

Dead or Less Himself: A Novel

by
Devin Curtis

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

University Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Scholar)

Presented May 20, 2016
Commencement June 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Devin Curtis for the degree of Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English presented on May 20, 2016. Title: Dead or Less Himself: A Novel.

Abstract approved:

Gilad Elbom

Dead or Less Himself is a novel concerning creative impotence and the ways in which people become repressed and stagnate through expectation, isolation, and over-analyzing. The novel takes place across high school to chart the ways the characters change or refuse to change as they “grow up.” The novel is intended to be above all else an emotional, not necessarily rational, experience.

The novel has been edited extensively. However it is far from a finished state. In conversation with peers and instructors it was found that various characters and dramas need to be expanded upon and or realized.

Key Words: Fiction, Meta-Fiction, Novel, Creative

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APPROVED:

Gilad Elbom, Mentor, representing The School of Writing, Literature, and Film

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Devin Curtis, Author

INTRODUCTION

It is my intent in the following pages to set down my philosophy and intent in writing *Dead or Less Himself*. I will compare my work to exemplary works of fiction that I have drawn inspiration from and in doing so I will also cover some of the techniques I employ. Finally I will comment on the current state of the novel, where I think I have succeeded and where I think I have failed as well as my plans to revise. I do not intend to perform a reading of my own work or explain specific choices in the text.

From the outset *Dead or Less Himself* was intended to be a very personal project. Much like my protagonist I had never written anything based on my own experiences and feelings up until this point. I had written mostly in fantastic settings based on historical moments with characters who may have some of me in them but ultimately have lives very different from mine. I don't think there is anything wrong with that mode of writing. It can work brilliantly just as it can be incredibly banal. However, I believe as I began reading more literary fiction I began to grow disillusioned with my writing which I perceived as having little to do with me or my world. As I worked on revising my previous project I came to the conclusion that it no longer represented my literary vision.

My purpose, as I've come to see it, with *Dead* is to convey my experience. And maybe it's as simply as that. I am also trying to, through my own experience, touch what I believe many people in my generation feel. There is a certain disconnect, a certain loss of reality or at the very least felt reality that I see in myself and those around me. There is also a self-conscious helplessness surrounded by apathy that is

the very core of everything I hate about myself and what I see of the world I live in. Of course I didn't think these things precisely as I was writing the book. As Gilbert Sorrentino says, "A writer discovers what he knows as he knows it." Whether or not my book is about any of these things or says anything meaningful about them is not for me to decide, so I don't want to linger on this point.

A secondary purpose has been to allow myself a freer space to play with language. Before *Dead* I'd nearly always been conservative in my use of language. It was not experimental or playful or self-sufficient (lyrical or otherwise language for the sake of language). The summer before I entered college I wrote a series of short stories in which the whole point was to be experimental. I found I liked this approach to writing much more than the formal, realist style I'd been writing in before which is another large reason I ended up abandoning that project. I structured *Dead* in such a way that I would have little restriction in my use of language, and then went even further than I intended originally. Perhaps this makes *Dead* an even more selfish work, but I myself love works in which I can see the author having fun and I hope that comes through.

Now I would like to talk about the works I draw inspiration from. I'm using the term inspiration loosely as I'd only read about half of the following works before I'd begun writing. Though you have no right to believe me *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino does just happen to mirror the structure of my novel. I think Dr. Elbom had mentioned the novel to me before I began writing *Dead*, but I did not read it until I had completed most of the first draft. With that in mind, *Traveler's* project is ultimately dissimilar in many ways from my own work. Calvino's work is

mythic in scope, as it tries to come to terms with every possible way literature can be created, appreciated, and interpreted by readers, as well as how it can change people and their relationships to each other. It's an amazing book, but more than anything in relation to my work it confirms that I'm not completely insane for structuring and styling *Dead* the way I did.

The true progenitor of my desire to develop a character along with said character's literary output is my reading of *Mulligan Stew* by Gilbert Sorrentino. That novel is composed almost entirely of the literary creations of its main character. *Mulligan Stew* is a rare novel I think because it blends a stylistic and structural inventiveness with a deep investigation of its characters (a point I will return to later). *Mulligan Stew* works on a page to page basis on its linguistic playfulness and unrelenting self-indulgences. It expects a lot from its readers or perhaps more accurately doesn't care if its readers are able to follow everything. This was refreshing for me because as a writer there is a pressure to make things easy to absorb for your reader, which I don't believe should always be the job of the author. Reading should be a process of discovery in which connections are still being made on second, third, and so on read throughs of a book. I'm not sure I'm there yet with my own work in the way that Sorrentino, Joyce, and others are, but that is my goal. *Mulligan Stew* also convinced me that a book about the creative process could work and probably should work by showing not only the artist but their works in question. Whereas a lot of other stories about artists of all kinds focus on the artist's life, *Mulligan Stew* swings heavily in the other direction. In so doing, the reader is forced to extrapolate from only the often hilariously overwritten chapters of the protagonist's

novel what the protagonist is thinking about, angry about, obsessing over, etc. Again, I don't think *Dead* in its current state is a sterling example of this technique, but it's what I had in mind when writing. *Mulligan Stew* is also not without its problems. It is at times too much. The many descriptions of garter straps, panties, bras and the like can be grating, even if that is what Sorrentino intended. It can get exhausting to read, especially because there are a certain number of sections that do not seem to reflect on the protagonist's psyche or develop the text in any meaningful direction. On the other hand there is a charm in beautiful nonsense. It is delightful to read a trippy parody of a graduate level mathematics research paper even if I'm not sure how it really fits into the grander "stew" beyond checking off the academic writing parody box. As a self contained piece it works, so I wouldn't cut it. And as Sorrentino has said, "I like to take disparate parts and put them all together and see what happens. I believe the old saw that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Of course, it may also be less. But it's the parts that interest me; it's not the whole." Sorrentino is clearly OK with failing if he succeeds at least most of the time, and on those terms *Mulligan Stew* is a success. What I take from this way of thinking is how a sentence, paragraph, page, etc can be aesthetically significant without having to be strictly necessary. After all the most striking thing about *Mulligan Stew* in my opinion is not its characters or themes or even structure but its celebration of language (which its characters, themes, and structure all support).

Jonathan Lethem's *Lucky Alan: And Other Stories* and Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim* graphic novel series are significant for me in that they are examples of texts that tell somewhat standard tales which utilize unique styles of presentation in

order to manipulate tone and ultimately alter the way they are viewed as constructs. *Scott Pilgrim* creates a unique voice through its visual style, dry witty dialogue, and manipulation of cultural and sub-cultural touchstones. While probably not conscious this creates a work that plays to a certain audience and that builds off of genre awareness, expectations, and obscure knowledge. We live in a time when everyone is to some extent a bit of a Stephen Dedalus — everyone has pockets of obscure useless information rattling around their heads. *Scott Pilgrim* stands out in this area because it combines this cultural and generic synthesis with a highly populated world replete with interesting, unique characters. *Lucky Alan* works similarly in that Lethem often writes his stories from the perspective of rather than references the reality of his cultural object. For example in “Their Back Pages” Lethem populates an island with what you come to discover are comic characters whose strips or books have been discontinued. Lethem’s greatest gift is his ability to match or appropriately mismatch style and tone with content. “Their Back Pages” works because you would never expect to read a story about comic book characters written in fragmented, elusive diary entries. “The Dreaming Jaw, The Salivating Ear” works because it obfuscates what is in reality just an insecure person being bullied by an internet troll within highly internalized, lush, impressionistic prose. I’ve tried and often failed at emulating this aspect of Lethem’s writing. This book did a lot to open up what seems to me to have been an insatiable need to morph stylistically in scene to scene. On another note writers like Lethem (others being Michael Chabon, and Dr. Elbom’s own *Scream Queens of the Dead Sea*, and to a somewhat lesser extent artists like O’Malley and filmmakers like Sion Sono) are engaged to varying degrees in bridging

the gap between what anthropologist Robert Redfield calls the “little tradition” and the “great tradition”. In this context these are the common man’s art forms often seen as low-brow, and the elite high-brow art of the upperclass. Whether comic books or heavy metal we see the validity of these art forms both implicitly in their being heavily valued in literature (now seen as high-art), and in how they are made explicitly psychologically, aesthetically, or otherwise significant in the text. This is an idea I’ve been interested in for a long time without having a name to put to the idea. I foresee the aspects of my own novel that attempt this crossing (roleplaying and hip-hop) becoming stronger as I revise.

I will conclude this section with a look at a few very personal narratives. The first *A Dark Night’s Passing* by Naoya Shiga was written in 1920’s Japan. *Passing* surprised me with its similarity to my own work. It is a clearly very personal story despite many dramatic differences between Shiga’s life and his narrator’s. It is essentially a book length expose into Shiga’s insecurities and formative experiences that despite the century and hemisphere between us felt close to my own. Where we differ is in Shiga’s extreme solemnity. His prose is clean and restrained (though apparently very lyrical in the original Japanese) throughout, and there are no moments of levity or humor. Tao Lin’s *Taipei* on the other hand runs with the same essential tale of being adrift but brings it forward to the modern day, wrapping it in drugs and the fast-paced-meaninglessness of today’s city life. Lin is a dry, sarcastic wit, finding the absurdity in everyday things and conversations. I would also place Louis C.K.’s TV series *Louie* in the same category. An average episode intercuts bits of his stand-up routine with often absurdist portrayals of small moments in his life.

All of these texts dive deeply into the experience of their protagonists. In these sense they are truly immersive. Not in the sense that there are not moments that take readers out of the experience (they all do this, as anything worth its salt does), but in the sense that they trap the reader in the minutia, the day to day, where real life is found. They are not only catalogues or simple recordings though in my opinion. They each offer a structure, if sometimes hard to find.

I can't go on about my influences forever, but I should mention I am indebted to Willa Cather, in particular her story "Coming, Aphrodite!" for the inspiration for the characters Karl and Emily. Though I recently went back and reread "Coming, Aphrodite" and found that Don and Eden Bower are not as similar to my characters as I'd remembered.

Looking at *Dead* now and thinking back to my conversations about the book with Dr. Elbom and others I can immediately see the problems with it. It is a scattered book. I certainly intended a great deal of scatteredness, and believe it or not I have reined it in some since its initial version, but it is perhaps still too scattered for its own good. Both Ezekiel and Timothy are characters with potential to become complex counterpoints to the protagonist but they are treated too lightly. Ezekiel is abandoned in chapter four and we hear nothing of him for the remainder of the book. Timothy on the other hand seems to come and go as he is needed and for that reason his character arc is lost. It's pretty clear to me that there were certain sections I was intently focused on Timothy, but most of the time I let him fade into the background. I think further linking of the text on the level of linguistic motif will further help to bring unity to certain scenes that may seem lacking in purpose.

Dr. Elbom's main concern with the novel throughout has been its strict adherence to the main character and his reclusive tendencies. He argues that it is because of this that there are no complex relationships. I agree that this is an area that requires work, and I agree with him that it is the most difficult part of writing. I do think that the germs for these are there in the current draft. As I continue to revise the novel, I'm going to force myself to work on this aspect of the novel. I do think that the novel is in a decent state for being a work in process because as I think back to everything I've read I am hard pressed to think of many works that portray multiple characters in a deep, satisfying manner. Most books I think sacrifice a deep psychological probe in order to have a fast moving plot and large cast of characters, or are forced to go the other way with things like I or authors like Tao Lin have. The authors that manage to have it all are rare (Joyce, Sorrentino, Soseki) and are not even able to manage it successfully in all of their works (these three authors early works are unsuccessful in this respect). I do not want to make that sacrifice with *Dead*, so my revisions going forward will be a learning process for me.

Another area I would like to focus on is setting. Some authors are able to turn their settings into more than just a place. They take on a character of their own, and you can imagine living there. Joyce does this to the extreme with Dublin. Many authors have managed it with different parts of New York. Cather does it with Nebraska. It's not vital to me that I manage it with the same proficiency as these writers, but I think it would be a feat if I could make a crappy little suburb have even half the impact as Joyce's Dublin has.

Right now I'm not sure how much longer I will spend on *Dead*. It could be a year, or it could be longer. I wrote a lot of *Dead* intuitively, simply following my emotions and instincts, and I think that has a lot to do with where I am as a writer. As Dr. Elbom loves to remind me, most authors are not published until they are in their 40's. And I think the choices I've made in my novel reflect my maturity level as a person, but also as a writer. I'm still getting there. I think F. Scott Fitzgerald sums up what I'm trying to say well in a letter to his daughter:

You've got to sell your heart, your strongest reactions, not the little minor things that only touch you lightly, the little experiences that you might tell at dinner. This is especially true when you begin to write, when you have not yet developed the tricks of interesting people on paper, when you have none of the technique which it takes time to learn. When, in short, you have only your emotions to sell.

I'm still learning, as I will be in five, ten, or thirty years. So I think it's important for me to remember that *Dead* is only the next step in a long road for me. It's been said that writers never finish novels but that they only abandon them. I have no current plans to abandon *Dead*, and in fact have many notes for new scenes and revisions both small and large that I haven't had time to implement yet, but I do know that at some point I will have to be content with it. I know that when I do move on I'll have learned a great deal.

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Chapter 1

“At that time I eagerly absorbed everything I read without a thought of authorship, and even now I cannot be quite sure of the boundary between my ideas and those I find in books.”

— Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*

Below, to the left, the Columbia stretched out far into time and space, behind which was home, and to the right, a smorgasbord of rickety iron riveted park rides dotted the arid landscape of Washington State. From atop the motionless ferris wheel, fair goers looked small and meaningless like the motley crew of multi-generational plastic action figures who came from far and wide to sit, to this day, underneath my bed accruing dust and telling themselves tales of the glory days to pass the time, but the landscape — the rushing water, drowned out by the sound of the perpendicular highway, and the sandy bank it ran through were full of life. Why has the river gotten dirtier? Isn't civilization at its peak? Isn't that the whole point of me being suspended in this pink saucer? I tried not to let my thoughts — dull like the pathetically plastic wails of the fairgrounds below me break the moment. I have to admit that although I had never been awed by the majesty of a river quite like this before, that it remained an imperfect moment. I find my life is full of these moments.

Six summer's previous, when I was ten my grandmother took me to the Sandy River. The sun was out, sending its blistering rays, its advertisements. I was a plaything of both my grandmother and the sun, so even if I'd rather have stayed home, I went. She took me through a little path through the forest to a secluded

portion of the river. I decided that I was going to show off my new skills I'd developed on the swim team, so I pushed past my grandmother and took the lead. The forest, a maze seemingly created by a manic dungeon master or perhaps Daedalus himself, the ultimate dungeon master, abruptly gave way to a coarse, rocky beach. It made me wonder who'd named it the Sandy. We lay our towels out in the sun to bake in preparation for the chill of the water.

In the middle of the river stood a grassy outcropping suggestive of an island because of the way the water broke around it, almost as if the water would become impure if it was to touch it. I told my grandmother that I wanted to swim out to it. She warned that the current was quick and ceaseless, and that it would be dangerous to go out too far. This meant don't try. I watched the surface of the water cascade by in a lazy manner and decided that since I had been on the swim team a whole year that the waters would be obsequious enough. Nothing can prepare a warm body for the shock of ice cold water to the system. Lungs shrivel, whimpering diminutively and shrinking as if under heavy artillery while the heart spasms erratically, a dying bird's last fruitless flaps. Still, despite the chest cavity collapsing chill that had settled over me, I felt a beauty in that place in the way that the water flowed so effortlessly across every inch of my body, passing through me as smoke rising up to the firmament. Out in the middle of the river I lifted my head and watched as my target, the isle, slipped away. Panicking, I adjusted my hands and kicked my body into high gear. My grandmother yelled desperately at me to swim to the side through the bubbling divide. What about the island? Wasn't I going to reach for it? I gasped a warm breath of air and dunked my head just under the surface while my arms and legs cycled uselessly

against the arms of nature. The island bent before the wind and I knew then that there was no island. “To the side, now!” she yelled. I quickly followed her rule, forcing my shallow lungs to hold out the whole sally back to the side, whereupon I clambered out over bulbous rock formations that battered my knees and hands as I scrambled to stand. I waded through two inch deep water, acutely aware of the still present pressure of the current between my toes, waddling in defeat up to my grandmother who wrapped me in a sun-dried towel while I shivered.

Later that day I’d peeked from the top of the stairs as my grandmother talked to my parents in the doorway. No doubt about what. They never said anything about it to me after that, nor I to them, but I know they knew. They never talked about any of the drownings in the newspaper either. They never said they were worried. They said, “Do you want a popsicle?”

“I think I wanna write a novel,” said Ezekiel, the beach featured neighborhood friend that had accompanied me to the fair.

My stomach doubled over in knots like I was stuck in the middle of that river again. Should I keep my head underwater? Images of Ezekiel whispering into Summer’s ear. My eyes watered. For the past six years I had been telling myself that I was a writer, and that one day I would be sitting on the beach and look across my shoulder to see a nice gal reading a paperback with my name on it. Maybe it’d be Summer. He’d never go through with it though would he? Ezekiel was always talking up his plans. But he’d pushed me back into that water. He’d reminded me that everything I’m not makes me everything I am. My sham of a nervous identity had been crushed carelessly, callously, certainly without intention. But that made it worse.

Ezekiel had been reading a series of young adult books written about vampires and other freaks who performed in a circus that became increasingly tangential to the plot as the series continued. He talked to me every week about the twists and the turns in the plots of these bite sized thrillers.

“So what do you think?” he asked.

“About what?” I said, trying to avoid the subject in my meekly magnanimous manner.

“My novel.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you had a novel.” The words fought their way out of my throat, past a Mt. Sinai sized lump, barely audible.

“Well I haven’t written it yet, obviously.”

“Well...what’s it about?”

“I don’t know.”

In that manner then, we were the same. Not that I hadn’t put down a good fifty thousand words or so in various novel projects of mine, but none of them had stuck. They weren’t things I would go talking about to people. I certainly wouldn’t go around revealing that I in fact had no idea what I was doing.

“I’ll probably write it over the summer mostly,” said Ezekiel. “It’s gonna have zombies in it.”

“Sounds cool,” I said as the ferris wheel began to spin again. “But you know it’s really hard to write a novel.”

“Naw,” he said, taking my feeble doubt and crushing it with the hammer of absolute nonchalance.

“No, really it is,” I say, windmilling in a vain attempt to swim against current.

“Aren’t you going to write something?” he said, catching me in a riptide. It was almost as if he’d just remembered what I’d proudly placed on every “What Do You Want to be When you Grow Up?” sheet teachers had ever passed out when they felt like they’d been dealt a shit hand by life or maybe woke up too late to grab a coffee at Starbucks.

“Yeah. I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s time yet,” I said, and I hated myself the moment I did. I’d swam to the side once again. “I want to though,” I added, the words hurrying out of my mouth.

Our container lurched to a turbulent stop and opened up to the dusty wooden stairs that lead down to the ground. A mexican man in a half buttoned up peach shirt waved us down the stairs.

“You think they’re all illegal?” he said with a thin lined smirk.

I was thankful for the change in topic, so I let him chase this one for a while with my well tuned sense of how to carry on a conversation without saying much of anything. He thankfully didn’t return to the topic for the rest of the fair.

A year after the Sandy raptured me in its fatherly touch, in the Spring of sixth grade, sitting in the High School band room, I looked over my shoulder while Mr. Mann, the gray haired Woody Allen glasses wearing teacher, stepped out for something, and I turned at a sound like a Zerg unit from *Starcraft* bursting forth from its varicose veined, mucous covered membrane of a womb to see the trumpet section, three large kids, pulling the valves of their pewter golden instruments apart and letting torrents of thick, warm spit loose on to the floor. The trumpet section chuckled

to themselves, and I turned away in disgust. I hated them. They were obnoxious, and you could never quite tell what they were getting up to since they sat way in the back. They didn't talk to the rest of us. And now their spit was on the floor, marking their territory. I hated their hollow power.

In the summer two years in the future I'd watch a droplet of water, left behind from the wet spring, descend onto one of these trumpet player's heads from the apex of a concrete drain pipe and slide down his forehead, bisecting his face, while his hulking teddy bear form enveloped and strummed a ukulele, rocking back and forth in a mellow performance for the camera I held. His name was Timothy. He always introduced himself as Timothy and if you called him Tim he would correct you. Tim, he assured his friends, was not his name. Tim was not him.

Tim was his dad. He didn't say that part, but it was true. The dad he saw once a week.

After Timothy finished playing the lackadaisical tune, written by internet based musician Terry Masters, I hit the big red button on his brick of a digital video camera and puckered my lips at him. He was going to put it on his Youtube channel. Timothy's dad was always talking about viral marketing and hitting it big on the web. Maybe that's where Timothy got the idea from. Probably not. Probably the other way around. In fact it probably all stemmed from Terry Masters and the burgeoning Youtube music scene. Everyone likes the idea that it's just the people around them that don't want to listen to their crap. That there's a fanbase out there for you on the *web*. Everyone likes to think they already have fans, and that they just have to find them.

Timothy's dad was a musician as well of course. He played bass and so his son did too. He wanted to *make it* still which didn't seem so crazy back then because of course we wanted to make it as well. Everyone just needed that one shot and then — boom! — people'd see. Then: no more smelly gigs, no more Medicaid, no more twenty year old suits, no more gas station meals, no more loans from parents with no interest rates. Stars, just waiting to be born.

Mr. Mann returned to the room with a tall girl in a tank top, her black hair back in a ponytail. She planted her feet next to Mr. Mann, who peered out at us behind his two lines of defense: thick glasses and empty music stand. He told us that Gloria was going to take us one at a time and see how we were doing while the rest of us worked on the ensemble.

I waited my turn and then followed Gloria, blissfully unaware of the gravitas of the swing of her hips and the swish of her ponytail, into a small room stuffed with large black cases and overturned drum kit pieces. She sat down in a foldout chair opposite me and told me what to play on the clarinet my parents had rented as one in a long line of sophisticated torture devices. I played, my fingers slick with oils and palm sweat, poorly under the pressure of her blank gaze.

“Oops,” I said when my fingers missed a key. “Oops. Oops.”

“Just keep playing.”

“Oops.”

When she told me to stop playing she said, drolly, that I wasn't bad, but that I just needed to stop saying 'oops' when I messed up. I nodded, my tongue itchy from making it with the wooden reed, and hurried out of the room, taking my seat in the

front row where I watched a small glob of spit drop out the end of my clarinet onto the technicolor TV static carpet.

“Wait wait wait,” said Timothy. “Listen to this.”

It was early in the afternoon on the precipice of a sleepover. My first sleepover at his house. He’d already shown me where on the couch I’d be sleeping. We were up his double set of stairs, tucked away in his green walled room. The rest of the house was not painted green.

He bent over the flat black box before him so that his thick crop of hair brushed against the table. An over-sized framed photograph of a baby thumping a stand up bass hung above his head like a thought balloon. The place was, frankly, crawling with stuff — not all of it so endearing. Album posters, twenty different unopened packs of gum, five identical and pristine packs of crayons, hallmark cards, loose pieces of candy, and a hundred other nameless formations of dollar store plastic littered the floor. His instruments on the other hand were kept elevated, hanging from the walls or placed on stands — almost as if they needed to be physically removed from the rest of the room.

His fingers, inches away from his face began to hit a series of rubbery buttons, and after a moment a tinny drumbeat akin to 80’s pop rap pattered out of the speakers. His head jostled up and down with the beat, and his chair squeaked along as he pounded a couple of clumsy drum rolls out.

And then he was done, the beat was gone, and his face was peering into mine. I nodded.

“Yeah, Terry Masters has the same little guy, little drum machine guy in some of his videos.”

“Who?”

“Terry Masters.” Timothy’s eyes bulged as his head bobbed notably. “The guy with the blue hair, you know, I’ve shown you some of his videos. That was his song you know that I sang — the one you filmed.”

“Oh-oh, yeah, OK.”

“So you got it when...”

“Yeah I saw it in one of his videos.”

“Where the heck did all the rest of this stuff come from?” I said holding up some sort of rubbery flashlight that wouldn’t turn on.

“Oh, yeah. That stuff is all from my family, like my dad’s side... They just send me these packages all the time!”

It made me uncomfortable sitting there surrounded by all that worthless plastic wrapped in plastic.

“Yeah,” he continued. “My grandma just goes shopping all the time and can’t stop herself. Here, you want any of this gum?”

“No. That’s OK.”

“Yeah, honestly. It’s like. I didn’t ask for any of this stuff.”

It’s a familiar feeling for some I suppose - that of your conscious mind’s utter worthlessness made manifest in the world, cruelly given an avatar to mock you with. In my case this object is the blinking cursor on the computer screen, one pulsating

thin edge of dark pixels, teetering on the brink of possibilities against a bright white digital canyon, the screen an arroyo gone dry.

My vision blurs and then refocuses on my reflection in the monitor's glass. I look back into my eyes as if searching for an easy answer. Some days they're green, some days they're blue. Or so people tell me. People get a lot of joy out of telling me this because it means them knowing something about me even I don't know.

