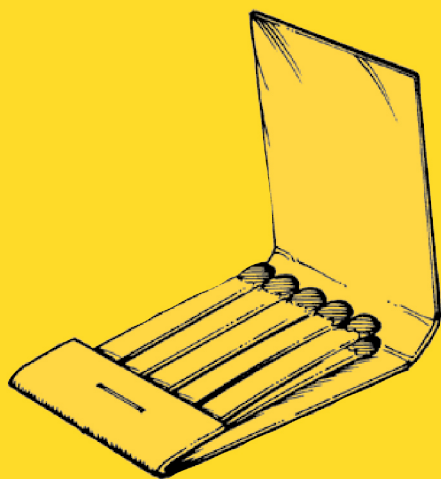


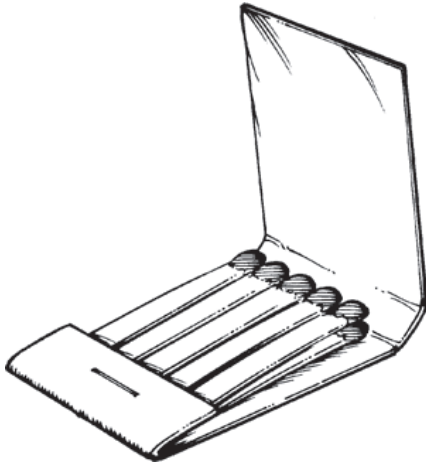
sulphur Like sunburns

Kevin Dewese



Sulphur Like Sunburns

Kevin DeWeese



These stories came about during my time as a creative writing major at San Francisco State University 1998-2003. Most of the shorter pieces were written after that time. I included two separate early drafts of Cheryskin on the off chance that anyone wanted to see the various directions that story took over the course of its gestation.

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The Interpersonal Model

It sounded like a slap, the impact from drops of water meeting porcelain in the dark, a shoe hitting an empty corridor. It's really all just stumble bumping without night lights, like the way the girl glowed in the corner of the coffee shop against the posters and pictures on the wall. Without this space we could smell the cinnamon she scraps into her drink, talk about the 24 hours between sight and the hope of seeing her again.

No, it was more like a click, the hit of keys chained together in my pocket betraying the approach. I imagine myself a cheetah, blending in with the shadows and the spaces in the grass, but she lacks the jump. I can tell she saw a clown flying twisted balloons that danced in the wind. Everyone likes the circus though, so we swallow words as eyelid flutters and heart stutters make a background for a movie, a concert, a walk in the park, the repetition of plans for next week in the notebooks and the calendars so we don't forget.

Or maybe it was like the thuck when you suck your tongue back from your teeth, trying to find a way to create sound in the time it takes you to realize walls and borders falling down. Easterners and westerners always blink at first, pretending to be birds unable to understand the meaning of an open door. The split second of hush when you can't make your breath shut up before everyone rushes forth to find the grass that they dreamed of dragging their hoes across like I would drag lightning across her skin with my fingerprints till it jumps from my eyes to her eyes to her match that lit the gas stove, warming the meal as we peel the skin from the onions, place the flesh upon the bed we prepare in the tray, blood running from the heat of the oven, bursting from the pores and mixing at last with fat and breathing the scent of the meal as we laugh at the dog in the corner gnawing on the left over bones of our kill. Always a rush until we finish and sit to watch the pictures we see in the after dinner tea mixing with the breath of her cigarette.

But sometimes it sounds more like the skritch scratch of my lighter spinning again, impotent over the flint as her Camel Red stays dark. Waiting for a cab in the rain for the last time and trying to avoid her sight as I skim over the chapter where she describes how much she feels trapped inside me, someone who can't even make fire. It's all written in her gaze that I grab onto at last and pull myself up and into her head, grabbing the rims of her iris, pulling myself through the pupil to sit inside her eyes, watch as my picture is flipped, spun around, ripped apart and transferred into the electricity shooting through her brain. Electricity that she used to feel when I touched her in the morning.

Or it might sound a bit more like the tock before the tick. Staring at a the old analog clock on the wall; right foot green, left hand blue, red arm 12, just holding out on midnight. The clock will always tease, shift to reverse for a moment, sucking the day back with it until crashing back against the coils inside the machine to scream another day at my face. Climbing down from the wall with three arms & purple heart leglessness. It throws down 12, 24, 28 hours of radio silence, watching the phone that won't ring with her voice anymore. Throws it at my feet like snapshots in polaroid of empty rooms with no furniture, no bread maker, no flowers, just white wall memory so every picture shows a corner and surrounds me like a ring of sacrifice, like the ring of dirt left in the bathtub as the clock tick tock chants and walks rings around me and the phone sits still in the back and the clock's tick tock laughter can't disguise the empty roar of the phone that said it'd call, said it'd ring, while the clock dances more rings around me and the phone is waiting to ring, tick tock circling and waiting for the phone to ring, and waiting for the phone to ring, to ring, to ring, to fucking ring.

But It ends up sounding like the crack of uncooked spaghetti, stiff lining the walls of the coffee shop, hiding in the colors of the glass that hold it at bay from the destruction of life and time. Sometimes like a coffin, mummifying the self in a moment of speculation and the freeze of action while I whisper the words I could say before she glances at the clock, packs her bags and walks with her heels clicking the floor and sounding like my grandfather's cane when he'd tap the floor and tell me that sometimes the chance at a lifetime you're supposed to live just passes like the explosion of fingerprints passing at the speed of sound.

The Strangest of Healers

I am duck flesh, greasy on china plate, drenched in soy on an American palate. I am twelve ounces of almonds tossed with peppers: green, red, brown, mixed well under kosher supervision. I am clam sauce, ordered on the side to appease a companion's palate.

My life is twelve inches in diameter, white, green stripe rim. Living inside the one-inch rim like the margins of a page. Some fill the space between the margins with words, the works of Shakespeare, the development of historical representation. I write sonnets of salt, soliloquies of sugar, mix in the spice of dead animal to show that my heart's still in it. I use the circle like a bulls eye. I sit thirty yards away, staring at my mark, someone I can't even see except for the swing-flap shutter of the kitchen doors. I shoot, I might score. A waiter sends the target's regards. More often than not they are lying. Such is the problem with the first person narrative of interpersonal communication, the speaker is always lying. This is expected in your final year as a culinary student, working the school's restaurant for credit and experience. You wonder about the truth of a compliment just long enough to realize that the red peppers are starting to burn.

Impressing the masses is the work of all great kings, jesters, and soothsayers alike. I know nothing about the art of divination, comedy, or statecraft. My niche in the world exists on two inches of flesh under the dressing of ivory teeth like so many gutted elephants. Impress and live forever. Fail and live even longer.

Dinner was important to my family. A ritual we took part in, every night, whether up, down, happy with the food, the company, the decoration, the lighting. A plain table, a plain dish, what else was there to require from a meal? Burnt meat, undercooked noodles. Raised eyebrows and into the belly. I was used to the same sights and sounds over and over. The walls of the kitchen holding paintings by family members I never knew. The just-sharp tone that a fork makes when it crashes onto a dinner plate after breaking through a piece

of chicken. Baskets hanging, filled with dried rattlesnake grass. The steady tick tock thick thuck sound of our teeth and food as we chewed with the regiment of a heartbeat.

There was no guarantee that our paths would cross throughout the day. My mother had her practice studio in the back study where she would run through the latest piece she was working on for her orchestra. My father either spent his time divided between his history books lining the walls of the guest room or at the living room table, running the tip of his finger over his students' latest history essays. Dinner was the only guarantee. The only time when I knew that we'd see each other for the day, or the next day, or the next.

Culinary school finds its members from a widely cast net. Old hen mothers, young rash boys, unmarriageable girls, unspeaking men. Tattoos and delicate fingers become neighbors plunging into the flesh of bread, kneading the dough of animals, sprinkling basil and thyme over a bit of sauce for decoration and scent. I tumbled in from a cannon shot escape from my home after my parents split up after eighteen years of "for the kid" pantomime. School to bar to bed to school being an appropriate ritual to celebrate my newfound freedom from home. Hidden past the vineyards of Napa Valley, the school offered a perfect retreat from whatever a student could be escaping in a hopeless, bland world.

Learning food becomes like learning brush strokes. Every combination of color finds its origin with an old master. Every mixture of spice traces back to some point in history. From the latest TV chef of the week to the proto-human Homo Erectus. Burnt bones found in a small cave in New Zealand that show the earliest recorded instance of something using fire to cook. Food and the ability to manipulate it leaves marks, something remembered as a greater step in evolution than some rocks with a few notches chipped out of them. A short hop from cave to kitchen over the course of time, I ask myself what they tasted like. Two parts grapes, a part damson jelly, a bit of potato bathed in celeriac puree, I say that I'm tasting a process that changes people, changes history, changes memory.

Christmas in '83: family extends beyond parents, sisters, brothers, aunts, cousins, second once removed tenuous connections to that same bloodline of understanding. The same womb can birth a yuppie, a doctor, a redneck. Connected by As, Gs, Cs, and Ts, you can fill a

dining room table over a Christmas dinner. These things that are important: sharing a moment with your family who is not your family.

Crisp duck, Napa Valley wine, Tahoe treats, bowls of sweets, laundry lists of this and that arranged in bowls and dishes. Two pots of broccoli, one boiled hard, one with pinches of baking powder in it, soft and mushy the way half the family likes it. Bowls, plates, service all matching, silverware held in wooden cases and stored in the buffet with its ceramic flower ornaments. The aunties and uncles and grandparents and friends and neighbors all showing up and filling the backyard, the TV room, the bedrooms. Board games, eating handfuls of stolen M&Ms from the living room. Talk of football chances, fists wrapped around the necks of bottles of Michelob making the glass soft against construction fingers. Networking for the Tahoe yuppies out on the back deck, swirling the lees of Chardonnay now, Pinot Noir and Sangiovese varietals later in the evening. Smiles, laughter, my mother beaming at my father, the chef beaming at the maître'd. His hands with white halos around her fingers squeezing his. Everything different and changed as if different people, a different family inhabiting my own at the right time. Football games ended, board games became boring, everyone found their way to the table. All seats filled. Toasts, prayer, school talk, work talk, adult table, kids table. Three hours later smoking cigarettes like satisfied lovers and kids twiddling thumbs and sneaking off to the candy bowls. My uncle is the first to stand up.

"My hat's off to the chef. Truly a perfect night." Purrs like kittens rumble forth and glasses raised to my mother's face, distort her through the clear curves. Red-faced glow like no other dinner she's presided over. My father beaming beneath his beard, both of them happily conducting a dreamy, glowing, happy, perfect night.

Slicing and dicing. Cutting yourself becomes an art. Like those little girls on the television who cry to the fat lady with the microphone about how letting blood is the only path to feeling better. No different from medieval surgeons and their leeches taking out the bad blood. Treating people like pigs, hung from the wall so that the blood doesn't congeal in the head. Like hanging game in the smokehouse, waiting for the meat to taste just right.

One needs timing. Waiting for the blood to drain, waiting for the maggots to eat through the flesh of a fowl neck, drop to the floor. No different from people hanging on the wall, slitting their wrists to let themselves drain onto the cutting room floor. This keeps every-

thing kosher. Druid rituals of cleaning out the skull to drink from it as a cup. The butcher as priest, the priest as butcher. Perfect game takes time. One must always be aware of the problems that may arise between what one wants and how they attempt to achieve such things. To give life, a cook must kill. To exist, create.

Musicians do the same thing. Guitarists in their backroom studios. Wound sheep gut pulled taught and straining against the nuts and holes on the face of the guitar. Fingers like fleshy bars holding a note in place. Like cutting onions, carrots, potatoes, the pieces of food like notes in a scale, blending together into chords of A-minor sweet and G-major bitter. With fingers smashed against the fret board, mechanical and metal, the flesh has to give way eventually. Like a flood, cut, gashes, flesh giving way to pain and bleeding fingers, except that these fingers become so much more when they keep on playing. Cook a dish, you can't stop, burns everything. The spring onions are boiling. The gammon is broiling. The cream is spoiling. Once you start a piece, the momentum is too much. Follow it through, blood, pain, and scabs. Scabs that become blisters that becomes cement on tips of fingers until the flesh is able to play the scales without pain, without stopping until the show is finished. The flesh that couldn't cope at the beginning changing into the calluses that become worth their placement within the body. Slicing fingertips, nicking a bit here, a bit there, after a while there's no need to feel it. Spice for the soul. Flesh for the soup.

At first I thought little of my mother's perfect Christmas meal. I had nothing to understand the significance of it. Family is a meal, being what and how they eat. Smiles, gripped hands. What I noticed were the days and months after the meal. Eating in the kitchen away from the grand dining room table now strewn with bills and test papers from my father's junior college history courses, my mother was quiet, my father stoic. One needs laughter to hear the absence of it. Eyes that can sparkle in the night looking from one face to another become obvious when they cast themselves back down at the food. Dinner became the light that let me see outwards at my family. The one refuge I'd taken, day in and day out, now torn down, leaving my naked eyes to view the stripped world within my house. The silence of a silent meal is invisible. The silence of a meal that, for one night, had been full of laughter and gossip, is deafening.

Food became the only connection to that Christmas moment. I began finding ways to pepper slices of carrots; oils that would make potatoes turn from brown to red. Rice that could coat and fry a cocoon

around an onion. Small pieces of life that was like a flashlight pointing back to Kiwi caves, farther and farther away.

Running along at a steady twelve-year-old pace I began to be able to see my family clearly from the dinner table, looking around with my flashlight beam, a lighthouse in the stormy night. A bilingual marriage of two native speakers that never learned a foreign language, a husband drunk on history, a wife tied up in guitar strings. Downcast eyes of a high school sweetheart turned into a sweet Irish whiskey flask heart. Hidden, out of sight. Finding his bottles in my closets, under his desk, in his bookcases, liver, bladder. My father staying in the guest room at all times of day, driving the van on sidewalk curbs after picking me up from school, asleep at the dining room table when I left in the morning for school. Missing lectures, missing ball games, missing concerts. My mother washing the dishes without a smile, TV without a smile, playing her guitar with sobbing hiccup breaths that reverberate through the hollow body. Starring at the metronome ticking slower and slower as its spring ran undone.

