was installing a fire escape.

“What are you doing here at this time of night?” Jerry asks. Billy remembers why he came. “It’s about Grandpa Bill.”

“What about him?”

“Are you sure he’s dead?”

“Jeez, Billy. What the hell is this about?”

Billy doesn’t tell him he saw Grandpa Bill. Jerry will think he’s having alcoholic hallucinations. Jerry says Billy drinks too much, but if Billy can think the term Alcoholic hallucinations, he can’t be having them. He can tick off the proof that he’s not an alcoholic on two fingers: He drinks because he wants to; he can stop at any time.

“I mean who saw the body?” Billy says. To his mental list of reasons he is not an alcoholic, he adds: I can follow a conversation. It occurs to Billy that if Grandpa Bill isn’t dead, maybe Joyce isn’t married.
“We went to the funeral,” Jerry says.
“But he’d been cremated. How do we know it was him?”
“Billy.” Jerry tilts his head and squints at his brother like he isn’t sitting straight. Billy straightens. “He died in the hospital. Uncle Ted and Aunt Mildred were there when they stopped life support. Where is this going?”

Billy will have to hunt down his aunt and uncle. He should have thought of that, but can he trust them to tell the truth? Can he trust anyone? Jerry’s face is cratered with worry. He shouldn’t have bothered his brother. “Go back to bed,” Billy says.
“What about you? I’ll get you some clothes and take you home.”

Jerry leaves the kitchen and climbs the stairs.

Lydia’s shrill voice drifts down. “What? Now? You’re going out now?”
“Shh. He’ll hear you.”
“I don’t care,” she says. “It’s the middle of the night.” Billy never liked her. She disapproves of him and doesn’t tell Jerry when he calls. “He got here on his own. He can get home on his own.” Every time he sees her, she gets worse. His poor brother.

When he comes down the stairs, Jerry hands Billy a pair of sweat pants. “Put these on.” Billy does as ordered, but the pants are baggy. Jerry pulls the drawstring tight around Billy’s waist. When they were kids, it was Billy who did the helping. He taught Jerry to piss standing up. Their father yelled at Jerry for his “fucking poor aim,” and didn’t have the patience to teach him. Jerry refused to let their mother teach him to tie his shoes, so Billy spent an hour three days in a row showing Jerry over and over how to cross one end of the shoelace over the other and to pull the loops through the circle. On the fourth day, he realized his little brother got it the first time, and begged to be shown again and again because he liked his older brother’s attention. Billy showed Jerry his first night crawler, dug up in a vacant lot near the house where they grew up. The house suffered fire damage last year, ten years after their mother died, and was boarded up, but Billy can still get in.

In the car, Billy says, “Bring me to Uncle Ted’s,” but Jerry says it’s too late and drives Billy home. Jerry walks Billy in, hugs him, and says, “Take it easy. Stephanie will be here to take you shopping tomorrow.”

“Can you loan me twenty?” Billy says.
“Nice try.” Jerry shakes his head and leaves.

The next day Billy’s bedroom smells like vomit. He doesn’t remember being sick. He can’t figure out where he got the sweatpants that fall down to his ankles when he tries to walk. Was Grandpa Bill wearing sweatpants when he ran into him at the package store? They’re too big to be Grandpa Bill’s. Billy kicks the pants off his straw-thin legs and stands in
his familiar long johns. He turns on the CD player and ups the volume until the sound bounces off the walls. He closes his eyes and plays air guitar as Eric Clapton sings *Cocaine*.

He doesn’t hear his niece when she lets herself into the apartment. Billy opens his eyes when the room goes silent. She has turned off the music. He gives the imaginary guitar one last twang. He used to own a real one, used to play it at family events, but he hocked it years ago.

Stephanie, Jerry’s and Lydia’s daughter, has used her father’s key to get into the apartment. Blond curls bob on her head. She stands next to the CD player. “I’ve come to take you shopping.” She does this every week, but it’s always a surprise. She looks like her mother, only fuzzier and more alive. “Have you been drinking today?” she asks.

“What time is it?”

“Midmorning.”

Billy pokes her in the shoulder and says, “Not yet.” She smiles at the joke.

Billy looks down at his hairless chest and the hard rock of his protruding belly. His skin is slightly yellow. “Oops,” he says. “I seem to be in no state for company.”

He goes into the bedroom to dress. Jeans. A jacket and his own woolen hat, a gift from the Salvation Army. He can’t find his wallet. “Billy, you dumb fuck,” he says, “you just had it in your hand.”

He joins his niece in the living room, drops into a beat-up chair with rips in the fake leather arms, and says, “I can’t find my wallet. Did I ever tell you about this girl I met once?”

Stephanie nods, but Billy continues anyway.

“She was sitting on a bench in that park where people go to feed the pigeons. You know, the one on Maple Street. She was the most beautiful girl in the world, and she was reading *Doctor Zhivago*. You know what I did?”

“What, Uncle Billy?”