I fill up the page with obscenities. I can just see Ezekiel bent over his desk, pouring over hand written notes illuminated only by slits of soaring light pouring ravenously through his venetian blinds in order for God to get a chance to look over what gold he's setting to type. Hell he's probably got a bottle of Jack Daniel's and one of those intricate crystalline glasses people drink hard liquor out of in the movies. He's making moves, his hands are like a supremely controlled jackhammer over the pages as he crosses out lines and adds in new brilliant characters. I delete the whole page and ask myself to think, but apparently I'm not asking the right question. I slam out twenty one pages of xD and then get up, shutting my laptop.

Out in the forest, past Ezekiel's house at the end of my street, past the maze of streets our sleepy suburbs provide, I think I'll have a shot to clear my head. I try to remind myself that Ezekiel is only going to write trash anyway, but it's a slippery slope and I fall in. After all, why should I presume that anything I do is automatically elevated above trash. The venom Self Loathing seeps into the cavity of my heart like hot breath and rapidly disseminates itself through my arteries because through all my life I've had no objective evaluation of my work that told me it was worth anything and yet I still find a way to be one cocky son of a bitch. I smash something under my

foot and find I've stepped on a packet of papers. They have my name on them. They say I wrote them.

That Which Smears Fair

I

Karl Limiter lived with his mother in an apartment he couldn't seem to shake. And why would he want to? Since he'd been born around the corner in a young upstarts office he really did feel, as he'd never gone astray for anything longer than a weeks trip to the Hawaiian islands when he was ten, that the apartment *was* him in some sense. He could keep to himself, play his clarinet when he wanted to and spend hours surfing internet message boards without anyone telling him that he was wasting his time. His room was secluded to the far west wall of the building - his window facing across a few inches to another brick monstrosity that was likewise years past the time of its life when someone could have seen it as beautiful. Though this was no matter as Karl hardly ever looked out the window, for he had literally billions of windows onto views far more stimulating than a brick wall, all right from the seat of his desk, and if you asked him what color the brick outside his home appeared to be, he would have told you red on the solid bedrock of knowledge that he had of brick being, in general, red, however in reality the years of existence in an industrial utopia had smothered themselves on this facade facing nowhere so that it was in fact more of a dark ocher brown. Karl "the man with no limits" (as an internet friend of his had said of him once) had a rather large room in which he could keep the various drum machines, synthesizers, vocoders, mixers, microphones and other recording devices

he liked to keep close piled around the room in stacks of loose association without fear of tripping.

His mother, Elizabeth the second, who hated the fact that her mother's name had been passed on to her, hated to acknowledge that she came from anywhere and in fact refused to be called anything but Beth, stayed out of his way, mostly. The terms were clear: as long as he accompanied her on walks on which she spoke of the good old days he would be left alone to explore his muses, though it would seem they'd recently receded in revenge for some as yet unknown blasphemy. She liked living with someone stable, someone who kept a routine, and she liked having him all to herself. He'd tried half heartedly to move out once. It hadn't worked out. Oscar the pseudo green, felt cat that they'd picked up off the street was more than a handful and had proven too much for Elizabeth on her own, or so she said. Oscar did throw up nearly every day, spinning in circles as his body convulsed as if spinning the Wheel of Fortune to decide where the hot mess of a prize would end up, but Elizabeth had a regimented process to wipe away the mess that did not involve Karl, leaving Limiter to wonder about the necessity of his stay.

When the day before, Karl had heard a bout of commotion in the hallway, Karl simply turned up his music and made nothing of it with the usual bitterness that real world distractions deign upon his psyche. The next morning, accompanying his mother on their morning walk, he was led into the less than interesting fact that a new girl, or woman, as his mother hinted, was moving into one of the neighboring apartments. People were always moving in and out of the apartments, and in the

modern age when so much of the world existed through a screen he often questioned why more people didn't simply stay put.

Upon returning home Karl Limiter submerged beneath a set of Sennheiser HD 455's and set about on his chosen path, mixing new sounds and twisting melodies to create pastoral skylines, tough aquamarine sonars, slick soaked city streets and verdant landscape sound collages. He cut, screwed, mix, mashed, and morphed orchestral triumphs against raw 80's synth and created something new. This day, as with all days, he filled up the chasm of his day with his musings and little creations, finding time in between to surf and saunter the available selections of free information he'd cultivated over the years as his personal prowling grounds, but something was wrong. It was becoming boring, stale. Not, perhaps, because of his work's inherent staleness, but because there was no audience for them. Out of the few dozen songs he'd released, one had received a torrent of views from the indie electronica enthusiast scene, that song being "My Asiatic Antonin". But, abrasive as the internet is, the experience left him scarred, and unwilling to share any more of his music with a world that wasn't prepared to appreciate its frontier sensibilities.

Closing his digital creation suite, Karl flicked off the ghost power on his mixer and set his black, cubic synthesizer off to the side. He slumped back in the tall black chair before his computer and frowned at himself through the slim, warped reflection he could see in the screen. His eyes, usually a sharp mulch red warp and woof, reflected as a thick muted tan of simple hue. He shifted his weight and began idly clicking through rainy day folders he'd forgotten existed. He noticed a new device on the apartment's shared network entitled "Emily-PC". Karl snarled to himself at the

crass unoriginality with which everyone named their computers. Then without realizing what it could mean to do so, he clicked on it. A series of folders appeared in his browser, and he clicked through to the “Public Pictures” folder, marked with a playful little flower icon.

Karl had seen his fair share of naked women via scandalous internet sidebar ads, and pop ups, not to mention the few internet porn sites he’d visited out of curiosity when his mother went out of town, but he’d never seen anything like this. Before him were dozens, if not hundreds, of jpegs named in a harmless serial like fashion, holding within their lines of algorithmically compressed code grainy, provocative, nude webcam pictures. After cycling through the first few, Karl landed on what he believed was a modern wonder of the world. Basked in the golden light of the sun, Emily’s figure was spread across her bed completely buck and completely beautiful, her frame smeared with a thick russet brown paste. A bottle of Nutella completed the picture, covering her most intimate particulars.

Karl checked over his shoulder to see if his mother, or anyone could see what he was doing, but the door to his room was closed as always. He returned his gaze to the picture which seemed to ravish his mind like nothing he’d ever seen even as his mind lavished upon her frame and name a background, intellect, psychology, and passion. It touched him in a way that nudity had never managed. His mouth curled up, and his tongue sought something; he could almost taste the rough bitter of bamboo; his fingers too began to quake, and they fell to, at first grasping and then with the lightest touch, fingering the buttons and knobs of his synthesizer with unprecedented ease and

passion. He began to rock rhythmically to the esoteric jam that crammed its way into his cranium effortlessly.

“Karl!” There came a banging at the door. His hands spasmed and knocked his synth to the floor, causing it to emit a low humming note. Suddenly a piece of the orchestra, the harsh screech of his tall faux leather seats, ceased. Karl’s mind was a bit slow to pick up the pieces of reality. “Karl!!!” yelled his mother for a second time.

Quickly, spastically, Karl closed the picture, but then, thinking on his feet, copied the entirety of the devilish collection into a new folder, unnamed, lest he be deprived of them in the future. As he rose from his chair Karl could think only in recursive, blocking ways of the beauty of what he’d seen and the ten seconds of zealous pleasure it had given him and not of the bizarre chance of fate that lead him to it.

“Yes, mom,” said Karl opening his door.

“Lunch is ready,” she said. “You need any more strawberry milk?”

“No. Actually I think I might go for a walk,” he said, blood flushing his cheeks.

“Be careful! It’s not safe out on the streets!”

And so did he take towards the streets with a quick, rash step. Coming down the steps of the apartment complex, however, he ran into the girl - *the woman* - the Emily. Seeing her with her bag of groceries, and fully clothed at that, put him in state of shock. He saw a bottle of Nutella nearly bulging out of the top of her reusable cloth bag, its bulbous form stretching its black cloth container to a point of frustration. She glanced up, met his eyes, and then smiled at him as his feet cemented concretely in their place.

“Hi!” she said, her eyes registering as a tad bit uncomfortable, probably a shallow reflection of Limiter’s own eyes.

Karl swallowed a great deal of fear, and then feeling like he swallowed too much continued to walk by her, only managing to choke out an inaudible response through his thick poorly aerated neck.

“Your name’s Emily?” he said, now that he only had her backside to watch.

She turned, ruining the illusion, “Yeah. How did you know?”

Karl felt his face rise to the color of a raspberry sherbert.

“Oh, I think I...saw it...somewhere...”

“And what was your name?”

“Oh, Karl...Limiter.”

“So, Karl, what are holding out on me?” She joked, a joyfully exorbitant expression shinning across her face. And when it was clear that she wouldn’t get anything more than the wide eyed look of terror or perhaps awe she was getting, she ended the conversation, “Well. Nice to meet you!” Then she bounced up the rest of the stairs and disappeared.

Karl waited a moment and then immediately dashed up the stairs, past Oscar in the midst of a counter-clockwise spasm on his mother’s new couch while his mother wailed like a whale lost at sea, past the kitchen where something sizzled on the precipice of burning, and slammed the door to his room shut, making a mad dash to his computer. He retrieved a carton of strawberry milk from his mini fridge and downed it like medicine, in sweats.

He found, over the course of a few days, as he looked through the pictures of Emily that he had acquired, that she was a model of sorts. A few of her pictures were watermarked with a link to a website that she modeled for. You payed a little fee to watch her on her webcam and she would perform for you and chat with you. Every day Karl neared clicking the ominous “Join Chat” button, but refrained.

Perhaps if he composed a song just for her. A song that could capture everything he felt about her. Maybe then he could reveal himself to her, or at the very least be free of the domineering presence she had manifested in his mind.

II

Emily Enticing, as she was known online, was despite all her online acts very much a normal girl trying to make it in the big apple. She just so happened to have found a niche in the erotic food market that treated her well. But it was just another stop in the road for her, just a temporary bump. Emily was headed real places, everyone that met her told her how beautiful she was and how destined for that golden screen she was!

There were girls on hottiesfromhellskitchen.com that strove, working their sweat filled profession for the kind of action they got on the webcam shows, but not Emily. She grew up in a small town, with no place and no time to learn such a trade. A trade which she fell into by chance, and with ease, but one in which she knew she was not destined. Which isn't to say that Emily didn't derive a very real pleasure from being fawned over by people of all walks of life, but she figured that it'd be pretty much the same thing when she was getting lauded on the big screen.

About a week after moving into her new apartment she accepted a webcam request from Shyguy380 and started her now tired routine. But her guest, Mr. Shyguy380 told her to stop emphatically. He said that he just wanted her to listen to a song that reminded him of her and tell him what she thought of it. So she listened to it like he asked since it seemed like a harmless enough thing. And when he asked what she thought of it she simply said, "I don't know what you want me to say. It's all just bleeps and bloops to me..."

Chapter 2

“All human beings have a sickness in their minds. That space is a part of them. We have a sane part of our minds and an insane part. We negotiate between those two parts; that is my belief. I can see the insane part of my mind especially well when I’m writing—insane is not the right word. Unordinary, unreal.”

— Haruki Murakami

“You, you read the thing I gave you?” I ask.

“Yeah. Little raunchy isn’t it? Poured a little bit of that ranch on there...um, yeah. I liked it,” said Timothy.

“So here’s the thing. I don’t think I wrote it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t remember writing it. I found it, and it’s decent, so I mean, obviously it wasn’t me.”

“Uh... Wait, you found it?”

“Yeah, I found it, and it had my name on it already.”

“Like...”

“Yes, on the ground, in the middle of the woods, you knew that already?”

“No? Wha... So who wrote it?”

“I don’t know, but it seems like the story might continue, doesn’t it? Maybe I’ll just have to wait them out. Then I can figure out who’s messing with me... what are you doing?”

“Just recording you so you can hear how crazy you sound later.”

Now I will tell you a story meant to illuminate my current “situation.” It concerns a boy, his friend and two girls. Where? Yes, that hive of scum and villainy *Skate World*. Let’s examine our subjects.

Our boy — our “main guy” — is mildly nervous. He is sitting across from two girls in a greasy dimly lit booth. They are identical twins. They aren’t the finish each other’s sentences type — more the obscure system of nods and impossible to catch looks to communicate type. You could never tell what they were saying to each other which is exactly how they liked to keep it. As if this alone were not enough to send a person over the brink, the boy in question had “dated” one of the harpies...excuse me... twins. One might think he’d come up with a system to tell them apart. One did think that. One was wrong.

He looked between them trying to decide which one he had once thought arbitrarily prettier, straining to discover anything charming about their made for reality TV looks. As they prattled on about their perhaps “niche” boy band of choice he wondered how he had fabricated feelings diametrically opposed to his true feelings for the person in front of him (it was the other one in reality). He marveled at the brain’s ability to at once be fully conscious of the utterly fictitious nature of its thoughts while still buying in to them. He now recalled as his friend sat down next to him with a hot dog, that the fiction hadn’t started with him. Rather, his “relationship” had been created “by committee” (suddenly that phrase seemed to make sense to him, though he did not in actuality understand the meaning behind the term he at least made sense of its negative connotation in his own reality). His friends had put him up to it. Perhaps it was fabricated on both ends. Had her twin... or someone else

entirely... put her up to it? The thought was liberating until he considered the idea of free will.

His friend meanwhile chuckled at an unamusing anecdote and wondered if it had been a mistake to invite him, or them, one or the other. He still felt something like shame for putting him up to it. He was now writing a “song for the dumped”. A “break-up” song if you will — though he’d realized upon formulating lyrics that it had been less of a “break up” since there had been no “together” in the first place. It had been more of an “awkward-up.” Though, that too was something of a misnomer because now that he considered it things could not have gotten much more awkward between the two “together” individuals who never spoke to each other. He knew he’d probably end up finishing the song anyway since he’d already written most of it.

But what of the time they were actually together there at *Skate World*? Considering nothing out of your ordinary awkward mumblings from people who wanted to be anywhere else occurred, I’d sum the feeling up with another story.

In 1984 my mother read an article in the University of Washington’s library discussing the viability of a vegetarian diet in modern society. It argued that the carnivorous diet of America was actually killing good old Mother Earth. Naturally my mother enjoyed Mother Earth on occasion, and at the very least didn’t want to kill her. But apparently the rest of her family was just fine with murder, which leads her of course to start her own family. Yes, she raises them vegetarian, and even convinces her husband to go cold turkey, or rather, no turkey.

So when, at eight years old, I was taken to an end of the season baseball barbecue party never having tasted meat, I hardly knew what to do. There were no

veggie dogs. Of course it must have been a mistake. We appealed, but no — “Who ate those slimy little weenies! Amiright!” I looked up to my mom for guidance because the compass that normally lead me through hamburger, steak and corn dog infested waters had suddenly begun to spin. I was curious. After all I had no ethical skin in the game. I didn’t say that though. I said I was hungry. So I took a chance — plopped one of those scary pale, slippery wieners between two squishy pads of white fluff and drizzled a bit of ketchup on top. It didn’t taste right to me, and it scared me more than a little to be eating something I’d heard could contain butts, ears, lips, eyeballs and all sorts of other nasty things, but I finished it and threw my paper plate in the garbage, happy to be rid of the ordeal. I’d passed through unscathed. Of course, though I had overcome a mental obstacle, my body still had something to say. So it was through no fault of my own that when I approached my coach to receive my obligatory trophy to the applause of other ketchup smeared kids that I puked the hot dog in all its butt/ear/testicle/eyeball glory up right there on my coach’s head and shoulders.

The neighborhood we drove through was singularly trashy — the sort of place where dead lawns were cordoned off with wire fencing, where loose stacks of wood and cinder blocks provided decor. The truck rattled past an illegally parked Winnebago with its top hatch propped open, and Ezekiel made a left turn, taking us deeper into the suburb.

Ezekiel’s father was sick in bed. His appendix had exploded “randomly” according to Ezekiel, so he wouldn’t mind or wouldn’t know, I wasn’t clear on which, that Ezekiel had taken his truck. And his mom had taken his sister to some children’s theater in Portland, so he was clear to “do whatever”, including, I meekly observed,

take me over to pick up his new girlfriend “the Freshman Shanna” without a driver’s license.

He kept on assuring me, over and over, that he knew how to drive better than his mom anyway. I smiled along uncomfortable with the situation and my seeming willingness to go along with whatever. On the drive over he’d kept taking his eyes off the road to change the radio station, one button push at a time. He’d click to a station then say, after less time than it was possible to actually hear the station’s output, “Nah,” and change the station again. He’d finally settled on a pseudo heavy metal station that played the sort of music in which the lead guitarist displaced his junk for an electric guitar and fiddled with it, sliding his hands up and down it’s long shaft as fast and as drab as possible for around four minutes exuding a disturbing, random slew of notes meant to convey his skill in “shredding”.

“Yeah!?” said Ezekiel.

I half smiled.

The house Ezekiel stopped in front of after passing it by once was forefronted by what I assume was supposed to be a pond, but had been left unfinished and allowed to decay into some sort of fantasy-film like bog. I watched, unsure if I should offer to sit in the back, as he texted Shanna excruciatingly slowly with his silver flip phone. He pressed every button the way presidential speech writers might select every word. We sat silent and still, amidst a cantankerous drum solo.

I thought surely he would turn the radio off, or maybe down at least when Shanna came out, but he didn’t. I asked if I should go to the back, but he didn’t really hear me, so I stayed where I was and Shanna awkwardly pushed past me to the

strange back seats that were arranged perpendicular to ours. I looked at Ezekiel expecting him to introduce me since we'd never met before. When Ezekiel made no move to do so, I swiveled to Shanna in an attempt to smile and make something of a good first impression despite the fact that I didn't want to be there at all.

"Where are we going?" said Shanna, leaning up to Ezekiel, completely ignoring my existence.

"This nature reserve!" yelled Ezekiel over the music.

The truck lurched forward, bouncing my head against the back of the headrest. I turned once again to say hello but found Shanna staring away from me and sort of retracted like a threatened squirrel. So I turned back and realized I was hungry and that I wasn't going to have any fun with these people.

We drove for maybe ten minutes to this gravel road, at which point Ezekiel rolled down all the windows even though it was cold out. We parked at the end of the gravel road and Ezekiel told me to open the glove compartment. I did and he told me to get out the big bottle of blue mouthwash. It was around three quarters full.

We got out of the truck and sat in the bed. I sat on one side while they sat on the other facing me.

"We can't drink the whole thing," said Ezekiel. "But, maybe like half of what's here, and my parents won't notice. They don't really use it anyway."

Shanna had pulled her hands up into her sweatshirts sleeves and looked like she might cry. She rubbed her nose and I noticed the little nobs of metal of a nose ring sticking out.

"Hi Shanna, I'm Devin," I said finally.

She looked at me for a second and then looked back down kicking her feet around. Ezekiel filled the bottle's cap with blue liquid and sipped at it. He passed it to Shanna who looked at it, not understanding for almost a minute before pouring herself a cap.

"Ted Bundy," said Ezekiel suddenly. "That guy was cool."

I had a vague idea about what Ezekiel was talking about.

"I'm in, uh, Criminal Justice right now and we just like learn about serial killers and stuff... those guys are nuts."

"Oh, yeah," I said now realizing that my mother had told me something about Ted Bundy because she'd gone to school in Washington around the time of his spree and that she was his "type". She hadn't really sounded worried about it when she told me about it. It was more like a fond reminiscence.

"Um," said Shanna, but when we looked at her she stopped talking.

She got up, shuffled to me and handed me the mouthwash. I hesitantly poured myself half a cap of the stuff mistakenly thinking that since it was sold over the counter that it wasn't possible to get really drunk on it or anything. I sipped the thick liquid into my mouth and let it rest there for a while before swallowing it, aware of Ezekiel's gaze. I coughed out of discomfort.

"Nobody knows, you know what I mean," said Ezekiel taking the mouthwash back. "Nobody knows why, you know?"

"Uh huh," I said primarily because I myself did not understand.

"How could you live your life like that. I mean, it seems like he didn't even know why he was killing all those people, or I don't know. Maybe he kind of did, but

nobody else could know, you know. He was alone like that — and,” he took a drink, “even if he did have some idea about what he did, you know, I don’t think he could have like stopped... But it’s like... who could he have talked to? Nobody, cause nobody’d understand. So he lied, like grew to have fun lying...”

I realized Ezekiel was essentially just talking to me, or maybe nobody, and that he was ignoring Shanna completely who I watched look from her feet to Ezekiel’s face in the manner of someone not wanting to look needy.

My chest felt hot and I pretended like I didn’t see it when Ezekiel offered me the mouthwash again. I looked out into the woods where I could let my eyes unfocus.

“I wonder what it’s like...” said Ezekiel.

“Are we gonna eat something?” asked Shanna.

“I didn’t bring any food. You guys wanna go walk in the woods?”

“You kind of freaked me out with your serial killer talk,” said Shanna.

“Aw, come on. Come on. Come on,” he said.

Ezekiel stood up and leapt over the side of the truck. I felt terrible for Shanna who continued to sit in place with her arms folded across her chest. I pictured myself sitting next to her, putting an arm around her shoulder. She’d probably just be creaped out, and anyway I couldn’t have done it.

“You coming Devin?”

My vision was crossed between Shanna’s hunched, small figure and Ezekiel’s highly energetic stance. I was going to say something, but I forgot what, then I just got out of the truck and hoped Shanna would follow.

“Don’t do this Shanna,” said Ezekiel. “I was just talking about stuff. They teach it at school!”

“Well, I don’t know, I feel like things are just weird,” she said.

“Weird how?”

“Just weird.”

Ezekiel retorted with multiple one word non-responses and then started out into the woods.

“Can I sit inside?” called Shanna after us.

“It’s locked,” said Ezekiel without turning.

Following Ezekiel into the moss-covered forest I felt suddenly foolish for ever having been jealous of Ezekiel’s relationship status. I trudged through the wet ground, trying to ignore my swelling anguish over the dampness of my socks. I asked Ezekiel where we were going and he shrugged. He grinned at me and said that, “this is all pretty stupid huh.” I tried to keep my face expressionless.

I remembered Timothy saying the same thing early that day about his video that had gone “weakly viral”. He had joked, “more like sickly viral” while he was trying to cut through a half green orange with a plastic knife. “Fk me Fk me Fk me,” he said under his breath as the orange slipped off his tray and on to the floor. “This is me right now,” he said pointing to the orange. “This knife,” he said, “is all the stupid comments people are leaving about me being terrible at singing.” So if I understood correctly they were trying to cut him open, but had only succeeded in throwing him into a new environment. I didn’t comment on the problematic nature of his metaphor. He said he was going to delete the video because it wasn’t his music anyway and he

didn't need all those reminders that he was actually terrible at doing the thing he loved.

I guess I shouldn't have been shocked, but I was because it seemed like Timothy was always trying to brainstorm new ideas for videos that could get him a "following". I guess the shocking part was how fast it had all happened, not that it had happened at all. Of course anyone was liable to get chewed out on the internet for anything they would ever do, but it was only because he'd attached his name to Terry Master's and his already established fan base that he had welcomed, as it were, a horde of eager vultures into his highly self-conscious, still developing home.

I couldn't admire Ezekiel's dilemma in the same way that I could Timothy's. Ezekiel picked up a stick and chucked it up into the tree textured sky. I stood by with my hands in my pockets, back hunched, waiting for something to happen so I could go home.

"You wanna —" my throat cracked from under use. I swallowed painfully, slowly, fully aware of Ezekiel's attention like a pressured drill against the side of my temple. "You wanna go back?" I said.

Ezekiel didn't say anything, but we walked back anyway. He at least was in a surprisingly good mood. He brought the conversation to *One Piece*, another topic I knew nothing about, speaking as if I somehow knew all the character's names, powers and relationships. When we got back to the truck Shanna asked if we were talking about *One Piece*, and they started talking about it together, so I could silently retreat into the back seat and then myself. Shanna seemed, at the moment at least, to have forgiven Ezekiel. Perhaps the most bizarre thing about the whole night was that

it had been *One Piece* — that one thousand episode ridiculous, banal faux-pirate anime — which had been the great reconciler.

“What makes American literature American? I’m not sure we can say. Perhaps there is no such thing as ‘American Literature’, but that said, we should at least try and talk about it, right? OK so if we look at the established American canon and we go all the way back I think we’ll find some anxieties that we can kind of play around with and ask ourselves about.”

All the way across the classroom, past a maze of tables, sits Summer. Her body is slouched forward. Her face is nearly touching the table. Her eyes half closed, she props herself up on her elbows and tilts her head. Her head bobs. There is something feather like about her. She wears her JCPenny top like an alb.

“So... Columbus, right? He’s our example. He’s obviously not the only explorer who we could talk about, but for now Columbus. We can see in him this confusion about what it means to have found this new land. All the Europeans who came to the new world were very European, by which I mean, they thought like Europeans. They came and they asked ‘Where’s the gold!’, right? Forget the fact that the people in this ‘New World’ are living a completely different lifestyle in a completely foreign environment. You’re going to have gold just like us. Kind of a stupid assumption, not that it was always wrong, of course. The bigger assumption they’re making though is that the people they are encountering value gold as much as them. In other words that the other would think like the self, be motivated like the self. Which is very hypocritical when you consider the fact that they also considered the natives as *other*, as lesser, as savage, etc, etc.

“He also has some very strange ideas about the Garden of Eden, and all that. And he’s very caught up in sexuality, right. The earth as mother is all over his writings. He comes to believe that the earth is shaped, in his words, like a breast... And his idea of a return to the Garden of Eden is very much caught up in this Freudian idea of the return to the womb. It’s a perfect, perhaps unattainable state to return to.”