My father did not drink until I was older. My mother did not work longer and longer hours until I was older. I was not the living breathing cause of my father's failure to achieve academic success until I was older. I only had knowledge or silence and sleep. No knowledge of rides to soccer practice unless my mother was home. No knowledge of needing money for movies, having to sneak into my father's leathered and worn wallet while he slept in front of Matlock in the middle of the day, curtains drawn, lights out, flickering shadows from the candlelight TV against my father's unaware face. Like water dripping from the tap, my mother would call my father to the table. A bugle call in the night of his slumber. I didn't know words for these things until I had the knowledge to create them.

The birth of sin and imperfection has a hold on memory. The Sunday school teacher at my father's church and her insistence on the story of Eve, her need for all girls to make of their gender what the first could not. Like being the son of Cain, where a vampiric bloodline makes you unfit to be anything but a killer taking life and replacing it with an eternal reflection.

Born of the same gender line of Eve she connected with the stories that the bible told. Forty years later and she still remembered these stories, let them shape her life, used them to support herself as she told us the evils of desiring perfection while still being of mortal flesh. She fingered a picture she always kept in her pocket. We could

see the outline of the frame showing through her pastel dresses every Sunday. We knew it was of her husband. He had left her two years before, just as she had started to teach Sunday school. She would tell our parents that it didn't matter that he was gone. She remembered, forgave him. With his picture, he might as well still be there in the flesh as far as she was concerned.

After class I would wait for my father as he finished a talk in the church undercroft about the historical factuality of bible events. His eyes brighter than they ever were at dinner jumped from person to person in the folding chairs, stroking his beard with one hand as his other moved through his notes as if they were test papers.

My father would pause and give a quick example using the actual remembrance against the factual need of Paul actually being spoken to on his way to Damascus by a person who has risen from death itself. What happened, what didn't happen. In reality, reality doesn't matter. Memory matters, my father would say, punctuating his words with untrained academic karate chops. What memory tells someone is what matters. Who really cares about the factuality? Proves someone wrong and they're still stuck with the reality of what they remember.

My father believed in the abstract creation of history. Historical documents, artifacts, bodies and graves. To him, these were objects of memory. He would sit at the dining room table, alternating between test papers and whisky, talking to the air around him. No one exists without memory. Nothing proves that people have existed, do exist, or will exist. He felt that if memory was invented then there was no difference between the historical factuality between that invention and the life of Napoleon or some other historical figure. Everyone invents themselves, their past, their future. He would stand up from time to time, steadying himself as he collided against the grand oak dining table. Looking down at it and grumbling, he would curse the tree that would never have existed had it been allowed to rot back into the earth.

I remember my first duck. With its greasy flesh, burnt skin, crinkle and crackle in the mouth followed by the gush of liquefied fat. Mixed with a dipping sauce of various gravies, soy, and plum sauces. Courtesy of my uncle, whose collection of pelts, stuffed animals, and assorted hunted animals juts out from the walls of his house like the jars jutting out of my mother's spice rack. Over rotting wood, signs that warn of trespassers to greener pastures and happier palates, two Peking ducks, plucked, bagged, and gutted. Hung in the smokehouse

after being ripped from their flight and pulled out of the muck of the marshes sunken into the valleys and hills where my uncle hunts every week with his friends.

“Gotta cook it head and all. Nothing prettier than the sight of a cooked bird with its neck all wrapped around in front like it’s resting before taking flight again.” The duck’s place at the center of the table was undeniable. From tall reeds and mating colors they became golden roasted on a raised hazel tray. In keeping with the holiday theme, my mother nested the tray on a bed of mistletoe. A cousin made a joke about having to kiss a duck. My uncle wrung his hands together like he was trying to wash off axle grease as everyone said their toasts and grace.

Four years of learning how to squeeze the air out of handmade ravioli, how to cut like a machine. Boil, braise, flambé, skin, bone, and powder enough to make any plastic surgeon proud. I was leaving culinary school. I had my invitations made up, white card stock against raised lettering. The corners like sharp daggers able to skewer flesh. The personal touch of my cards contained in the graphic on bottom left hand corner. A small duck flying from a bit of marshland, rising up like a dove up and away from the ground of the edge of the card. A black and white etching, but every bit as elegant as the actual duck splashing green, red, and brown across the sky as it migrated from one type of life to another.

Like the archer, thirty yards away from glory. A gold medal in the Olympics is more than the endorsement deals, posh parties, appearances on the television. A center hit on target, just the right combination of cumin and coriander on the plate, standing on the winner’s platform makes you a memory, a moment. It’s a process, like life. It happens, but perfect game takes time. Christmas of ‘83 was something that I wanted to live over and over, like standing on a gold medal platform; wishing time would stop at that moment forever.

There’s no point in getting to the main event without being properly prepared for it. Years of taut strings and notations in the margins before even thinking of trying to compete. In the same way, there’s no point to the learning process without the final event. The Olympics every four years, my graduation dinner reception after my schooling for those friends and family who are not my family. A chance to use what I’ve learned in a final moment to be remembered. A bit of genius in the salt and soy combinations of a coconut Thai heaven. Not unlike the shaft of an arrow through the center of a life-

saver from twenty paces.

I am trained in the art of never wasting parts of the buffalo that can be used. Magicians transforming bits of intestine and skin into crackling bowls of cumin and cream. Life is taught to be sacred, the chief, who sustains the tribe, knows this better than anyone. The chef must have the arrogance to change life into life, to feel that the thing coming out of the meat grinder will be greater than the sum of that which was shoved through it.

Which cut of meat works best with which spice? Which animal? A nip and a cut and that animal becomes a small part human--the cook himself--spilling into the final product, thickening the sauce and darkening the hue. Inessential parts of a body can be recycled into the parts that work. The appendix, sliced to a translucent film can defeat the complaints of a pheasant being too gamey. The kidney, doubled and redundant, works better for the cause of life and perfection as a base of nectarine sauce, drizzled over sea bass with a lemon and mushroom bed.

Flying about the kitchen, flailing meat, vegetables, olive oil, cooking is like history and its great figures. At the end there are statues, biographies, history lectures and everything looking nice on the plate with the rarest wine and best silverware. Flour in the eyes, dripping blood, sliced fingers, slipping over the oil on the ground, screaming red faced, bulging veins rushing adrenaline to all points north and south. Enjoyment of the finished product requires ignorance of the process. History, music, food all follow a trench war, chest down in the muck before the sweet taste of surviving the whole ordeal makes you feel alive. Life tastes better when you've almost been killed. Food tastes better when it's very nearly failed. What's the point of winning by a mile? Assumptions that you didn't have good opponents. Two hundredths of a second and a sweating lunge over the finish line will win more "compliments to the chef" every time.

Perfection is extreme. The walk in the park can't be perfect. It must be the walk in the park with the family, dog barking and chasing the swans, children playing on the swings. The sky blue with a few clouds that look like flowers, bunnies, and other pastel shapes. Slight breeze, jasmine in the air, a full stomach, no appointments, no mud, conversation, not too much touching, not too little. Every piece a keystone and more essential than the next, extreme in its once in a lifetime shot.

These moments can be seen on the horizon, like childbirth, dinner plans, or culinary school graduation. Four years without speaking to my parents for more than a few minutes at a phoned

in time. For lack of a good thing, you have to develop substitutes. Friends, pets, and recipes that shiver and shake. Good in their own right, but a failure due to their reproduction. There's always that thought, that cloud in the distance that can bring the original love back together. A dinner, food that would be remembered, a moment that could make its mark in memory. Creation of a memory, a past that didn't exist, but a past that existed well enough until I learned that it didn't. Thirty signed, sealed and wrapped graduation invitations sent out, only the two that bore my parents' names really mattered.

Food, mathematics, beauty care, surgery. Study topics may differ but all students seem to share a lack of funds that makes cohabitation unavoidable. While learning the trade of tastes I rented a room in a house with a few other students from different colleges and universities around the area. The only common ground we all shared was a liking for a touch of alcohol and weed every now and then. Self-destructive hermits always being the ideal roommates.

Moving about the living room, navigating between the cluttered tables and bong water puddles, we'd come together for discussions every now and then over whatever our inebriated states brought up. I often asked about surgical history in battlefields from the med student, he would ask me about the best way to make ghetto-gourmet from the cream cheese we had in the refrigerator and our box of Cheerios. Bouncing stories and ideas back and forth like table tennis, we talked at each other more than talked with.

Cream cheese can bake well on high; the Cheerios mixed in at the end just as the mixtures starts to brown for texture. Field medicine always had stories of people crazy enough to perform surgery upon themselves. With war, packets of morphine were plentiful, pop a packet, cut upon the gut, remove the offending bullet, shrapnel, organs. Cheerios ground to a fine powder could cover small balls of cream cheese in order to be fried in oil. That's the crazy thing about people on the battlefield, even without morphine, if they knew they were going to die before a medic could get to them they'd start cutting themselves right through the pain. Mashed up Cheerios with boiled cream cheese could be mixed to form a bready paste that once dried would go well with a little butter and olive oil. War could make you like fox trapped in a snare, chewing through its leg to get away before the hunter comes. There's always eating Cheerios with milk and cream cheese with some toast if someone was being especially

adventurous and ingenious.

Perfection causes more imperfection than imperfection itself. It's all desire based. The way shown long ago by Eve in her vegetable garden. We're sharks in the Pacific Ocean with the taste of blood in our noses. Who desires paté without having a taste of it? Who knows distaste at a potato before they know what else there is? Twenty years of cornflakes do not produce a desire for frosted flakes until the tip of the tongue is awoken in a flash explosion of "what have I been missing?"

Perfection is fleeting moments. Mediocrity is much more lasting. Happy in the middle with that old adage of ignorant bliss. Compromise between the edges of pain and quiet, but in the middle there is no perfection without venturing out.

There are no adventurers in the middle, those that dream. Those who live on the edges. Those whose names are not forgotten, whose history and life are considered real. Those who wonder about the other side of the fence. Create wars, ships that carry smallpox to everyone who can't pronounce their own tongue, heavy with the weight of sugar and spice pointing them forward no different from a pointer dog in the bog, barking "duck duck duck" and wagging a tail behind a mouthful of avian carcass and future centerpiece to a desire to see if the grass truly can be once again as green as it once seemed.

Graduation dinner looming and I am three eggs cracked against the sharp edge of a mixing bowl. With parents eyeing each other like wounded dogs from across the room, I am a small yolk, shouting yellow against my infertile white halo. With thirty plates to prepare, I am the promise of life, rejected and then raised from the dead to serve a variation of my first mission. Life for life. A cook is the strangest of healers. The giver and taker of life. I sustain those who would eat of my plate by transferring the life of a carrot, of a soulless cow, of the lemon tree. A cook becomes immune over time to the process. He learns that the sustenance of food is in its life. Rocks and dirt do not nourish. Metal and concrete do not make you grow. Life for life for perfection. The thing that was what is remembered. Perfection, which is the time before remembering, ignorant happiness. The lack of knowledge which is what happiness becomes. Silence and sleep in exchange for a past that is once again the present. Survive to the finish line with one of those last lunges at the tape. Create immortality within a moment that is remembered. This eliminates the need for the body to go on. Now the cook that must take life to sustain life can exchange life from the very center of the downward spiral. The spin-

ning around of take and give, the very stirring hand of the dead stew to nourish the living body.

With my empty kitchen, I am shavings of skin and unintentional disease sneezed into my food. With the crowd joking and socializing outside, I am the very life that my food gives. Like musicians who sweat and wheeze on the stage, burning up in the lights like a chicken in the oven. Audience watching with drink in hands like children at the oven window waiting for the Christmas duck to finish. The musician puts her soul into her music. She places the caress her body craves upon the neck of the guitar and cooks it in the wood-fired body. Her audience drinks it up and spins around, floating back to their cars in the strangling murk of the San Francisco fog, humming a chord progression here and a solo there. The professor puts his soul into the juggling of connecting books. Silent words expressed through dust and copy machine ink. I am the taste upon the diner's tongue. My sweat and blood pours out of my veins to make the perfect texture of gravy. Gravy with a slippery catch across the meat.

To create the perfect meal, one has to cook themselves. 450F for a few minutes before lowering the heat to 375F. I cook for family and friends in a Christmas fashion. An audience to show up and fill a house as I conduct in the kitchen. Laughter and smiles, conversation covering the evening like a woolen blanket, heating the atmosphere and cooking the ingredients to a perfect crust projecting a memory to cast aside the lifelong battlefield beneath.

Timing is everything. Expectations cause eyes to peek through the swinging doors to the kitchen only to be sent out again. The hardest peaks are achieved in a solo ascent. All pieces come together in the proper order. Broccoli in the pots boiling at just the right temperature for just a few minutes as my fingers jump from the heat of the water. Yorkshire pudding cooked with liver waiting in the convection oven. I run the back of my hands across the taped up wound on my midsection that's starting to seep warmth the more I move about the kitchen. Time becomes more and more of the essence. Duck in the oven, taken out every few minutes to baste over a small slice in my wrist. My life into the life of the bird into the life of the dinner into the life of my dreamy, glowing, happy, perfect evening.

The Pronunciation of Pho

I look at my fiancé and her mother and think about nurture. The ideas of what a family is. To her mother, a family is when you drive to their flat in Oakland and call on the cell phone from behind locked car doors. Make your daughter come out to the curb in her socks to pick up a plastic bag of Vietnamese food, sounding to my white ears like “fveahng choahup” or some derivation of that.

She lays the contents on the granite of the live-work kitchen counter. Like when we go to the pho restaurant and look at the menu where there is five different bowls of soup with five very different looking names but the English translation for each one is “tripe, beef, and fish.”

Or something like that.

Ask my fiancé what the differences are and she looks at it and says, “oh yeah, they’re totally different.”

I don’t think she realizes that’s not an answer. I can read. I can make a distinction between tripe, beef, fish and fish, beef, tripe. Meaning, there’s no difference.

But the words defining them are different and the pictures look the same. I say, “but it says they have the same things in them.” she replies with a, “yeah” so now I’m looking at my fiancé like she doesn’t understand that you can’t agree in the negative without adding a little more detail. “So what IS the actual differences?” she stares blankly at the menu and so I try to help her. “Is the sauce different? Is the meat cooked in different ways before it goes into the broth?”

She turns the page of the menu and says “Sure, something like that. Why don’t you get the pork?”

Pho. Or phu, or phuah, or ffffffeh, or however she says it. It’s silly, she tries to teach me how to say it and it feels like my first week in French class.

She says

“puhuh” and I say “puhuh”
she says “No, like this.”

“PHuhUH”, and I say “PHuhUH”

And this repeats for 10 times or so until I say “Vietnamese
noodles. You want to go get some Vietnamese noodles?”