“I married her.”

“You mean Joyce? That’s how you met her?”

“The most beautiful girl in the world.”

Stephanie goes into the bedroom and returns with the wallet. “It was right on top of the bureau.”

Billy opens it to Joyce’s picture, creased and faded. “The most beautiful girl in the world.”

Stephanie takes the wallet from him and studies the picture even though she has seen it dozens of times. “She’s beautiful, but we had better get going.” She urges him to leave the jacket and hat at home. “It’s stifling out.”

At the grocery store, Billy buys milk, six cans of sardines, bread,
and whoopie pies. Stephanie puts sandwich meat, cheese, cereal, and canned soup in the cart.

At home, Billy waits until Stephanie packs away the groceries, gathers up his dirty laundry to take with her, and leaves in her Ford Escort. He puts on his hat and sets out to buy booze, but now he has two package stores to avoid. At the corner, Grandpa Bill pretends to wait for a bus. Billy figures it doesn't matter where he gets his liquor, Grandpa Bill or the man pretending to be Grandpa Bill will find him so he heads for the Paper City Package Store.

There's a twenty-something boy behind the counter where Gary should be. He wears glasses so thick he must be blind.

“Where's Gary?”
“Who?” the kid says, brushing dandruff off his black T-shirt.
“Gary, the guy that usually works here.”
“Never heard of him,” the kid says.
“You ever seen a skinny old man with a dingy woolen hat shopping here?”

The kid looks at the hat on the top of Billy's head and says, “And?”
“Ever seen me before?”
“Sure. Jose Cuervo and a six-pack of Corona.” His fingers tap the counter.

Billy’s sure he’s never seen this kid before, and figures he must be an associate of the guy pretending to be Grandpa Bill. Or maybe he’s a friend of Grandpa Bill’s. Billy had friends once, but not anymore. His world has narrowed to his brother, and his niece, his apartment, package stores, bars that dot the neighborhood like pimples, the grocery store, and the spaces in between. Billy likes the concept of the spaces in between. “I don’t live under the bridge,” he says to the kid manning the package store. “I live in the spaces in between.”

“Sure, Gramps,” the boy says.
“What the hell ever happened to poetry?”

The kid doesn’t get it. He stares at Billy with a blank look on his face. He probably never heard of Walt Whitman. Billy picks up the bag with his bottle and six-pack, pays, and leaves.

Grandpa Bill follows him home. Billy stops at the door to the apartment building and confronts the old man. “Is it true?” he asks. “Did Joyce remarry?” Grandpa Bill doesn’t answer. Instead, he holds out a lint-covered cookie. Billy doesn’t take it.

He drops off his purchases, takes off his hat and wipes the sweat from his head with his hand, has a quick one and then another, sneaks out the back, and walks to his brother’s house to get his motorcycle. It takes four tries to kick-start the bike, but no one seems to hear. They must be out.
Billy weaves in and out of traffic, speeding off after scraping against a parked car. The damn road is too narrow for parking on both sides, and it moves. He rides to Uncle Ted’s without his helmet because he lost it two years earlier. There are five cars in Uncle Ted’s driveway—two pickup trucks, a big wheeler, a Buick, and a fifteen-year-old Lincoln Town Car—so instead of going in, Billy circles around the back and peaks in the kitchen window.

The window is squeaky clean, and the blinds are up. There’s a large black spider with eggs under its belly building a web in the second windowpane up from the bottom. Billy pushes the web aside, and it sticks to his hand, encircling his fingers. He imagines gigantic spiders weaving a web around him, shudders, and wipes the sticky, stringy mess on his pants. Then he worries that it will burn through his pants and legs. He pulls up some grass and wipes off the gunk, then returns to the window.

They’re all inside—Uncle Ted, his glasses held together with white tape; Jerry, who usually looks well-tailored but is wearing a dress shirt that sticks out of his pants in the back; Lydia, whose hair used to be blond but is now bright red; Aunt Mildred, leaning on her walker; Grandpa Bill, wearing the woolen hat; even Gary from the package store. Gary is wearing a welding helmet pushed up on top of his head. The kitchen light glints off the green eyepiece. He looks like a giant insect.

Billy tries to hear what they are saying but can’t make out any of it. For a moment, he wonders if they are pod people, like he saw in a movie years ago. Suddenly Aunt Mildred points to the window, and everyone rushes for the door, everyone except Aunt Mildred, who plows along on her walker.

Billy runs to the motorcycle, slips on a landmine of rocks in the driveway, catches himself on a flowering bush, which uproots when he pulls on it, and regains his legs. He knocks over a trashcan with the bike but doesn’t stop to see if anything fell out. A breeze ruffles his thin hair. He looks back and sees his brother and someone else in the red Ford pickup truck about a block behind. He turns right on a one-way street going in the wrong direction. They will probably say he didn’t know what he was doing, but Billy took the turn on purpose, knowing they wouldn’t follow. He’s a genius.