It was six years ago that I’d learned to swim. It was here at the pool only a few hundred yards from where I sit. I was an absolute failure in the water. I stayed in the same level every summer for four years. I could never make it all the way across the width of the pool. If I was allowed to swim in the shallow end, I could do most everything right, but the minute I was forced to start from the middle I could never make it. So I hated my time there, watching as new kids filtered through while I stagnated, alone. Any friendships I made were transitory and meaningless, so I stopped trying to make any. I would resent kids who made a fuss or tried to get my attention. I wanted the lessons to pass as calmly and uneventfully as possible. I shivered in the water, my pale skin clinging to my bones like a wet rag. The only thing that kept me there was my mother’s silent domineering. Her wordless machinations. My father took me half the time, but I could feel my mother’s presence in his actions. He wouldn’t yell either, but I felt their disappointment at the end of the day when they would look at me when they would look at each other. And when my mother would take me into her bed, stroke my hair, and tell me that I had been signed up for the next set of lessons, holding me close so my protests would be drowned in the mass of her body. By fourth grade — I don’t know — perhaps it paid off. Either

way I was improving. It felt good to suddenly have leapt ahead of everyone I was around. It was as if some dormant range of genes in my body had been suddenly switched on by an unseen epigenetic hand. I'll never know what was holding me back.

Our class went to the pool in fourth grade to provide lessons for those kids who had never had the chance to learn. There were two kids who got to skip the lessons and just swim. It was Summer and I. We made fast "wall buddies". The wall to which we clung was a safe vantage point to watch our floundering classmates and ponder each other and our newfound sovereignty in amorphous ways. But whatever equality came with that wall left as soon as we let go. Out in the water, even if I swam till my legs wanted to collapse I'd have to stop on each wall in order to feed my starved lungs while she simply flipped, twisted and turned, sliding on, never stopping. It was a completely fluid motion that reminded me of orange maple leaves falling through a dense mist.

At some point she must have noticed me watching and offered to teach me. I watched her turn, wondering if we might get to stay in the pool longer. I didn't want to return to a world where Summer and I weren't together. I didn't want to go back the classroom where we sat on different sides of the room and sat with different friends. I was scared to flip of course. It's something you have to throw your whole body into. A half flip gets you nowhere. A half flip made Summer bored. So she went back to swimming alone while I stewed. I won't, I can't say how it happened, but something must have clicked with me later that day as we were all corralled into the computer lab for standardized testing. I'm not sure how to describe it, but sitting there

looking at my score at the end of the test — the highest in the class — I felt alone. It was not a satisfactory or happy moment for me, sitting there, looking around at the other kids fidgeting in their chairs, trying to get their tests over with. Not one of them looked back at me. I knew then that the number I was given meant nothing. I could outscore them all precisely because I couldn't care less what my score was, but I couldn't somersault underwater.

The next day at the pool I surprised myself and flipped right there in front of Summer's eyes. She taught me how to place my feet on the wall so that I could push off and keep swimming all in one motion. I watched her eyes when her goggles came up. I was giddy. I don't think she understood quite what I felt. I had no idea how to convey how I felt other than be the way I naturally am, so I felt at a loss when she simply kept swimming after that. I followed of course. Still warm at heart, following Summer's heels.

I was a wreck when I would flip-turn for the longest time. I snorted water up my nose, missed the wall with my feet and ended up confused more often than not, but I felt lambent in the water. I felt attuned to my position like a NASCAR driver who had accepted his place as 33rd, and would maintain it.

When we returned to our classroom we once again sat at different tables. We ate lunch apart. Nothing had really changed, and I found myself slip into a dolor too old for my age. The trips to the pool continued for some days after that, but they were only tepid reminders of the peace I once felt.

“And the earth as mother, the Garden of Eden — these are ideas of conception, and they are as far back as you can go if you want to talk about beginnings in a

literary sense. Though unless we're talking about the Mormon scripture we should probably veer away from Eden as an object of analysis. But you will find that American writers have a strong sense of... perhaps Colonialism is putting too fine a point on it... of wanting to erase what is there and start fresh. A desire to wipe the slate clean, which is of course impossible. Perhaps it is possible to a certain extent, but you find invariably in any text or thing which tries to do so echoes of the past, a tension with the unsaid or unwanted. So, Moby Dick, 'Call me Ishmael.' In that one line he's both wiping the slate clean by creating a new identity and at the same time bringing along the baggage of the past by indicating that perhaps this has not always been his identity. That whole very long book is about reconstructing the whale. You could have never seen a whale in your life and by the end of the book you'd have a pretty decent idea about whales. Now you could definitely argue that writers all over the world face this problem, not just Americans. That problem being, how to distance their discreet beginnings and projects from their contexts or histories."

Summer catches me staring and smiles at me from across the room. My eyes water, and I look away idiotically. Her gaggle of friends sway or shift uncannily as a unit, and I stare down at my notebook's blank page.

"If we look at the text we're going to be reading for class, Cather's *My Antonia*, then we can see the beginning in a sort of bizarre limbo state where it is both the "beginning" but also clearly in the future looking back, and we're not exactly sure of our narrator's relationship with the story that is to come, and we never exactly discover it either. It's a sentimental beginning, but I think it's a great beginning

because it's very blatant about the fact that beginnings are inherently based in the past. They can't exist on their own because they have to look back."

Who is Summer today? What do I want? What I really want is to go back to fourth grade. Maybe if I could have swam faster than her. My feelings jumble around in a way that makes me uncomfortable, so I stare at Sydney, the girl to my side's, phone playing a Korean drama with the sound off hidden under the table. I watch the bodies move back and forth across the screen in long cuts. One side to the other and back again, not bothering to read the subtitles. The interplay of the bodies is enough. The trouble is in fourth grade I'd only wanted to be friends, but now I can't help but feel something more urgent, more driving, more carnal. I wish that I could do away with these feelings and look at her like a human being again.

A year and a half later, once again in the heat of summer, I will find myself in the empty pool at the high school with Claire, a nine year old whose mother has placed her trust in me. Claire's grandmother watches as she kicks out from the wall to me, perfecting her streamline on the first try. I coo praise into my prodigy's ear and tell her to go back to the wall. She's gone from understanding nothing to swimming full laps in a few lessons, but she won't put her nose in the water. She wears a mask.

So I explain to her that if she were to fall off of a boat into a lake or ocean or river (three very dangerous places whether you know to swim or not), that being unable to swim comfortably with your bare face in the water could mean death. And I'm serious. You have to know how to handle yourself in water. I take the direct approach with Claire. She's bright.

“Come on,” I say. “Just stick the tip of your nose in and blow really hard out through your nose at the same time.”

I demonstrate. A series of minute trellises pulse through the pool. She smiles at me, wordless.

“OK... now your turn,” I hazard.

She stares back at me. The thing with Claire is that it almost feels like she’s teaching me. And maybe I’m not smart enough to know what the lesson is.

“OK, I’ll try,” she says.

I count down from three and then the two of us lower our heads. And Claire jerks her head away at the last minute.

“Claire...” I stare at the clock, and then catch her grandmother’s eye. She smiles. “OK Claire, what kind of music do you like?”

“Hip-hop.”

“Really? Who do you listen to?”

“Common, Large Professor, Tribe, I like Wu-Tang before they went slick. Even *Supreme Clientele* is too slick for me. My dad says I’m crazy.”

“Oh I see, once they got money behind them. OK, so let’s take Wu then. What did you think when you first started listening to them?”

“Hmm. It’s hard to remember.”

“Yeah...”

“But I guess, I guess I thought it was kinda boring and hard to understand. Like, you know, it was hard to pay attention to what they were saying.”

“But now you’ve listened to them a while and you dig the way they draw together kung-fu films and dirty tones and street life and comic books, all that bricolage, it just seems to fit, right?”

“Yeah. They got style.”

“So what I’m trying to say is, things are different in the beginning to how they’re gonna be later if you just keep going. They get better.”

“Why?”

“Well that’s how we work. And it all comes right back to swimming,” I say. “Cause swimming is just like everything else. You just have to keep going wherever you are, however tired you are. That’s really all there is to it.”

“Really?”

So I nod, slowly. I’ll leave out the part about having skill, mostly because skill will never be the thing that holds back Claire. Like I said, she’s something of a prodigy.

“Well, class is almost over anyway,” she says.

“Yep, and you haven’t even started.”

Timothy didn’t do it like most. He didn’t invite friends to his garage to thrash and smash instruments as fetish. He didn’t carve expletives in his guitar case to displace his anger. He didn’t need to yell at the world.

He sat in his room with a microphone his dad had given him and a few electronic boxes, and he made music. He played alone. He played with his headphones on so his mom couldn’t hear him downstairs. He went into the bathroom in the back of the house to sing.

He didn't do it like most. His songs were confused, fluid, electronic smorgasbords. Sonic gallimaufries with tender harp solos and overpowering delay drums. Something about it belonged to the jungle. But not just any jungle. This was his own jungle, created from scratch in a new code that you can't help but wonder at as it rumbles through the earth. You feel the reverberations in your chest. The feeling, the energy — it's there, but the meaning is lost in the transmission.

Was it a success? Who can say. Most would say no. Most wouldn't say anything because most haven't heard it. But most was never the goal. What hurts is that his own mother wouldn't listen to it. He handed her a CD and she smiled and said, "Awww," like a good parent does. And maybe that's all it deserved. Who was he to say?

All I can say is that it existed, and no it was not like most. It was complete even if it wasn't sure what it wanted to be. What did I have?

Chapter 3

“It was often this way, life consisted of a series of false beginnings, bluff declarations of arrival to destinations not even glimpsed.”

— Jonathan Lethem, *You Don't Love Me Yet*

Ezekiel wouldn't stop talking about D&D. The forest was wet from the morning rain. My socks were getting wet, and I had to stop and lean against a tree because my foot was cramping up. And Ezekiel wouldn't stop talking about D&D.

Now he wasn't even talking about characters he'd “made” (his term for rolling dice, writing numbers on a page and throwing up a character name if he felt like it). He was talking about being the Dungeon Master. About taking control. He had a whole world he wanted to make me live through.

He described in intricate detail the way in his world an ancient evil god, actually the god who'd created the universe, but who had since gone insane trying to micromanage said creation, had been chained up in the far reaches of heaven by his offspring, but that there were cultists all around Elchestria (the name of his world) who were trying to set him free. Their eyes were cut out, had chain tattoos, generally looked like a circus freak/biker gang hybrid, etc. He talked about Iron Town and its boilerplate fantasy economy and racial make up. The banality of his talk reminded me that the robot that lived in all of us insinuated itself into everything — even the seemingly imaginative fantastical ultimately suffered, perhaps most transparently of all, from the robotic creep of complacent thinking.

Trying to unhinge the conversation, I asked him why he didn't just write this all into a novel "or something". He pushed air out of his lips to show his disregard for my proposal. He'd hit a snag on that front. Wasn't sure it was fun to write anymore, he said. He was having fun making this new world, but it didn't do anything, it was static without an actor in it. He wanted, needed me to become an actor in it, though I knew if I were to participate, it would evolve into the tale he wanted to tell, not the one its principal character wanted or needed to act out. I'd seen it before, because I'd been the controlling one.

Ezekiel had wanted to take things off the rails with his baby eating son of satan character Shiv, but try as he might, he couldn't disrupt the system I and moreover the rulebooks had set up. There was always a greater evil to fight, a larger threat looming — the classic bullshit to get an anti-hero to perform heroically for the short duration of the tale before returning to activity no one wants to be a witness to. "I kill him," Ezekiel had said, referring to a prince who had been trying to help him get where he needed to go. "What?" I'd said. "Why?" Ezekiel shrugged, rolled a die. "He's dead," he proclaimed. There it went, my whole plan for what would have ended in a hopefully character defining moment as Shiv is forced to confront his father (literally the devil) who wants nothing more than to rid the earth of his chaotic offspring for sullyng his name. I'd hoped it would allow Shiv a moment to ask himself why he was such an unmitigated psychopathic killer. Instead I asked Ezekiel point blank. "But why would Shiv do that?" Ezekiel laughed and said that it was fun, that's all. "But his character, like you get that his character doesn't make any sense."

"Yeah, but he's not real anyway."

“Who cares? Shouldn’t you have internal logic?”

“No, I just do what I want.”

“But what you want has to come from somewhere. There’s a source to everything.”

“Eh. I just do what I want.”

So when he asked me to play in his world I skirted around the subject. Yes, skirted. Looking back on it, Ezekiel probably knew exactly what I was doing, but he played along. He was strangely desperate enough for human interaction that he would even settle for me. I wondered about that sometimes. Ezekiel had lots of other friends, why did he feel the need to see me as well? His other friends were much more wild. Maybe I was just the other side of the coin. Maybe I provided some balance. Maybe I was just safe.

I remembered about a week prior when I’d been over to Ezekiel’s for some reason and on my way to Ezekiel’s room been taken aside by his mother into the kitchen, a strangely enclosed, low ceilinged place. She crossed her arms nervously and penetrated me with her usually dull eyes. I felt myself grow anxious — general fight or flight symptoms gearing up. Her push pin eyes roved across my face and more importantly I felt into my chest. She turned, opening a cabinet in stiff, restrained motions and I heard Ezekiel’s sister Caroline walk by behind me. She opened her mouth and shut her eyes tightly like a child overly afraid.

“Do you know what sort of people Ezekiel’s been hanging around?” she asked me in a loud whisper.

I asked her what she was talking about, and she clarified “at school or, you know!” with wild, helpless hand motions. Not really, I told her. I wanted to ask her if she was OK. If I needed to get her a chair or something. I didn’t.

“It’s just... he’s been, you know, acting up... Oh I don’t want to tell you this kind of thing. I guess, he’s just been, uh, staying in his room more. He takes his dinner in there. He tries to pick fights with me and Jeff. He just,” she said her voice rising to a whispered apex.

I watched her hand come down against the counter-top in a spastic motion, and realized a second later, once she started moaning, that it was implacable on the spectrum of purposeful action. She growled deep in her throat. I backed up.

Ezekiel walked in behind me.

“Mom?” he said. “Are you OK?”

He stepped to her side with a look of genuine concern. His mother was running her finger under the tap where I could see blood mixing with the water from the spot on her fingernail where it had broken.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice reduced to its usual tone, seemingly devoid of emotion. I studied her face. The expanse of conflict had disappeared. Our parents, I decided, are masters of deception, able to mask themselves to their own children especially at the drop of the hat. They’ve had much longer to get good. “I was just telling Devin that I’m glad he came over.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Ezekiel. “Sure you’re OK? That looks...”

“Yeah I’m fine. You guys go to your room or something.”

Ezekiel left the room first, then I followed. I looked back at his mother, leaning into the sink, her long hair dipped into the growing puddle. Her eyes were shut again. I wondered if she could even tell if the water was there. The drain must have clogged.

I too had stopped writing, or stopped trying to write. As the weather warmed up once again I was able to spend more time outside, and grew acclimated to not being so cooped up. I remained solitary however. My mother working long hours “for the family”, and my father quitting his job to once again try to become a full time massage therapist. He was now at his office or running errands most of the day, so I rarely saw either of them. I’d find a box of food in the fridge with my name on it and eat it in front of the TV or just standing in front of the kitchen counter. It was new, the counter. It gleamed now — one of those stylish new marble counters, but it was cold.

I guess I’d still needed something to fulfill me because I’d started a roleplaying game on an online forum. It developed into sort of a urban fantasy style of game, though it had started out as a “supers” game. You can never tell how things are going to evolve.

The game was over a few months later when rather abruptly it would seem everyone had lost interest and stopped posting. I told myself it was nothing I’d done. I still checked my notifications everyday to see if maybe they just hadn’t had enough time or had been away from the computer on vacation, but they remained vacant.

I heard an airy *boop*, sucking me back into reality, and I realize I had a new notification. I clicked on it eagerly. I felt a strong sense of foreboding, as if this notification portended all of my fears. One of my players was going to reveal that as a group all of the players had talked about how bad of a storyteller I was. As the page

loaded I realized that my father was sitting a few feet away from me. He too was staring at his computer screen, studying a video of a small Asian woman, standing in her underwear in that quintessential Leonardo da Vinci's pose. A white, hairy, freckled hand scanned over her abdomen. The camera zoomed out to show this hand belonged to a man who dressed like my father who stood there, talking into the camera. The woman was perfectly still, expressionless. He took the headphones off and paused the video, jotting notes in a little notebook.

I stare back at my screen, puzzled. I see it's a private message from a name I don't recognize. Stupidly, my heart begins to beat.

From Pervati:

Hey, I was just reading your game (Judgment) and it looks really cool. Are you guys still playing? I sketched out a character anyway.

Her name is Virgil, but she prefers just Jill. She has bright pink hair, and wears a long, simple tan cloth over her body, sort of like an old school beggar or you know ascetic (I drew her). Anyway she is manifested in the world as a two dimensional plane (sort of like the negative zone from Superman II, if you're familiar) because she was banished into this state a long time ago before the rise of civilization by those pesky powers that be. She was a little too curious about what goes on "under the hood" of the universe, or whatever. I'm not exactly sure what she was looking for, but I'll keep thinking about it.

She's since grown able to move her "body", though she can't interact much. She can talk, listen, all that. So she was basically just a floating head. But in the modern era she has managed to construct a half-way body for herself. One that allows her to

function closer to normal. Of course she looks anything but normal, and feels anything but normal. Today she can walk and use her hands like anyone else, but she can't touch. She can't actually feel what it's like to sit next to someone and brush up against their arm. She's forever stuck in this nowhere state, and goes through cycles of deep depression and revolt against the supreme powers that made her this way. Then there are times in which she finds things are not so bad, manageable at least. Right now she's on the downward slope, and she can feel herself slipping.

Hope I'm not too late. This character really intrigues me.

From Pervati:

Aw that's too bad. It would be cool if we could play, but whatever. I'm mostly just looking for something to do while I work.

From Pervati:

Not a desk job per say... I'm a cam girl, so I'm in front of the computer all day p much. I like having a game or something going so that I can just get away from that whole thing for a few minutes at a time without anyone figuring it out.

From Pervati:

Haha, maybe you have, I don't tell people what I do face to face. Too awk. Yeah I get in my "naughty" underwear (people think if you wear different underwear you are suddenly a different person...), play with some dildos, chat with people, eat food (ice cream obvi, but also broccoli for some reason? Oh and one time this guy payed me \$50 to eat a century egg :/). What can I say? People like watching me eat. It's

pretty weird, but yeah, it's not a bad job really. I get to stay home, and I can goof off quite a bit and kind of just do what I want and the people watching don't really care. So yeah, I get very little me time, even though I'm alone pretty much all the time. People are always watching me you know. Like even when I go out, or take a few days off I'm sending pics through snapchat so the people who pay me don't forget about me. So this is a deal I can, you know, have going on that they don't know about, and I can do it right under their noses. People are surprisingly willing to watch a girl type...

But yeah, it's pretty boring, really. Everyone chats me that they love me, but its fake, fake, fake and we both know it... anyway. I def do not want to talk about that. Why don't you tell me about something. Like what do you do?

I stare at the screen. I look to my side to my father who has silently left, . I close the window, terrified and leave my desk. I imagine this girl, is she a girl? Does it matter? No, I decide. It doesn't matter what she looks like. I force myself not to try and visualize anything because I know that it will be purely fantastical — something so out of proportion, out of reality that I won't be able to treat her like a human being. Don't respond right away. Treat her like a human being.

My world studies teacher, Mr. Jung, asked the class one day if they'd heard about what was going on with Washington. I knew, but I didn't say anything. I watched as the rest of the class seemed to shimmer, Mirror Lake under the noon sun charged with apathy and a jittering, self contained movement which conceals the towering reflection of the white capped peak of Mt. Hood. He asked again, then asked

if we ever looked at the news at all. It was silent. Only the rustling of the leaves belied the class's presence.

That morning on the car ride in with my father, Morning Edition had reported on the ongoing legislative debate in Washington over a gun control bill that was being passed around the House. This was in response to a couple of different school shootings in which over 30 people, mostly children were taken — the last moments of their lives becoming a kind of feverish temporal severance from life. In three years time, when the issue had been swept under the rug and nothing had been done, there would be a shooting at a school about five miles from where I sat in Mr. Jung's classroom in which an angry, depressed white kid named Jared would hoist on to his school bus, hidden in a black leather guitar case, an AR-15, a semi-automatic jet black rifle built for the United States Military and meant for precision in combat situations in which extraneous force is required, all with the ease of use that an assault rifle supplies, and then into the band room of his high school where he unloaded the weapon, stuck its twelve components together with sweat cooled hands and texted Yuna Umeh, who upon entering through the band room's heavy metal door was shot twelve times in the chest, arms, and legs all over two ticks of a clock. The P.E. teacher, Mr. Sherrett, who happened to be walking by heard the gunshots and nearly died himself after brashly stepping forwards to investigate, but managed to survive after slinking away, hand gripped to his bullet filled shoulder and slick with blood, from the first black and red body he'd seen off of the glowing golden screen, his back to the cold, thick metal door, fumbling madly for his phone to call for help, his blood slicked fingers slipping uselessly over his brand new iPhone's touch screen in

desperation. Mr. Sherrett had never cried on school grounds before. Yuna Umeh had never been kissed before and the poems she'd been writing at night when she couldn't sleep about, among other things, the meth addict down the street and the time her parents told her that she couldn't walk around the neighborhood anymore without an adult because a sexual predator who'd once preyed upon a little black girl had moved in two blocks down, would lie in the bottom of a drawer in the desk in her room that no one would sleep in again, untouched, unread and unfinished. When Jared heard the sirens through the green painted concrete walls of the high school he thought about how ironic it was that he was going to die in one of the places closest to hell on earth and then he spit into Yuna's slightly agape mouth and then shot himself in the face. That day I was skipping school, along with anyone else in the senior class who wasn't stuck with a presentation or too dumb to consider the possibility of rocking the establishment, at an antique shop only three miles away. It was full of relics of the days when Manifest Destiny was a term heard outside of teacher's power points, days of conquest the nation could look upon with valorous approval, days when the Nation was still young enough to think blood could solve problems. But amongst all the china, old kits, old tarnished silverware, z-box camera's, dusty plastic Polaroids, postcards with dates and names and small windows into lives on them, and posters of road shows with smiling little boys looking proud, I was captured, laughing at a small wilting action figure of Jar Jar Binks.

“Nobody?” asked Mr. Jung. “OK. Maybe we'll talk about it later.”

When my mom gets home at night the moon is out, her son is curled up, his knees to his chest, caught between headphones and screen. He can barely murmur a

hello to her. Her husband is sitting nearby under a lamp, a book full of ligaments and bones in his hands. He has the heart to look up as she collapses to the dinner table. She finds a covered plate of cold keish. She says something that I, under my headphones, cannot hear.

She only eats half the keish before she goes out into her garden with her red rose pruner. It's dark out, but I can make out her bending, tending. Now that she's gone I find her terse, purposeful movements far more intriguing than the block of text on my screen. I feel the sudden need to know her every thought and to tell her mine.

And I remember a time, I can't remember when... It's one of those rare times in my life when the boundary between progeny and progenitor lowers, if slightly. It's night, under the stars, in a concrete pool filled with hot springs tap. In the deep end you can put your hand where the water comes in, but don't get too close or you might burn yourself. I'm sitting on the edge of the pool next to my father, cooling off. In moments like these words come, certainly not easily, but they come. I can't predict these moments, nor am I able to savor them when they happen. They are rare. They are brief, these lapses in the silence.

It's just a simple conversation, it evolves through tangents, takes on new meanings. There's no need to chronicle it here. But it ends so abruptly.

"Well," said my father, "that's what people like your cousins think God is. They think they know what God is, but they don't really. They talk about God and call him certain things, but that's not what, you know..."

I'm paralyzed. I've never heard my father speak about religion. I can't recall a time when he said "God" for any reason other than to form a complex expletive. But

that's not what stops me. I'm shocked by his vehement denial of my cousin's beliefs, and even more shocked that he would know what they are in any meaningful way. Because of course I don't understand anyone's religious beliefs beyond a superficial level. How could I? How could he? But I don't think this is what stopped me, ultimately, from speaking again. I could feel words forming in the chambers of my skull, words that wanted to be let out, but didn't know how. It's this sick pressure. I say sentences silently in my head. Ask questions, come up with new ones, think they are fine questions, try to speak. My mouth doesn't move.

Understand, I never hear my father speaking about anything personally this way. The only other thing he is passionate about, his politics, seems distant — his opinions seem far away, bolted on, any democrat could have them. I just didn't know how to react. I wasn't used to having real conversations with him, and when I looked at him then, he was looking away, like he didn't expect there to be one. So I slipped back under the warm water.

When she comes inside I'm eating cereal, listening to the mouthy crunch of sugared grains within my jaw. She follows her routine: exclaims her exhaustion with a loud sigh; counteracts it with a smile; pours herself a glass of wine; sips it while dancing to some internal salsa tune. I think the moment has passed. I follow my own routine, unable to bridge the gap between us. My mind pulsates, scheming for ways to establish a link. Her robot carries her on her path, ultimately to her bedroom where she won't fall asleep, and mine to my bedroom where I too will lie awake. And it's there that I decide to let her read my book.