I might begin at these times to think about the fact that I’m
trying to learn Vietnamese from a girl who was made fun of at her last
job because the Vietnamese janitor told her that she didn’t pronounce
her own name correctly.

Her mom sits in the car, hands the plastic bag over and drives
away

Too many black people in the neighborhood

Too dangerous to get out of the car

Good that we have a gate.

Gamuh ang

Sulphur Like Sunburns

When the doctors said it was a normal pregnancy, my mother insisted she could sense two of us. Sonograms and ultrasounds couldn't change her mind. "You don't have things growing inside you" she'd say to the doctors. My father would shrug his shoulders and look at the doctors, "What can a man say to a woman?" and the doctors would shrug.

My brother's name was Matthew. He lost his right to the name when he was stillborn. Five minutes later I came out in the afterbirth and claimed the name for my own. My mother tells me this. Five minutes after Matthew's birth I was wrapped in the blanket that held him and delivered to my mother's dizzy arms. She was asking where her other baby was. My father said, "This is Matthew." My mother's eye's dragged throughout the room, asking for another child in a way only drugs can decipher. The doctors assured her it was a normal delivery. She looked at the female nurses who all shrugged.

My father says that sometimes twins will try to kill each other in the womb. The loser left to be absorbed into the other. Matthew kept growing instead.

In class I learn about knights of the old days, when nobody knew a knight's true name. To know their name was to puncture the skin beneath their armor before the battle had even begun. The teacher tells us about Native American tribes that give their children two names; one for the tribe to know, and one for the gods to know. I wonder what it means to have a recycled name. I write, "My skin itches" on an index card and staple it to the wall.

My mother tells me that it helps to think of stories at night to help our dreams find a way into our heads. That they become excited when hearing us thinking of playing in fields and jumping through trees. They bring their ears close to our thoughts and use their fingers

to climb into our bellybuttons so they can play with us until the morning comes. I wonder who they get their ears from. I lie in bed with my eyelids closed and feel how my skin doesn't quite fit.

My mother tries to read me stories about scrawny lions and little people who live in cactuses before she turns off the lights. I think that maybe I was born with little wings that my brother won't let me see. I imagine them without feathers, small stubby arms that move by themselves. She tells me stories about plane captains who save their passengers from broken engines, astronauts that chase after stars in their ships, closes books about firefighters before they can save cats from trees.

My stomach twitches when I lie down and my legs are numb in the morning when I wake up. I know it is my brother. If little men can live inside cactuses, my brother can live in the flesh that was supposed to be his. He has my sight already. In the dark there is less of him around, but I cross streets in the daytime without holding my mother's hands and try to look up at the planes flying overhead. His eyes can only see the cat in the gutter waiting for the street cleaner to wash it away before its body gives birth to flies. At the playground my friends become blurry as the two kids fighting over the tire swing become clear.

When I dream, there are more mirrors than walls. Bodies that would steal my face and copy my moves. They giggle and laugh when I do not. My father watches TV on a rented set that is too big for the family budget. "Enjoy the things you borrow Matthew, the things you take are easily taken back." I wake up and bury my face in my pillow so my brother will not see where I am.

My father taught me how to write upon the petals of flowers. We have a tree in the front yard that blooms huge curved petals of cream. I think of husk wrappers soaked in tamale sauce when we eat at the restaurants on Tuesday nights. We take twigs with jagged edges to the surface of the petals, tearing gashes in angles and curves. Like skin, the petals turn from flesh to brown. "Like a bruise" my father would say. Bruises are supposed to be black and blue. My father shrugs. "Who has ever seen black and blue in a bruise? Bruises are green with specks of purple. Your mother would say they smell like cantaloupe." We write messages in the petals and show them to each other as they seep to the surface. He writes, "flower petal" and wipes

the flower scrapings off the tip of his stick with his shirt. I write, "ouch" and tell him that a bruised flower petal would cry out. He laughs, "Yes, I suppose bruises tell us these things." My mother tells me how my father finds bruises from his job when he wakes up in the morning. He laughs at those too.

Later we write on sheets of paper with lemon juice. After they dry, the writing disappears. The paper becomes crispy and feels of the words on the page even though it looks empty. Later we put the paper in the oven and turn it up to broil. The heat burns the juice, turns it to a bruise against the cream paper and lets you read what was hidden a few minutes before. If we leave the paper for too long it can't hold its color. It gives up in a burst of smoke and curled edges like small limbs when there's nothing to do but let a fire consume them. I watch "Matthew" on my paper burn before we turn the oven off.

My father gives me a box of index cards. Vocabulary words: read, define, flip. I take out a ruler to measure the space between the blue lines, between the red line and the blue line, the second blue line. The blank side is a canvas, like flower petals. A circle and a line make a balloon - pins, broken shards of snail shells, pellet arrows, pricks and sticks that can puncture like bicycle tires. You can turn a triangle into a house, curve the sides of another triangle and attach to the first triangle and it looks like a house with burning windows and screaming mothers on the front yard. Circles with triangle ears look like cats. Squiggle line like bursting balloons look like tails that make them easy to catch. Tails that make a "pop" like paper firecrackers when you yank them too hard. Ovals are like stretched circles, triangles can be wings on the oval, attached to let the oval flyaway like fireflies and moths. Other triangles that look like the edges of pliers, hands that hold the pliers and triangles that used to be wings while the oval wiggles. I figure out how to build lines on top of each other to make flowers. Markers with angle ends work well for covering a card until the lines beneath can't be seen. I spend my day going through a pack of 300 cards, covering each in a layer of black so that eyes couldn't see what is drawn beneath them. My mother asks me what I'm drawing, I say eyelids.

I stare at a point until the eyes lock up. The edges of sight are like tunnel vision, vague, liquid. Fuzzy borders keep in what is seen and the rest of the world out. The news says that birds fly into windmills because they can't see the blades spinning. I can flap my small

arms and I can see the blades. I wonder if a bird tries to turn away? Staring is like riding in a car at night where the black seeps into the windows. If my eyelids open, there's only stars to see, small points that eventually give way until everything is dark, pouring through the atmosphere and raining against my chest, sounding like the waves of the beach turned backwards. In class we read stories about sea-shells. They miss the waves and cry in a sound that reflects that. We make shells out of shoeboxes and paper towel holders. I wonder if the crabs that used to live in the shells ever want their former skin back. At home the closet holds more shoeboxes that call for the ocean while I sit and stare at the dark.

Sitting in the closet helps to speed up the approaching dark. The door bolts shut so a brother can't see anymore. Here I can reach out and feel my clothes. I sit on empty seashells and run the back of my hand over the blue of a sweater without having to see wool rope to wrap a neck in the warmth of a flowing heartbeat. When I was born I learned to smell the blue, the slight dust behind the bookcase smell that comes from too much ink in the threads.

I have a feeling that my brother would have needed glasses if he had lived outside the womb. There's a gray fuzziness between what the organs can see and the dark of the space outside the line of sight. Glasses for me are not a choice. Life's better lived without open eyes. With my eyelids shut I can hear exactly how the tear in the shoulder of a shirt echoes a heartbeat off closet walls. After years of laying in the dark, you learn the smell of your thoughts from the day before, hanging in your clothes like the smoke from burnt fields and lit matchbooks. If you lie still, you can feel the weight of shadows hanging over you, cutting off the line between your skin and the warmth of a nightlight.

Before I was born my eyes watched myself across the liquid between my brother's body and my own. I saw chicken arms and salamander legs sprout from my body and imagined tadpole noises. There's a constant shifting between who gets to go first. We flap our arms and legs like wings to find better seats and hear rumbles like far away car alarms. "Feel, the babies are kicking. They're telling us about their dreams." My father speaks slowly and sends ripples through us when he answers my mother. "Yes, I feel a baby kicking." I keep my eyes shut tightly. I can see this from my brother's view. We have lines that connect us to the sounds we hear and they wrap around and

tangle about in knots as we bustle about. We both know that whoever gets out first will survive. We are too young to know the difference between the surviving of the body and the surviving of the soul. We do know that there is space and sense for only one of us. It is hard to share a womb, harder still to share a body.

There is a small creek along the edge of my school. In the past it was covered in cement so that the ground would stop eroding. Now the dirt erodes around the cement that grows an edge that rises higher than where the dirt ends. There are cracks that run through the surface of the cement like wrinkles on my grandparents' hands. The cracks start with the rain but it's the kids attached to sticks and rocks that turn them from smile wrinkles into deep gashes. Part of the fun comes with jumping from the dirt to the lip of the cement without falling into the crevice. Eyes focus down the space behind the dirt and cement, the dampness of the mud between the gray and stubborn earth. I try to stay out; falling means cuts and scratches against the cement trying to grab back onto the dirt. My brother's sight doesn't worry about cuts and bruises. He sees lizards and beetles crawl through the cracks and hopes my fingers will follow until the skin of my hands burst against the rough edges. He sees spaces in the cracks to hide notes and treasure maps that mark an x where bike tires and balloon grafts hide.

My fingers have cracks too. In my sweat, small things sparkle in the sun, telltale residue from the places they've been and the things they've done. In science we cover our fingers with saran wrap to lose our fingerprints. With saran fingers the world feels sticky, less real. My brother watches as my friends suck small sections of saran back into their mouths until they can twist the bubble into balls to pop against the palms of their hands. He thinks about cracks to hide in. I feel the slow bleeding of the cuts on my hands as the saran wraps so tight that my fingers start to feel cold and far away.

I put the cracks in my fingers against the cracks in the cement during recess. My lines tell about where I've been and what I've done. I feel sorry for the cement. None of the lines are its fault. The rain, the kids, the sticks. All the ridges that make fingerprints in actions that don't belong to them, but still there making the earthquake scale lines among pockmarks that come to define who the cement creek is.

We learn in class about how our fingerprints are the lines that

define us against all others. We search through the shapes on our skin to find the marks that can identify us and us alone. I stare at my fingertips and they look like pictures of earthquakes and plates moving under the skin. I stare at the cement and think of small faces in the cracks, disfigured eyes and long mouths held upon in a grin. With more rain and kids, the cracks of the grin will probably turn into an open mouth, yelling or yawning. They have ink sets and pink goo to wash our hands after we are fingerprinted in class. An officer tells us that the lines that define us are the things that will help us be found if we're ever lost. I wonder what will happen if they ever look for my brother and turn up my fingerprints. My cracks are second hand, used for a few minutes before being stolen. The policeman looks at us and tells us how they catch people by looking at their fingers. "You can't take things and not expect to keep them without consequence. If you take things, believe me, there are more ways than you can think of for those things to be given back to their rightful owner." I wonder what they'd say if I told them how my skin is a size too big when I lie in bed at night.

On the weekend I run from my house until I get to the park a few blocks away. The ground has a bare dirt skin that cracks on the edges where I lie. All the weeds hold tinges of black from matchstick experiments in the weeks before. I learn in class to not look directly into the sun, but my father tells me that not all things we learn in class are always to be followed. My father watches movies where a man is taken over by evil spirits and to save his body he cuts off his hand. I remember my father ruffled my hair when I giggled. Staring into the sun becomes a game. How long before the heat spreads from the back of the eyes back up to the skin. Afterwards the world looks like a sunburn, black dots that fade to blue and shift to red depending on how fast the eyes move. Wait long enough and the hole that is the sun is so big that the eyes can't even see the shape of a match burning small bits of dry grass around me.

My mother speaks of possession. An arm is not yours if your will cannot move it. Much like the possession of a child. My mother holds her stomach when she speaks of our birth. My father holds his fingers to the sweat above his eyebrows, "A child is its own Maria. We are not to be so arrogant as to hold a baby to our chest until the breathing stops." My mother looks at his chin with eagle eyes.

My father tells me that possession isn't a concrete thing. A

child, an arm, the eyes, a sight you cannot control seems less yours than the controllers. "Ask yourself who gives you thoughts every day Matthew. Find your voice among the others in your head that have been placed there by that damn TV, and whatever else you kids are absorbing."

I forgot what the wallpaper in my room looked like a long time ago. I have my index cards instead. The walls are for the lined side though. Words and phrases are better suited for the machine symmetry of parallel blue lines. In case I forget myself I use my cards as instructions for the morning, the midday and night. Next to my bed it says, "Close your eyes" under that it says, "count to ten, count again, count again, do not count sheep." Over my desk it says, "Keep your eyes open when you sneeze" Under the window it says, "Look at the birds, look at the fig tree, look at the clouds" I have to remind myself, "Do not run with scissors." "Call 911 in an emergency." "Report suspicious activity to the Neighborhood Watch."

The walls are for words. My father has a bookcase that he built on his time off from his job. "You'd think a fireman would learn to use less wood in his house, eh Matthew?" I shrug. The centers sag under old copies of *Field & Stream* and sideways stacks of UFM minutes that belonged to my grandfather. In the spare room it becomes the skin of the far wall like a blanket over a wound. It smells like oranges depending on how long it's been since my mother has dusted. The bottom row holds my father's collection of science fiction books. I keep my index picture cards in those like bookmarks.

Rectangles look like stitches on a soccer ball. No circles, the index card is too small. I make dots that are specks of dirt above where I buried the burnt husk that survived the fireplace. On the weekends with the other firefighters, my father plays soccer and looks for his ball before he leaves the house. I watch from the edges of the field as he drives Hector's ball towards the goal. "Football is like fire fighting, you have to outsmart your opponent. When you look right, turn left. When you stop, shoot the ball behind you to the man with the hose and more oxygen in his tank. Then you run around yelling 'goal' at the top of your lungs and hoping the family had home insurance with fire protection." The flowers at the edges of the field survive long enough to catch themselves in my hands like pages in a book, compressing and milking them until I can smell their ginger scent later at the dinner table. My father reads a book about fireflies and other

worlds and finds index cards stuck in the pages. Rectangles remind him of station wagons and house windows while he looks around the garage for his missing soccer ball.

Surrounded by cards that tell me I'm real, my mother sits with me until she can feel my breathing slow down. Sleeping is hard for the whole family. Drops of water hit the kitchen sink and my father wakes with a jolt, thinking the alarm has gone and there's a fire to fight. My mother sits for 24-hour shifts at the table, listening to the scratching of the scanner, listening to fire calls and mouthing the names of the wives she knows.