Billy’s going full out when he comes to the intersection, enters against the red light, and sees the garbage truck out of the corner of his left eye.

The next thing he knows he’s on a gurney being rushed down a brightly lit corridor. Jerry, or someone who looks like Jerry, is speaking to him. He no longer trusts anyone to be in the right body.

“You were in an accident,” Jerry or Jerry’s look-a-like says. His eyes are hooded. “You’re going to be all right. Surgery.”
“Don’t let them cremate me.” Jerry doesn’t seem to hear so Billy says it again, adding, “No fucking ashes.”

Billy is rushed through a door, which clicks shut behind him. Inside he is trapped under lights so bright that they hurt his eyes. They are going to interrogate him. They ask his name and if he knows where he is, but Billy refuses to answer. There are three, maybe four of them. They speak some language Billy doesn’t understand. It’s more buzz than words. They stick needles into him. The ceiling moves closer, and the walls press in. Sweat drips into his eyes. Billy smells something sharp. It pricks his nose. His belly hurts, and he smells gingerbread.

Someone wearing a white mask leans over him. His eyes are muddy brown. He presses something rubbery over Billy’s mouth and nose, and Billy thinks of the spider’s web. He tries to scream, but the rubbery thing pushes spider’s eggs down his throat and into his nostrils. He drowns in spider eggs.

The man in the white mask leans in very close. A loose string from his dirty woolen hat slaps Billy’s forehead.

Two days later, the doctor tells Billy, “You’ve had surgery for a large hole in your intestines. You were in an accident, but nothing was broken except the motorcycle. Ha ha. It’s a miracle.” The doctor says the internal bleeding from the ulcer was life threatening. Billy’s been treated before for bleeding ulcers. “This time, a section of your intestines had to be removed,” the doctor says. “You will die if you don’t stop drinking.”

Billy stays in the hospital for five more days. He’s fed Valium and fluids in an IV until the gnawing in his gut, the crawling of his skin, the shivering, the nausea, and the weakness stop. When it’s time for him to return home, a nurse wheels him to his brother’s car. His legs wobble when he stands.

“No more drinking,” his brother says as he steers the car away from the hospital. “Please, Billy. You’re killing yourself.”

“No more,” Billy says.

“I’ll take you to AA.”

“I’m not going anywhere with a bunch of losers. I haven’t had a drink in days. I’m not a drunk.”

At home the refrigerator has been stocked with milk and homemade chicken noodle soup. From the window, Billy watches his brother’s car move down the street. He looks around for empty booze bottles that he can rinse with water to get a taste, just a taste, but the apartment has been cleaned and the trash emptied. The newspaper with Joyce’s marriage announcement sticks out of a worn copy of Leaves of Grass on the nightstand next to the bed. Billy checks the newspaper as he has done every day, hoping it will change. It reads the same. Mrs. Baker’s new husband owns a furniture store. She’s moving up in the world, but no one will ever love her like he
Billy’s belly growls. He knows Grandpa Bill is dead and Joyce is married. That knowledge rushes through his veins and eats at his stomach. It points its clawed finger at his heart and carves out the word “dead.” For a moment, Billy wonders if he’s the one who’s dead, if he’s haunting Grandpa Bill. He even hopes it. He wishes he could keep his promise to his brother, but why? What would be so bad about dying? He checks the newspaper again. Joyce is still married. When he was nineteen and his heart was broken by a girl for the first time, Grandpa Bill gave him his first taste of booze. He watches the clock for the next five minutes to make sure his brother isn’t coming back. Then he leaves his apartment and heads to the Paper City Package Store. You can’t get dead fast enough.
AGUACATE, 1954

CHANCE CASTRO

She said:

We followed work to this state when I was nine years old. My father was always in the sun so he wore a straw hat, but it didn’t matter. His skin was like those aguacates, especially after years of drinking away the back pain. I remember how he would hold me. And tell me that he didn’t love me. Que yo era una guerita y no podía ser su hija. He would grip me like the avocado. With unwanted skin and often bruised. Yo no te quiero, he would say with each swipe. No eres mio, y yo no te quiero.
JACOB
JACK READY
oil
24" x 36"
I SPY
MAX WESTERMAN
photography
MISSION STREET