My mother sits in front of the computer screen, visibly, artificially I think, anxious as the Skype dial tone plays through a long-blown-out speaker. The calm electro ring tone pops in and out of existence. My father leans forward and starts jiggling the speaker's wiring. It doesn't do much. He flicks the speakers on and off, and when that doesn't work he sits back as if nothing had happened, except he's still staring at the speaker.

It stops ringing, and I wonder if we'll talk to my brother after all. He hasn't sent me any other letters, so I'm wondering if Kama will be there. Probably not. Why would she be? But I'm curious as to what she would sound like.

Ultimately this whole thing is an untimely distraction in my quest to build up the courage to give my mother my book. But I can't decide if I want to. I haven't even looked at it in a year. It's not like it'd change anything between us anyway. When has a book ever done anything like that?

A garbled hello farts out of the speakers. My mother yelps in excitement, and then starts frantically asking where he is, like she thinks he's in the room as some invisible apparition, and not hundreds of miles across the sea. I'm envious of his ability to leave. There's a good reason he hadn't called us this past seven months. I tell my mother to calm down, and she gives me a look. She starts to ask him a series of standard motherly questions.

I wonder if she'll hate it? Better than not having read it at all. Maybe? Maybe everyone's better of not reading such a terrible book.

"How come you haven't written us or anything!?" my mother asks.

My father continues to smile and hover over the speaker cables though nothing he does changes the quality of communication.

“Sorry, I..” His voice was lost in the transference of electricity.

I suddenly felt cold and hollow staring at the three of them. Were we really all in a room together? My mother, father, and brother represented by a featureless white silhouette on the screen.

“You only wrote me?” I say.

“Huh? I didn’t write you...” he says, his visage illuminating as he talks.

“The letters, and Kama, and...” I say.

Is this my brother? My father seems completely oblivious of the conversation. My mother is staring at me respectfully, as if waiting for me to finish my thought.

“Sorry, you’re kind of breaking up,” he says.

“Um. Never mind. That was... just thirsty,” I say, feeling it.

I scramble away from the computer, up the stairs, down the hallway to my room, into my desk’s drawer. There it is. Why hadn’t I noticed that there were no stamps on the envelope? There were no dates, names of places... I’d been convinced by this?

Whoever was playing this game with me had just upped the ante. I couldn’t show this to my parents. Crazy. Anyone would think I’m crazy. Maybe, what if it *is* Henry? Could that be possible?

I creep back down the stairs. I hear loud acoustic guitar and the faint hint of singing. It sounded like he was singing from the bottom of the ocean. His voice is compressed out of existence. My parents stare vacantly at the carpet, probably trying

to remember the last time it had been vacuumed. Then the music ends, and they snap to.

“What did you think?” he asks.

I stand behind and close my eyes while my parents flounder to respond, tripping over their own half intended syllables.

From Pervati:

Wait a second. I thought you were stressing about trying to write a book in the first place. Now you’re telling me you already have a book written??? Am I getting this right? Did you write a book in the last week? I’m a trifle confused.

From Pervati:

OK, so you wrote this like a year or two ago, but you haven’t really shared it with anyone? I guess it could work, I mean it does sound like it deals with some of your feelings about family... albeit layered into that historical fantasy backdrop. I mean, I think it’s a good idea for them to read it, I just don’t know that you should expect a sea tide shift in your relationship, necessarily. Most people when they see like a genre movie or whatever kind of dismiss it, or you know, they don’t like to read into it I guess? Though, again they *are* your parents so you’d kind of expect them to read into things when you’re writing about a family splintering in the civil war... So, yeah, honestly I would go ahead with it. You seem to really psych yourself out of doing a lot of things... I mean you can alleviate this trouble, literally get it out of your mind, and it’s a pretty simple thing to do, so why not just do it? If it turns out bad, then that’s something else to worry about, but it might not, right?

And I'm just gonna tell you this cause I kind of have no one else to talk to RN, and I'm like kind of getting worked up about it. But yeah they just reported how this factory in my neighborhood is like totally polluting the air with dangerous chemicals, and it's been doing it for years, and I'm just worried, you know. Like I watched my cousin go through chemo and I hope I never have to do anything like that, but there's nothing I can really do about it cause my apartment is rent controlled, so it's like the one place I can afford even though I really want to move. Agg. It's like, Oh you can't pay! Guess you get to die! How's that fair?

God I have got to find a new job. I wake up everyday, and I think that. What does it say that I don't do anything? You know what I should do? I mean, that's not rhetorical. Literally tell me if you have any ideas. It's like, how do I get a "good" job when I can't really tell them what I've been doing for the past year, you know? And it's not like I've been picking up any marketable skills... "Can talk in sexy low voice for extended periods"...

Man, thanks for listening to me. I've got to run to the store.

Ezekiel is staring right at me when I open the door.

"Wanna go for a walk?"

"Sure." I close the door on him, then put on a jacket and grab a hat.

We walk through the forest. It's familiar, familial even, to us. Water is dripping irreversibly down the tips of fresh pine needles. We tread well worn paths, marking them clearer with our footprints. We stop at a tiny shed covered with ivy built on top of a rusty sewage pipe. Its wood is rotting, barely visible underneath cross hatched

vines. It will only ever rot further, I think, leaning my shoulder against it. It will never be this stable again. Ezekiel takes out a bag from his pocket.

It's a ziploc with what seems like a large amount of weed. In reality it's probably nothing, who knows. It's not like I've ever seen a large amount, or a small amount, or an amount. It's enough to be afraid of though. His other hand held a tightly crumpled wad parchment paper.

"Come on," he says, and he opens the baggy up.

I am still. His fingers fumble over the paper, trying to pack a cigarette. His hands are trembling. He stops for a moment, balancing the supplies on a bit of moss and then blows on his hands to warm them up.

"You want this one?"

"No, that's..."

"You're gonna do it with me right?"

His eyes were glued to his hands, working, twisting that paper.

"What happened to that party you were gonna do?"

"Oh, yeah. Nobody seemed into it. The rest of the team is real... uh, I don't know. Here."

He holds out a twisted, lumpy cigarette.

"I don't really."

"What? Come on? It's just gonna be fun."

"Yeah."

I'd never imagined Ezekiel would actually get his hands on any marijuana. I'd painted myself a world in which these situations happened only on TV, or in the

scuttlebutt of the high school hallway. Those 80's infomercials we watched ironically on Youtube. Michaelangelo of the Turtles saying, "I may be a party dude, but even I know a party is less fun with drugs. Say no to drugs, kids. Cowabunga!" Now that I was here, I realized my lack of imagination meant I'd also never imagine a way to get out of this impossible situation.

"I don't get it. How come you don't wanna?"

I'd never be able to explain to Ezekiel how afraid I was that if I started smoking, even just once, and I liked it, that I wouldn't be able to stop myself from doing it again. And again. I'd read about that, an addictive personality. I didn't want to like it, but something in me warned me that I would.

I was afraid if I started smoking that I'd wake up and find myself devoid of ambition. That I'd somehow morph into another being who was content. Someone who didn't mind where he was, who he was. I was afraid that smoking would be something that I fit right into. And I had too many ideas for what I wanted my life to be for my life to make something else of me.

"I don't know... How come you want to?"

"Cause, it's gonna be fun! What's there to worry about? Just have a shower when you get home. Nobody'll tell."

He pulls out a cheap pink plastic lighter and tries to light his cigarette. Once. Twice.

"I mean, but, I mean other things are fun too, so why..."

“I don’t know. Don’t you want to feel different sometimes? Weed doesn’t hurt you. Seriously. It’s just like a, you know, it just makes you feel nice. Just better. Like it’s just more fun to be.”

He keeps the cigarette in between his teeth while he talks, until the roll starts to unwind. Then he cups it in his hand.

“It’s like. It’ll help us just have a good thing, you know? You do it *with* someone else.”

He finally gets it lit and puffs away, clearly full of himself. Like he’s some creative genius who invented getting high. He’s just another kid, isn’t he?

“It’s cold out here,” I say, looking back the way we came.

Am I just another kid?

“Take it. It’ll warm you up. Come on.”

I take it from him and held it in my fingers. I put it to my lips and suck a little smoke into my mouth. I wondered if he could tell that I hadn’t inhaled. I pushed my chest out artificially. The smoke tickles the back of my throat and I explode into a hoarse cough. I spit.

He smiles, nods and takes it back from me.

“How’s your book going?” I say.

He takes another long puff and laughs.

“I swear you are always asking me that... Didn’t I tell you I stopped?”

“You stopped?”

“Yeah. Just stopped. Still got it, but I haven’t done anything on it in a long time.”

“Oh, uh, how come?”

“Oh, you know.” He stops and looks up at the sky, and I wonder if he’s going to start telling me a seemingly useless parable that ends up changing my life. But he looks back down at the ground, kicking a muddy rock, and says, “Stopped being so fun. Once I got done going through the story and stuff... I got a little too serious with it, right? Just stopped being fun, and it’s not like I was going to like sell it or anything. I mean, maybe, but I doubt it.”

I felt a wave of shame for having been jealous of Ezekiel’s seriousness. That I’d been caught up in his process at all. All based on what? A few mentions here and there about making a “serious book”. One that’s got something major to say. This is the same guy that watched fail videos all lunch, and liked sadistic torture porn movies like *Saw*. I’d taken that guy seriously? I’m taking *something* too seriously.

He passes the cigarette back and I take a brief inhale. I hold it for half a second before my body sends me into a cascade of coughs.

“How bout you?” he said, seemingly unfazed by my wheezing.

“I don’t know if I can do it,” I say after a while. “I mean I just don’t know what to do anymore. I mean, I show my writing to people and they think it’s like some joke,” I say, thinking my mom when I’d said ‘people’. Litter the book full of holes. Oh it was fun and maybe interesting, but I thought it better to focus on the typos and comma splices. Look I marked them all here, with page numbers and everything. There *is* kind of a lot... “They’re probably right anyway.”

“So don’t do it,” he says.

“Yeah, but... if I, uh, if I don’t, then who am I?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean I’m a writer. That’s what I think my future’s going to be, you know? Cause if it’s not that then I don’t know what it is... So I have to get good now. Otherwise I’m just gonna be another loser at a desk job or in the cashier line or...”

“I get it,” he says.

My eyes were watering.

“But you um,” he says. “It’s not all or nothing, you know. You don’t have to like get everything right now.”

“Now is no different than any other time in my life. If I can’t do it now then I’ll never be able to.”

Ezekiel laughed, and for some reason I start to laugh with him.

The summer would officially start in a few days, but the fever had already hit. The seniors were gone. Ezekiel was free.

This is why at 3:40 in the afternoon I was inexplicably in the middle of a conversation with Ezekiel’s mother over the phone.

“I don’t... What?”

“You’re just a good influence on him. I know when he’s with you that he’s not going to get into any trouble.”

“What, ah,” I said, clearing my throat and trying not to breathe too heavily into the receiver. “Excuse...me,” I sat down. “Did something, uh, happen?”

“It’s the same old problems. He spends all his time with Jacob and Aaron. And it’s just the way he’s acting...”

“I’m...sorry.” I hadn’t talked much to Ezekiel since that day in the woods. We’d reached some sort of understanding of each other I think. Maybe we don’t have much to say to each other anymore, I’m not sure. But he is a graduate now. No matter what we have in common it is clear to me that the two of us are on different paths. We diverge here. “Have you talked to him about it?” I said, my voice returning to me.

She was silent. I checked to make sure our land line hadn’t died. It was getting old in this smart phone age, and occasionally it died silently and without fuss in the middle of conversations. The light was still on.

“Hello?” I said.

“Thanks.”

“Oh, OK—” and the line went dead. Had she expected me to solve her problem? Why would anyone expect that of *me*?

When I go upstairs for dinner I find the small black moleskin I’ve been looking for for the past week sitting out on the table. I retrieve it and during dinner while my mother is checking email on her phone and my father is filling out a crossword in the newspaper, I flip through the pages and discover that it has been filled with words that are not my own.

Living with a Satanist: Selected Diary Entries

October 15, 2014

It was a blockbuster. You could call it a sleeper hit. It was the sort of dream that shows you how small your life really is.

I was in one of those skyscrapers. The place was empty except for us — me and thirty odd others. For some reason (leave it to the script doctors) we were all stuck in

this nowhere of a place. And we all knew it. But we all had an inkling of an idea that there was some way out too. Where we landed that idea, who knows. I can speak for everyone here because sadly... they're all me. Not that there was a bunch of me's running around or anything. I mean that these were all constructions of my head. None of them were real. They never will be real. So maybe there was some desperation we all shared.

There was a rush for the elevators. No one trusted the stairs. Who used stairs anymore? The building had hundreds of floors, and it was one of those buildings where each elevator only goes to certain floors. In short the group was split up. Only, the floor I got to was the same as the one I'd left. I mean, exactly the same. Some people tried other floors. Every floor was the same. Everything was always the same.

I found myself wandering through the boring polished steel landscape. There was no use looking out the windows. They might as well have been filled with cardboard cut out skylines, but I started to anyway, for something to do. A shadow appeared on the window before me. A cute voice started to accompany the shadow's movements. I realized the shadows were hand puppets. They were bickering about who'd lived in Boringsville the longest. I let it play out for a while before the idea to turn around came to me.

A girl with frizzy orange hair was hunched over, absorbed in her rapidly flapping hands. She stopped when she saw me staring. Then she burst into belly lead laughter. I fell back into the window. She rushed to my side, still smiling, and asked if I was OK. Then we were walking together. A hard cut. There was something unspoken between us. Then we sat down. The seats were those black cheap cushioned

kind you find at the airport. We were waiting for something, the two of us. The rest of those trapped in the purgatory with us were still scrambling, fighting to be free. We'd decided to sit. We were facing each other.

She asked me what was wrong, and I told her I was lost and that no one here liked me. No one here wanted anything to do with me.

“Are you a leading role?” I asked. “Are you... not me?”

“I don't know how to answer that,” she said. “Why does everyone else ignore you?”

“Why wouldn't they?”

She started to hum and to draw a stick figure comic of a man looking into a mirror and seeing no one there. His expressions change from panel to panel. First confused. Then sad. Then happy. Then he decides to draw a picture of himself smiling on the mirror. Then he becomes sad again.

She suddenly said, “But we have a connection.”

I agreed, though I was a little uncertain who she was.

She said that if we ever got out of here we'd have to see each other and get to know each other, very nonchalantly.

She couldn't be me. I wouldn't say such a thing.

So I watch her. She does things. Maybe there's no dialog. Maybe it's just the looks that we share, the things we do. That's film. And it became hours. We fit perfectly together. Yadda yadda. Relationship growth. How do you show that on film? Maybe hire some famous composer?

Then something happened. Something to make everyone jolt out of their own little paths — the elevator mad dash, the lonely pacing, the window staring, or the hand holding as we had done. Our hands were made our own. Aurora was on her feet. I can't remember where I learned her name. I guess I named her.

She was running to those heavy green doors that lead to the stairs. I followed. We dashed up the stairs, flight after flight. It was pointless, picture a ten frame animation loop, but I followed Aurora all the same. It was an important moment to reflect that this moment had no context. Why are we running? Is there a rush? Are we needed somewhere?

She knew something I didn't. We entered a small room. At the far end of the room there was a man in a cloak behind a heavy important desk. Aurora retrieved a long silver baton from somewhere and broke it out to its full length. The man pulled a sword from behind his desk. And they fought. You've seen films. I leave this part up to the director. Insert action scene here. I was just the observer. Aurora was stunning. Action heroin, still a dab of that wacky veneer so you just get a tad of slapstick, but not enough to make her into "the Fool". Everything I wanted, so much so that I'd left nothing for me. She was the perfect one, the real hero of our tale. Had I fallen into the audience?

I looked up at myself on the screen, pressed up against the room's tacky wallpaper, pushed to the periphery of the screen. The camera lunged and flew with Aurora, leaving my image behind. I left the theater, and was the "real world" inviting? I don't know. I barely had time to feel sick to my stomach before —

BRRR BRRRRRR BRRRRR BRRRRR BRRRR BRRRR BRRRRR.

I opened my eyes. Can you believe it?

BRR BRRR BRRR BRRR BRRR.

To think that on this night (this night!) I could fall into such a lovely sleep so quickly and become wrapped up in a beautiful dream, the end of which I would have liked to have seen! I laid there for a few moments longer trying to fight my way back to the dream.

For once I wasn't able to keep myself in my head. Instead Tim and I were forced to sit up and groggily share looks of utter disgust and disbelief. It was three AM. The fire alarm was going off at three AM on the one night I dreamt well. Only in this place, this hell, could that have happened. After we groveled, gabbled, and stomped grumpily down the fire exit, we stood silently in our hastily thrown on extremities, shivering. We could feel the wet grass through our shoes. As the rest of the bleary eyed residency vacated, I remembered Tim had wanted to talk to me about something and asked him about it.

"I'm gonna be a Satanist. I am a Satanist."

"Huh?" I said. "You worship the devil?"

"No, that's only like a myth. It's been named really poorly because I feel like it doesn't really have that much to do with Satan..."

"So what does it have to do with?"

"It's all about like self empowerment, you know?"

"OK."

"And like living for yourself, taking care of yourself first and foremost. I feel like sometimes I don't treat myself good enough you know."

“OK, like how?”

“I don’t know, just like in a general sense. Like a living in the now sort of thing, sense.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Stop doing that, I’m being serious.”

“No, I’m listening I’m just cold and feel like poop. So is there like a bible or something?”

“Yeah.”

“You read it?”

“No.”

“How are you a Satanist again?”

“Whatever, jag. How many Christians actually read the bible?”

“Fair enough... Is this an aesthetic thing? Are you trying to look cool.”

“No! I’m not going to be wearing any leather jackets or anything, I swear. I swear. I mean, IDK. I feel like that part’s also a myth. But I’m in it just for the philosophy.”

“So you’re definitely not just doing it cause it’s called Satanism?”

“No.”

“You’re definitely not just doing it so you can write 666 on the wall or something?”

“Eh,” he said as if considering it, then he laughed, and I laughed. “No, but I’m serious,” he said.

That's pretty much how I remember our conversation going last night. Soon after that the firetrucks came and turns out, of course, that nothing was on fire at all. We went to sleep after that, and then today he didn't really mention it, but he did come home with a pentagram. He hung it on the wall over his bed and I joked if he was going to use it for a dream catcher, and he said, "duh didn't you know that Native Americans were Satanists?" and I laughed.

November 21st, 2014

Turns out there is a Satanist group here in Corvallis. I never would have thought a small town like this could hold one, but I guess college towns really do have a little of everything. I went thrifting with Tim over the weekend and I picked up a raincoat because my umbrella had broken. The weather has been straight up black the clouds have been massing so much. He picked up a couple pairs of jeans which he quickly turned into jorts through his patented jort process. He also picked up a few black robes for the services he attends. Oh sure, I was concerned at first, but right after his first meeting he told me point blank that there had been no funny business going on there — just a nice little talk about the folly of Christ, and then a potluck where he got to know a flock of the other members. They were mostly all college students, but a few of them were older members, one of them even told Tim that he had been around in the 60's when LaVey had written *The Satanic Bible*. Tim said they all drank a little sixty six point six proof, a strong enough drink to tear up Tim's virginal canal, and then walked home. He said he'd felt a little out of place since he'd barely even read any of *The Satanic Bible*, and cause he'd just been wearing a navy blue hoodie over a *Beatles* t-shirt and jorts. In fact Tim hasn't really read any of *The Satanic*

Bible. He's read what amounts to a few paragraphs and some cliff notes online ("What the heck do I even need college for? Everything I could ever want to know is on Wikipedia, and it's free and good and I don't even have to get out of bed to learn stuff!"). He's getting around to cracking open the tome, or so he says, but every day I see the ugly thing (not in a spiritual sense, purely in an aesthetic one) sitting on his desk, untouched, while he continues to bring home Satanic paraphernalia. These days there are ram's horns, posters of LaVey throwing the horns with his bald head shining under harsh studio lights, crude metal drawings printed off of fan boards, and more pentagrams than you can shake a witches broom at hanging on the walls. When our RA said, at the beginning of the year, before he handed us our room keys, "Welcome to hell," I hadn't realized he was being so literal. Still, as long as Tim keeps his things on his side of the room everything should be fine. It's been kind of fun to watch honestly.

December 1st, 2014

Tim has been invited to a Satanic retreat in Portland for a long weekend. It's not until January, so he's still making up his mind whether or not to go. If he does I'll have the whole room to myself, all weekend, whoopie... I told him it'd get real boring up in here. Until then, we have finals to worry about and Winter Break to enjoy.

December 6th, 2014

Tim opened the door quickly, and stood before me, so I looked up from *I Love Dick* just after Chris Kraus made a reference I finally understood (Kurtis Blow).

Timothy was standing in his “All Goats Go to Hell” t-shirt conspicuously devoid of dinner, which he had left a few minutes before to retrieve. I stared forward, knowing that I would be, in time, whether I liked it or not, regaled with the epic story.

“It’s fucking 8:41,” said Tim. “And food place is closed! They think they can just do that!”

“Oh, yeah. Did you get the email?” I asked.

“Why would I read their dumb email?” said Tim, wildly gesturing. “It’s not even that, that late to be eating. I literally, I think, yelled LUCIFER’S FUCKING SAKE right outside and I hope someone heard it. Now I have to find somewhere fucking else to eat.”

Tim threw his phone and then his wallet onto his bed and then took off his shorts, dropping them to a little pile at the side of his bed next to his PVC translucent backpack and crumpled sweatshirt he’d bought on some Satanist’s Etsy store.

“Why are you taking your pants off?” I said. I couldn’t help but laugh at the whole thing even if it was messed up that Cascadia was closed conspicuously early tonight.

“Just like showing off my bod! It’s cold out there, and I guess I’m gonna have to walk somewhere else. So, pants.”

“The MU stuff should be open.”

“Do you really think the MU fucking places are open Devin? Do you?”

I did. But I wasn’t talking.

“I’m not,” continued Tim, “you know if I’m going to eat at a place where I have to spend my real money I’m not going to eat at the fucking MU place. I’m not giving my money to them!”

Tim looked to the ground and whispered something vitriolic. He pulled on a pair of black jeans, found his ipod - set it to Sufjan Steven’s most hardcore album, the charmingly apocalyptic *Age of Adz*, threw his big ass studio headphones around his ears and went out the door with a slam.

Through the astonishingly thin walls of the dorm I heard Tim slam his considerable (2 x Me) weight against the door to the fire escape. Then the reverse crescendo of dull pounding metallic lurches as he charged through the hollow metallic stairwell that leads from Hell to the campus at large. He stops and stomps, shocking the muscles in his thighs, against the sickly, paint chipped steps and flies down the steps in a barrage. At this moment Tim realizes that he is alone in the stairwell, and it is at this moment that Satanism first truly captures his heart. He understands that to be alive is to be alone, and that if he can’t control himself, he can control nothing. He understands Lucifer and can feel his serpentine rock hewn incarnadine tendrils filling up his heart with love. The hemorrhaging divine beauty of the world as he has never known it seeps into his pores through the wide open spaces between nucleus and hazy indeterminable electrons in those thin iron alloy walls and into that empty packet of sour gummy worms that someone left on the ground. Tim has never felt so connected to anything as he feels to that empty packet of sour gummy worms in that moment. Tim leaps into the air and brings his full force down against the ground, sending a resounding, effulgent industrial frequency bouncing and

bounding up the tower he has made his dark kingdom. He leaps and heaves his body against this beautiful prison that he can't wait to rid himself of. He hates this place and he hopes it fucking gets swallowed up by the fucking jaws of the earth. He loves himself because he can hate freely, without remorse, with the solid knowledge that there is love in his heart for himself and for Satan, that being of terrible influence who loves him back so.

Back in the room I just laughed at the outrageous racket Tim was making.

December 10th, 2014

We've been invited to an impromptu Satanist wedding tomorrow. I've been told to dress in black.

December 11th, 2014

The wedding had to be a hoax. It had to be! I snickered throughout the entire thing. I tried to contain it. I covered my face, I looked down... I did what I'm supposed to do — more out of fear than reverence towards anything I was witnessing. After all I was with Satan and his little would be helpers. I don't even know why I'm writing this. I'm never going to forget this day. Still, the details are so perfect I don't want to forget a thing.

So, to set the scene for you, the wedding was held outside, in this sort of overgrown grove with these long vines hanging down from trees and thick, long legged spiders crawling through the undergrowth. We were sat in two rows of kingly mahogany (kingly in that they were over-sized, highly polished, heavy and replete with wide luxurious arm rests). Tim and I ended up sitting in the second row, though

as it turned out this was an unnecessary bit of courtesy on our part since the first row of ten chairs never completely filled. Our programs pointed out with discernible glee that the groom was six years, six months and six days older than the bride. The wedding party consisted of three men and seven women. I was told that the bride had a large family, born and bred Satanists. Everyone was dressed in black — from Tim and I's black slacks and shirts to the bridal party's admittedly sleek, slim dresses that I'm sure in another situation could turn an eye, to the groom's party whose heavily padded silk vests (gray on black) with dark red ties and entreating (probably horned, though I never saw them up close) red cuff links, to the arch of matrimony whose painter had found an undiscovered hue of black (something I thought impossible, I mean, it's *black*), to the silver buckled black leather vests and dwarfing boots the long curly bearded "minister" boldly portrayed. It wouldn't be for a few minutes, however that what I was here for would actually dawn on me.