I turn my head to the wall where an index card says, "Lay out your clothes for school tomorrow." We have a fireplace but unless the power goes out, my mother doesn't let us use it. At night it stays dark. I tape a card to the top of my bed that says, "Go back to sleep" but I can't see it when I wake up in the night. I crawl through the house looking for a drink of water. Light switches feel like the wiggling of moth larva, so I stay close to the floor. In the dark when eyes can't see, I'm invisible to everything coming back. I know how far away the bathroom is by outlets on the wall. Two outlets and a hard right is my bathroom with the glowing nightlight reflecting off of the curved spigot head. I let my fingers catch on the plastic plugs filling the outlet holes. My mother put them in when I first learned to crawl and the family got used to them. Now we take them out and put them back in when we're done without thinking about who we're trying to protect anymore. Like the plastic hooks inside the cupboards under the sink where we keep the animal poison. Like the doors in the backseat of the car that can only open from the outside.

It's late and I drink with my eyelids shut. I smell like jumping, but I'll have to wait for the morning before I can take a bath. I crawl back to my bed where I can feel the pillows wrap themselves around my head until I pass out. I was born with a nose that could smell the way one hundred pounds of sixth grader is like grass and graham crackers. I can smell the three inches of skin that does not fit on my shoulders. It drapes across my bones like saran wrap after it loses its stick. I was born with ears that can hear my parents setting clocks and watering the plants in the night. I can see a person smile by the way they reflect the sunlight onto my skin. I can see the planes in the sky by the way their exhaust fumes fall down to the earth like lazy stars. I can see the sun by the sulphur of its flesh long after it goes from white

to black on an afternoon.

When I walk to school, my backpack sounds like a pair of maracas from the box of matches I took from the drawer next to the kitchen sink. At the cement creek I hold them in my hands up to the sunlight, letting the shining sun halo into my eyes. There's something beautiful about matches that even my brother and I can agree on. I think it's how fragile they are. Huge greedy red heads that change right in front of your eyes and try to change everything along with them. I can tense my thumb and snap the match in half before the thought has a chance to form. Against the side of the box it reminds me of the duck pond by the house where my father and I throw bread at the ducks. They share the pond with a sewer main and it smells like the eggs that we forgot to take out of the bag when I was younger. "Sulphur Matthew, they're making the water better with it. Even though it smells bad, it's good on the inside." Like matches. Eggs smell like sulphur that smell like matches that smell like houses burning down. Dad would stand in front of our house on the Fourth of July and remark, "Smells like arson." My mom and I would shrug.

We have dinner by candlelight when my mother is too tired to fight with my father. There is a line of heat that spreads the air in an invisible line above the flame. When my father speaks, the flame tries to rush away from his words. They know he prefers a flame to be dead. The heat above the flame scatters but holds its ground, like ripples in a pond against the rock of my father's voice. There are scents that are added to the candle to make it smell like vanilla or flowers from the front yard. My nose smells the sulphur of the match that lit the flame minutes before.

The skritch scratch of a head against the side of a matchbox sounds like fingers opening my window at night. Underneath my eyelids I count a broken-record list of numbers. I smell the smile of a dream searching for a space to drift through the window and into my room. I sometimes believe I can cover my nose and make it go away. Like nightlights and candles, the sulphur of the head exploding overpowers the smell of a dream's slipping grin. Sulphur like arson, like the surface of the sun, coming up and chasing intruders away into expanding holes of white, then red, then blue, then black. I toss the box of matches into the cracks of the creek cement with the matchbooks that came before.

Method

I count the things I know are facts. The things that I believe. I lie in bed at night, staring with my eyes open at the ceiling where the moonlight draws faces in the cratered landscape of the stucco-spray. I hear the whirr and click of my father working down the hall. His inventions follow a methodic path.

My eyes snap open. The morning is throwing back the shade covers and opening the windows to let the wind rush through the house. I am told that the air sits during the night. Holds late night poker games, throwing life savings around, adjusting themselves in the chairs when they begin to numb. All I find is the dust they leave. Oxygen and hydrogen and nitrogen spinning around and around in place until it just quits and falls on the furniture.

Nothing is ever slow in my life. My mother used to crack the door and turned the radio on until I came out for breakfast. Now my father just pours ice water over my head and calls it even. On my birthdays he forgets the ice. Cold is pain. The morning air hates the sun's burning, screams through the house, frosting my fingertips and making my tongue stick to the bathroom mirror. It's no good to wade in slowly; you have to jump directly into the waves. The light pours over my head. Without the warmth of my dreams, I'm just cold again. Jumpstarts forget and no one makes fun of you for leaving the lights on all night. If you count, you can keep on forgetting.

Over breakfast my father reads the papers and watches me eat. My mother uses one hand to push the spatula pushing the bacon down and the other to keep me in my chair. My father built a video camera that looks at my every move. My mother built a harness so the camera spills into the space in front of me, looking backwards to make sure I'm following. I wonder why it never runs into anything if it never looks where it's going. At night we sit around the tv and watch my mouth in class giving answers, my hands scratching at my

face, my eyes looking back at my father hidden inside the camera. He needs better angles so he builds three more and my mother makes adjustments to the harness. We watch with the mute on.

Another ice water funeral for my dreams and father's reading the paper again. Scientists have made robots that can build other robots. In time, they'll be able to make themselves better than we can program them. I look at my video cameras in the corner avoiding breakfast as they tear apart my stereo to make more of themselves. In class I look up at the ceiling. I'm surrounded by too many cameras to see the teacher. She comes through as whirrs and clicks. The smoke detector light blinks without a pattern as it watches me. I blink back morse code but can't understand the responses. Better to ignore a fire alarm given the chance so that the warmth will overtake you. My father watches my eyes and his cameras reflecting in my pupil. It's colder in the mornings but I can't fit my coat over the harness anymore.

I dream of Buddha getting hit by flower petals, I turn ice cubes into coals in the shade of lipstick. I get up anyway. We made a deal; the cameras get my blood, they get me antifreeze. They get my place at the table. Father moves the tv so my eyes can watch me from tape delay.

Hydraulics don't respond to dreams, just grease. I smell bacon before I take my morning shower. I've learned to see through my eyelids. Lids that open up on my feet and in bowls of cereal. They see me putting on my harness, crawling inside my bubble; prongs hold my eyelids open so I don't blink. From dreams I know that tensing your muscles creates warmth. Concentrate and you can be still below the surface of a frozen lake. Concentrate long enough and you can sleep while you're still awake.

Charcoal and Maroon

I remember the first time I saw that bulbous rat. The sign on the cage said “Chinchilla- Brevicaudata”, something I’d never heard of, but it should have said fuzzy-rat-that-your-girlfriend-will-fall-in-love-with,-force-you-to-buy-her-and-then-stick-you-with-when-the-two-of-you-break-up, maybe then I would have quickly turned away and wandered over to the fish aisle.

I figured it’d be dead in a month or two anyway, but I got in a habit of feeding it, so he got a bit on the overweight side instead. I’d also come to realize that the cage we’d bought was too small so I took him out every now and then for exercise, not for play, just exercise. I guess that became a habit too since I kept on exercising it even after I bought the bigger cage.

After we had broken up, Stephanie called out of the blue to yell at me for talking to my friends about what had happened between us. I heard the click of her disconnect before I could summon any words. I sat there staring at the phone in my hand, counting the numbers on the keypad in my head. My mouth would open but close again like a goldfish for lack of words. I could hear her words in my head as I watched the dust play in the sunlight streaming through the window, dancing in yellow swirls as the breeze brushed through the screen. How could I not think of her? When I lived in the room I painted her in, dressed in the clothes she would borrow, wore the skin that had touched hers? I remember looking with contempt at the dust. The yellow should have been beautiful as it played with the small rainbows resting on the dancing dust, but I didn’t care anymore. I watched as the yellow turned to gray before I closed my curtains.

“Maybe you need to admit that no one ever has loved you.” I don’t remember that much else from the conversation but that phrase stuck in my head. I try not to listen but it echoes through my head every time it feels like someone’s going to attack me and hurt me

again. Some people have mantras they say to themselves throughout the day like “you can do it” or “Jesus loves me”, me, I just have my ex-girlfriend saying I’m unlovable.

I started sketching the chinchilla for my art class. I had to. When I started my art classes I was sketching Stephanie. That was real art. She had a way of filling the spaces between my lines. I’d stare, motionless, at the developing picture, feeling my desire pulse in the broken bits of charcoal, until she’d clear her throat and snap me out of it. Maybe it was just me, but when I drew an apple, it felt like a sketch of an apple. When I drew Stephanie, I wanted to touch the image, roll around in it and crawl inside it.

I put my face down on the page as I sketch, cheek against the rough grain, watching the charcoal break off onto the surface. I want to see the minute pieces of the image I create. Even the sound adds to it, giving it the industrial music of objects coming together as I play god in the emptiness. I feel like I’m creating a bit of myself in the reflection of the sketchpad. Stephanie would look at me and say I had charcoal on my face again. I look at her images on the canvases now and my body freezes up, stuck in my memories until I sit on the floor, tears working to wash my face clean.

Actually, the crying dried up a while ago; I just sit and stare these days. I needed something else to create and all there was for me was the chinchilla, filling the page with his stupid animal fur and too big eyes that seemed more like mirrors than anything else.

His name came from an class presentation. I was presenting my piece on the chinchilla, trying to explain what I meant to convey by the long strokes of his face and the jerked shorts of his fur when my table mate, Kat, asked what the animal’s name was. I didn’t know how to respond. I never get speechless, I can usually make something up if I don’t know what the answer is, but I guess she caught me off guard. The point was, I’d never bothered to name it. Stephanie called it Sir Robin, but I’d never called it that. I didn’t want to insult the fuzzy thing with such a cheesy name. I had to think of something quickly because I could see the whole class looking at me like I was some sort of freak and Ms. Fylder was probably writing “idiot” in the space for my grade so I blurted out “Kevin” and the class just sat there. They probably thought I had some major issues for having an animal with the same name as my own. I saw more than one person look at their watch and change positions in their seat so I rushed through the rest of my presentation and sat back down.

"You don't talk as much as you used to." Kat says without stopping her sketching. Her hand is holding onto the end of her pencil as the lines from her wild strokes continue to form an alien manipulating a pair of record players. The presentations are finished for the day so Ms. Fylder is having us do individual work until the day ends. Usually Kat and I don't talk, mostly because I never know what to say, but she's persistent with her overtures of friendship.

"There doesn't seem to be that much to talk about anymore." Turning towards her, I'm struck, as usual, by her straight red hair cut to just above shoulder length, showing a stalk of neck before being engulfed by the red. The smallness of her body grabs my attention as usual too.

"There's always something to talk about silly! Didn't you wake up today? Isn't that enough to talk about? Hmmm, I guess that would all depend on how much you're cracked out from the night before...but never mind. What have done so far today?"

"I... guess I woke up and came to school." By now, she's stopped working and is facing me as she swivels her chair back and forth. Her head is bowed so that her eyes have to look up to see me. I can't think of anything else to say as I watch the overflowing fabric of her pants slap against my knee every time her chair swivels.

"Hmmm, something tells me I just got the edited for television version of your morning, but that's cool. Did you do anything last night to celebrate the end of the weekend?" Her hands are a flurry of motion as she plays with the neon bracelets that travel like a caravan up her right arm. I can't take my eyes off her hand as she hooks her finger under the rubbery plastic and spins it around her wrist a couple of times before stopping and then spinning the bracelet back around the other way.

"No, just laid out some sketches and went to bed."

"Too bad, you should have been with me last night. Fuzz-E put on a party out in the industrial park with DJ Flower spinning nothing but happy hardcore. I was in heaven. I must have danced until I got home around five or so. I've had no sleep so I'm either running on empty or overdrive, I can never tell which."

My eyes are closed now. I don't want to hear about dancing, there are too many memories. I don't want to see her swaying back and forth in her chair as she talks to me. I don't want the complexity that comes when I feel her knee pressing against mine as she twists her chair. I turn myself back towards the table so I can work on my shading, or at least not have to show Kat that I'm wiggling out. She

can tell though.

“What’s wrong Kev?” She’s stopped twisting and I can feel her looking at me out of the corner of my eye.

“Nothing, I just need to get some shading done before the bell rings.” I’m trying not to look up from my sketch and face her gaze.

“Well tough luck pilgrim. The bell rang about a minute ago.” I lift my head from the paper and notice that half the class is gone. Turning to Kat to see her looking at me with her head bent again before I turn away and gather my things to go to my next class.

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Stephanie and I used to go dancing together, but never swing. We were jinxed. Whenever we’d tried to go swing dancing, I’d get depressed over this or that or she’d get angry at me and soon enough we’d be in the parking lot of some side of the road super market listening to the car idle, its bored growl no match to the screaming of our lack of words. But we’d had fun when we actually made it to the few all age dance clubs that didn’t have swing night. She studied ballet and I studied with my eyes closed, leaving us as reflections of opposite realities coming together in our chosen dance spot on the floor. With Stephanie’s precise movements, like an exacto knife through the beat, contradicted my flailing arms, the liquid of shaping clay, the floor would be filled with eyes dismissing and dismayed. At first I was self-conscious but one night, I noticed her spiral hair chasing the beat and her head, and she loved me so much she kept my picture in her pupils. I never told her about it, but after that, I didn’t find it so hard to go dancing with her.

Now I dance around my room to the Cure while Kevin runs about trying to avoid my feet. It’s okay with Kevin, but the mere mention of dancing by anyone else sends running for the corners like Kevin when the CD skips and it becomes too dangerous beneath my stuttering feet. It was like I was still shell shocked after she left a bomb in the shape of a box containing everything that reminded her of me on my front steps for me to find after school last semester. Kevin waits patiently for me sit down with my sketchbook and charcoal before he joins me via zigzagging patterns across the floor.

I wonder sometimes what everyone else in my art class thinks when someone gives a presentation on their work. Trey finished his presentation earlier this period and either the rest of the class thinks he’s full of it or they think he “gets it” enough to hate him for it. Thick as thieves, artists are not. Just my luck, as everyone is packing

their tools away, Trey comes up to me and drops his canvas roll of brushes on the table.

"Hey Kevin, what's up with the guinea pig obsession? Realism or Absurdism?" I can feel my face getting red. Trey's always name dropping styles I've never heard of and wearing subtle shades of black like it's a fashion statement of his inner complexity. He's looking at me for some answer and I'm just looking for a way to get out of class. I purse my lips to make it look like I'm forming an answer while I wait for him to lose interest. He grabs his role of brushes from the table, "I mean, seriously though, what's with the exclusive use of black charcoal? If you're going to make a point of using a lack of color, maybe use a postmodern medium instead?"