CELIA SCHAEFER

photography
WYOMING

CASEY CLIFFORD

mixed media
3.3ft x 3.7ft
AND THEN YOU TAKE IT AWAY FROM HIM

AMBER NELSON

To make a man believe in a pagan god, you must give him a motorcycle, and for Lord’s sake not a Harley. That will make him an Episcopalian, which will accomplish nothing. You must give him a cafe racer and tell him that the Great Tentacled Monster of Hope will come after him if he does not drive it through Joshua Tree by tomorrow. (Note: you will carry a staff when you tell him this, and you will just have placed an order for ten thousand ice picks, which will save his father’s hardware store). He will believe this because hope is outshined by only coffee as the most treacherous enslaver of humanity, and because this is Texas in July. You will put just enough gas in the tank for him to clear Fort Hood, a few yards past the diner where a girl sits drinking a milkshake and smoking a cigarette at the same time. (She is an actress. You will pay her to do this. I did not say this would be inexpensive). She must be fluent in every language except humility—even sorrow, even grace, even French. And she’d better have black hair. She will be stranded and fitful and make him feel needed; he will fall in love instantly and run two miles down the road for gasoline and take her with him. He will drive through the night, skirting the Mexican border while she drowses on his shoulder, and he will be thinking the whole time that to be alive and in love in this part of the country is as achingly rare as planets are in the universe. (He doesn’t know about Kepler 186f.) By mid-morning they’ll be in Arizona, and she will want to rest, really rest, but he will be scared of the Great Tentacled Monster of Hope and wonder if they’ll make it in time. He can’t just leave her there. So he will relent, and they will sneak into a movie theatre and sleep in the back row. When he wakes he will be so much in love with her that he has to tell her, because you don’t just throw a girl on the back of a motorcycle that isn’t yours and drive across the desert unless you are in love—or part of a drug cartel. She won’t say it back, and they’ll drive on still, into Death Valley where she is deeply sunburned (she turns the same color, he will never find out, when making love), into Palmdale with its alphabet
streets, and it will be growing dark. They will stop in Mojave at the roadhouse with old Hot Wheels on the ceiling, and she will cry and say he promised her more than this, “tu n’aimes pas vraiment moi” and leave in a storm of eyeliner. A car will be waiting outside to take her away. He will look for her and will not find her and in his heartbreak unintentionally veer into oncoming traffic and be thrown from his motorcycle. When he wakes up in the hospital some hours later with an amputated left leg, you will be there with your staff and say it’s been three days. You will say that you don’t need the ice picks anymore; it is now summer in your country.

That is how you make a man believe in a pagan god, and then take it away from him.
You know the owner of the Pour House? Hispanic bar that smells like lemon bleach? Turns out she’s Chantico, goddess of the firebox. She told me after tarantula shots. We split an order of Devil’s Toothpicks and swapped stories on how we washed up in Lubbock. She created paprika and was zapped into a dog by fertility gods, so she roamed the border for centuries but grew tired of kidnappings and so a coyote shaped her into a lady. She lit a cigarette with her tongue. I admitted to never preventing wildfires back east, and as the night grew on a fight broke out over Golden Tee. She escorted them out and reduced them to peppercorns that scattered away like tumbleweeds.
SAPPHO AT THE BROOKFIELD ZOO

JIM DAVIS

A prayer for epiphany, then. She desires to leave Crete once & for nectar over ice while laughing at the pygmy hippo’s idea that she might forever be young & pretty & her mother will plod, cautious & heavy beside her all her life. Every night seems to leave quickly as it came, buckets by the door full of lettuces & as the prayer goes: gorge on whatever the world presents. Sappho leans over the rail, one hand holds a lemon ice, the other in her mother’s, she wonders what happens to all those ballrooms she let fly away: small at first, mambo, then smaller.
I’m on the corner of 101st and Broadway, sitting on top of two giant green backpacks, guarding the guitars and rolling a cigarette. It’s the end of April, and the trees are just growing back leaves, but the sky is still gray and threatening, the parched grass is covered in dirt, fast-food wrappers, paw prints. In my torn Converse shoes, leather coat, and Box’s thrift-store bowler hat, it’s no wonder people are walking by giving me looks of pity, their judgments trailing behind them; they think I’m homeless. They think these are my sleeping bags, my guitars.

An old man with a white beard and a wrinkled corduroy suit stops in front of me and says, with all sincerity, “You’re going to be famous one day!” He’s glowing, like he just made my week.

I look around the corner where August is buying us breakfast burritos from a cart, and then down at his sand-colored, peeling guitars. I laugh; I want to tell the man this isn’t really me—I’ve never played an instrument in my life. I am twenty-one years old and about to finish college, I have three roommates and a dog back in Milwaukee, and tomorrow I will wash my hair, slip on a pair of high heels, and take a train to New Jersey for my cousin’s wedding, where I’ll be surrounded by Louis Vuitton purses and thick aunts wearing too much lipstick, and act like a happy Russian Jew that doesn’t smoke cigarettes or spend my time with people who make money playing music on street corners.

But I don’t tell him any of this. He’s already moved on down the crowded street, and anyway, I’m too tired to say much of anything—all day long I’ve been carrying around Box’s thirty-pound backpack and sleeping bag on my shoulders while she’s helping her sister with something in Brooklyn. I don’t even know her real name, just that August, one of my closest friends, loves her enough to give up other women for longer than I have ever seen. Enough, even, to lose a room in our huge three-bedroom house in Milwaukee and a full-time job fixing bicycles—all because of a work injury, a weekend vacation in Chicago, a chance meeting with a girl
at a coffee shop. One day, he was a clean-shaven, well-mannered bike mechanic with bright blue eyes and thighs the size of watermelons, and then, suddenly, he was gone, riding freight trains all across the country, like a piece of driftwood lost in a river, unable to find a place to stick.