It was cold, but we all waited as the gruff minister (not someone from Tim's church, he notified me) went on for a bit about how LaVey had seen the power of marriage and that he himself had written The Bible under the influence, so to speak, of the institution. There was nothing, he said, that made it at all un-Satanic. After all if one person wants another and the other person wants them as well, what could be more selfish than choosing to covet them for eternity? It is an act of release, he said, a coming to fruition for both parties to find a partner just as Satanic as they are who they can share life's ups and downs with. The audience briefly applauded. Then the music began.

It was “Here Comes the Bride” exactly as you know it, straight from a CD in a cheap speaker system in the woods. And then come she did in a black, lacy, I’d say over the line for a wedding (but I suppose I really don’t get to say) dress that was in short, lingerie, if a bit more protective and flowing than your typical garb. I have to admit that there was something alluring about the way she walked in her, as I then noticed, bright red heels. She was from Tim’s church, and I suddenly wondered if Tim had known what he was doing getting involved with Satanists if women like her were attracted to that sort of thing.

Later at the reception, after the groom stood before the crowd and talked in tongues (a practice, he assured us, that was completely unchristian, and that they had bastardized the practice in order to undermine Satanists. I of course wondered what he was talking about since Christians had been speaking in tongues long before LaVey was born, but hey, it was his day, I let him have it.) for a few minutes while the crowd cheered. I really wasn’t sure why I had been invited, and honestly wasn’t sure that I had. Maybe Tim had simply dragged me along incognito. He probably needed the support. If I wasn’t supposed to be there, no one mentioned it. Someone had found out how to plug their iPhone into the speaker system and had begun to blast Kanye West’s “Devil in a New Dress” and people began to dance right there. I’ve never been one for dancing, so I asked Tim if we could leave. He looked to be only marginally less comfortable than I was.

It was then that the Reverend returned (though I hadn’t notice him leave) on his obnoxious motorcycle and ran up to the dancing newly weds. He exclaimed proudly

that he'd obtained the marriage license as if that were something that hadn't been squared away already.

"Oh, I can't believe we aren't officially married yet," said the bride, bending her knees in a delicious display of cutesy affection.

"No, no, no," said one of her sisters. "That piece of paper doesn't matter. You're married in the eyes of our Dark Lord. That's all that matters."

The bride nodded and her eyes flooded with tears, not for the first time, and in that instant I lost all attraction I had to her, and thus knew I had to leave. They didn't have cake.

December 16th, 2014

Tim got rather unprecedented grades on his finals. Straight A's, though his midterms and such still prevented him from getting a 4.0 this first semester. I didn't do quite as well on my finals, but I still eked out a 4.0 without too much slack. I haven't really been able to get a hold of Tim this week. Whenever I call he's holed up at home making music that he won't talk about. Honestly, it's fine. We've definitely seen a lot of each other over the past few months. The problem is I don't really know what to do. I feel like I spend most of my day doing the dishes and running errands for my parents, and I don't really have any projects of my own. It's all making for a rather dull break, but I'm sure things will turn around when we get back to school.

December 27th, 2014

I...really don't know that I want to be here anymore. I felt like I had purpose before the break. Before I left for school my parents wanted to take me places, and

then they'd call me all the time, but you know the thing is now that I'm back with my parents they don't talk to me. They, you know, cook me food, do my laundry. They've got their lives to lead, but I've got nothing to do. And my friends are all gone too.

December 28th, 2014

I think it was always like this, looking back on things. My parents are happy to have me, I've no doubt about that, it's just they don't realize that something is missing between us. Maybe they do realize it. Maybe the whole family is too screwed up to do anything about it. Or maybe I'm just wrong. Maybe this is how everyone's family is. Maybe I have it good.

Maybe I'm just misreading the whole situation.

January 8th, 2015

Tim's made a pact (a dark one, hehe) to go to that retreat thing in Portland which is kind of dumb. Why would you want go back there. I really don't see why they just didn't have the retreat over the break so I wouldn't be left in this hellhole by myself, but whatever, leave it to Satanists to only think of themselves.

January 15th, 2015

Tim woke me up last night when he returned from his retreat. His eyes were bloodshot sort of like, well you all know what a mule's visage reads after a sixteen hour day of riding through the desert, yeah pretty much that. The black robes he had departed in were nowhere to be found, replaced by a bright yellow t-shirt and dark jeans. After locking the door, he told me, while I rubbed Mr. Sandman's garbage out

of my eyes, what had happened to him. I really don't know how to write all this down or anything like that, but I think it should be written.

Tim had been taken to a church after hours. Along with the eight other Satanists in his mass. The church was made unhallow: with spray paint over the false Messiah's kisser; with raucously overturned chairs; with burned bibelots of bibles; with piss in the pews; with spurious spit in the holy water; with pious pentagrams; with crosses, upturned; with worthful curse words; with His name taken in vain; with a large helping of glee; with anisotropic vigor for as long as worldly contempt lasted; with a black felt tipped marker used to draw phallic imagery across the sacred wallpaper; with a cow humping grin; with an upturned nose full of recalcitrant snot swiveled indiscriminately towards civility; with a single dirty cum stained sock placed neatly upon the podium come directly from the Universities cum laude; with Jimmy the Satanist screaming praise to the Dark Lord like an auctioneer with all his teeth knocked out; with Alfonse the Satanist draining pack after pack of summer fruit Capri Suns; with Hector the Satanist pulling out his dick at every juncture and fucking God where he lay; with Rick the Satanist jumping up and down in uncontrollable splendor, speaking in some unknown speech, and fluttering his eyes like a winsome movie starlet; with Malik the Satanist herding the pig into the center of the congregational center and having a gay old time; with Harriot the Satanist sharpening her knife in the corner with nothing less than a pentagram adorned whetstone and handing it off pointed end first to Simone the Satanist who licked it with her pierced tongue and took the handle up her hooch as far as she could reasonably stick it before walking over to Tim and removing the now hot and slick tool from its pouch of love and

carnal intent; with Hammerstein the Satanist with no first name who barked orders of ritualistic consignment at Tim who now seemed to remember some sort of oblique passage in *The Satanist Bible* that referenced rituals but that he had only skimmed over like he had done rather a lot of things in his life; and with Tim who, now faced with a deadly task, took the sexually imbued blade in his virgin hands and walked up to the pig and, fearing for his own life, slit the pig's throat rather with a hesitant altogether non-committal jerk, which left it to die a slow and painful and loud and bitter and harrowing, to those nearby (even the most hardened of Satanists had hearts), and wet and bloody and trembling and seemingly endless death to which Tim now held the murder weapon. They danced around him in that desecrated space and pronounced him a true Satanist, and asked the Dark Lord himself to take him as a vessel to the mortal world. Tim stammered that he thought that LaVeyen Satanists didn't believe in anything supernatural, and they simply bleated, gloating.

Tim didn't go into much beyond that. He stopped, and I saw it in his eyes. That inability to continue and the utter loss that accompanies it. I stayed up that night with him and wrote this. I was much too worked up and freaked out to sleep anyway. We talked about a variety of things: TV to movies to music to whatever I'd done over the weekend, and occasionally he would mention something that had happened or his eyes would go rigid and his soul would seem to leave his body at the mention of a word. He mentioned a party. He mentioned a long dark tale or maybe tale. The details were few and far between. I caught shudders only. This must be the end of this whole Satanist thing. I'll be glad to be rid of it, and I think it will be good for Tim to leave it behind. My eyes are starting to close on their own now.

January 16th, 2015

God damn it. I really thought this whole Satanist thing was behind us, and yet today Tim has returned to that cult. I should call the cops on them. When Tim gets back I'm going to call the cops on them. F F F F F. I can't believe he went back. Without even telling me either. I just know that that's where he is. This is their meeting time and Tim is nowhere to be seen. It's sick. I wonder if they have some sort of control over him. Obviously not like black magic or whatever, but. I wonder if they have like some sort of thing over him that they're black massing, I mean mailing him with. I wouldn't doubt it. They could have made him do anything up in Portland. Maybe they got video of him killing the pig. Poor little pink guy.

He's just come back. He says he just went there to tell them that he was going to continue being a Satanist. A real Satanist, and that he was done with them.

Shit, someone's knocking at our door.

Fuck. Those Satanists just came to our fucking room! I'm going to helling (I've been around Tim too much) call the cops. Tim doesn't want me to. ???! There were two of them, in those stupid, campy Buffy villain looking black robes and they got into an argument with Tim. I honestly don't know what Tim thinks he's arguing about. He still hasn't even read that dumb bible he's so friggen attached to and he's acting like this Satanist thing is the most important thing in the world to him. He told them that he was gonna keep being a Satanist as long as his middle name was 666!, but that he was going to become an unorthodox Satanist. He said he was going to cut out all the ritualistic, you know, spiritual parts of Satanism. He was just going to treat it like a philosophy, the way it should be. Those Satanists laughed at him and called

him a fake. They said they knew he was a fake from the minute he walked in the doors but that they thought he might awaken when they gave him the chance to feel The Dark Lord in his veins. They said that true philosophy can't be segregated from spirituality. That philosophy can't explain everything properly, and that spirituality must fill in the gaps and lower philosophy to the human realm where it can be really experienced and felt rather than simply studied. Tim opened his mouth to answer, but they stormed into the room and smashed all of Tim's things. As they left, he called them dumbos.

Tim says they won't be back. I still want to call the police, but I guess they didn't do anything to me really. But I refuse to live in a house where Satanists who are known pig killers can just come waltzing in and do whatever they want to me. Tim says they won't come back. I asked him if he was really going to stay a Satanist now, and he said no. He threw *The Satanist Bible* out of the window and our RA saw it and yelled at us, saying that that sort of thing was dangerous and could get you kicked out. Tim said that he was really sorry, but he was looking at me.

January 30th, 2015

Tim says he doesn't need a religion to define him. He's just going to be himself. He just has to be a self that he can live with. I told him I thought it was a good idea what he was doing. He asked me if it's what I do, and I said, yeah pretty much.

February 18th, 2015

Neither of us have been sleeping very well. Not well at all. I keep waking up in the night, over and over. Hell I really don't know when I sleep. It feels like I'm awake

all night, but I know that can't be right because I always have some lost time. I never remember what I dream or if I dream at all. Tim's still dreaming, but he's having trouble sleeping too. It doesn't help that it's oddly hot for February. I think our bodies are wiggling out.

March 1st, 2015

Tim has told me that his soul is yearning for something, and he said couldn't it be that's why we've been having trouble sleeping. My sweet lord. Where does this guy get his ideas from. I said, "don't drag me into this mess! Just cause I had a dream about God doesn't mean I have to go play the slots with him." I just wish we could go back to the way things were before this whole Satanist thing, before school started. Maybe Tim was still squirming under the hot of the cosmic pressure on his soul, but back then I didn't have to deal with the excess radiation quite so much. Tim's trying to change everything. He's stopped wearing those big skater shoes. He's started hanging out at a cemetery that's like a thirty minute bike ride away. I don't know if any of this stuff is really a change, or I guess it is, but I don't know what it's really affecting.

March 20th, 2015

Tim came home with a big tome of the Agamas today. He said that they're ancient Jainist texts. Jainism is apparently some ancient Indian religion sort of like a more extreme Buddhism, whatever that means. Tim tells me he's a Jainist now, or he's going to be. I asked him if it had anything to do with Krishna or whatever, and he said no, that there were no gods in Jainism. That it was more of a philosophy than a

religion. I nodded along. He said that Jainists were pacifists and vegetarians. That they literally couldn't hurt a fly or any other kind of bug or even micro organisms if they could help it, so they had to be super super careful.

“Uhhuh,” I said. “So you're going to be like a monk?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.”

“And you're not just doing this so you can walk around in white robes and look all wise or something?”

“Well... I'm sure they're comfy!” he said while he hung up a clay disk with Sanskrit carved into its artisanal ancient design. “But no, it's all about finding peace and unity with the universe. It's all about like mindfulness and compassion and helping others, you know putting others before yourself.”

“So you're definitely not doing this because it's an obscure Indian religion?”

“It's not that obscure...haha OK it's p obscure, but no it's going to make me an infinitely better person. You just watch Devin.”

So I guess I'm going to be watching, though what I'm not sure what I'm watching. It's like a whirlpool, I can't find where any distinct whirl begins or ends — it just seems to be going on and on forever.

Chapter 4

“Then she asked me politely what I'm thinkin about

I said nothin — she said nothin leaves nothin

If you feel me I bet this'll bring that out”

— Ghostface Killah, “Underwater”

It was almost a pleasant summer. Until the day I saw my nemesis, a guy in a black hood, slide across the shingles of my neighbor’s roof in descent.

Two years earlier I had knelt outside staring up at this same roof. My black and white beast of a cat Jemaine, sniffed the ground between his ice capped paws next to me. “Look Jemaine, look,” I implored my slow moving, self-absorbed companion. “Up there,” I said, and I pointed up to the roof where a cat had perched. This cat was, to the best of my vision, an exact replica of Jemaine. It wasn’t just that they looked identical, it was that they moved in the same slow, roving manner. I had seen this cat a few times before, though never regularly. He tended to disappear for months at a time. Jemaine didn’t like going outside when it was too hot. That’s how my parents explained his refusal to leave the house like a normal cat. I tended to notice that this behavior coincided with the times this other cat (who I’d aliased “Evil Jemaine”) came around. And he happened to come around in the summers.

This was the first time I had seen him for anything longer than a few seconds at a time, and I wondered if Evil Jemaine knew that I was watching him. If he knew that I was uncovering a secret link in the universe by being able to look between him and his dopy copy next to me. I wondered if Jemaine had ever seen his Evil counterpart,

and if so what had happened? I captured about a solid minute of Evil Jemaine on my digital camera. However, when I looked at the footage the next day I saw that it was blurry and that Evil Jemaine couldn't be made out in any detail. He seemed to be a cat. And that was about it.

By the time my thoughts caught up to me, the man in black had all but disappeared from sight. He had dashed off, down the cul de sac, but not before I could get a good read on him. I knew immediately what he'd been here to do. I knew immediately that I had been visited by the visage of my very own Evil Jemaine. Finally I could put to rest all doubt that such a being existed. But had it been luck that led to this discovery, or had he wanted me to see him?

I forced my way through my front door and locked the door. I slid down to the floor and thought about who it might be. Who knew so much about me? Who wanted me destroyed? Who had I wronged?

I wouldn't have time to worry about what to write, I realized, because this was a much greater mystery. I rose to my feet and ran to the back door to make sure that it was locked. Yes, this would take all my energy.

"We recording tomorrow?" said Andrew.

"Yeah, yeah yeah yeah ye-ye-ye-ye-ye-yeah!" said Timothy miming Devo.

"Wait so we are?"

"Yeah," said Timothy.

Andrew's tin can hurtled over a speed bump and his asbestos covered roof let loose some of its package. To think that Andrew's car was our favorite car to spend time in. Sure, you could say it had character. You could also say it was a piece of shit,

but there was something in the three of us that enjoyed shityness at its playful best. When people saw it on the street they probably saw it as an old worn out pair of wheels with chipped paint and broken locks on one side. It didn't matter because we all saw it the same way.

"Devin," said Andrew, blatantly looking the opposite way he was driving to talk to me. "You still, uh, working on a little bit of this." Andrew then removed his hands from the wheel and mimed typing.

"Oh, uh," I said. "Watch the road!"

Andrew laughed, but did as I said.

"So is that a no? A yes?" he said.

"Devin is the king of just saying, 'Uh, duh, I don't know' when you ask him questions," said Timothy.

"Whatever. I'm a busy dude, you know."

"What do you do?" said Andrew incredulously, turning once again to face me.

"I work at the pool! You guys don't have jobs!"

"Psh," said Andrew grinning. "Pooping around in a pool isn't a job."

"I'm not pooping around! I'm having to fix its poopy brokenness."

We pulled into a record store and shopped around for a while. I kept bringing them records with silly cover art and laughing at them, so I could keep moving around. I didn't stick around them long enough to have a real conversation. I kept it at one liners and silly looks.

Then we were on our way home. Andrew bought an old Dylan record, and Tim bought a local tape called *Soloing over Helen Keller*, which was exactly what it

promised. The guitar licks were so random and overpowering that they invoked some sort of irrepressible urge in me. Finally I understood. Ezekiel was the him. The enemy. Who else was a writer, who knew me, who had easy access to my house, who knew my family, and my friends, who was sadistic enough to pull something like this off. What had I done to him? That's what I wanted to know.

I grabbed Andrew's shoulder and told him to stop at Ezekiel's house, an unnecessary request for sure given that he lived only a block away from me. But that block suddenly mattered a great deal to me. There was a clock spinning in my head, and I could see now that I would have this whole ordeal put behind me when Senior year started. Ezekiel! Of course he hadn't been able to resist, and of course this was why he'd refused to talk about his writing! God how he must have laughed every time. And how was I going to get back at him?

The car stopped. I dashed out of the car and pounded on Ezekiel's front door. I'd smash his computer. Easy. I'd need evidence on him though, otherwise I'd be the crazy looking one. His little sister opened the door and I stepped past her, asking, slurring the words as I went, if Ezekiel was in his room. She said something, so I charged down the hallway. His door was closed.

Suddenly it opened. A smile on his face. Dreamy, expectant. Knowing. He was here to gloat. He'd known I was coming. He opened his mouth. Well I wasn't going to let him have this moment. I pushed him aside and sat at his desk. Where is it! I searched my name in his computer, but nothing came up.

"What are you doing?" he said.

“Oh, playing dumb now?” I said. “Where’s all the stuff you wrote? Where do you keep it. The writing?”

“Why are you yelling?”

I felt my senses slowly come back online, realizing that some sort of hyperfocus had momentarily captured me, and that I hadn’t had the chance to feel or smell or taste anything for some time.

“Ugh,” I said. “What is that smell?”

“Probably my Iguana,” he said. “What do you want?”

“Your novel, your stuff. I want to see it. I never got to see it. I need to check something.”

He stared at me appraising, I’m sure, the likelihood of my leaving if he refused.

“Fine.”

He pushed his chair with me in it out of the way and opened up a word file. I scanned it quickly.

“No. This isn’t it. Where is it?”

“This is it. Why don’t you get the fuck out of my room now?”

I stared at him. I’d never known Ezekiel to be a good actor. I looked for a tell, like they do in movies, but of course, he was just Ezekiel.

“Why did you talk this up?” I said.

“I didn’t. I mean. What? Get out. It’s good.”

“It’s fan fiction,” I said.

“What does that matter?”

“You talked about it... you talked about it like it was Hemingway or something.”

“Who said anything about Hemingway? I just told you what sorts of things I was thinking about. Whatever. You just have such a high falutin ideal about fiction you don’t think anything can be good unless it’s ‘serious.’ Where’s your book?”

“I’m not going to be lectured by a fan fiction writer!”

“Oh, excuse me,” I said. “No one’s allowed in here.”

I stopped in my tracks. It was Lena Lingard. I was struck once again by the similarity her face bore to her daughter who’d I taken classes with.

I’d taught one of her boys during the school year, and had met with her because her boy had been having trouble with his breast stroke kick. He had been held back for a few months because of it. He was one of those kids who is so eager that he’ll barrel on as hard and as fast as he can when he’s doing something wrong because he wants so hard to get it right. He’s the kind of person I didn’t know how to teach. She’d told me that she wasn’t worried. She’d smiled, and said that he would pass when he needed to. She didn’t look old enough to be the mother of a girl my age, and I was left to wonder when exactly she’d immigrated from Vietnam.

“Sorry Devin,” she said. “I was looking to see if you had classes...” Her eyes roved across the drained pool.

“No, uh, pool’s broke,” I said.

She’d asked me once if I’d wanted to paint with her. Had she invited me? Paint? Paint. What a beautiful idea.

“Do you still... paint?” I found myself saying.

“Of course. I was just showing at a gallery yesterday. Are you interested in painting?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you come over then.”

She reached out and held my shoulder.

I walked through the neighborhood wondering where the relief of cool maple and fir trees have gone. I stood at the corner of their home looking up at a pale blue two story building with shuttered windows. It’s my house. I become concerned I’ve walked in a circle; that’s my window up there with the blinds drawn, isn’t it? Then Lena called my name from behind.

She was standing, framed in the doorway to a tall white house with a peculiar chimney on the other side of the street in a white dress that flutters around and revealed her knees.

“Come, come,” she said, and I followed her into her home. I muttered an apology about thinking the other house had been hers. It fell flat. I’m not sure if she heard me or not. It was a stupid thing to say anyway. I followed her down a shallow set of stairs and into a wide open space where a wide painting of Lena herself is hung. She was searching the horizon from a hilltop overlooking the Tillamook coast with a paintbrush held high. The painting itself seemed to zoom through the air. It wouldn’t let your eye rest. Directly ahead of us was a small canvas on a makeshift easel and a table covered by a clear piece of glass.

Lena put on a CD of classical music and returned to the canvas while I watched, my hands folded together. I watched her hands as she picked up bottles of paint one at

a time and squeezed thumb sized dabs of paint onto the glass. After a minute the whole rainbow was present in little snails of paint. Her hands seemed to be the only part of her body that showed any age at all. It was as if her hands had become small wardens.

“You see I have no black,” she said. “This is because I do not believe in black. Some painters use black, but I don’t believe it exists. Black is not a color, right? Just an absence of light. Darkness is only a place where the light has not reached yet, but it will, so it does not exist. OK.”

She taped the picture of the Columbia next to the canvas. The river was as still as the forest and wetlands and mountains that surround it. In fact the only thing that seemed kinetic was the barely visible fog that appeared to be rolling in from off screen. The fog captured some sort of purple hue and refracted it onto the red rocky mountainsides. The result was a picture in which color is untamable, incomprehensible, detached from a visible source.

“Beautiful,” she said. And with her back to me she continued, “When you paint. When you create art, you are not trying to conquer. We are not trying to conquer this picture. This picture of nature is already beautiful. We are putting ourselves in with the picture and creating something new. We want to go and meet the picture at half way, you see. It is the same with everything. One day when you meet a girl to be with, you do not want to conquer her, no. Never. Simply meet her halfway, come together in unison. That is where beauty happens.”

Then she picked up a wide brush and began to paint the sky.

“We always start with the sky...” she said softly as if a secret had passed through her lips. “I know you have come here to paint,” she said, turning back to me and smiling. “Do not worry, you will get a chance to paint.”

Then I watched her paint.

“We put on layers, lots and lots of layers of color, so we only worry about one layer at a time. That’s all you can do. One layer at a time is difficult enough. Never try to think of everything at once. You’ll never pick up the brush. At the end, after the paint has dried, we put on a coating of varnish which will help the layers shine through. People glow, and the more you look at a person and love them the more layers that come forward to the eye. It is the same with paintings. The varnish helps all the colors and layers come forward to be seen. Until then. One layer.”

After that she was silent for a long time. I would watch the strokes of the paint for a while and then adjust my feet and watch her shoulders as they pushed and pulled underneath her smooth cotton dress. The light would strike her just so, and I would watch her shadow on the floor as much as I would watch her. She would mutter occasionally, and less frequently she would step aside and hand me the brush or the pallet knife with scant instruction. Then after I had finished worriedly dabbing and prodding at the poor canvas, she would return, wordlessly, but with a tall presence more like a mountain, lake, or jungle than a human and I would relinquish the brush. We carried on like this, the soft Vietnamese mutterings of her eighty year old mother in the room behind us mixing in sweetly with the terse, tinny orchestra that reverberated from Lena’s stereo.

She stepped back and placed her paintbrush to the side.

“It’s beautiful. Already. If you step back and half-close your eyes like this, you can see it better as a whole and see...gorgeous, isn’t it.”

“Yes.”

But I wasn’t sure. They were her strokes. Then we continued on, much the same as we had. Her brush made fast, irregular strokes, crossing the now color-lit canvas a hundred times every minute. When she handed me the brush she told me again and again, “randomly, randomly, but be precise. Know what you must do, but do not think too much.” Time did not seem to pass in that room. The slim light that slid in through the cracks of the venetian blinds remained constant throughout. I must have gotten used to standing for long periods of time, for my feet and legs did not bother me at all.

I held my hand out, hovering above Lena’s supple shoulder, anxious to use the brush again. I must have watched her paint for hours. I figured I knew how to perform with the brush as well as she.

“When I was in Vietnam I used to be very proud of my paintings. I thought they were very good, and I was impressed with my own skill. Others told me how precious of a gift I had, and so I cherished it. I held the paintbrush so close to my heart that nothing else could get close. But after I fell in love with the creator I realized that it wasn’t me doing it at all. I was only copying him.

“I came to America, and my hands forgot how to hold the brush. I was in an accident here and suddenly nothing made sense. I could not hold the brush. It hurt even to think about such things. I fell into a dark place, where little light could find me. All the color in the world literally started to fade away. I lay in bed all day

thinking over and over again that the walls had turned gray. That the sky had turned gray. That my hands had turned gray.