The lightning cracks in the cement floor of our classroom are becoming increasingly interesting as I try to make the situation go away with my silence. Finally I open my mouth to answer but the voice I hear sounds a lot more like Kat's until I realize it is.

"Shut up Trey. Who are you to come down on Kevin for sketching the same thing all the time? At least he's not bringing in a canvas with some random dots on it like one of us tried to pull today. Besides, it's obviously a chinchilla." She turns her attention from him to me for a moment, wrinkling her nose at me and blowing a kiss before turning back to him. He holds his hands up to Kat as if to show that he holds no weapons, notices the roll of brushes he'd picked up from the table and sticks it underneath his arm with a shrug.

"Well Katherine, at least one of us actually paints dots, instead of punching a few buttons on a keyboard, but I wouldn't expect a little raver like yourself to understand real art. But it matches I guess, my dots and real artistic music to your photoshop graphics and sampled computer beep beep artisan plebian fare."

"Hey, the music I listen to may not be Mozart, but it's fun you know? Like, entertainment? When was the last time you accessorized your 'wah wah emo' outfit with a smile? Don't forget Trey, we're artists, not saviors. Geez, get some perspective," I almost want to smile. Kat is literally glowing as she stands there bouncing in front of Trey. Her 4'12" figure is dwarfed by his, but she clasps her hands behind her back and sways her smirk back and forth whenever Trey tries to create a comeback, and suddenly, he's the one who looks smaller. The pacifier she always has around her neck caught my eye with its swinging against her sway, hitting the sides of her baby tee before arching back around her body. I can't stop watching it dance around her, touching her sides for a moment before hugging her with its path in front of her body. I can see my own hands in its place for a moment

before I shake the idea out of my head and retreat from the classroom at the sound of the bell as Trey backs away from Kat behind the shield of his forced ironic toothy smile.

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I always felt that Stephanie believed in my art. She did like my work though, so long as the subject was her. She'd stare at my finished pieces while running the back of her fingers along her cheekbones and smiling approvingly. She'd been the one to favorably compare the work I did with the works we saw in coffee shops of the art crawl every second Saturday of the month. I'd stare at the pictures, wanting to touch them and feel the canvas scratch along my fingers but I was always conscious of the artists standing a few feet away a looking for the slightest openings to engage with you. I remember when she stood a few steps behind me and said, "These paintings are all bullshit. If they put this crap up then they'd probably be ecstatic to put your stuff up too." I would quickly lead us to the next coffee shop in the crawl since she didn't really have a grasp on talking in a whisper.

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Lunchtime means sitting with a sketchpad on the bleachers of the baseball field. No one else is ever there so finding a place to sit by myself becomes an easy chore. I sit at the top to get the best point of view through the pine trees that line the fence dividing the field of play from the houses behind the school property. Kat and her group of raver friends hang out beneath the trees, using the fence as a backboard to sit against. Kat usually sits against the largest tree surrounded by her friends, watching them and smiling, her hair a beacon I can never lose. I've been trying to sketch these trees for the last few months, but they never feel right on the page. I don't work well with ball-point pens.

Today's no different and I begin to watch Kat's group play around with each other on the grass. It always seemed amazing to me that they don't trip over their pants when they run at each other and mock wrestle before dance-skipping back to the main group. Kat laughs at almost everything around her. I watch her talking with her friends as they bounce about listening to the music that I can faintly hear coming from a small tape player hanging from one of the tree branches. I try to match the pressure of the pen to the page to the

pressure I can feel holding me down to the seat each time I imagine myself getting up and walking over. My finger is on the page, smudging where the ink spills onto her face and close my eyes, imagining the feel of inky flesh before I pull my hand back to my side feeling pathetic. I'm beginning to remind myself of one of the psycho guys from an eighties movie that just follows a girl around high school, worshipping from afar. Soon I'll need to buy a boombox and Peter Gabriel tape. With my eyes open now I content myself to look at the smudge of ink on the page and Kat's hair burning through it, a perfect sunset growing out of her head.

When I was younger, my Mom told me I could paint the rock wall in the back yard. She probably just wanted me to stop painting the hallway walls. To me it was my first big job I could do to help out around the house. I took all my watercolors and lined them up in front of the wall and set to work. Three hours later, I was finished just in time to let my father see my masterpiece before he would leave for the night. I went into his room, where he liked to lay the dark watching our 10-inch black and white, and pleaded with him to follow me into the backyard so I could show him a surprise. Like the giant I saw him as, he lumbered out behind me, passing my mother without a word and stood in front of the wall. He looked, nodded his head at the splashes of green, yellow, and pink already draining off some on the lower rocks and walked back to his room. I remember the sounds of the water thumping through the garden hose as I turned it on to wash the rest of the paint off the rocks; it sounded like my father's door closing over and over again like a sample on a skipping techno CD.

That wasn't the point in which I stopped using color though. There were phone calls for that kind of thing. How could I explain these things to someone like Trey? That I didn't see the point in using colors when everyone had boyfriends and girlfriends they didn't talk to but wouldn't leave. That there wasn't color in a world where your father sleeps on the couch because he's too ashamed of the alcohol on his breath to sleep with the woman he married. That when the only person who's opinion you cared about told you to stop doodling and get some real goals, color seemed to only complicate things.

My biggest fan now was an oversized rat that would lumber over and bite at my pencil while I worked out ideas in my notebook. I figured around that time that if I was stuck with him then I'd put

him to work. I spent about four days perfecting a harness that would allow Kevin to wander around my canvas while leaving lines of charcoal. He always looked like a miniature creature from Star Wars, walking around with his pack of artist's tools bent on the destruction of the rebel forces. When he was finished wandering around, he'd plop down which would make the sticks crumble or fall out of the harness, leaving strange foot prints at the end of the lines. I'd finish up with a few strokes of my own to bring some plot into the piece and turned them in to Ms. Fylder who told me that most of the primary lines were too mechanical and that I should tap into my carnal animalist side in order to give more power to my pieces.

When Stephanie and I got tired of looking mutely at each other, we'd go for walks at the state park that was near her house. We'd follow the path until the trail's turnaround. Just beyond that was a hill with a huge metal electrical tower at the top of it. From there you could see out into the bay if you sat in just the right place. We would always end our walks at the base of the tower with a dinner of melted M&M's and body-warmed tap water. Most of the time we'd sit together, her between my legs, using my knees as arm rests while we stared up at the clouds and argued about what they looked like. I liked bringing my ear to her back, sometimes if the sun was still high and there wasn't any wind, she'd let me lift up the back of her shirt and press my ear against the flesh of her back. My skin connected to hers and I'd listen to her heart beat as she talked about how she was getting better at whipping her head around so she wouldn't get dizzy when she did her pirouettes in dance class.

We loved watching the sun as it set. Well, I loved watching it and she loved the idea of watching. The beauty made me feel part of something bigger than just being another kid with an artist pipe dream. We'd sit and watch the sun begin to set but the wind would pick up and Stephanie would become uncomfortable and want to go home. I didn't mind then that we never got to see the best part of the sunsets though. I felt part of something bigger when I was around her and I never worried about turning my back on the rising red tide that followed the sunset so that I could follow her back to her house.

It would have been our second anniversary today (and the anniversary of our breakup), so I knew I couldn't sit around in my room, at least I couldn't do it and be anywhere near healthy. I tried wander-

ing around town but avoiding everyone I saw led me farther and farther away from the center of town. Somehow I knew I would end up at the park. At the top of the hill, I felt out of breath and pathetic. I sat down and wrote questions in the shapes of the clouds: Is Stephanie making anything of this day? Is Stephanie worried about whether or not she lost the only person who could make her feel alive? Is Stephanie warm if she's not up here where the wind always made her cold? The weeds stand there silent around me, leaving waves in the wake of my hands running across the top of their sea.

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Our final project in art is due at the end of the next week. I'm turning in a four-piece work on Kevin that I've been working on all semester. I'm almost finished with my fourth piece and I decided to bring it into class and work on it there during and after class. Ms. Fylder agreed to let me bring Kevin to class during the day as well. Kevin hasn't yet gotten used to the room and so he's assumed his usual frozen position leashed to his harness on top the table, which is okay since I'm working on shading after school today.

Kat had come in to work on the computer about a half an hour earlier. We'd looked at each other for a moment before I looked down and turned away. She had sat down at the computer next to my drafting table and had been working silently ever since.

I'm trying to work but every time I turn, the red on top of her head drags my eyes slower than my head wants to move. Putting the charcoal down, I give up and turn to face Kat. She's decked out in her usual oversized pants that hide her skinniness and tight blue top that does just the opposite. Her feathered hair brakes at the top of her neck showing her neck leading into the red. I hear Stephanie's voice echo in my head, clouding my sight for a moment. I shake my head and bury my face in my fist for a moment before turning back to my piece. Bending down, I reach out to Kevin for some moral support. Twirling the fur underneath his chin, I notice that he's holding my reflection in his eyes. Looking him in the face I try to see if he's trying to tell me something before I remember he's just a chinchilla. I sit down with him for a bit with my eyes closed and breathing to myself. Looking over at Kat and then back at Kevin, I exhale one last time, get up, and turn again towards Kat.

"Hey." I suppose I could say something more poetic, or even slick, but I didn't say anything more.

"Hey." She saves her work before turning to look at me. Her

T-shirt has a small E on the chest, surrounded by a circle and no larger than a quarter. I look at it for a moment before I realize I'm staring at her chest and snap my head up to look in her eyes. She looks at me for a moment before smiling and raising an eyebrow.

"Sorry, I..." She reaches for my hand and shakes her head. I let my words hang in the air.

"It seems like every time we talk, something happens and everything shuts down. It doesn't seem healthy you know?"

"Yeah, I've just been down I guess."

"You guess? There's no doubt that you're down. The question is why are you down, or rather how long is it going to make you this hermit that you've become? I remember when we were in Chem together last year, you were always so much more bouncy and happy."

"Yeah, I know. I guess I just got hurt too many times by people..."

"By people, or by one person?" Her hand rises up to hold my chin to prevent me from looking away from her. "Don't worry, I don't know that much, just bits and pieces I pick up when people talk about people who seem cool." Her eyes wane against her eyelids as she pushes her head forward and turns it to the side, simulating a sad child that's begun to hang their head. She pulls her hands together against her chest like she's praying, at the same time starting to bounce ever so slightly to a beat I couldn't hear.

"Well Kevin, maybe it's just the raver in me, but if you don't start opening up again you're probably going to die." My face must have seemed shocked because she started laughing, leaning forward to rest her forehead on my knee. I'm watching her hair, like waves, crashing onto my khakis every time her head moves. I could touch it with a slight adjustment of my hands, just a simple movement would put my hands upon her head, but I fold them into each other instead until she catches her breath to look up at me. "I didn't mean that literally. Oohh, you should have seen your face! No, it's like in Peter Pan. If you don't laugh at least once a day in Neverland then you'll die. I feel the same way about life. You have to be happy and trust people if you want to live in Happyland."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll probably just die then as everyone keeps attacking me, and the world keeps getting worse." Kat's worked up now. Her movements are too quick. I can see it in her furled brow, something I've never seen her do before.

"Kevin. Look at me. Am I attacking you? Doesn't one person make it worth it? I understand that it's safer to assume all people are going to hurt you. People even say it's a sign of low self-esteem to al-

ways trust and believe in people, but even if that's true, do you want to be someone who doesn't trust anyone? Do you want to assume that everyone you meet is capable of hurting you or do you want to assume they're capable of loving you?" Her last words hang in the air for a moment, competing with the opposite messages that have been repeating endlessly in my head. I pull my head up in line with Kat's. The sun is starting to slant into the room through the windows behind her. I notice the yellow swirls the air behind her as her eyes wait my response.

"Do you want to see the piece I'm working on?" Her eyes widen as she brightens up immediately. Bouncing out of her seat, she almost falls forward onto my lap, but I catch her by her waist until she gets her balance. I still feel my hands touching her as she skips around the drafting table.

"Of course! I loved that piece you brought into class the other day. I do so much tech style art these days that's it's refreshing to see something organic." I walk over and pick up Kevin who looks a bit skittish with a stranger so near his easel. She reaches out and picks Kevin up from my hands and brings him up to her face. After spinning around with him she hands him back to me and turns to the easel. I step back to give her some room to look, feeling Kevin's heart beat faster than normal after his recent flight.

"Better than a bunch of random dots on a canvas?" I watch Kat running her fingers along the rough outline of Kevin's shape on the page, she laughs slightly as she moves her face closer to the canvas and her hand. I notice that she's stopped bouncing and her head has begun to draw the outline on paper in the air with its movements

"You know what I find helps me understand a piece?"

"It's not really done yet, I haven't gotten around to fleshing out the depth of the subject or stuff like that."

"Well yeah, I can see that silly, but what I find helps, even when the whole idea isn't really there, is to get right on top of the piece, You know, just put your eye up to surface and ride the lines. It helps show where everything's going. Gives you a new angle to work from. It even works for people like you who deal with the organic. Nothing wrong, a new perspective on things. After all it's still real." Her face is literally against the surface of the piece as she moves from right to left to follow the lines. She finishes her inspection and stands up straight and turns around to face me. You do understand don't you?"

I don't know what to say. Of course I know what she means, I've been doing that for years, scared to show too many people be-

cause everyone who saw me do it would ask me if I was joking or, and this was so much worse, they would just look me silently.

"You've got some charcoal on your cheek." I raise my hand up to brush it off her face but hesitate a moment before my finger touches her. Kat just stands there smiling, never taking her eyes off mine. I blink and begin to rub the charcoal off her cheek. Closing her eyes, she moves her face against my hand as she brings her hand up to cup my own. She starts to run her fingers across the back of my palm and I can feel her touch follow moments after her skin has made contact with mine. It feels like small explosions under my skin following along the path she chose. I can't move as she takes a step closer to me. Looking in my eyes again she uses her other hand to reach out and pet Kevin, who is still between us, cleaning his paws.

"I could really fall for a guy with a chinchilla you know..." I just stand there until she steps away and walks over to the computer. "I remember you saying you were doing a four-piece collection of your chinchilla pieces. Can I offer some advice?" Turning off the computer, she goes into her teddy bear shaped backpack and comes back with a stick of lipstick in her hands.

"Sure" I figure I have nothing to lose anymore.

"The stark usage of gray is striking, but a bit surreal. If you could ground just one of your paintings in color, just a bit, it might help slam the emptiness of the other pieces home. Just something to think about, besides, Kevin's so cute, he deserves a little happiness on at least one of the canvases." She takes Kevin out of his harness and sits down with him, her pants nearly engulfing him, and starts whistling again. After a few minutes without speaking or moving, she looks up at me. "Well, I need to get going, walk me to my car?"