Before August and Box and Manhattan, I was no stranger to train hoppers. Every summer, these modern-day gypsies flood into Milwaukee, a sea of dreadlocks, homemade tattoos, patched-up overalls, tattered black or beige shirts. They sleep on the couches of local anarchists and metalheads, sneak in cans of beer to punk shows, appropriate all the patios down Center Street; they play music on the streets, dumpster-dive for food outside bakeries and Trader Joe’s, start bonfires under the Locust Street bridge. At first they are interesting; their lives seem beautiful and free, they make you wish you weren’t tied down with jobs, schools, lovers. But come September, you’re sick of them. Sick of the smell and self-importance and mediocre guitar chords, sick of tripping over the empty guitar cases littered with coins. You’re glad it’s getting cold soon, when, like the birds, they go south for winter, live in the parks of New Orleans or scatter across California, Georgia, Florida.

August is just like the rest of them now, spending most of the year in New Orleans, spitting out numbers and directions of freight trains exactly the way he used to speak about bike parts. He’s only been back to Milwaukee once, for a day. This is the first time in months we’ve been in the same state.

August gets back with the burritos. He sits down next to me, wearing textbook train-hopper attire; black jeans with patches on them, striped suspenders, and a beige shirt that is barely even a shirt anymore, it’s so thin from wear. He’s got dirt under his fingernails and sweat over his dimpled cheeks. His long, wavy hair, stretching crookedly down towards his muscular shoulders, is the color of rusted metal. We shovel the burritos into our empty stomachs, and roll two more cigarettes. People rush by, talking on cell phones, carrying briefcases, eating slices of pizza or sandwiches as they walk. I lean my head against the brick wall and exhale, letting my eyes close for a second, listening to the sounds of police sirens and conversations in various languages—Russian, French, some dialect from Southeast Asia.

Unusual transportation aside, August and Box aren’t the only people to have ever caught the traveling bug; my parents, after leaving the former Soviet Union with my sister and me in 1991, saved every penny they could for their biannual trips around the world, and I’ve been lucky enough to go on some of them and a few on my own. But for August, it doesn’t seem to just be about travel, or even about riding trains—it’s about community, culture, a place to belong. Where you’re not judged by how much money you make or what books you’ve read, but instead, how many trains you’ve
ridden, how many instruments you play, how many swords you can juggle. Growing up poor, fatherless, and a very bad student, these are things he finally has a chance at succeeding with; once you make a discovery like that, it’s hard to let go.

When I open my eyes, August is standing up, avoiding my glance, mumbling something under his breath.

“What?” I ask him, sitting up.

He clears his throat, then tells me that he and Box have decided to leave later that evening, cutting our short time together even shorter.

“August,” I sigh. “I only came here to see you. I didn’t even want to go to this wedding. You’re just going to leave me in Manhattan by myself?”

My shoulders hurt. I’m tired. These past few hours have been the only time we have even had to ourselves since I arrived late last night, and I’ve practically had to impersonate someone else just to do it—not by merely taking a walk in their shoes, but carrying their entire outfit, all the baggage that comes along with it. If I’d ever been tempted to join August on one of his aimless travels, jumping onto a train as it starts moving, feeling the wind dancing around the steel car and hearing nothing but a roar for eight, ten hours, it has officially lost its appeal. Give me early morning classes and a stack of a resumes and pestering phone calls from my parents any day. A bed that’s made, books neatly arranged in alphabetical order, a dog sleeping on my feet.

“I’m sorry,” August says, rubbing his brow with his dirty hand. “Box’s friends said we can’t stay at their place again so we’re just heading to Philly a day early.”

“What about her sister?”

“She’s going to Philly too.”

“This is bullshit,” I say, because I know the real problem is Box, that she’s jealous of me, that she’s barely eighteen and names herself after inanimate objects.

“What is going on with you two?” I ask. The previous October, when August had come back to Milwaukee for a few days to put his stuff in storage, I’d never seen him so happy. The three of us had stayed up late every night, sitting on our rooftop, drinking tall cans of Strongbow, exchanging stories and promises to meet up again soon.

August lowers his eyes. He looks tired too. “I don’t know.”

“How long are you going to keep this up?” I ask. I want to say, You’re just afraid of growing up. I want to say, this is dangerous, once you slip through the cracks you’ll never get out again.

“We’re going to stay at her parents’ house for a while. Then...maybe I’ll come back to Milwaukee,” he says, but it’s obvious he doesn’t believe it. I roll my eyes and stand up. I can almost feel whatever’s made us close all these years—youth, music, freedom from responsibility—starting to
drift away, like we’re on two boats sailing in opposite directions. I want to pull him back toward me, but instead I drape my own large canvas purse around my arm, then pull up Box’s giant backpack, dropping slightly with the weight of her world back on my shoulders. It may be freeing to live with all your possessions on your back, but it sure is heavy.