“But the seasons change. I began to imagine myself painting, yes, just laying there imagining it. I think this is when I needed to paint the most, and in a way I did. I can still see those paintings in my head sometimes. When I began to use my hands again, I think the doctors were frightened. Frightened that I would not work, you see? But I had learned that even if my hands never worked, that I could paint. I had found room inside, you see. I could share my work with the creator. No longer was I trying to conquer my brush. So when I painted and failed, it was still beautiful. Always beautiful.

“When you create something or do something only for yourself you are trying to conquer it. It can feel good, yes, but you can never find the truest beauty, the greatest potential in yourself until you relinquish this control and learn to meet at half way. I believe art is a wonderful...wonderful thing. I only wish more people would spend time doing it because it is not a violent...not a conquering activity, truly. Once people learn it is not a conquering activity. If people enjoyed art more there would be much less conquering. There is so much violence sometimes...and it is because people want to conquer everything. Whatever you do, you must not let it conquer your heart, for you will then become a conqueror, and have no room to love anything else in your heart.”

I dropped my hand to my side, stuck it in my pocket, and she turned, knowingly, to smile at to me.

I'm still thinking about Ezekiel and what he said in that ferris wheel. We've moved forwards a summer. This is the summer after I graduate, if you're keeping track. There isn't anything really between us any longer. Friendship, rivalry, all gone. But I still can't get that conversation out of my head. Which of course means only one thing. One important thing. I haven't written that novel. It's like that little scene with the two of us up there in the sky is the first chapter to a novel, but there's nothing more to the book. Title page, that humiliation on the ferris wheel, blank space. One or two hundred blank pages. So what do I do? I go back and read what's there.

The deck is a large raised platform of tender oak adorned with a pair of once white, once seamless thick fabric lounge chairs, one of which I find myself laying back on reading *The Blind Owl* by Sadegh Hedayat, an Iranian novel written from the perspective of a madman. From the top of my deck one can see across the old wooden fence that separates the yard of my family and that of the nameless family in the adjacent street, past the thick Douglas firs which perform as a second fence.

Fifty four years earlier my grandfather stands on the deck of an aircraft carrier, where one can see all the ocean has to offer, nothing more than the white of the surf and the blue of the sky reflecting on the opalescence of the water and nothing less than the endless monotony of sickening wave after torrid lap that is the Atlantic. My grandfather had been out for three months and had yet to see dry land. The last time he'd touched ground he'd been in England, and even then only for one and a half weeks after a four month stint maneuvering through endless peaks and valleys. My grandfather had come to the conclusion since his being posted on the USS *Circumference* a year ago that every wave was the same, not a repetition or a clone

but in fact the same exact wave manifested again and again, caught in a loop. He felt for the waves. The two destroyer class battleships on either side of him seemed nothing more than waves themselves now. He looked to the horizon and saw clouds building in the distance while the wind beat his salt sunken face into a scowl. He figured the next time he stepped off this boat, he wouldn't be getting back on. He'd had enough of the ocean, enough of maneuvers, enough of storms and wet nights, enough of thin, corral rough hammock beds that swung into the wall while you tried to sleep, enough of dry packaged cans of shit for every meal, enough of that wall of water that stared you down no matter where you looked, enough of downed airplanes, lost crew members, and commands that tended to act like whirlpools, sucking you right out of your job description and into somebody else's, enough. And to think he'd felt the same way about the farm. It was all enough to make him wish he had to guts to jump off the side of the damned thing and just start swimming to see how far he could make it.

Spread out atop my deck with the folds of the book held up in protection against the direct light of the sun I hear the neighbor boys come out to play. I listen to them shout and giggle a few undecipherable words before returning my attention to the words of Hedayat and his powerless protagonist. I curse inwardly after a page of text has passed through my eyes and out of my brain into the blank canvas where unread words go to mingle with mixed drinks.

In this same backyard, five years earlier, my brother, fed up with a school that tells him what to think and of teachers who couldn't care less and a society that shovels plastic pollution into the waters which are his waters and say it's his problem,

and people who tell him to stop wasting his time, to stop growing his hair, who look at him like he's some street urchin, decided it was all enough to just start digging to see how far he could get. So he picks up a shovel, picks a spot and starts digging. By the time our parents had returned from work the damage had been done: the hole was a foot deep and about two feet wide. My brother sat, sullen, his guitar held tightly to his chest as our mother overreacted to the new blemish in her yard. She wanted to know what he was going to do with it. My brother plucked a few strings, forcibly unpleasant, then he looked up and stared, blank faced. By the weekend my father had started digging, the shirt off his back, a new something temporary tattooed on his brow. They dug through the summer, took the hatchback to the river and loaded up the biggest rocks they could lift. But of course by this point there was too much of a point to the whole thing, and pretty soon the leaves were falling from the trees and my brother had been granted permission to attend a special school where he wouldn't have to see all those loud mouthed idiots who used to leer at him in the halls, and pretty soon "the ditch" wasn't "the ditch" any more it was "the pond" despite the fact that it remained, and has remained as I stare out at it now, simply a ditch.

"Hey," I hear a girl shout, subverting my expectations and jolting me from the page. I look over the brim of the book at a little boy, shirtless with red shorts, and a little girl with pigtails and a black shirt with a pink dog on it. She bares her teeth and puts her arms up like a homeless T-rex before slinking away under my gaze. I return to the novel. The boy shouts at me this time. I put the novel down, annoyed, but unwilling to show it. I simply stare back at them. The boy asks for my name and I put my book up as a hopeful third fence between the two of us. It's getting hot, I think.

He shouts at me again. He asks me if I can talk. I stare at the words in front of me blankly letting them melt into a stew of letters. He asks me if I'm dumb or something. I get up, the book held loosely in my grip. I stalk up to the sliding glass door without looking back. I open the door. They laugh. I step through the door. They shout one last meaningless thing and the door is slammed. Kali, my calico cat, runs and, her nails, having slid out of her plush paws in fright, skids across the hardwood floor and crashes headfirst into our coffee table. She looks up at me. I immediately feel shame for letting those snotty children dominate me the way they did. I put the novel away on my bookshelf in disgust.

After that first meeting with Lena I rushed home to watch dozens of Youtube videos on: the basics; the fundamentals; the beginners guides; the five easy steps; the easy way to; the simple man's path towards an understanding, of art. Focus on the lines, not the bigger picture they said. They said put it together like a puzzle. They said don't think. They said don't hesitate. They said don't have regrets.

So I draw a meandering set of lines. Some short, some long, some straight, some curved, some spiraling, some in catabasis, some in anabasis, some in a Southern tone, some in a Midwestern dull eyed stare, some in a Washington smog, some in the style of a Canadian kerfuffle, some in some sort of *New York!* boldness, and still more in some rawboned Brooklyn bitterness, some plain, some scribbled, some meticulously laid, some intriguingly inventive, some sporadically spooky, some hellishly hawkish in the way in which they peered out at me as if to provoke some sort of brooh-ha-ha or hurly burly; in short: any which way that came to the tips of my fingers.

And it was a mess. Absolute anarchy — and meaningless at that.

It was the end of the summer, yes, the cusp of school and in fact a completely different way of life from those hot months, was here and there too, perhaps there more so than here, for by mid August all across the East Coast and Midwest, kids were sitting in classrooms as attentively as the chemicals and electricity bouncing around their flesh obsessed minds would allow. That's why schools start so early, you know. But it doesn't work. Erotic thoughts come just as often in the morning. And in the morning you don't fight them.

It was still warm, but overcast. The model for how a project can go wrong — “The Ditch” — in my backyard had wavered slightly this summer, changing once again to The Pond, and had actually been reduced in depth, but widened in scope to include a small waterfall, before settling once again, as the leaves begin to shiver and catch a fever, to becoming nothing more than The Ditch, as it belongs.

I sketched while I listened to some of Timothy's new demos, placing lines and marks across blank pages until I no longer felt hateful towards the automaton that put them there. I threw away every piece of paper I placed ink to with no remorse. By the end of the month my hands felt like the algae that had been feeding off them, making them awkward, weak and foolish had disappeared. I could draw for the first time in my life, and yet as I called Lena, intent to paint again, free from the sea gunk that had held me, I heard my voice quiver.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Lena.”

“Devin, how are you?”

“I’m OK, I’m OK.”

“You would like to paint again?”

“Yes,” I said, and I knew I only wanted to stand next to her and watch her slender arms create a whole new world before me.

When I returned to Lena’s home it was filled with music. It was soft, but moving. I found myself listening strangely closely to the music I had never heard before.

Lena approached me from behind and placed a hand on my shoulder. I pulled away out of instinct, but her hand remained in place.

“Do you like the music?” she asked me while I continued to face ahead, towards the studio.

I saw, out of the corner of my eye, appearing at the top of the staircase like a phantom, Lena’s daughter, Fubuki. She hovered. I watched her eyes, a bright constellation that shone independent of color, as they gathered up information from the scene before her. I felt Lena’s grip harden, probably imperceptibly, over my skin. Somehow the air around me grew wet. The music grew frantic, the pace increasing dramatically in the blink of an eye. The daughter turned, her obsidian hair acting the part of a ninja’s smoke grenade. Lena’s hand slipped away, for the theme began to slow.

Lena led me to the aft of the room where a new completely blank canvas waits with its sudsy hue and timber texture.

“I’ve been practicing,” I said.

Lena cocked her eye at me and placed a paintbrush in my hand. A picture of a coral reef, illuminated as if through a huge slice of swiss cheese.

“Try on your own,” she said.

I stepped up to the canvas and placed a glob of each primary color on the glass tablet next to me as I’d watched her do it. Then I stared at the canvas, utterly captured by my helplessness.

“What does this picture say to you? Remember, you are trying to place yourself with the painting. What are you thinking?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Remember you are creating something inherently beautiful. There is no need to fight with it. Whatever you place there — that will be an accurate depiction of what you are. As long as you want it to be.”

While I painted I was aware of something slipping across my back somewhat in time to the music. I didn’t turn my head, but my vision was caught in the corners, the ice caps of my eyes. The music had become soothing, as a sort of permanence fell over my being. When my brush paused Lena asked me this question:

“What are you thinking about?”

“You,” I confessed, looking at the painting of her on the wall.

I held my breath and waited for my temperature to drop. She seemed content with the answer, so I continued to paint. Lena’s arm extended into my vision and I watched as she squeezed tiny droplets of oil onto the paint.

“Try not to think of me,” she said.

I felt her presence lift from me ever so slightly. I continued to paint. Time passed for a while like that, with her presence somewhere behind me making itself known ever so slightly while I tried to focus on the paint before me. And then a sentence popped into my head:

Forlorn felines mourn sad piano pound flounder. Piano pound?

“What is on your mind?” she said.

I lowered the paintbrush, its tip ran blush pink. “I’m writing a novel,” I said. “Or trying.”

I turned around, but Lena was not where I had inferred her to be, and I found myself staring at Fubuki who was staring back at me from the kitchen, with a plate of heaped apple sauce, one eyebrow raised. I stared in confusion and was captured by the likeness she bore to her mother. It was as if they were the same species of plant and had simply begun to grow at different times. There was a notebook tucked under her arm, nuzzled in her armpit. The music became familiar. I knew what I was looking at. I’d heard this a thousand times in films. It was Beethoven. Only, what had come before had been completely unfamiliar. It was only this small section of the song that had become known.

“You are?” said Lena, stepping into my vision.

“Yes,” I said, meeting her eyes.

She nodded. “That is wonderful.”

I looked past Lena to the kitchen, but Fubuki was gone once again.

Jim, Fubuki’s little brother, waved at me from the bottom of the stairs before dashing back up to his room.

“Tell Antonia that she left the kitchen dirty!” yelled Lena after Jim.

Antonia? I’d heard the name before. Why did he call her that?

Lena turned to me. Her smile was warm, but it held a quarter teaspoon of bitterness. I looked at the painting. I had painted the shafts of light in the coral reef somewhat crookedly and jaggedly. It looked as if the light were being filtered through a city street riddled with craters rather than the simple swiss of reality.

“This is good for today,” said Lena.

I’m standing in the “literature” section at Fred Meyers a year later, looking at the pocket sized Stephen King display, Dean Koontz at the edge of my vision, the newest YA post apocalyptic smash hit threatening to force itself upon me at any moment, wondering if the paper in these books would make good fire starter. Fire starter. Stephen King. Ha.

I glide away and look at what I think in a moment of extreme self-delusion will be vinyl. I have a vague recollection of where I am, in relation to the social, spatial, and temporal. Fredies. Etymology? They are just uninspired calendars after all. I stare at them non-committally, seeing if I can spy any “sexy lady” ones or maybe ironically “valuable” ones, like a Shrek one or something.

“Do you need a calendar for your dorm?” my mother asks, appearing on the farthest reaches of my periphery. That’s right. You go to college. That’s what you do these days. I don’t remember applying.

“No.”

“Look,” she says, “this might be fun,” lifting a quirky “Bizarre Friendships of the Animal Kingdom” calendar.

I stare at it, reading the fine print on the bottom of the packaging, shifting my hands in my pockets. They misspelled “whole” as “whale”. “Have a fun desk companion for the Whale Year!” Intentional? Can never tell anymore.

“No,” I say, wondering why today my words seem ineffectual, devoid of meaning or emotion, even to me.

“OK. I’ve got to go find some things for the trip next week,” she says.

I feel like I should just sit down there, on the floor, in front of the calendar section. I feel very tired, but I have no sense that I need to sleep. It’s more like I just want to stop existing here, in this stupid store. I stake a long breath and decide to look for the clothes section since that’s ostensibly why I’ve been dragged along.

I begin wandering, staring down the endless columns of brightly displayed junk. I have no idea where I’m going. My parents usually shopped for me. Or I just “had clothes” from somewhere. Usually hand-me-downs from my brother, but we’d both stopped growing a while ago...

There was the shoes... There was the kids things. Toy isle. Should I take a look? There was the “lil’ women’s” section. There was Claire.

My legs brought me to her, a human connection.

“Devin,” she says, throwing down the box of underwear she was holding.

“Here,” she gestures with her head for me to follow.

We walk to the hunting section, so that Claire can tell me that she wanted to get away from her mom who’d heard “something on the radio” and now suddenly structured Claire’s every waking moment with activity.

“A structure isn’t so bad,” I say. “You just get told what to do.” I stare at the rifle packaging above Claire’s head. “Semiautomatic”? Does that one have pink camo? “You get taken care of.”

“Are you some kind of idiot! This country’s about freedom! Free! Dom! Don’t even come to me with none of that shit!”

“Hey. Don’t you quote Kanye samples at me.”

“Well, now is no different than any other time in my life,” she says. My eyes focus to hers. “So, it’s my mom now. Tomorrow it’s school, then it’s college, then it’s some big dumb corporation, then it’s a family, then it’s a hospice, then it’s heaven or hell or freaking resurrection!”

“I get it. Hey, I just got my license. You wanna take my mom’s car?”

Claire grins and hugs me.

We drive around screaming the lyrics to “Can I Kick It?” and “Daytona 500”, trying to pretend we were anywhere other than the quietly pathetic urban sprawl of Gresham, OR.

“I have my mom’s credit card!” she yells.

(Oaks Park — Ring of Fire. Trick the height requirement by pretending to be one very tall girl using the trench coat trick we’d seen in movies)

“We are going to party the same way Teddy Roosevelt did!”

(Shooting Range — AR 15. Tell manager Claire had cancer. Unload those babies into hay backed targets. Pretend they were my “friends”. Claire loses control of her weapon due to small body weight and ends up shooting out a row of lights.)

“We should probably go!” I yell over the screaming of an official.

“You had fun, though! OK, now let’s go back to my house. I have to get something.”

(Claire’s House — Canned Oysters. Cover parents’ bed in canned oyster. Stop at desk. Stare at open text of “The Iliad”. Stare at pre-calculus textbook on shelf. Stare at nine year old girl squealing about oysters.)

"Sometimes I just want to stop doing my homework, stop practicing cello, stop reading the Iliad and the Odyssey and all those things and just sit in front of the TV. I know it's bad for me, but I just want to watch cartoons until I can't anymore sometimes. Just too see. I just want to dive in like any normal kid!"

(Claire’s Garage — Retrieve manila folder of “documentation”. Drive to Humane Society. Plead for “Tony Starks” her old Shih Tzu to be released into our custody. Distract Vet/Guard while Claire sneaks away with keys and lets “Ghost Deini” make his vanishing act. Get away, Tony’s head out the passenger window. Claire sneezes theatrically. Pet fur, softer than Camay.)

“What’s this all about Claire? I mean. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t having fun, but it really feels like we’re not addressing something here.”

“She makes me eat oyster sandwiches every day for lunch! Eat your oyster sandwich! She says it’s healthy for you, but that’s shit, everyone knows oyster is the bacon of the sea! She just read it on some mommy blog so she thinks she knows everything.”

“What about Tony?”

“I hate them! They don’t care about me at all. They said just because I’d developed an allergy, to him, I couldn’t have him anymore! And they didn’t even find

him a nice home or anything. What am I supposed to do when I hear ‘Back Like That!’ Cause it’s like Ghost is rapping about us being apart and he doesn’t even know it!”

“You’re allergic to him?”

“Now I don’t see my mom all week, and then finally she says she’s going to take me shopping.”

(Claire heaves, nearly throwing Tony out of the car, suppressing a sneeze. I toss the little guy into the back seat.)

“And I was very happy because she let me ride in the front seat and choose the radio station, but she kept looking at herself in the mirror and then when we got to the store she told me to just get whatever I want and then walks off! I don’t want to actually be at a store! She thinks she can just buy me whatever to make me happy and then feed me oysters! I feel like, like when she says things to me I’m forgetting how to say things back! I don’t want to eat oysters any more.”

(Doing donuts in empty K-mart parking lot)

“I’m going to talk to your mom about the oysters.”

“No! Then she’ll get me a new teacher or something!”

“Ah... Claire, you know we have to take Tony back, right?”

“Can you take him? I don’t want him to go back to the pound!”

“The Humane Society is nice. Look it’s in their name.”

“You take him!”

“I’m going to stupid college in a few months, I can’t take him. And I don’t have any friends that live here anymore, so I don’t know who to give it to.”

“What about enemies?”

“...No. Hold up.”

(Texts: Me: Hey...uh...u have space for a dog? Pervati: lol, wat? Me: Need to find a home for a dog. You're nice and live alone right? Pervati: hm... \$\$...)

“Can you forward some money if they take Tony?”

“Do they promise to take best best best care of him? Then...no. I'm nine.”

(Return to Fred Meyers. Park car. High five. Parents fail to notice absence of children. Showed Claire's mom a study calling oysters the “bacon of the sea.”)

And as Claire left, so did all feeling.

“Ready to leave?” asks my mom. “Did you pick anything out?”

“No.”

And a year prior, as all the school children go back to school, the messy hydrocarbon of our lives passes through its sweaty and loose summer catalyst, emerging finally as a hardened, structured state.

In the village of my high school I feel as if something is coming to a head. It is as if the graduating seniors are in a sort of race to see who will be able to build themselves an artful enough engine to rocket themselves safely away from this festering muck. It is a likely fact (we hold it in our hearts) that only one of us is going to make it — that through all knowing statistical probability we have deduced that in a town full of losers our class will be lucky to have one escapee, but even that lone winner could change things for all of us. I was the only one who seemed to know that it wouldn't be one person, but two: Timothy and I.

Yet, yearn as we might, we had failed to account for the fact that yes, we were still in school. All through that dullard, repetitive foolishness from the early morning bell to the early afternoon friendly, “Get out!”, there is a calculating exhaustiveness which our dear department of education seeks to impart on its subjects so that nothing valuable may be done with our ample remaining time. No, not exhaustion exactly, more like a strange ballooning emptiness. Maybe it’s the way we can see teachers unraveling, giving up, before our eyes, or maybe it’s the security guards snapping their eyes at the girl next to you like “If only you gave me the chance.” I’m not sure I’m able to pin it down. That’s the genius of the system.

“Why do you always choose to paint rivers?” said Lena.

My shoulder spasmed, sending a dark brown streak through the middle of the canvas. I stared at it solemnly.

“I don’t know. They’re... mysterious,” I said.

She circled, turning off the classical music. I made myself aware of her the same way a bat would. I think I was afraid to look at her.

“Why? They are simply water, aren’t they?”

“Whatever,” I muttered.

I focused on the painting. One layer. Just fix that stupid brown stroke. Salvage it. Make it part of the whole. A few minutes later I realized I could no longer sense Lena’s presence in the room. I cautiously turned, twisting at the torso, feeling completely inorganic. She was nowhere to be seen.

Fubiki was sitting in the kitchen, her black jean covered legs crossed. I continued to search for Lena, becoming aware, as I did, of Fubiki’s gaze. I wondered

idly why I hadn't seen any of her at school, and as my eyes continued to search I realized that the rest of my body had lost interest in the search. It was preoccupied.

"Why do you always paint rivers and stuff?" she said.

I met her eyes, and she didn't flinch. She seemed to actually want to know.

"Well... I don't know. I like them because even though they look the same all the time, really they're always different. I mean. It's always new water, so really when you visit a river for the second time it's a whole new river, only you can't really tell."

"Huh," she said. "Guess that's true."

"Hey, why do—"

Lena's hand alighted on my shoulder. My breathing halted.

"Tony," said Lena, cheerfully, "Maria needs help down at the coffee shop. Could you drive down and help out for a few hours?"

"Yeah," she said, slipping from her chair. "I'll text her I'm coming."

I wound up waddling back to my painting, suddenly unsure what I was looking at. I turned and watched Fubiki leave through the garage. She dressed excessively normally, and yet her movements were obscure, like she were being directed by a hand that planned every step particularly.

"Devin," said Lena. "I'm wondering if you really want to paint," she said.

I expected her to add *today*, or *right now*, but she didn't.

"I... do. Why?" I said.

"You seem distracted. More than only a little."

My back audibly slackened, *humph*. So I wasn't cut out for this either. Maybe drawing and painting and all of that was just another thing to "do". Maybe it was just another little thing I could check off, say, yeah I did that. At a party, at dinner with relatives, oh yeah, I paint. What sort of paint do you use? It's real important. It's the most important thing about painting next to what sort of light you paint in. Why yes! Of course I don't use thick brushes, I'm not a monster. I take my time on things. Yeah, I always say, one layer at a time. Strike me down if I go down that road.

"I wonder," she said. "Did you know Antonia writes, like you?"

I stared back blankly for a moment, wondering who she was talking about.

"Oh... Really? Like... what stuff?"

"I'm not sure exactly," she said. "Short things mostly, I think. I think perhaps you are still thinking about writing as you paint. Which means you are meeting the painting nowhere, especially not halfway. That is no way to treat the painting. Or yourself, surely."

"I'd like to finish this painting," I said, picking up the paintbrush.

Generated images on the TV glow, sparkle, splinter and shift before me while Timothy's new album, *Seafoam*, pours out of Andrew's speaker system. Timothy put the iTunes visualizer on the TV, and we are splayed out on the couch "absorbing" it all. Timothy keeps getting up and changing the visualizer style. Waves, to circles, to a strange race through a ever shifting tube.

The album is already half over and the chips bowl has been demolished. It's damn good music. It's made me hungry.

"Oooh," says Andrew, giggling as the track shifts into a new melody.

I look around at the other faces in the room, their heads bent, halfway obscured. We're at a listening party, I silently realize. For Timothy's album... What does that mean? I became excited, and realized I'd missed a great deal of the album. I'd listen to it later.

As soon as the last song ended, Andrew hollered and clapped. I joined him.

"Now we just have to finish my album!" said Andrew grinning.

"Oh god," said Timothy.

My phone buzzed. It was a notification from Twitter. "How many unarmed black boys shot by cops can you name off the top of your head. #blacklivesmatter".

"Why don't we ever do anything?" I said without warning.

"Eh?" said Andrew.

"There's people getting shot. There are lives being trivialized. I can't figure out why we don't do anything."

"What are you talking about?" said Timothy.

"We tweet about it! That's it! We virtualize our problems... There are people somewhere doing things... but they feel fake. It all feels fake... Like when I look at Twitter I expect to see jokes and wacky pictures of animals... so when dead people show up it's like... they're just another joke... Something unbelievable to stare at in the middle of your day, before you go on..."

"I mean... we're in school. What do you think we should do?" said Andrew.

"I don't know... I have no idea... that's the problem."

I got up and told Timothy that I had to leave. That I'd loved the album, but that I couldn't stay.

I was barreling down Stark, listening to *Seafoam*. I'd become lost in it, bouncing in my seat. But I heard the crash. For a second I thought I was — but I wasn't. I was stopped at a light like a good boy.

A white Honda was spinning in the middle of the intersection. My mind cross referenced the images to movie trailers. It checked out. This was real. A white Subaru with a smashed hood drove off.

The light turned green.

I watched as other cars started to move forwards. In their mechanical simplicity everything seemed simple as if the world was continuing unabated. And it was, except for the fact that there was a white Honda at a forty five degree angle, across two lanes of traffic, with a scared woman in it. I drove, slowly, and watched how other cars swept a safe perimeter around the bits of broken glass and the bent up car itself. I wondered if I should pull to the side - I saw myself running out to the middle of the street and asking the woman if she was OK. There was a honk behind me, and my foot snapped to the gas pedal. I'll drive by and see if she's OK, I told myself. I saw a woman still in shock; while the rest of the world had collapsed into normalcy around her, this woman sat, her car loaded to the ceiling with black trash bags and old luggage cases and a fish tank and a TV with duct tape over one corner, with her fingers still biting into the hard plastic steering wheel, the muscles in her arms twitching, and her eyes snapped to their fullest aperture. Blood, maybe on the windshield. Heeding the tribe of cars around me I drove on.