"Sure."

Reaching out, I help her back up as she lets Kevin back onto the table.

Once again I don't know what to say as I walk beside her so I just listen to her pant cuffs slapping against the ground as she skips along towards her car which is parked on the street across from the art room. She doesn't seem to have the same problem.

"You should come out with me sometime. My friend's spinning this weekend at the Sinfusion party, I want you come hear it."

"Ummm... you'll be there?" I imagined myself blending into stark concrete walls, people throwing backpacks and jackets at my feet until my camouflage is complete.

"Of course I'll be there silly, I wouldn't want you there if I wasn't going. I'll give you the info later this week." She grabs my

wrist and pulls my hand up and towards her. Her lipstick is out now and without looking up she smears a line on my finger leaving a maroon scar mixing with the charcoal from her face before placing the case in my other hand. "Here, this should match Kevin's coat for now." I receive a kiss on the cheek and she is bouncing through the grass to her car. A quick wave and her Volkswagen Rabbit swallows her whole and drives off. I'm still staring down the street a few moments after she's turned, the moisture from her lips still gathering the cold of the air on my cheek.

Back in the classroom I stand in front of the canvas, looking at the charcoal and at Kevin. In the daylight filtering through the blinds, his coat is glimmering with bits of color. Reds, browns, and grays, all mixed in and creating combinations I'd never allowed myself to see before. I pull my finger in front of my eyes and touch the maroon to my lips for a second.

I can feel the lipstick hit the canvas somewhere between splat and thud. I still carry Stephanie's black and white second grade picture in my wallet. She is crying. I'd look at it and remember her telling me that trust should be given slowly and taken away quickly. I close my eyes for a moment before bringing my face to the canvas, my eyelashes touching my fingers as I blink. I hear Stephanie's echo drift up from the picture as it has for the last year. "No one has ever loved you" and my finger rises from the canvas for a moment, ready to pull away. I begin to whisper the phrase out loud, slowly repeating it until I can't understand the words anymore, until I heard Kat join the chorus in my head with her own saying, "One makes it worth it" loud enough to drown out my own parroted whisper. I continue to repeat Stephanie's words now out of spite, until the words blend from black and white thoughts to up-close collages of colored sound, until I place my finger against the canvas and begin to knead a rising maroon tide across Kevin's charcoal fur.

A Revolution In Interpersonal Communication.

At half my age, I counted the weight of a woman's name upon my tongue by the words we could speak in unison.

To have a reflected mirror rippling from our fingertips dragging across the skin that separated our bodies.

To pull the carriage that would take us through life, blinded by bit and harness below flaps that denied my eyes the world's distractions.

To shake awake and speak into a morning phone, long after the battery had lost its charge, about dreams and ideas and knowing the shape of your face as you receive this in your sleep.

At half my age, I wrote love poems about becoming another of your own hands, hugging your neck when you smiled, keeping the world at arms length when your eyes followed gravity to the ground. Preying on each other, becoming less so that the two can become greater.

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At twice that age, I count the weight of a your name upon my tongue by the number of pages I turn to remain at battle. Time builds lines upon my heart colored from the river that cuts through it slowly until reaching a larger sea where I find you.

To flip an ivory page, my own heartbeat heavy with her expectant conversation topics. Every word pouring from the page as setting concrete of a foundation, our similarities from shared lives hoping for another to care enough to invest time enough to listen with researching ears.

To have come to feel the pull of gravity in the planets that orbit above our shadows and star speckled heads. Knowing that rotations are slow and two orbits do not lose their weight in the time on the far side of the sun, casting daytime you will share via starlight when my own day has become night.

At twice that age, I write a love poem about becoming my own flesh, rolling up prayers I have not yet known and placing them into the wailing wall that brings us closer than an open field could ever allow. Praying not before you, but next to you, two spinning tops comfortable in their own orbits.

Coiling Hair

Sometimes the best place to see the computer screen is from behind her head. No need to worry about the left or right angles and the reflections of the energy saving fluorescent bulbs always directly over the protagonist's face. Sitting behind her, I place myself cross-legged with knees compressing her waist and resting upon the bones of her hips. She is the front seat of a lowrider and relaxes her back into the curves of my own protruding hips and ribcage.

In this position the movie on the screen becomes secondary. Far away and serving only to flicker light across her now upturned face, it becomes a digital candle on the floor of the living room.

This is a test. Run to the line in the sand. Do not tiptoe gingerly against its invisible heights. Become a pig; roll in the line, always on both sides of the fence. An apt metaphor. Greedy and dirty, I use my nose to draw lines across her forehead. Something allowed but my closed eyes belie the intimacy of the movement. In the dark beneath my eyelids, I see her own eyes closed, a moral game of peek-a-boo where the children can make the world disappear with a simple covering of the face.

Resting my thumb upon her shoulder, feign a check of the time on my watch. I do not notice the time. My forearms, bare against her rising hair on her arm tell our place better than the abstract of another far away candle on my wrist.

I bypass her ears just as I bypass her stomach, her thighs, her neck. At the base of her skull my hand is a rake to clear her hair from her skin. My fingerprints pressed against her scalp make me imagine a CSI with a dusting of her head for signs of a crime.

True criminals wear gloves; I wear her. Her hair becomes a bed of snakes, coiling themselves around my fingers and drawing new lines from the pressure against my skin.

The tell tail signs of her presence can be found in the strands left behind, woven into the carpet and grasping to clothing like blue flowers from a hike through tell weeds and forget-me-nots. From my fingers I take each strand and place it into a loom, create rope that

serves practical and symbolic purpose. Her eyes still closed, I bind my hands together, arrested and detached again. My nose once again on her forehead, reestablishing the clear lines in the sand, our heads turn back to the flickering screen, blinking the world back between the slithering shadows it makes.

125 Ounces of Commitment

I'm not sure if it started out as laziness, a bit of me wanting to put the perfect thing into the perfect place, but two years after poking through the sale bin at Macy's, past belts with five too few holes, 0.67 liter soap bottles, and two hundred sixteen different shades of summer yellow, my good intentions eventually melted into laziness. I chose a credit card purse with stock pictures in a little see-through window. Someplace proper to put your driver's licence, or a picture of a loved one, maybe one of those crazy girls night out pictures where you're wearing chunky hats and someone always seems to have their leg up covering everyone's waist. I settled for the picture that came with the wallet. A small kid on a swing set being pushed by his mother while her husband stands to the side. Smiles abound and you could imagine seeing the multicolored leaves in the trees behind them poking through the classy black and white veneer of the film.

Once noticed, generic pictures seem to fall into two categories: irritatingly cheesy and spookily familiar. My photo became the latter of the choices. I gave them names, little stories to go with their lives, plans for the rest of the day when their park fun was finished. The happy mother became Sharon, the man remained nameless, and the kid became John, though sometimes Jerry or Jack depending upon my mood, but always a name starting with a J.

J like Jeremiah, my fiancé.

My brother and I used to go on hikes through the fields behind our house. Trampling through the waist-high weeds, we'd crouch down and then pop up, pretending to shoot at each other in mock ambushes.

One day my brother found an old Balzac Ball, faded from the sun and half buried in the cracked dirt. He held it up above his head as if he'd found the treasure of a million pirate plunders. About the size of a basketball, it had a weighted sack inside that made its flight

path look like a blackbird drunk from too many overripe Crysatheaper berries.

We played with it for hours before I got fed up. He had learned how to predict its path and could catch it eighty percent of the time. I was forced to watch helplessly as it twisted past me every time. One throw went far over my head and he laughed as I watched it bounce away. His laughter became my own as I saw that it had landed on the grates of the storm gutter. I heard him yell as I kicked it through the grates and watched it wiggle down the drain and disappear into the dark.

“What the hell did you do that for?” He was breathing hard and alternatively clenching his fists.

“Who cares?” I laughed and danced away before he could grab me. “It wasn’t yours anyways. Whoever it belonged to obviously didn’t want it. Who cares?” He stood there watching the grate for a few more moments before chasing me back to the house, biting his bottom lip the whole way.

I started noticing the smaller print on things after Jeremiah proposed. Minuscule typing, 18k and a strange *** that I couldn’t make out. The unspoken clues that came from learning how to change the subject when an untruth came up. “Tell me again about your work” was always an appropriate answer to an unwanted question. The MUNI signs saying, “Information gladly given but safety requires that the driver not speak while in the driving seat.” The bottle of lotion that told my watchful eye not to apply it to my skin. The warning in the magazines that said, “Condoms are only 97% effective due to breakage, human error, and acts of God.”

The afterglow of sex is supposed to relax the body, to make your mind think clearer. I ran through math figures while he lit a cigarette in his bathroom. Three months of clandestine meetings every four days or so that would make perfect fodder for one of Erin’s romance novels. That made about twenty-two meetings. Factor in the double and triple shots that occurred in the early days of the affair and the number came to about thirty-four. Ninety-seven percent of thirty-four meetings allowed for one session of statistically unprotected sex. One, that number which the radio says is the loneliest number, but seemed to feel more like the heaviest number, weighing down on my stomach and crushing me into eleven ounces of bed as he walked over to me having finished up in his bathroom.

"How do you feel?" I could feel the bed shift as he sat on the corner and stared at the cherry of his cigarette as he took a drag. I kept counting numbers on my fingers and staring at the hanging plants attached to his ceiling. He cleared his throat before taking another drag. "Hmm? Doing okay there?"

"I'm great, just had my world rocked." I imagined that he winced at the barb.

"Yeah" He shook his head as I sat up to gather my clothes from about the bed. He reached for his watch off the nightstand and slipped it on his right wrist. My tasteful buttoned top had been unclasped across the room, by the door. He got out of my way as I slowly walked over, counting the steps between his bed and my shirt. I decided that odd numbers would be a positive sign. Nine steps to the shirt and I turned around on my heels.

"I thought you were left handed when we first met. You know, watch on the right wrist and all."

"Nothing's ever what we think it should be." I exhaled and waited to see if he would start a conversation, something to talk about on a strictly superficial level. I'd be happy with baseball talk, maybe stock prices, union disagreements within the city fire department, anything, but he waited at the window.

"Do you ever think about kids?" I immediately focused on buttoning up and quickly flattened the twenty-two vertical stripes of my shirt. He put his fingers to the blinds to get a better view of the outside scene before answering.

"Tell me again about your work." He let the blinds slip back into place with a "thuck" and reached for another cigarette.

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I've known Erin since her family moved into the house next to me when I was in elementary school. We've made a habit of meeting in the park every first Monday of the month since we graduated from the same college and took jobs on different sides of town. Me working in the PR job I'd dreamed of since jr. high and she taking her editorial job at "the better of the two independent sheets in town, thankyouverymuch."

I watch her approaching and drag my playful-yet-smart saddle shoes through the pea rock under the seat of my swing.

"Hey little girl." I look at Erin's face. She's spiked her close-cut blond hair again, a blue kerchief tied between the spikes on the back of her head and the combed to the front. She set off the green of her

eyes with dark mascara and just a bit of aquamarine eye shadow. She looked very much the part of a fist-in-the-air independent newspaper editor.

I bat my eyelashes at her as if I'm a little girl testing out my flirting powers. Joining my swaying on the swings we stare at the sky for a minute. She had read somewhere that it was a Navajo custom to sit in silence for a while to get used to another person's presence before starting a conversation. Now it's our custom whether the Navajos practiced it or not. Forty-seven months later tradition becomes personal culture.

After a bit she reaches into the bag she's brought with her.

"Are odds or evens lucky today?"

"Evens. I saw twins walking to school on my way to work. Everyone loves twins right?"

"Well some people do like to double up." She winks as she hands me a dried bouquet of flowers. I count seventeen before she reaches out and takes one of them by the stem and tosses it into the pea-rock at our feet. "No need for the odd one out. I got these at my cousin's wedding last week. Your typical grade A fought for, beaten for, and thrown over the shoulder bridal bouquet. Doesn't it just reek of that desperate-to-settle-down musk? Perfect for the eternal fiancé. I'd say it'd make a great addition to the collection"

"Thanks."

In my second year of engagement to Jeremiah, I caught the bridal bouquet at a friend's wedding. She had been involved in a three-month whirlwind romance and was getting married to the guy after a four-month engagement. Seven months, two hundred and fourteen days. At that time I'd known Jeremiah for seven years, two thousand five hundred and fifty six days. During the ceremony I contemplated the difference between the two of us. There she was in a tenth of my time, achieving one hundred percent happiness, while I was still wading through a piddling one hundred percent of overdrawn credit. I flipped through Corinthians as the priest asked for objections to their blissful union.

After the vows, I channeled all my energies into catching the bridal bouquet to cement my soon-to-come nuptials. With a few well-placed elbows, a star was born. Eight years later I had a small closet full of fifteen hanging bridal bouquets in the flat I shared with Jeremiah. A total of one hundred eighty seven flowers covered in three

thousand fifty one pedals. Some I caught myself, most given to me as humorously sympathetic gifts by various girlfriends.

Jeremiah worked in accounting, but the job he loved was defending his title at the Cipher Club. The Cipher Club was like a bowling league for nerds who liked their numbers. Mostly accountants and Mensa rejects, but there were thirteen number junkies like myself spread throughout the crowd of sixty-eight normal members. "Every Tuesday, even leap year" was their humorous slogan.

The Cipher Club was based around the playing of a game where there was a set number that was to be reached by the players. Numbers would be pulled out of a box at one-minute intervals. The game was to combine the numbers together in such a way (addition, exponents, logs, even taking a two and a three and putting them next to each other to make twenty three, or thirty two) that they equaled the set number. You had to use all of the numbers that had been pulled from the box, thus making your calculations irrelevant once a new number was pulled. First person to ring their buzzer correctly won. Simple game, but the winner basically became a god for the night to his number crunching underlings.

My first night at the club, I saw the way that everyone looked at Jeremiah when he walked in: high fives, pats on the back, handshakes all around. Jeremiah never spent more than a few moments with any one person in the crowd. He drifted through them as if they weren't there; his eyes continually finding a further admirer in the room whilst he was still shaking the hand of the person in front of him. He would keep this up until he got to his chair in the front of his room and sat down in his crowd in his club. I sat in one of the folding chairs at the back tables and beat him.