We get back on the train to meet Box on the Lower East Side, barely saying a word for the entire ride. When we see her, just outside the train stop, I immediately drop her luggage on the ground and she puts it on like it weighs nothing, like it’s just a part of her outfit. “Thanks,” she mumbles, and we start walking, looking for a place to sit and have coffee before they have to leave.

A few minutes later, we find a small Lebanese restaurant with leopard-print booths, apple wallpaper, and large gold frames holding black-and-white photos of famous American actresses. It smells like jasmine incense and tahini. There’s hardly any room in the booth because of all the gear. Their guitars lie on the floor next to our feet, and both of the large bags sit on the empty seat next to mine, like another person. Box is wearing an army jacket, green tights, an old black bandana covered in pins, and looks like she’s about to cry. Her brown bangs hang over her dark eyes, her thin lips are stuck in a pout; she covers a large mole on her chin with her hand and stares at the table.

“What is wrong with you today?” I ask, because I know that this attitude is not really directed at me, that I’m just the catalyst for whatever’s been going wrong lately. Somewhere, I feel like we are still friends.

“I’m just tired,” she says, looking down at the table. When the waitress comes she orders a hot chocolate, and it reminds me of how young Box really is. If she hadn’t dropped out, she’d still be in high school.

August throws a short, pitiful glance in her direction. Then, he and I, rejuvenated by coffee, start talking about our old house—the revolving door of roommates, the smell of Milwaukee in summer, all the bonfires under the bridge that he’s missed.

“It’s not the same without you,” I say. “Nichali went to Istanbul to teach English. Jenny’s friend, Shannon, took your room and painted it yellow. She collects fingernails for art projects. Once I came home and she was stripping the fur off of a rabbit in our bathtub.”

“How is that art?” he asks.

“I guess that’s what they’re teaching kids in school now. Shannon told me that if it’s beautiful, it’s not art. I think that’s when I knew we wouldn’t be friends.”

“As if there’s not enough ugliness in the world. Now art has to be too?”

I sigh. “That’s exactly what I said.”

August pays the bill, with money he still has from a large workman’s
compensation check the shop gave him, the whole reason he left town in the first place. Somehow he’d caught his finger in a moving bike chain while cleaning it. He’s still missing a small piece of his finger and the entire nail. He also still hasn’t taken his bike from our house—it was his own that he was working on when the accident happened—and I’d been using it ever since. It was starting to feel like it was my polka-dot bike.

We walk towards the train station. It’s starting to get dark out. The sidewalks are wet, but I don’t even know when it rained.

“That hat looks great on you,” August tells me, again, reaching out to fix the felt lining and fake flower petals of Box’s hat. For a moment he looks happy, young, innocent, like the old August. The one I used to go on long bike rides with, carrying bottles of wine and plastic cups in our backpacks, sitting on the rocks by the lake. The one who used to lie on our couch playing the guitar and singing off-key Bob Dylan songs when I got home at night.

“Most hats look good on me,” I say, smiling. “I’m very adaptable.”

We stop at a little shop so I can use the ATM, and as I walk inside, August and Box start talking to some kids on the sidewalk with the same tattered clothes and homemade tattoos as them. These people can spot each other—like retired soldiers or cancer survivors, but they haven’t been through anything, except maybe jail.

When I come out of the shop—which actually turns out to be a Jewish deli, manned by a very attractive Israeli who ends up asking me out for dinner—August and Box are alone again, sitting on their mounds of gear.

“Ugh, did you see all those marks between his fingers? He could barely keep his eyes open,” Box is saying about the train hoppers they’d met. Even their subculture has ranks.

“Yeah, that’s so gross.” August shakes his head. “Junkies.”

We walk to the nearest train stop. August gives me a long, earnest hug. He smells like cloves and weeks of sweat. People bump into us as they walk, as if we aren’t even there.

“What happened in that store?” he asks, as we step out of the embrace. “You were in there for a long time.”

“Oh. I have a date,” I say. “Only in New York...”

“That’s awesome,” he says, sounding less guilty now, looking down at the ground and turning his back to Box, and even though he’s standing right in front of me for the first time in almost a year, it’s like someone else is there, wearing his face. “A real date?”

“Yeah. Maybe I’m getting old,” I say. “I don’t even think I’ve ever been on a real date before. Do people really have those?”

“Let me guess, he’s a musician,” August laughs.

“Actually, he’s not! He’s foreign,” I say. “Israeli.”
“Wow. Your parents will love that,” he says. “I probably won’t tell them. They think I’m still hanging out with you tonight.”

“Oh,” he says, then looks back at Box, nervously. “Actually, they probably have no idea what I’m doing,” I say. “I don’t think they really want to know anymore.”

August shrugs, looking back at Box again. “Why not? It’s not like you ever do anything that bad.”

“Bad is pretty relative,” I say. “This whole day would probably look like their worst nightmare. They don’t even know I smoke.”