I pulled into an empty parking space in front of Lena's Coffee Shop — the remarkably unmemorable *Destination Coffee* and stepped out of the car. It was a bastion of a small family owned business within a swell of corporate icons with dull but recognizable logos.

It was late and there was no reason they would be open. I'd no idea what their hours were, but felt more than anything a need to go there. It was a safe little way to say I'd tried, I'd done something. I'd acted on a feeling even when I knew they'd never be open this late.

I squinted at the glowing OPEN sign from the car, sure it would flicker off at any moment. Sighing, I made my way into the shop. A group of the World War Again generation sat clumped together around a small table in front of me chuckling in raucous measures. I scanned the remaining tables for any sign of Lena. On the wall I found only a painting of a flower in a vase in which the bottom of the vase disappeared and the roots of the plant extended below into hands that held hammers, saws, nail guns, screw drivers, vacuum cleaners, sponges, sand paper, and glue. It was certainly Lena's brush strokes, but it was uncharacteristically intricate and photo realistic. Lena's work was typified by sketchy lines and dashed thick applications of paint which were left rough, mountainous and blotchy. This painting was smooth, blended, glistening like porcelain.

"Hey," said a slow, deliberate, low female voice.

Turning in a daze, it was Fubiki. She was shorter than me with black hair cut as her mother's to a T. She was standing alarmingly close to me, her nose a mere lean from brushing against my shoulder. I swallowed and smiled in feeble show of comfort

and apprehension. To my surprise she took my hand and led me to a coffee table by the window, her hand a timid creature with a small but hardy heart. I sat down expecting her to sit across from me but instead she wandered away. I stared out the window at the shopping mall in disbelief. She returned a minute later with two hot coffees. I, unthinking, immediately took a sip and burned my tongue. I awaited something. She surprised me by looking just as nymphish as I remembered despite the fact that we were caught in the middle of a gray block of consumerist capitalism at its menial, low priced, low esteemed peak.

“My mother isn’t here,” she said, her voice breaking the elfin enchantment her body had woven with its atonal matter of fact delivery.

“Oh,” I managed.

“She thought I should talk to you.”

“Uh, Uhhuh?”

I’d forced myself to de-sexualize Fubiki, but even that couldn’t stop me from fantasizing. The fantasies were transformed into images of us comparing manuscripts, sharing trading lists, discussing different writers merits. That sort of thing. The nature of my fantasizing, my fixations were never sexual, not really. I could see that now. Oh what a simple fix it would be if they were. I tried to swallow my sickness. I began drinking the coffee.

“So what sorts of things do you write?” she said.

“Oh... Different sorts of things. Some more fantastical than others, I guess. What about you?”

“You wanna see?”

She got up and strolled away. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to follow. I stayed and continued to sip my coffee, my burnt tongue masking the taste of the coffee entirely making me forget that I hate coffee. I had drained a third of the cup when Fubiki returned with a laptop. She placed it in front of me.

“This is where I keep some of my pieces.”

Selections from Dignified Puddles:

In the dark where we first met you were perfection. Ribbed and svelte at the same time. We touched and held on to each other then, our bodies melding, becoming one bodice one bloomers, but we were just that, textiles constructed under dark light — the filtration of slave wages, and yet I want nothing more than to see you again. Though I know, yes, I know now who you really are. I can't keep my soul from searching for you, yearning for you, grasping, but a slick bit of my slip slips towards the twain in our twine. I want you in more than my clothes.

Every time I look into your eyes I see the pain of:

a fruit tree apparently laden with fruit, the ground covered with the boughs the last harvest brought, a stream of dark infesting organisms pouring forth from the tree's gorged core,

a mine field the size of the Sahara that I must walk alone,

a knife made of Gold Kryptonite plunged into my Kryptonian skin, turning me into a subterranean blue light absorbing shell of myself,

tachyon rays blasting through the void relaying the sickening news of my once peaceful home ground to dust in an instant.

So I guess what I'm saying is,
that I can't really see you at all,
I like my imaginary friends a little bit much, I imagine.

When in ten years you are a whole new person,
with new molecules,
generated in evolutionary response to the turn and turbulence of time,
at least you'll still have every bit of nerve you have now.

Jack Ass.

Part 1

I only know you in letter.

You, a man of letters.

The letters create you — you, a character to me.

Am I a tyrant? A fool, have I been lied to?

Did you change when I wasn't looking?

Between the ink spots do you hatch plots?

You, a son, but loved like a lover.

Pen in hand, I gush.

Part 2

I write this to you now for though my vocal box has been pounded into a pyramid, I still believe in the power of words.

I would tell you our love is like a bird on the wing Swooping Low but never reaching that place where our nest could Arise. Perhaps it was dead before it Rose and a Lazarus Pit was the unfound land that No Compass could lead to.

And yet haven't others found it?

Maybe you're real. I'm fake. Maybe you are eternal. I'm only a moment.

Perhaps our compass was broken. But I spoke of the power of words. Is there power there, or is it simply another barrier? Another line set to give us the illusion of collusion. Is there anything at all between us? Perhaps I've married the messenger. And if you came from within, then you've remained within.

So, I don't love you.

Part 3

I like you better on the right side of a metaphor,

There,

making the world

(flamboyant, untamed, ludicrous) — the way I like you.

I don't like it when you come out plain. Signifiers of no significance. I like you messy. I want you to put me in a box — make me realize I'm already in one.

I look in your eyes, that stupid foliage, and I know then.

"You still don't know who I am," I say. "Maybe you used to, but you're Blank Inside now."

You play that Solemn Swamp Thing State then. You let me know you still care with a rustle of my hair, reminding me of the road trip we'd taken, me in the back. And then you plead, a sweet sap sunken in your tone, that scrumptious syrup which I shall not suckle again. I wish it weren't so, but your verdant limbs have nothing to offer me any longer.

I finally pushed the laptop back towards Fubiki. There was more to read, but I hated reading under the 10^9 Pascals of pressure a diamond melting laser or the gaze of a writer whose work you're reading exerts. I couldn't focus on it, only that feeling on my forehead. The words had slipped past me.

But I was sure we weren't the same as writers. I wondered again why I'd come here. Why I'd felt the need to seek out another writer.

"So what did you think?"

"Oh, it was all...good, I don't know. That's a lot of pressure..."

"Well, what did you like?" she said.

"I don't know... Clearly its all pretty witty, and uh, you really stick to your convictions well."

She eased back in her chair and her hand slid along the pressure emitter, turning it back to 10^4 Pascals. My ears popped. I sipped at my coffee and noticed it was all gone.

“Uh yeah,” I said, “I don’t really have anything to show you.”

Even if I did have something to show, I couldn’t do that. The thought made my stomach churn. How stupid and simple all of my fantasies had been. In my head every writer was a beautiful critic of another’s work, who read it exactly the way the author intended, who enjoyed all the right moments. Of course, I wasn’t that. How had I expected anyone else to be?

“Well I should probably get back to work anyways,” she said picking up her laptop and retreating to her zone of professionalism. I approached her again at the counter feeling nostalgic.

“Wait, so where have you been?”

“I transferred to the community college. Got fed up with all the idiots at high school.”

Had she written that in a poem? Had I skipped that line? I desperately felt like I’d missed something vital and wanted to ask for her laptop back, but I couldn’t. I threw away my coffee cup feeling sour.

“Sorry, uh... Fubiki?”

She looked up at me.

“Why does your mom call you Antonia, but at school everyone calls you Fubiki...”

“It’s no big deal. My mom named me Antonia, that’s my official name. I came up with Fubiki in middle school. It means snow storm in Japanese... I just wanted to name myself pretty much. Doesn’t really mean anything, I just thought it sounded cool being called “Snow Storm” in middle school. And I got to write those cool

characters on stuff, on like my books and stuff. No one ever really knew it meant anything, but yeah. That's it."

I nodded and wrote down my email for her when she said that she'd be interested in reading my work. I told her I would send her something, thinking I would write something soon.

When I stepped out into the cold night air I realized that I'd just drunk a coffee. Coffee does bad things to me. I looked to Fubiki through the window as if she was somehow responsible for this, like she had known. She bent over, all the strands of her dark hair fell together as she jotted something down on a napkin. She looked up and our eyes connected. I felt locked and lost all at once, sure that somehow she was the descendant of an ancient long extinct organism that Homer alone knew about. She rushed through the shop as deft on her feet as if she had had four of them and burst forth from *Destination Coffee*. She pushed a brown napkin into my hand, leaving hers in mine for a peta-juole powered second. Then she was gone. My stomach rumbled incoherently, bitterly.

I turned on the overhead light once I got in the car. It was her email address and the name of her website again. I threw it on the passenger seat where I noticed a manila envelope.

I opened the envelope and slid out its contents. The first page was blank except for a tiny underlined title in the middle of the page. *Branded 2*. A sequel to my stupid book. I felt my bowels shift, immeasurably.

I looked up and saw a pair of headlights turn on in the far reaches of the parking lot. I'm not sure how I knew, but I knew that there was my nemesis. My doppelganger. My Evil Twin. I started the engine. I'd be reading on the go.

Branded 2 — Chapter 1.

I sat with my back to the now smoldering thirty foot standing cross. The sound of my cooking beans with the accompanying snap and crackle of my utilitarian fire almost drowned out the sound of the bound and gagged klansman whimpering and squirming in his dirty, browned white linens. I coughed, used a long wooden spoon to mix the beans and restrained myself from kicking my prisoner in the ribs. Not that there was any real reason not to, but I had morals. My daddy had raised me that way, my father too, and my pops. All three of them brought me up never to kick a man when he was down, unless he really deserved it, or you were more down than him, or if it was for their own good. Sure I loved all my fathers, but what with all their sayings and truths and messages, sometimes having had three fathers was a bit confusing.

I lifted the pot from the fire and sat back, pulling a bag of oats from my bag for Sister my filly. Cezary my pops had warned that she wasn't old enough to hit such a rough hewn road, but Sister had pulled her weight and proved as loyal as the best you could want for. She nuzzled into the bag of oats silently and ate by my side while the klansman watched in dull horror. I brushed my hair to the side of my long unwashed face and let him think I was considering what to do with his body after I'd disposed of it. His tongue was trying in vain to wrench the cloth from his oral cavity. I ate my meal in silence, turned my pot over to let any juices drain, and stood up, whipping a

knife out from a pocket in my vest. I bent down, letting the proximity of our bodies do the thing it always did to men and then brushed my knife against his cheek. I loved watching warring emotions fight for control in people's eyes. It was like watching a wheel of infinite possibility spin round and round, nobody knew where it was going to land, the spinner least of all. I stopped the wheel by cutting his gag open, though I hated to waste a perfectly good piece of linen I knew the dramatic effect it had. Simultaneously I placed my hand on his stomach, near enough to his crotch to make him wonder. What sort of psychopath is she, I could almost hear him think. The funny thing is that I have to pull out a knife, work out a whole series of vicious looks sustained over roughly an hour, even kill other people around them to make my prisoners think that I might kill them, but all I ever had to do to make them think I might fuck them were a few half second calculated looks, and a touch here or there. I can't remember when I figured it out, but it made me very angry. Now I find it laughable that they would be aroused by a sixteen year old girl who they watched pick off their friends with a rifle, who'd shot them in the leg with said rifle and was now standing over them with an experienced knife.

“You're going to tell me all the Klans little haunts,” I said, slipping my hand around underneath his garments and feeling for his appendix.

“OK,” he said.

I removed my hand and pointed at places on the map. He really was being quite helpful. They pretty much all were at this point in the process. I let the knife disappear back into my pocket since this particular guy didn't seem particularly hard to handle.

“Now I want you to tell me what the Klan is up to. Why are they having these meetings out in the middle of nowhere. Why are they corralling negroes up outside of the cities?”

“I uh, I don’t know,” he said.

“I do,” said a voice behind me.

I whirled around to face a tall man with a long brimmed hat surrounded by the night’s umbrage. His hands were drawn long down his sides, unarmed. I stood trying to get a better read on the man. He removed his hat and placed it on his chest. It was in the glare of the moonlight that I first saw his eyes. They were murky like a swamp, or clouds, or rather like the smoke that rises from a coal engine going at full throttle. They were not exactly right, but with the way my face looked I’d learned to stop passing judgment on such things years back. I waited for him to speak.

“Name’s Olbreck,” he said.

“What do you know?” I said.

“A whole lot more than this man’ll be able to tell you. Why don’t you join me in my camp and we can talk over some dealings of mutual interest.”

“How do you know me?”

“I’ve certainly never met you, but word gets around, and you’d be the first to say that you’re anything if not recognizable, isn’t that right. Though I must say the stories don’t speak to how lovely you are.”

“The stories are a bit dated,” I said, bending down and cutting my prisoner loose.

“What just like that?” said Olbreck as the man scurried to his feet and began to dash surprisingly fast given his injured leg through the soft soil and undergrowth. Then Olbreck shot him. The man’s body tumbled down into the undergrowth where it could be forgotten.

I pulled my own gun from its holster and cocked it back.

“What was that for?”

“Man knew my name, didn’t he. Besides, he was running straight for my camp. Couldn’t have that. I apologize if I’ve frightened you miss, but I assumed you hadn’t any compassion for these supremely hateful folks.”

“No,” I said. “Not frightened.”

Olbreck’s camp was just a quarter of a mile into the forest, although it would have been nearly impossible to find in the dark without him as a guide. I uncocked my gun, but kept it handy as I followed him closely with Sister. The camp was made up of a couple of tents and a post driven into the ground to tie up two horses. He offered to tie up Sister, but there was nothing you could do to make Sister want to run more than tying her up, or even saddling her for that matter. I left Sister at the edge of the camp and followed Olbreck to a ashen pile of flames. Tending to it was a darker skinned man. Not a Negro I realized as I approached, but a Native, the people who’d been in America before us. My first father had pained me to understand them as they were, poor souls caught in a trap they hadn’t known had been set. He wore a tunic and dark baggy pants. He looked nothing like the other Indians I’d seen before, his face was sharp and long, yes, but it was the clothes he wore, free of accoutrements or any

sort of affiliation at all. Olbreck brushed past this man who in turn watched Olbreck with deep torch lit eyes and seemed to ignore my presence.

Olbreck brought a series of thick logs of wood for the two of us to sit on, and to act as a table between us. I reminded myself that I had to watch this man's actions, but I couldn't keep my eyes from drifting to the Indian, Native, whatever it was he was called.

"What is your name?" I called to him.

His eyes lowered to the flame and he stepped back into the shadows of the forest a moment later.

"He only speaks to me," said Olbreck producing a small pouch that clinked.

"Call him Joe."

"Is that his name?" I asked, searching the darkness for a sign of him.

"It's what we'll call him."

"But it's not his name."

"Correct. Perhaps I should have explained, we're not here to discuss Joe or his name or my name or your name. Frankly names are only as important as you make them. I call things what I like, and I like you missus, so I'll call you Honey."

"Don't."

Olbreck smiled a rugged impish smile and dumped the contents of his pouch onto the log. Dozens of beads, white and black, poured on to the ersatz table. He brushed them to the side and placed a large square cloth on the table.

"White or black?" he said.

“You have something to say to me? If not, I have a schedule I’d very much like to stick to.”

“Please, sit, play, we have important things to discuss, but what are we if we don’t sit and enjoy a game, a bit of entertainment every now and then? Simply animals hunting each other, I’d say.”

“I don’t know this game,” I said.

“It’s called Go, which comes from the Japanese, igo, the encircling game.”

“It’s Japanese,” I said, trying the word out on my tongue.

“Chinese in fact, things have a way of squirming around in the world to where you can’t just figure where they came from in the first place, so yes our name comes from the Japanese, but the Japanese get it from the Chinese, and no one has a clue where it came from the Chinese. No one knows who made this game, it’s just always been, so white or black?”

“Black.”

“Always an interesting choice, of course you understand that white goes first. Here collect your pieces, put them in your lap, we must keep the board clear to begin. You play on the intersections here on the board, intersections are all over our lives aren’t they they make our lives meaningful, it’s like when you come to a river and you have the choice to cross it and venture into the unknown or to stay where you are.”

Joe was watching silently from his post at the fire, his arms folded, his knees to his chest. He looked like a little boy to me then, like a lost child being forced to watch the grownups play. Of course I’m probably no older than he.

“You use your pieces to capture territory like this, and if the other side is in that territory it is snuffed out. But that’s the state of things, yes? So tell me where did you acquire such a mark?”

My fingers moved instinctively to the left hemisphere of my face where the thing that had killed my father had tried to kill me.

“It was a disease.”

“Of course, and how did you cure it?”

“Someone crossed a river for me.”

“Well put. I happen to know the disease of which you allude to, yes, no need to look shocked. Those ephemeral beings, while they do not roam this land, make their presence known throughout the country I assure you.”

“So you know about them, you know about me.”

“I know about them yes, I know about a little else, but about you? Hardly. Why ask a question I already know the answer to? Why cross a river I’ve already crossed.”

“It’s a refreshing swim.”

“That you are, now play.”

I placed a piece on the board in a spot on the grid far away from Olbreck’s daunting white piece. I was suddenly attached to this dark rock and wanted it to survive the game.

“People aren’t supposed to be able to withstand an assault on the soul such as you were put upon, and add that to the fact that you’re out here killing cultists and I figure you’re a special person, but now I’m wondering how long you been in the area.”

“Two weeks. Followed a few rail men down here. Klan ties. Turns out nothing.”

“How you figure?”

“Just passing off money here and there.”

“And you don’t see that as an offense?”

“I can’t justly kill people for spending their money how they please.”

“Why not, you think all killing comes from guns and swords? Hardly, though such men aren’t my concern either.”

“What is your concern?”

“Play.”

“What do you want?”

“Right, now I present you with this information in the hopes that the two of us have got a better shot than me on my own. The KKK have gotten their hands on some powerful tomes of magic, which you can imagine is not a great thing for the people they don’t tend to care for. Pressure from the North has all but died out which means that, as I’m sure you’re aware groups like the Klan are able to operate in a sort of renaissance sense. The Shades that gave you that mark are immigrants, as you know. They come from Europe, spreading the disease of the old world here. What the Klan has begun to do,” he said, encircling a defenseless black stone and removing it from the board, “is to construct a grand brand new beast whole cloth from the chaos that has embroiled our clearly doomed nation.”

“Something new?”

“Something especially designed for this nation.”

“You’re a monster hunter,” I said, posing it only lightly as a question.

“As you are.”

“No, I’m really not. I’m trying to help people. Hunting monsters gets more people hurt than it does save them. From my experience the only people being hurt by the monsters are the hunters themselves.”

“I can assure you, that this monster will be different. The European variety came with its own baggage, it’s own agenda. This new creation will have no other agenda than the Klan’s.”

“But you want to see it anyway.”

“I wouldn’t mind being able to see a new creation, this sort of thing doesn’t happen every day, play!”

“I’m done with this game.”

“Then you lose.”

“I was never one much for dragging out the inevitable.”

“You’re much too pessimistic for your age.”

I stood up and strode to the fire, pacing myself so that Joe wouldn’t be able to properly react to my approach. I had him, face to face, his eyes wavering on the dark inky splotch on my cheek I knew he couldn’t keep his eyes from.

“Show me yours,” I said.

“Now, just what do you think you’re doing?”

“Being pessimistic.”

Joe bent his neck down like a horse and showed me the familiar sickly tendril like stain I knew to be on my own face right there on the back of his neck. I swallowed and tasted dried sawdust in the back of my throat, an unfortunate

irrepressible bit of memory. I counted backwards from twenty, but whirled around at ten with my gun leveled at Olbreck. The man had remained stationary. It seemed he hadn't done a thing.

“He is my willing servant,” said Olbreck. “Don't make this personal. He came to me for help. I protect him, I give him food, I give him water.”

“Servant,” I said. “Joe, what's your name.” I felt drunk, the edges of my vision swam with the memory of large sad eyes looking out at me from a farmhouse before it was burned down. My footing felt loose and I suddenly realized I had not slept for twenty hours and hadn't eaten for seven. I beckoned weakly for Sister. “What's your name? You don't belong to him. I can help you.”

But Joe's eyes were unmoved, sullen, almost synthetic. I grew unnerved looking at him. I stepped to the side and hoisted myself to Sister's back.

“Anne,” said Olbreck, I realized for the first time. “There's no need to act this way. I feel we have a great deal to teach each other.”

“I've already had three fathers,” I muttered.

Joe opened his mouth, but in place of his voice I heard only the crackle of the fire. Then I rode off, prospecting for a meal I knew I'd left up on the ridge, but hankering in my soul for anything other than what Olbreck's speech had promised.

Let there be no more canals, I wished, foolishly.

Chapter The Last Chapter

“Oneself behind oneself, concealed—

Should startle most—”

— Emily Dickinson

I kept as close as I could. Of course I lost him a few times, but he stuck to the main roads. He wanted me to follow. He was wearing a red jacket. That’s how I knew. He drew me away from the low urban sprawl into the backwoods and farm country. We crossed the Sandy River. The bridge was old. It was probably created sometime around the 20’s or 30’s when the Columbia and it’s offshoots were being used for logging. I imagined huge flotillas of hewn trees jettisoned down the Sandy. The change on the landscape, the barrenness. It made me dizzy. I did not long for the Sandy’s cool embrace. I doubted I ever would again. The road began to steadily climb as we passed through Corbett. We slipped round a bend, coming upon Vista House. He stopped his car and got out. I wondered if this might be where he had been taking me. He was gracious. He let me soak in the turbulent Columbia which from our vantage high up looked peaceful and inviting. Like a sleeping bag, I thought.

Then he was in a new car. Even in the dusk I could tell. He’d wanted to leave me here, but I was going to see this through.

I followed him out onto the Interstate, wondering for the first time if I would be at home in my bed that night. Not having a great amount of freeway experience under my belt I was worried about being able to keep track of my target’s movements. After a half an hour of driving however I found my fears to be misplaced since, if I became

caught between large trucks or forced to slow or switch lanes, I would find that he had placed himself kindly back in my path. I pulled up alongside him, testing my car's acceleration. He was wearing a green jacket. He stared at me, smiling. We continued east past the Dam and the Bridge of the Gods to Hood River where my cousins lived.

We didn't go into town. Instead he drove in a twisting loop around the whole thing and led me into the country, an apple orchard on each side heavy with dormant proto-apples waiting for their moment. We started cutting southwest, towards Mt. Hood, and I suddenly became aware of the fact that he could in fact be leading me nowhere, in circles.

The road continued to narrow both in width and height as trees began to cover evidence of a sky. We drove alongside one branch of the Hood River itself, driving against the current. After some time I realized we had gone off the highway at some point and onto a seemingly one lane road. The river had regressed to a creek. Under the umbrage of the surrounding trees our environment was nearly pitch black. I could barely see the road and so it was with my lights trained on his silver car, using that reflective surface as my North Star. Finally we passed a large wooden sign that was painted yellow with the word "Lost Lake". It was there that fittingly, I guess, I lost him. And I was alone.

I pulled my car through a parking area. There was no sign of him. I wanted to find someone. I just wanted to find someone.

I walked down to the lake, searching. I'd been here once or twice before as a small child, but my memory was nothing more than a sense of past experience. The

details were gone, past the point of a soft blur of impressionism to the incomprehensible feeling of modernist blocks of color floating in white space, the only speck of reality left in that white space besides the formless block itself was the memory I had of almost returning to Lost Lake on a fishing trip with my best friends shortly before our friendship deteriorated. We lived twenty feet from each other. Now I lived next to them and never spoke to them. Stayed inside if I saw them through the window. Pretended I didn't know them at the store.

I walked along a path and stared out at the reflection of the moon in the water. I heard a splash, and I looked down to spy what could only be the phantom I had been chasing. He was waist deep in the water, scrubbing himself under the armpits. He hadn't noticed me, or hadn't let on that he had. I shifted. If I took the step off of the path, if I crushed a butterfly or something else as irrevocable... I swallowed.

"OK," said the figure in the water. "Just come on, nothing's going to happen if you step off the path. It's a line the Forest Service sets up to protect plants from idiot kids, but fishermen come across it every day. The Park Rangers do it. Just do it."

I breathed a strange sigh of relief. His voice was completely normal. He spoke. He sounded like me.

So I stepped across and walked down a platform of rocks towards his position. As I did the lake revealed itself, free from the arms of the forest the moon illuminated all, almost as if it weren't truly night. There was a wrapper for "You're in the Forest" soap lying on the rock, and I saw now that he held it in his hand, sliding it across his bared, skinny chest. It looked a lot like mine, I thought. Despite the new light source his face managed to stay hidden in ripples.

“This lake,” he began, “is fed by little creeks that come down from the mountains around, and then Lost Lake in turn feeds in to Lake Branch Hood River which is a tributary of the Western Fork of the Hood River. The Hood River of course all feeds in to the Columbia. Did you catch all that on your drive down here?”