It was never my title though. It belonged to Jeremiah. I knew it. The club knew it, and he knew it. When I won, people would comment on how I was keeping the title warm for Jeremiah. When he won, there would be comments on how it felt to have your baby back. We wrestled with each other for a few weeks before we ended up agreeing to switch off the nights we would play. I would still come on his nights to watch him from the corner, laughing at everyone who tried to beat him and cursing at all the people who treated him like their king.

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Across the park from us, kids are playing on the monkey bars, switching between king of the hill and showing off who could jump

from the highest rung. Every few moments they look over at the swing set longingly and then go back to their games. Erin notices and sticks her tongue out at them whenever they glance our way.

"I remember when I was a little girl. I used to hate the big kids who'd come to the park and hog the swings. They never used to swing or anything, they'd just sit and talk while we had to muck about on the slides and hanging rings. Now we're the big kids. Should I feel sorry for the kids, or should I revel in my well earned playground superiority?"

"Well, you're already reveling, and inertia states a body in motion desires to stay in motion so..."

"Always the practical one." She makes a cartoon sneery smirk and starts spinning her swing seat back and forth. "So how is Jeremiah doing these days? What does he think about the unpreventable future?" She pats my belly until I turn my swing seat away.

"He thinks it's his. He didn't even crunch the numbers to figure out the last time we had sex. It's been two hundred and forty nine days since he started ignoring my body as much as he ignores his vow to become wedded. I told him I was pregnant and he just ran with it."

"So he's excited then..."

"He's certainly happy about something. He talks about life with a kid, traditional stuff he's going to teach it, things like that." She frowns as I finish speaking.

"Sounds like you may get the husband you want after all."

"No. He never talks about us and the baby. It's always him and the baby." I look at Erin and fake a smile. She doesn't look impressed. She knows that when I think of the future, I think of marriage, me and him, not some common-law connection to a child." She stops spinning as I pause to watch the kids pushing each other off the monkey bars. "His future is with some kid. That 'unpreventable future' was supposed to mean us eventually getting married. He's got everything he could want from a marriage already." Erin looks off towards the children on the bars and lets her swing bump into mine.

One of the advantages of keeping a generic picture was the icebreaker mentality about it. Sean told me that he figured I was downright glacial the first night we met until he saw the picture as I paid for my drink. A few quips later about the general apathy one often has for their friends and how keeping a generic picture was a good way to blah blah blah. A few more blah blah blahs mixed with a

couple of yadda yadda yaddas and I was sold. Well, sold for the night at least. With the rising sun he woke up and stopped me as I was sneaking off to return home to Jeremiah.

"Heading off so soon?" A shake of my head made thirty-six ounces of hair cover my face as I fumbled through my bag. Avoiding eye contact seemed to be the order of the day.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"It wasn't you as much as the sunlight reflecting off that rock around your finger. Rebound or just simple lack of character?" His words, as the night before, were never what I expected, having grown used to living with someone as subtly passive as Jeremiah. I had planned to be off without another thought, maybe hit Jeremiah with the news of what I'd done the night before when I got home. The thought didn't scare me.

"Is there a third choice?" I still hadn't looked him in the eye.

"There's always a third choice. Fill in the blank. Have the teacher evaluate it." I looked up at him and got a smile. Seven teeth visible, white, vertical, good stock.

"Umm, how about, my reasons are my own." He shook his head as he responded.

"Fair enough." I sat back down on his bed to lace up my shoes. He sat up and placed his fingers on my neck. Their calluses scratched my skin and I suppressed my own smile. "Sometimes it's better not to know." I followed his gaze down to see his hand laying a slip of paper with a phone number on my leg.

Two months. Two months was the limit to Jeremiah's attention span. I noticed it in his friendships. His best friend Chad who he met at work, went on fishing trips, out for drinks, dinner parties, long lunch break talks before deciding after eight weeks that Chad was an irritating fool. Forty-eight ounces of here yesterday, gone today. I noticed it in his relationships. Jeremiah was able to fit years of adoration into his quickly wavering field of view. I got caught under the weight of it: camping trips, nights out for drinks, candlelight dinners, long midnight talks that all came wrapped up in a sixty day old proposal for marriage.

I remember watching *The Wizard of Oz* as a kid. I felt sorry for the witch that got smashed by Dorothy's house. Four pounds, four ounces of house seems a lot heavier than it is when the whirlwind throws it down on you causing fourteen ounces of dead. I thought

that if I ever got caught up in such a state I'd want the whirlwind to keep spinning forever.

Jeremiah stuck to his commitments if nothing else. I wondered sometimes if his proposal to me was a subconscious attempt to fend off his approaching boredom. As it went, his eyes went a little blank while we went through the flowers, romantic dinners, out for movies routine of two people in love. Two years later I was still spinning, counting my rotations around Dorothy's house and smiling at Chad when he would come over for a game of darts or to watch a football game with his best friend.

When Erin and I were younger, we tried to develop a secret code to communicate with each other. Something that would make our important conversations private, to make us belong to each other. We tried learning how to tap out morse code while we spoke, an attempt to have two different conversations going on at the same time which grossly overestimated our mental abilities. I never got a hang of morse code anyway. The cooler girls at our school were able to speak what they called "double speak," putting in "effah" sounds and repeating consonants of their words over and over again. Something that I couldn't get a grasp on so when Erin said, "Thefah eyfey arefey-enfent worfuh thefeh youfuh orfuh tfeh ifuh mefeh" I could only respond with "I effah effah effah effah don't effah effah ..." and we'd fall into fits of giggles when I started chocking on my own effahs.

We eventually found the weight system. Words got weight via their letters, A=1 ounce, B=2 ounces...Z=26 ounces. Add the letters up and figure out the weight of the words. Fun became forty-one ounces of. Commitment became one hundred twenty five ounces of. Seventy three ounces of futile became the end of it all. We couldn't make it work on any sort of large scale communication system, too many combinations of letters to make set weights. In the end we kept it as our own joke, using the phrase "x ounces of (whatever word made the weight of x)" to show that we were together part of a group that was just as good as the more popular girls who couldn't be bothered to cast a spare glance in our direction.

My watch starts beeping, but we seldom leave the park on time anyway.

"So, are you still playing groupie with Sean then?" My head jerks up at Erin's voice. The monkey bar kids have gone off chasing the ducks and leave us to sitting in the silence of our own thoughts.

"Nope. He found his phone harder to answer when I asked him about kids."

"Hmmm, at least he was honest about the chances for a future for you two though."

"Yeah, you're right about that." I reach over to tangle my fingers in the chains of her swing. I thought that taking myself away from Jeremiah might have created some sort of response. Twenty-two almost rock solid alibis and outright lies and I doubt he ever even gave it a second thought.

"It's what I kept telling you, your best bet was to just leave the whole thing, both things. You know Jeremiah's never going to leave you. He's too proud to admit that he was wrong about that forever shit he pulled on you in the beginning." My eyes fly open as my fingers clench the metal loops of her swing. I try to make a few tears well up, but nothing comes. I've been dry for too long now. All that emotion has been channeled into bitterness.

"He'll not get away so easily." She breaks my stare and shakes her head slowly. "Not after what he's put me through. He doesn't get off without something to remember me, something to drag him down for about three and a half thousand days."

Sean had a way of dragging conversation out of me even though we both were well aware that he didn't really care what I said. He knew what I liked to talk about and used it as foreplay like a dutiful soldier.

"Tell me when you became bitter." His fingers scratched circles on my temples like I'd taught him to weeks before.

"Twenty years ago, with my brother."

"Your brother became bitter at the same time as you?" I pushed his hand away from my head so I could sit up and look at him.

"No, I was bitter because of my brother. Just because he was a thousand or so days older than I was, he always got better gifts. He got a set of Legos for Christmas while I got a doll's clothing set. I asked him to share, he said no, I cried, he laughed, the usual sibling stuff. I sulked off and let him be."

"Sounds pretty calm and normal, nothing to be bitter about."

"It's always a hair that breaks the back. That's just the set up for the story. He ended up working on this spaceship thingy that took a few days to build. He was proud of it, displayed it on the coffee table once he'd finished it to the cheers and delight of our father... I need a smoke." I leaned forwards as he lit the cigarette and the first dizzy waves spun about inside my head. "Thanks. So, remembering how I'd been wronged, I woke up in the middle of the night and smashed the vehicle of his excitement and left it on the floor next to the table. I grabbed some of the cat's hair from the couch and spread it around the pieces. I won and my brother lost." His fingers went back to my temples applying just enough pressure to make me close my eyes as I finished his cigarette.

"You blamed the cat."

"I didn't blame anything. My mother blamed the cat and my father found blame a bit more effort than his kids were worth." I turned my head away from his fingers.

"Maybe you should let the past rest someday." I pushed his hands away.

"The past doesn't rest, it's too busy repeating itself."

Dinner should've been a pleasant time. It said so in my etiquette book on page seventy-six, starting with the forty-eighth word on the page. Dinner is a time when the family can relax from the hustle and bustle of the busy day and engage in pleasantries whilst filling their tired bodies with warm nourishment from out of the kitchen.

With Jeremiah, dinner had become more like a game of hide-and-seek. He would hide the date of our marriage and I would seek it. It was a spice that worked well with any meal. Porkchops with applesauce and potatoes benefited from a touch of "will you be able to manage to agree on a date before the end of this year?" I would add a pinch of "child is to adult as proposal is to... hmmm?" to spinach quiche and chenin blanc. On special occasions I would use a slight sprinkle of "Time is manipulation." to the strips of New York steak with broccoli heads.

Jeremiah became more and more buried in the quicksand of his tax firm as the months following our engagement turned to years. He neglected to notice when I began replacing the usual flowers from the corner flower stall with the dried bouquets that he knew were from all the weddings I'd attended but had never played the lead.

I expected much of the same when I told him I was a few

weeks late but his response was quite the opposite. He stopped reading his case file and his mouth immediately froze mid-chew. Spitting out his mouthful, he jumped up and began pacing back and forth moving his hands as if he was trying to pull his words from his mouth.

“You’re not serious.” Two steps to the left, “You’re serious. A baby. I’m going to have a baby.” Four steps to the right his hands drumming sets of four beats onto his legs. “But when... oh of course. I suppose we should, well I should go out to... yes of course.” His hand began rubbing circles on his stomach as he took four steps in either direction, hopped a bit on one foot before reversing the whole thing. I was reminded of the time we spent together after The Cipher Club when he would bounce back and forth as we drove to the movies, or pace four steps back and forth as we waited to get into a cafe, talking about the weather, the state of new members to the club, where we would be in a few years.

Here was the man that I’d wanted to marry years before, waking up. Page eight of my etiquette book, Never be angry when someone has done you wrong. Simply find the good aspect of the situation and focus on that. Follow this course and you’ll find yourself in the calm waters of a good host in no time at all. Instead of going back and remembering how I once felt, I stayed in the moment and began to see the kid growing in me as the thing that stole my chance at happily ever after. The same slit eyed anger moved in both directions while Jeremiah hopped about, left and then right.

With someone like Jeremiah at home, you find yourself going out on your own more often than not. He seemed to understand that my slitted eyes meant that I had had enough of going out on the town with him simply for the sake of appearances. Since participation in The Cipher Club happened on alternating weeks for us, I had no use for sitting about like the attentive fiancé.

This was his night at the club so I went off to a small show in the industrial district of town that Erin had told me about. “Hip, underground, music, drinks.” She said more but I wasn’t paying attention.

Anything seemed better than counting to sixty every minute while I waited to fall asleep at home.

In the club I met Erin and proceeded to the spot she’d claimed at the bar. A quick motion to the bartender and I turned to see the performer. Blond, scruffy, alone on the stage, he sang his songs of typical heartache with such force that it made up for his lack of tonal stability.

“Not too bad looking eh?” Erin nudged my side a little too

enthusiastically.

"Ow." I placed her hand back on her drink. "He's interesting."

"His name's Sean. He's been making the circuit out here for about three months now. He should probably break through into the major papers and clubs any time now. But for now he's our little secret." She made a sweeping motion with her hand to show me that "our" meant the venue's small crowd, spilling a little bit more of her double rum and coke than sobriety would allow. "And not to mention the fact that he's sixty-six ounces of single."

She winked at me and pointed towards the bathrooms as the music stopped. I nodded and waited at the bar for her to come back while the sound crew changed the set up on stage. I busied myself with counting the bottles of beer underneath the shelf behind the bartender. I looked down at my single rum and coke. I didn't like to drink too much in a night. Being drunk tended to make me lose count of things. I'd always felt that keeping count was always an important way to find your way through the night. Numbers are like bread-crumbs in the forest, a trail back to the way I came in.

"Hey little girl." Erin was back with a vengeance. "Guess who I just ran into next to the stage."

"Your sobriety?" She laughed quickly and loudly.

"Careful, if you're not nice to me I might not tell you who was giving you eyes from the stage." She followed this with a rebel yell that made my face retreat into my hands to cover my reddening cheeks.

Erin turns me towards her by locking her legs into mine. We sway slightly as the swings try to right themselves.

"I'm not sure how you're going to make Jeremiah pay. What are you going to do? Threaten to marry him in his sleep?" When she forces her smiles, I can see her bottom row of teeth.

"I don't know." I imitated her tense smile and smashed up my nose between my eyes and lips.

"Maybe I can make him start his own flower collection to let him keep time like I do now."

"What do you mean? Like maternity bouquets and such?" We hear squawking as the kids start throwing rocks and sticks at the ducks they'd been feeding. Erin jumps up and faces their direction. "Hey you fucks! Go do something meaningful with your shallow mouth-breathing existences!" She begins to gather up her things as

the kids make faces and run off towards the creek on the other side of road. "I can't stand that need to hurt things. Page eight in the book ..."

"I know what's on page eight."

"Well I'm just saying ... You know all this anger, it can't be good for your kid's development."

"I think you're right. It can't be."

"Yeah ... well be good little girl then. Same time next month?"

"Same time." I look over the bouquet she gave me as she walks away. Picking up the tossed flower from the sand I take a petal to save in my wallet. Just one of those whims that you follow because it seems right. Slipping the cracking purple pedal under the generic picture, I take a moment to stare at the scene again. Woman and son in the swing set with man looking on, smiles always all around. I've always felt that the smiles are how you know pictures aren't of real scenes. I fold my wallet back up and drop it into my bag.

Sitting by myself now in my swing, I listen to the silence of the park that the kids left behind.

Jackals and Vultures and Bees, Oh My!