“Seriously?”

I shrug. “Anyway, I can see you’re really anxious. Just go.”

“Bye, Zhanna,” August says, giving me another short hug and turning around. Even though he’s smiling, I can tell that it isn’t real, that there’s something quite tragic underneath it all. For the years we were friends, August was like a little brother to me. I know that he’s going to spend the night in the train yards drinking Pabst and making up with Box, promising her she has nothing to worry about, that he’ll take care of her, that whatever they’ve been fighting about lately doesn’t matter, that really, nothing matters except the two of them, together. But maybe that’s the best you can hope for when you truly live every day as if it’s your last—a home without a house, someone you don’t have to share. Or, maybe they’re just having fun, being in the moment, and that’s no longer enough for me.

Maybe I really am getting old.

Suddenly a very cold breeze travels up through my torn jeans, through my flimsy leather coat. I feel the rumble of the train below making the ground shake. Even though I really don’t want to—I’ve never in my life grown so attached to a piece of clothing—I give Box her hat back. I even offer to buy it from her, but she’s quite adamant about keeping it.

“Maybe I’ll send it to you down the road,” she says, and because I don’t yet recognize the futility of holding onto things that were never yours to begin with, I believe her. She puts the hat on over her matted greasy hair and smiles, finally, like she’s herself again. I start walking away, wrapping my arms around myself for warmth, when August calls out my name.

“Yeah?” I ask.

“Take care. I’ll see you soon,” he says, and somehow, I believe him too.
Sabrina Barreto is a Bay Area wordsmith and graduating English major at Santa Clara University. She received the University’s Shipsey Poetry Prize in 2012, the Academy of American Poets Tamara Verga Prize in 2014, and two statewide Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prizes from U.C. Berkeley in 2013 and 2014. Her forthcoming work appears in explore Journal and The Bohemian. This suite of French microfictions was composed in Philip Kobylarz’s fiction class.

Devin Bratset is a photographer and artist from the Bay Area. A senior at Santa Clara University, he works with multiple mediums including spray paint, ink, and acrylic. His work is distinguished by its lack of digital alternation, as he believes in keeping his photographs as authentic as possible.

Kara Mae Brown is a writer and writing instructor located in Boston. She graduated from Emerson College with an M.F.A in Creative Nonfiction. Her work has appeared in Bluestem Review, Flint Hills Review, Word Riot, and Summerset Review. She’s the winner of the Flint Hills Review Nonfiction Prize and the Emerson College Creative Nonfiction Award. Follow her on Twitter @kmaebrown.

Chance Castro is a former poetry editor of Ghost Town Literary Magazine. His work is published or forthcoming in RHINO, Tin Cannon, The Chaffey Review, and elsewhere. He is the founding poetry editor for The Great American Lit Mag.

Casey Clifford is a junior art minor at Santa Clara University. She created “Wyoming” because of her love of the Teton mountains in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where she used to ski with her family.

Joseph Cotter I was raised in St. Louis, where I learned that people are cool and terrible. I enjoy writing little stories, playing pianos, drawing pictures, and the sensation of falling.

Jim Davis is pursuing a Master’s degree at Harvard University, and has previously studied at Northwestern University and Knox College. He edits North Chicago Review and reads for TriQuarterly. His work has appeared in Seneca Review, Sugar House Review, Midwest Quarterly, and California Journal of Poetics, among others. In addition to the arts, Jim is an international semi-professional American football player.
Professor **Don Fritz** received his BFA from UC Santa Cruz in 1976, and his MFA from UC Davis in 1978. Don has been teaching full time at Santa Clara University since 2004 and was added to the tenure stream faculty in 2007. Recently he was awarded the Artist Laureate award by the Silicon Valley Arts council for 2013.

**Natalie Homer** is a cranky librarian from Southeastern Idaho. She enjoys rainy days, cats, and catching up to the person who cut her off in traffic. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Roanoke Review*, *The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review*, and *Epigraph Magazine*.

**Elias Ishibashi** is an enigmatic artist, writer, and musician from the Bay Area whose 8th grade teacher once described him as inquisitive, ingenious, and tenacious. He art deals with themes of isolation, ritual, and folklore. Elias studied at SCU and might have graduated.

**Sarah Katharina Kayß** is winner of the manuscript-award of the German Writers Association for her poetry and essay collection *Ich mag die Welt, so wie sie ist* (Allitera: Munich 2014) and works on her doctorate in military sociology at King’s College London. Her artwork, essays and poetry have appeared in literary magazines, journals and anthologies in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the United Kingdom, Italy, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. www.SarahKatharinaKayss.com

**Noah Klein** is a Pushcart nominated poet & writer whose primary focus is self-discovery and community engagement through writing. Recent publication(s) include the *Poets’ America Anthology*—Hidden Clearing Books, LLC, 2014—whereby he acted in the dual capacity of editor and contributor. Publication(s) forthcoming in *The Missing Slate*. He is currently writing his first novel. Contact at Knoah15@yahoo.com.