“Yeah,” I said, dry mouthed.

“Well so you know where it begins?”

“The mountain?”

“And where does the mountain’s water come from?”

“I don’t know. The sky.”

“Ah, and where does the water end?”

“It...doesn’t.”

“That’s right. Nothing ends. Everything is just a story in progress and we never know when they start or where they end because they never do, we just look away.”

“Who are you?” I managed to say after a minute of silence.

“Do you know who wrote all those stories you are obsessed with?”

“You.”

“That’s right. Me. Me me me me me. I I I I I.”

“Stop it. Who are you?”

“Life isn’t that facile.”

“What... What are you talking about?”

“You should, maybe, consider the fact that you are alone. And that is why you never do anything.”

“You’re not going to tell me why you’re doing this to me? What does it mean?”

He looked surprised.

“Perhaps if you looked at it this way. Life is a coma splice, it just goes on, it doesn’t care if it is sensible. You have to be the sensible one.”

I could feel my muscles coil up within me. I wanted to push his head under the water.

“You think I have what you want, but I’m saying you do. If you only considered it. You’re lost.

“I’m not lost, well OK, we’re at Lost Lake, is that what you mean?”

“Please stop asking what I mean. If you don’t understand a word, just look it up.”

“I...” I dug my nails into my palms.

I walked back to the path, my shoulders bunched and heavy. I heard a splash behind me. It was a fish, of course. It was eleven when I got back in the car. I wasn’t tired at all, so I drove back then and there. Luckily he was wrong, I wasn’t lost. I barely took a wrong turn the whole way back home.

I told my parents exactly what had happened, more or less. I’d driven out of town. I said I was sorry and that it wouldn’t happen again. They said it was OK, but my mom said she’d been worried and had almost called the police. They forgot about it after a week or so.

From Pervati:

I'm glad you sent me that dog. I mean, yeah, he's OK... But my landlord found out and it actually forced me to move out of that stupid apartment that was going to be the death of me...

On the other hand now I'm in a place I can't afford basically and yeah... I don't know why I thought I could land a real graphic design job without any real experience. I mean, maybe I know how to do everything as well as the next guy, but I never went to school for it. They all have degrees... This is the thing...

So maybe don't be so bummed about going to college. I know you feel like you've been shoehorned in, but really it's probably for the best. And hey, you might learn something. I mean, I don't want to admit it but they totally have a point in choosing those lame graduates over me. They have something that's rounded them out... They didn't just sit inside all day... I can trick myself into thinking I'm doing things in here, but really I'm not. I mean, I can read all the blogs and wiki pages I want and say I'm getting smarter... Gah. See there is truth to it. Even if I'm reading "smart people" stuff what does it matter right? If I don't leave the house sometimes...

I think you're feeling sort of the same way. The way you're talking about getting "pushed around." You say you're going to sit down and find out what actually matters to you. Please tell me what you do cause I def want to do that too... Some days I think I've got it, but I must not because I don't change anything... or I try... It's frustrating. Tony's scratching at the carpet. There's carpet in this new place. Why did they let me move in with a dog??? At least I've got a good resume typed up now.

PS - Dude are you really telling me you drove for like two hours and had a conversation with yourself in the middle of the woods. And you weren't on drugs? Haha, I mean, you do realize you have just been messing with yourself right? Well, think about it.

“I’m going to send you a new story every week,” I said.

“OK,” said Timothy.

“I put it on my calendar. I’ve started to come up with ideas.”

“OK.”

We were driving away from Andrew’s farewell party. He was going to school in the Midwest because that’s where his parents and his siblings and his grandparents all went. He’d be on a plane in the morning.

“Everyone’s gone,” said Timothy. “We finished recording Andrew’s album... and now everyone’s gone.”

“Yeah, but now you can go back to working on your own music though.”

He was silent. We sped through the countryside. I was confused. Though it was dark out.

“Are we going the right way?” I said, making a light gesture towards the steering wheel.

“I don’t know.”

It was quiet. Timothy kept looking over at me. The engine was getting loud.

“This is a good time for us,” I said. “You know, because we won’t be stuck with our parents anymore. I’m just, you know, fed up. High school was such a waste.”

“I’m quitting music.”

I laughed. He leaned over the steering wheel and opened his eyes wide as if he were surprised. He was locked this way.

60 mph.

“Wait... why?”

His hair was stuck to his head at the ends with sweat. “It’s a waste of tim... I, time, I mean. I’m... tired of my family laughing at me behind my back.”

“I don’t think they’re doing that... are they doing that?”

“All of my cousins are become doctors and crap like that.”

70 mph.

“What. So you’re going to be a doctor all of a sudden?”

I pressed my body up against the door, griding my shoulder into the plastic siding.

“No. But I want to be in charge of me. I’m not going to go to college at all. I don’t want to live anymore with my mom’s money. I don’t want to get any more crap from my grandma, and I don’t want to smile and write thank you notes to people I don’t know for sending me money. I can’t write another card to someone I’ve never met. I can’t keep. My dad still lives with his parents. I’m going to go far away and get a job and so I can...”

80 mph.

“Even if I really tried. Like really tried — I’d still be broke. And I don’t want to waste any more time. And don’t you even open your mouth you piece of crap. You can’t talk. You’re all talk. We both have been living in a fantasy world Devin. The difference is, I actually tried. I failed! No one listened to *Seafoam*. And that’s OK, but see, I learned something from it.”

90 mph.

“You don’t write anything so you never have to face the fact that no one’s ever going to read anything you write, and that you’re terrible at the one thing you want to do.”

I lunged for the steering wheel. He pushed my face back. I bit his arm. We tumbled off the road, our arms wrapped around each other’s in vice grips. The car spun, getting tangled in a web of barbed wire.

We should have died. Not in a self-hating it would have been better if... kind of way. We actually should have died. Or at least broken our backs or something. The barbed wire actually kept us from crashing through a barn full of heavy machinery.

Timothy got out of the hospital before me. I was alone in there. Except for my family and the cards and the flowers and the doctors and the nurses I guess. They all blamed him for what happened. I felt vindicated for a while, but the feeling didn’t last. I talked to Andrew. He’d seen Timothy. He was driving across the country. He was headed south. He’d brought his guitar with him.

When I got out the pool was closed down in preparation for the school year. It was like Timothy’d said. Everyone was gone. When I sat down to write I froze up. My body shut down. My mind kept on recreating the night it had happened. It was focused on the party beforehand just as much as the drive. I was angry at myself for what I did and what I was still doing. Timothy was gone. Now he was just another one of those things pushing me around.

At the end of the summer, a few weeks before I would be shipped off to College my family gathered in Hood River, that bright windy tourist’s wet dream full of vineyards and micro breweries, where my cousin was to be married. It was the same

route I'd driven at the beginning of the summer. We drove into town and then to a four bedroom rental home where we would stay the night before the wedding. My mom was treating it like a vacation since it would be our last time to be able to spend *family time* together. What that meant, even after living as a member of said family for nearly eighteen years, was beyond me.

So it was to my great surprise that upon entering my uncle's jewelry store and engaging my uncle my family agreed to let me wander around the town in search of things that would interest me. That is, in short, how I came across Claire and her mother who looked like a character from *Thomas the Tank Engine* who'd gone off the rails in that her body was weirdly devoid of the high strung emotion contained in her face. She saw me and started gabbing much too fast to catch. Claire looked up at me with watery somewhat apologetic eyes that betrayed her ignorance of the situation. Claire's mother took my hand, shook it, told me that I was a savior, and that she would pay me back. I nodded weakly, and let my hand be lead through the motion of agreement that I had never agreed upon making. And then Claire's mother was gone, choo-chooing down the street, lines of rage sizzling off of her form. And Claire was still standing there, looking up at me. So I had acquired a subject for the day. She smiled up at me, disarming the bell of confusion and panic that had been ringing in my head. I reached out and grabbed Claire's hand.

Claire, my nine year old ward for the day, and I walked down Hood River's waterfront. I asked her if she knew what was going on with her mom, and she tells me that her grandmother was probably dying. She hasn't seen her grandmother for a while and every time she asks about her her mom looks away and checks her phone.

She says she's expecting things from work. We passed by a lush rose riddled garden and stopped in front of Pop's Sweets Emporium. I asked her if she wanted to go in for a treat, and she nodded enthusiastically.

A doorbell clanged in rustic, hesitant jubilation at our arrival, and an old man, Pop, looked up at us through thick, dark gray eyebrows from behind the humming ice cream and salt water taffy filled counter. One of Pop's eyes looks bigger than the other and besides that his mouth seems to hang open in a circular involuntary motion, exposing teeth riddled with dark specks. I smile unenthusiastically at Pop and tell Claire to go look at what ice cream flavor she wants. She rushes up the glass display and presses her face against it, peering down with one squished eye. I see Pop eying her, so I step up to the counter.

"So, you're Pop?" I asked.

"Pop's dead," said the man, his eyes still roaming Claire's nine year old, bright pink sweatshirt wearing form.

"Oh..." I let the machinery's dull conversation fill the void, a task it performs nicely. I figure I could leave it like this, but Claire keeps hemming and hawing over which flavor to choose so I reopen the conversation.

"So, who are you then?" I said.

"Pop's twin brother. Pop's dead," he repeated.

I looked at Claire. She was bouncing on her heels, twisting her head this way and that.

"Oh, OK... You know what you want?" I asked her.

“Yeap,” the man continued, “and why do people always come in here and ask for Pop? Why do people always confuse me with Pop? I’m alive! Do I look like a corpse to you?”

I nodded at him politely. Claire asked what flavor Pop likes now that he’s dead.

Pop’s brother scratched his chin and said, “Probably that alligator one,” pointing at a dark green bucket.

“Do you want that one?” I asked.

“No, I was just wondering what sort my grandma would probably like. I’ll have the dolphin one.”

“Hm. That’s the kind Pop’s wife likes...” He scooped “the dolphin one” into a cup and handed it to Claire, letting his hand linger as she wrapped her fingers around it.

“OK...” I said, waving money in front of his face. He sat back, unbuckling his belt.

“You so interested in Pop, I can show you his body... Got the urn back here...”

“What?” I left the money on the counter and rushed Claire out of the shop.

I asked Claire, once we were outside, if she liked the ice cream, and she smiled up at me, ice cream dripping from her lips. I figured it was better not to bring up what had just happened, so I didn’t.

Instead we walked back to the townhouse and sat down for a few minutes. She said she didn’t care what we did, but I didn’t feel comfortable browsing the internet with her. I pulled out my laptop anyway and looked through some documents. I’d

retyped some of those stories I'd found to see if there was anything worth keeping.

I'd tentatively started to add on to one of them.

"What's that?" Clair asked.

"Nothing."

"Are you writing that? Let me read it!"

I shut the laptop and stood up.

"Let's go somewhere. Come on, want to go down by the water?"

"Are you gonna let me read it there?"

"No, I don't want you to read it."

"Awww," she said growing a grin. "I get it. It's for your girlfriend, huh?"

"No, Claire. I don't have a girlfriend."

"How come? Aren't you old enough?"

I shook my head and stood up.

"Well who gets to read it then?"

"Nobody, I don't know."

"Well why do you even have it then? I mean you don't write rhymes unless you can spit um, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Come on."

We walked to a little peninsula. The river stretched out in front of us. It looked too big. We stared at dogs swim loops chasing after toys, lapping up the Columbia as they went. As if what they held in their mouths was the river. I kept my laptop under my arm. Claire had insisted we take it along. I'd thought she'd forget about once she saw the river and the crappy little twenty foot beaches they had. But of course

children hate coarse sand as much as adults and she wouldn't go near it. Instead she dropped down to the grass and gestured for me to do the same.

“You told me you couldn't write anything before.”

“I did? Man I am a broken record.”

“So I'm excited you have something written. I want to read it because...” She started to reach for my laptop. I moved it away. “Because... my grandma's dying and, yeah.”

“What sort of reason is that? You're grandma's probably fine.”

“My grandma told me her sister was a rodeo queen or something back in... you know after dinosaurs, but before cars. She rode horses and had adventures and left my grandma behind at home. She said I should run away from home as soon as I could.”

“I don't think your grandma told you to run away from home.”

“When I'm grown up, she said. She said she stayed home all the rest of her life, and now she's dying. And my mom is sad because she sits at home and smokes, and then tells me not to smoke. And grandma tells her not to smoke, and she gets mad at herself because she's at work all the time and even still it's like she never leaves the house. Even though she's gone all the time. So let me see your laptop.”

“Claire, just let it be.”

“Devin you always want to let everything be!”

“That's not true.”

“I just want to know. If you'd just stop hiding yourself,” she said. “And I don't see what you're so worried about. I'm nine years old, how could you not trust me?”

“It's not a matter of trust, Claire.”

“Yes, it’s a matter of you just letting everything be!”

“I’m not letting anything be!”

Claire lunged for the laptop. I yanked away with everything I had and my knee collided with her chin. Somehow her nose started bleeding. Or was it her mouth?

There was blood. I’m sure there was blood. It made a nice pattern on my laptop’s white varnish like it had been tagged. She wasn’t moving. Well. Hell. There. Did it. What? Had I murdered this child? Broken this weird relationship I had. Maybe one of the last relationships I had? I knew then that I was done with it, done with all of it. I still had most of my life ahead of me, and if I threw all of my childish ambitions of seeing a woman reading my book through Gucci sunglasses away now, and of being “important”, and having a big old desk — that’s what it’s supposed to get you right? Maybe I didn’t hang out in enough coffee shops or grow up in the right place or the right time or have the right parents or something, but honestly who cares. I needed to throw all of that shit away. If I could do that, I’d only be a few years behind most — maybe not even that! I reared back and then threw my laptop into river. I watched the rapids yoke my works’ destiny to the flow of things. It was done. Writing. I’d get a job signing people into county jails or something. Something low key, easy, no, doable. Doable sounds good.

I bent over the body and propped her up against mine. It had looked like a lot of blood, but after I wiped at it with my sleeve she was Claire again. That seemed to be the end of it. Her eyes kicked open. They were trying to focus. I kept pouring my thoughts onto her like I could save her somehow by forgetting everything else. And maybe I did. Who knows really. I asked her if she was OK, and she nodded. I helped

her sit up then, and she frowned seeing that the laptop had disappeared. I told her that I was finished writing. That I felt stupid because I'd never really been able to start.

“That was a stupid thing to do,” she said. “You know things get easier after a while. I mean sort of. Like I still have to try to keep water out when I put my nose underwater, but I'm not scared too anymore.”

“Yeah, well... Come on, your parent's are probably waiting...”

The morning of the wedding as we're all getting dressed in our inexpensive suits and used, creased dress shoes and cracked belts my grandmother comes in and tells me that I've got a letter. She says she's no idea how it could have come, and I said I didn't either. Of course I knew what it was. I didn't bother to open it. I was in control. My consciousness. My mother eyes me suspiciously as I tuck it into my suit coat.

“You guys are looking snappy!” my grandma says before she closes the door. We all smile compunctiously in return. The room is silent after that. Then we drive over to the riverside restaurant where the wedding is taking place. I feel for the letter's existence every few minutes in the pocket next to my heart as we drive. I didn't want to read it.

All through the family photos, opening music, early rumblings of ceremony, I could feel the letter burning a hole in my jacket. So when the ceremony actually starts I can't help myself. I just hope I'll be able to stifle my laughter. I've already moved on from this, so why am I still being bothered? That's what I need to know.

There was no front matter. Always one to cut straight to the chase. It was hand written. The handwriting was unmistakable. I begin to read, and as I do the world

around me peeled away graciously, seemingly compassionate to my cause. When I raise my eyes from the page the world has been lathered in a generous Gaussian blur. When my eyes focus it is not on any of the white decorations or white people that surrounded me, but on the Columbia. Its wide form frothy; its cool breeze tickling the back of my neck, ear, Adam's apple, lascivious as I could stand.

“I will love you to the ends of time, of space, of every dimension, I will love you non-geometrically, in a non-Euclidean environment, in the burning dastardly pits of hell, and in the cold dark windless tunnel of space, I will love you. I will love you if you become paralyzed at the waist and you can't have sex anymore, I'll still love you! If your arms and legs get amputated because you push some old lady out of the way of a semi, I'll still love *stump* you. If you lose all your hair, or change political parties, or become infertile, or go into space on a one way trip, or become a nun, or decide to become a gold digger, or get dementia and forget my name, or change into an entirely different individual who's almost the polar opposite of the person I marry! I'll still love you! And I would not lie, because I would not lie here in front of everyone, or alone, just by myself. Because that's just the person I am! I want people to know how much I love you so that they can know that love like ours does exist. And yeah I know it's not always going to feel like this, but you know we're just going to have to find a way to nestle these two parentheticals who have lived for so long as individual into a combined, nested parenthetical so that our clauses seamlessly combine while still being recognizably their own...”

“Um... same.”

My eye wanders over the shimmering waters. In the distance a troupe of water skiers are vaulting down with the current. Behind them is Beacon Rock, a huge slab of rock, one of the largest monoliths in the northern hemisphere which was almost destroyed in the 30's for building material. But it's still here. A monument... A beacon. It's solid line lead my eye back to the river where a laptop (immediately recognizable as my own) had been caught in a flotilla of wooden sprig and twig outcasts. It made little sense to me since we were upstream from where I'd chucked it.

"...So we could go on like this. You two seem to have lots to say, not to mention the parents and teachers and... friends, but, what are we waiting for? Let's just get you married."

I stand up unaware of my own fervor and knock my chair over. Several heads turn I'm sure, but my attention is firmly elsewhere. I dash through grass, the blades bending under my feet and springing straight in my wake, bounding past cake. I leap the small decorative fence, and face to face with the river I halt, heaving with exhilaration and effort. I look back at the wedding party, my family, dozens of faces I've never seen before, all of whom stare back with a mean of awe, disgust, confusion and ambivalence. My grandfather's face is lit with a wide joyous smile and his eyes glittered like the Atlantic. I tramp down the hill tripping under the tremulous force of my body. I dive then, headfirst into the Columbia's outstretched arms. And I feel the current touch me, carry me up, twist me round, play with me. I remember my grandmother on the banks of the Sandy 8 years ago warning me not to swim out too far. Now, fighting free of my suit jacket, I am not afraid to go out too far.

I turn on my back and watch the none too smooth aftermath of my departure. My jacket floats by, a shadow passing before my eyes. My cousin shouts from the other side of the fence into the fierce sound canceling wind; my mother wide eyed shakes my father who for a minute looked as if he would jump in after me; my grandma watches with a hand to her mouth and a phone to her ear. Only my grandfather looks happy. I can barely make him out sitting back at his chair, his eyes somehow finding me past the wall of bodies on the fence and across the great distance separating us. I kick to keep my legs at the surface and feel the sun on my face, at a loss in the beauty I've found. My laptop with its raft of logs seems to have found its way to me, so I clamber on. Immediately, the touch of the world's wind bites me to the bone as if in warning. I dig my laptop out of the bramble and hold it close. I look back, and while everyone was still held by my actions, the panic had left their eyes. Only, my grandfather had stopped smiling. He is coughing and holding out his hand for a glass of water that isn't there. Then with my eyes finding his, I leap back into the Columbia. It looks like the cloudless sky.

The letter was still back on the lawn midst a storm of toppled chairs and overturned purses. If you wanted to know what it said, this is it:

Emily scrunched her knees to her chest on the couch and observed. Paul had his arm around Stacy. This was Stacy's apartment. Paul had no feelings for Stacy, never had. He just wanted somewhere to sleep. Sleep, and that's it. He'd seduce her as much as required, but at soon as everyone left, he'd be out with the light.

Paul was telling the room about his trip to Germany. What a great country it was. The food. The drinks. The abundance of happy faces. They didn't have problems over there like we do. He shook his arms for emphasis.

Ian was in the corner bent over his phone and craft beer. He didn't like anyone here. He came because he didn't like anyone anywhere and because he'd told Emily in strict confidence that he could "get ideas" at these things. He must find them online because he never looked up from his phone.

Alick was trying to convince Svetlana that black magic worked.

"Why would people take the time to write something down if it wasn't true?" he said, reaching for her slowly retracting head.

Svetlana had hated Alick ever since he'd gone to New Mexico after graduation and come back with tattoo of their names chained together. Svetlana had her reasons to hate pretty much everyone else at the party too, except for her. Svetlana stared at her.

"I've already got a room back at my place set up just for rituals. Seriously. Blacked out windows, you know, uh, it's chill."

"I'm not going to go do MDA with you in your little brother's old room," said Svetlana.

She was pretty sure something had happened between Svetlana and Alick's brother before he'd enlisted, but she really didn't care. The act she danced with part time was leaving, so she was too. She wouldn't miss these people. They were just like the one's she'd known before. Somehow she'd found herself a part of these groups whose lineages' stretched back to high school again and again. Everyone had dated

everyone — most everyone had had adventures in far off lands and returned unchanged.

Why did she meet the same people everywhere she went? Why did she blend in to this crowd so well?

Conrad was passing notes to Nene. Dirty pictures. They snickered, and Paul and Stacy gave them dirty looks. Paul would never tell Conrad and Nene not to come. They'd known Conrad since he was a little leaguer. They'd spit sunflower seeds together. They hated each other. They always like each other's Facebook posts, but never commented. They spoke very highly of each other to others in loud, proud voices. Said the other was just "great", or "one of my oldest friends." She'd never seen them say a single word to each other.

Stacy and Nene worked at the same call center so they sometimes talked. When they did, Nene was always craning her neck like there was something interesting worth seeing anywhere else. Stacy knew how to milk a story. She'd once watched Stacy draw out an anecdote about their boss receiving duplicate Lego themed coffee mugs for thirty minutes.

She looked through her phone's old pictures to help with her growing boredom. Hm, there was a picture of her and that awkward guy she'd lived next to her in New York. They were smirking and sweating. He'd been different. She chuckled. She tried to remember his name or what any of those "songs" he'd asked her to listen to sounded like. She could remember a feeling, maybe. She felt sick. She stopped thinking. Karl.

"I have these folders on my computer of all the places I want to go," he'd said.

It wasn't the first time she'd talked to him, she knew that, but she couldn't recall anything from earlier encounters.

"I download lots of images and fix them in a certain order. I try to really get what these places are like... And I imagine what it feels like... um, the wind, the sun, the grass, what it smells like... and I write songs about them. I create sounds, layer them... until the picture can go away and I still feel the place...that's mostly what I do."

He'd been red in the face. Looking at the ground.

"So what places have you been?" she'd asked.

"None."

"What? Why haven't you gone?"

She'd been bubbly. She remembered the feeling sitting there next to him. The "why'd he pick me" feeling. She didn't care that they were neighbors.

"How could I?"

He'd taken out his phone and had her listen to a few. That's how she found out he was the one always waiting during her live shows for a quiet moment to chat. The one who'd sent her songs. She'd never appreciated them. Because they weren't songs to her. There was no singing, no beat, hardly a melody. He'd obviously wanted her to find out who he was. She'd been repulsed. No one had ever tried to make things personal that way. And he was living next to her? She'd been scared. Nothing like that was ever supposed to happen in a city of 8 million people. She'd been living alone for the first time. She'd overreacted. Probably... No, definitely hurt him.

Somehow she'd missed the fact that he was just as scared as her. She saw now that he'd just wanted her to find out who he was. What had he said? Never left New York.

She looked him up. There was an interview on LisaFrankTape.com.

"Organically Grown, Locally Sourced Vaporwave," read the site's tagline. She scrolled through it, skimming. There were a lot of comments. People loved his music. They wanted to know when more was coming out. She felt strangely elated.

She looked him up on Facebook. His profile was public, so she scrolled through his photos. They were few. He was smiling in fewer. There were a few cookie-cutter birthday wishes every year. Every once in a while he posted a link to his music. No one left comments. He was single. He was still living in New York. There was a post from his mother publicly thanking him for taking her out for a weekend. It came with a picture of him, slightly hunched, his hands in his pockets, looking past the camera with a half-smile in front of the Niagara Falls.

She put her earbuds in, eyeing the rest of the party. They went on just as they had. She clicked on one of his songs. It began: slow, low, wide. It let her into an open space. There was a beat, but it was distinctively him. She stared at Paul. His hands waved from side to side. His mouth opened and closed. She giggled to herself. That was all Paul ever did. She kept on smiling. She felt like she was on water. Something cool bubbled in her.

She stood up and said she was tired. Conrad smirked at her while he tickled Nene's armpit. Everyone said bye. She knew better than to wait for anything more. None of them remembered that she was leaving tomorrow. She got a Facebook message from Ian on her way out.

“U were interesting. Got good ideas for things from you. Props. Good luck and thing,” it said.

She took an Uber car home. She asked the driver if respect meant success, even if there wasn't any money in it.

“You gotta pay me,” he said.

She assured him, and then pressed him for a real answer.

“Well. If it's something I care about doing, and that gets me respect, then that's alright. That means I can respect what I do. If I can't then there better be money in it,” he laughed. “I like driving. People need me, you know?”

She sat back and closed her eyes, her hand brushing against a wad of dried gum on the seat. Tomorrow she would sit before the computer and put on her mask. She would be Emily Enticing once again, and then she would dance one more time and leave this city to “see” more of the world. But did she mean it only ironically? Was there a chance? She kept her eyes closed and imagined the possibilities.