**Jeffrey H. MacLachlan** also has recent or forthcoming work in *Metonym*, *Clay Bird Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, among others. He teaches literature at Georgia College & State University. He can be followed on Twitter @jeffmack.

**Edy Madsen** was born in Seoul Korea and is a graduate of Kyunghee University. Now an American citizen, she works at the Bon Appetit at Santa Clara University. A lover of nature, her many paintings are of landscapes from around the world. Several have been published in the *Santa Clara Review*. 
Carolann Neilon Malley is a freelance journalist, fiction writer, and poet. Her fiction awards include: Editor’s Choice from Shaye Arehart, Faulkner Wisdom finalist for a novel-in-progress, Faulkner Wisdom short story finalist, Carrie McCray Literary Award, and the Historical Novel Society’s short story award. Her fiction has been published in *The MacGuffin, Sojourner, T-Zero, Peregrine, and Black Magnolias Literary Journal*.

Chris Muravez is a poet from Eugene, Oregon. He served a combined 10 years in the U.S. military. He is completing his undergraduate studies at Sierra Nevada College, and was recently accepted into University of Notre Dame’s Creative Writing M.F.A. program. His poetry is continually trying to see the world in new ways.

Amber Nelson I’m a senior English major from Orange County. My great dream is to teach English at a university. My favorite pastimes include surfing, singing, writing, petting strangers’ dogs, and getting lost.

Born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan, Marlene Olin recently completed her first novel. Her short stories have been featured or are forthcoming in publications such as *Emrys Journal, Upstreet Magazine, Steam Ticket, Crack the Spine, Poetica, The Broken Plate*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* online. She is a contributing editor at *Arcadia* magazine.

Joshua Osto is the editor of *The Red Line*. His is published in *Birkensnake, Prole, The Canary Press, and Glassfire*. Before fifteen years in financial institutions, Josh obtained an M.A. in English Literary Research from Lancaster University. He’s worked in Seoul, Beijing, Rio, Boston, and Zurich, but now lives in London, where he has a vague idea what’s going on.

Andrew Purchin is a painter and interdisciplinary artist living and working in Santa Cruz, California. In his work he mirrors the complexities of life; hiding within hiding, layers and systems of relationships and the ever present question of when to speak and when to withhold. Purchin often creates in public and collaborates with others, making sanctuaries in which creativity flourishes. [www.andrewpurchin.com](http://www.andrewpurchin.com)

Susanna Raj is a junior majoring in psychology and minoring in studio art at SCU. Finding grace in life through painting and photography are her passions. Trying to capture the essence of a moment, an emotion, a way of life, a state of mind are some of the challenges that she likes to tackle through the medium of art.
Jack Ready is from San Diego and has been painting his whole life. Recently he has been working with oil paints to capture the emotions and personalities of his closest friends.

Celia Schaefer is currently a junior at Santa Clara University double majoring in art history & studio art. She plans on continuing her art education through design upon graduation. Her main focus within the arts is painting, however her interests in photography are growing.

Mohsin Shafi is an interdisciplinary artist living and working in Lahore, Pakistan. Shafi's work investigates the blurred edges between identity and the intentions of identity. His visuals create the fantasies of dream and phantasmagoria. Through his works he probes the small spaces between lucidity and madness, intimacy and alienation, desire and ambivalence, the living and the absent. www.mohsinshafi.com

Zhanna Slor was born in the former Soviet Union and moved to Milwaukee with her family in the early 1990s. Currently, she lives with her husband in Chicago, where she is finishing up a young adult novel about Ukrainian-born twins with unusual superpowers. She has been published in numerous literary magazines, including Bellevue Literary Review, StorySouth, and Michigan Quarterly Review.

Ashley Warren I am a poet originally from Minnesota and currently live in Long Beach, CA. My poems have appeared in several online and print journals including Hiram Poetry Review, Red River Review, Old Red Kimono, Convergence Magazine, Roanoke Review, and Sparkle + Blink.

Max Westerman is a senior communications major, English minor. Max became interested in photography summer of his sophomore year after working as a photo taker at the summer camp where he worked. He has been taking photos ever since and currently works for The Santa Clara, The Redwood, The Ignatian Center, and The Clara as a photographer for each.

Jacqueline Williams is from Los Angeles, but was born and raised in Annapolis, Maryland. She’s studying communications at Santa Clara University. She is the author of three unpublished novels, the ECHO Trilogy, and is currently working on another set of three novels. She is well known for her strange story ideas. In her free time, she enjoys overanalyzing children’s media.
J. Ladd Zorn, Jr. is a much-traveled freelancer—he writes for free—whose stories have appeared in Phantom Seeds, Inlandia, The Speculative Edge, Down in the Dirt, Hello Horror, Nth Position, Floyd County Moonshine, and Eclectica. He’s trying not to be so ironic all the time, but the world won’t cooperate.
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