Learn this from a month or two in the trenches, the same faces crisscrossing paths through the neighborhoods. These people do not stay at home with their coffee and an open newspaper, making jokes about who gets which section of the paper while their kids use melon ballers on quarter slices of cantaloupe and honeydew, always mesmerized by the spout of juice that comes through the hole in the plastic utensil, the younger child imagining it like the air hole on a humpbacked whale, the older child seeing it as a pimple being drained. These people you see every morning do not dress each other up in color-coded versions of themselves and drive to church, their wives paying attention to the pastor, their husbands paying attention to the crease of their pants and break of their cuffs, their children waiting for the coffee hour after the service that would once again disappoint them with its selection of cookies that are not sweet and drinks that do not fizz.

These people wear hats. These people wear fanny packs and front jean pockets that bulge from wallets filled with layers of cash, none higher than five in their denomination. They have learned the art of speed walking from car to curb, never outright running, but quickly moving towards the tinted glass, boxes of dolls, or antique-if-only-it-could-be-restored tools that caught the eye from the driver's seat of cars. Trucks for the kinds that go after furniture.

Competition comes in the form of the multitude of items stuffed under the arm, barely prevented from falling. The ground is the all clear, and claim is lost. Leaning towers of dishes and books next to the soon-to-be-previous owner all are known to be claimed, similar to the girl at the bar, standing with her hip cocked just so while her date is in the bathroom. Just enough to be lusted after, but not enough to welcome the swoop and grab. To do something so obvious would rumble back through the nonspeaking community of diggers. To be ostracized by the ostracized shines a light that burns through even the regulation wide brimmed hats that protect from the sun and the eyes of similarly clothed jackals and carrion birds.

Some garage sale ads follow the rules, factual statements that relate to the purpose of the garage sale listing. My finger hovers over the right click, waiting to open-in-new-tab the listings that venture off the expected lines of description.

“Sat garage sale, everything must go. 8am-2pm” says very little. These people stand in the back of their garages, sit on chairs on their porch talking to their family members. Never do their eyes rise up to match your own. They leave you to sort through their things without letting you take any personal part of them like a bee’s stinger attached to the heart as their discarded tapes, books, and furniture are handled, weighed, and underbid. These people do not look at the board games changing hands for too long, or run their fingers over the curled edges of the books as they drop them into the plastic Safeway bags that they save for occasions like a garage sale.

I train my eyes to find key words that show the story behind the separation between a garage full of items and the nostalgia attached to it. “Moving because of the economy, everything that doesn’t fit has to go. Sat-Sun all day” I circle this ad and write afternoon in red next to it. In the morning they will bounce from piece to piece, excited like an artist at a gallery opening explaining each piece to each new viewer. Later in the afternoon, they will slouch and sit without looking at the people looking through their things. Afternoon sun does not make the sale feel like sharing, there is no more memory of random Tuesday nights filled with board games when the power goes out. All that is left is the remnants of the pieces that make up the whole. The driveway becomes the body of the family, after sharing the heart, lungs, and hands of the body; everything else falls apart and ceases to live. We become more like vultures picking over flesh that hangs from quickly bleaching bones. The family is forced to watch as more and more of the items they once decided to keep are picked up, twisted around, and tossed back into the \$1 bin.

I plan my morning around a line from another ad, “Selling all my girlfriend’s stuff. No unreasonable offer denied.” I do not plan to rush to the biggest discounted resellable item; there will be plenty of hats and fanny packs for that. I will be looking through toiletries and bits of clothing left behind during the first claiming of his place as her own. There will be dishes, Tupperware, towels. Beach clothes and extra shoes that will still have grains of sand from desperate vacations planned and executed as sandy last ditch efforts to save their lives-from baking beneath the Sat morning sun.

Cherry Skin

During the spring, rain from upcity would rush down, turning single drops into oceans racing beneath our feet before we could run from one side of the bridge to the other. It would grab at the chain link fence that separates the alleyways of the housing projects, its fingers turning white when it couldn't reach any farther.

It isn't always in a hurry. When spring is over the flow would disappear. For a day there'd just be concrete. It'd trickle, flowing like a swallow's path turned on its side. Every few feet it'd dive under the concrete through the cracks, spitting up small glows of algae that would buzz with gnats. Just for a day. When you'd blink, the clap of your eyelids was like smoke and mirrors, small grasses and weeds would appear running along the side of the water while snakes jump from plant to plant without leaving the ground.

But it wasn't summer yet, and the trickle that came with it bored us anyway. Josh and I stared at the rushing water in the reservoir beneath us. We dropped acorns and sticks with ivy leaf sails. We fought over how they'd fall through the air. We fought over where they'd land in the water. We fought over how far down they could float before they'd get sucked under in the whirlpools of eddies and cement pillars. Josh showed me a new trick he learned the week before. Take a dandelion that's turned to fuzz, drop it, and watch as the seed parachutes grab the air as gravity grabs the stem.

"Maybe that's what it's like when you skydive." Josh's brother went for his twenty first birthday. Josh was itching to jump too. "My brother says you fall and fall until your body gets to the ground. Everything important is still in the air, floating away to someplace like China or something."

After the first rush, city workers would attach plastic signs to the fences along the river with those white ties the police use to handcuff rioters. My dad would watch on TV, rooting the police on. The signs say "No Trespassing, Flash Flood Danger" with a picture of a faceless person being sucked towards a storm drain below the warning. I wonder why the person has its arms above its head. If I were

stuck in a flood, I'd at least try to swim.

There's no fence on the bridge itself. When my father was my age, a kid was walking on the rounded handrail when he fell and broke his leg. Some parents tried to get the city to put up a fence but it took too long and they forgot about it. My dad said someone had to die before they'd spend money to make things safe.

The bigger boys would jump anyway. We'd watch from the alleyways. They came in groups of four or five, yelling at each other and stripping to their swim trunks or boxers. For a while they'd stand around, looking up and down the street, gauging the sky until one of them would let out a scream and leap over the railing. The rest of the group would follow in moments trying to land on the person who leapt first.

We always wanted to jump. We left home with our swim trunks in our backpacks and enough time to dry off before we had to be home for dinner. Climbing over the bridge railing, we faced the road with our heels bouncing in the air between the water and us.

"I'm going to do a half gainer with a somersault twist into a roundhouse to finish off. What are you going to do?" I didn't know enough about diving to answer. I stared at the clouds above us.

"Don't know. Think you'll have enough time to get all that done before you hit the water?" Josh spit on the railing and watched it drip onto the road.

"Hell, my brother says when you jump, you've got enough time to do anything you want. He says you could write a novel before you even lose sight of the airplane. At least that's what it seems like. Shit, we'd better jump soon before some cars come." I looked to my left to check for cars and felt him jump. I whipped my head around in time to see him hit the water and go under. I tried to figure out where his head would pop up like the ivy leaves and dandelions before.

Ms. Flannen teaches fourth period geometry. Sometimes she curses to herself as she writes on the board about having to teach a math class right before lunch, but I can never make out exactly what she says. When she turns to face us, she wears a smile that's so wide we're supposed to think it wasn't her who was cursing. I don't pay that much attention. All she does is repeat the readings from the night before on the board, complete with the same examples. She teaches the same stuff year after year. Most of the class got F's on their report cards first semester.

Spring is my only salvation. The bushes outside the windows have their berries for entertainment. Against the suffocating green of the bush, the berries stand out as spots that bleed out droplets of blood that harden and stick. I imagined them as scabs from a war. Every day, the red darkens until they lose their youthful tightness. These days they hang by the last breathes of their weakening skin, barely holding in their fermenting guts. Birds have begun to spend most of their time bouncing around the bushes, fighting over who would get which berry. I watch as they gorge themselves before trying to take flight. They get about ten feet before crashing to the ground. One bird keeps trying to fly after it hits the ground. It keeps flapping its wings as it somersaults across the grass, colliding with the bushes and disappearing. I didn't know birds could get drunk.

I mumble something about the bathroom and leave class. I always use the bathroom at the end of Wing F. It's the farthest from any of my classes and takes me past the baseball diamond that the PE classes never use. Usually I watch people that are there cutting class for a while before I wander back to geometry and my avian sideshow.

This time I see Russell and Jennifer sitting next to each other on home plate, laughing through cigarette puffs and obscenities. Jennifer and I have Econ together during sixth period. She smiles a lot which makes her eyes sparkle like the glitter she spreads across her cheeks. Russell has a habit of pretending to beat me up "on principle" as he waits outside Econ class to pick her up. They're eating and smoking while throwing bits of bread at the seagulls and other birds that walk about trying to look nonchalant while they wait for the next projectile of food. Everything Jennifer throws they snatch from the air, fighting with each other over the little bits that fall to the ground. They don't eat any of the bread that Russell throws. He laughs out loud each time they avoid his food. I start walking back to class as they kiss. Nobody respects a voyeur.

"Never forget Brandon, you're named after my father. He used to fly in the war." My father turned from his WW2 Generals Memoir to face me. My gaze was focused on the plastic trashcan on the top corner of dad's desk, its red washing against the side of dad's computer monitor. I could make out the Lego pieces shadowed between the lamp over his desk and their bucket jail. "Your grandfather knew what honor and self-sacrifice was. He left us a hard message when he died. No one likes a greedy man. Understand? You're from average

stock. A Simoncini is never rich, but we're never poor. We sacrifice to better the group. People see that. People respect that. Understand?"

"Yeah." I shifted my stance when he looked away. "Can I play with my Legos now dad?" He looked at my feet and exhaled while his shoulders fell from their military speech position. I stopped looking at the bucket and tried to look him in the eyes.

"Go help your mom cook dinner." I didn't move. I was hoping I'd still get to play with the Legos or that he'd look back at me before his book.

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My grandmother never spoke about my grandfather in hushed tones. He spent his time in a square brass box on the top of the piano, adorned with pictures of him fishing, playing baseball, smiling. At home we only had his military pictures on the wall. Grandma would smile in his direction and tell me stories about how he'd hit on her at a bus stop in Plymouth and how they'd walk around the town square and then walk the same distance backwards wondering if they were walking farther or negating the distance they'd already walked. She's not old like Grandpa was. Her skin folds itself into origami but without the dust and crumpled edges that show up in pictures of him. She was in the Salvation Army during the war. She marches when she walks, floating over her own feet with a smile that she said they stamped on her for so long that it finally became real.

We went to the beach together because it reminded her of how she and grandpa had taken my father to play before the war. She had an eye for beauty. She could find shells and rocks whose color writhed in her hands. I hated it. When she'd present me with a handful of treasure and ask me to pick the one that I wanted, I froze up, hearing my father's voice, wanting to be a responsible Simoncini. Each time I'd watch as she threw out into the wave the beauty I could never choose. The seagulls would dive into the surf, finding my choice among the churning sand and defeated water. In my dreams I was a boy with wings reaching into the chocolate malt mess of the water to grab the cherry with my teeth before flying away. As fast as I flew, I never bit through the skin.

The birds would always fight with each other over the food my grandma threw their way. They could trust her. At school, when students throw bread, the birds snatch it from the air before it can even start its arc back to the earth. Some students wrap Alka-Seltzer tablets in bread and pizza crust before tossing it towards the clouds.

Their poison never has the speed to break gravity and ends up bouncing off the ground. The birds smell our medicinal jealousy buried in the bread. To the students, death seemed the only equalizer between those who are earthbound and those that would take to the air.

I never told my dad about my winged dream. He changed the subject whenever I talked about the rocks grandma found. I sat in the backseat as he bounced taunts at me from the front seat. I would remember the rock that I'd chosen from my grandma's hand sitting in my pocket and could feel it pulling my pocket down so that I was stuck to the seat that was stuck to the car that was stuck to the ground, slipping between Grandma's house and ours.

Grandma noticed how my neck snapped with her slingshot toss. She noticed how I never looked at the rock I'd chosen. How I slipped it into my pocket while I stared at myself flying away in the belly of the bird. She knows that I'm not here. She knows that when my dad yells at me I'm flying away in the belly of a bird, wings growing out of the back that stares at the water below the bridge.

I spend my days following class schedules and learning how to figure the path of money through a system. Econ class does have its advantages. An advantage named Jennifer. She sits to the left of me and reads my notes more than she reads her book. She reminds me of my grandmother, laughing at Mr. Wagner and burning through the lower letters of the grade spectrum like a magnifying glass against a fly. With one period together, our conversations stay to the high school minimum. Movies, parties, drugs, college, and dreams. The kind you have at night and the kind you have during the day in the counselor's office.

I speak up in class so the teacher won't call on her. I write twice as large as usual so she won't have to squint. We fight with each other about the meaning of things beneath wrinkled folds in ripped up lined paper while the teacher is unaware.

On Tuesdays she wears a plaid skirt that makes me dizzy. Fridays are for pigtails and eye shadow that streak green across her eyelids. Every day outside of class she wears her boyfriend like an old coat, and a skin tone a few shades darker than my father would approve of.

In my grandmother's condo, time stands still and holds itself upright behind the glass and wooden frames of the pictures covering the blank walls. I take the bus there every other Friday for a few hours until my parents come to pick me up and take me back home. Dig holes, dust high shelves, and read the paper with her until she falls asleep or wants to watch TV for a bit. Today she picks up the remote and points it at me.

"What do you want to watch Brandon?" I look at her reflection in the window.

"Whatever you want is cool with me Grandma." I can tell from her face that she's not pleased.

"Well you have to want to watch something right? A boy's got to like game shows over soap operas or soap operas over game shows right?"

"Really, I want to watch what you want Grandma." I turn from the reflection in the window to look at her. "Really."

"Just like your father sometimes." She sets the remote down on the arm of her chair and turns to look at the oil refineries across the water from her condo.

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Substitute teachers and misplaced lesson plans are like sirens in a prison break. I barely hear the sub telling the class about rainstorms and plane delays as I duck back out of class and head for the parking lot behind the portables. There are groups and herds that can smell the way you see the world most of the time, but the rain keeps them huddled under shelters. Water falling from the sky has never made me worry too much and so I find a comfortable silence sitting on an exposed stairwell and counting raindrops in puddles. Anything is better than history class.

"Aren't you afraid you're going to melt away?" I look up and see Jennifer walking towards me.

"You're one to talk. Don't you know most people try to stay out of the rain?" She takes a seat next to me and shakes her head. I watch a halo of clotted hair spin around her until she stops and look out at the cars passing on the street.

"Yeah well, boyfriends and cars and going to smoke pot didn't mesh well with me, so I had to hoof it back to school. After you're wet, a little more water just slides off your back. Though I have to admit, I'm not going to be smiling when I sit down for my next class."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Kinda like running through

the waves at the beach. The first fifteen seconds suck, then the rest is great, well, at least until the hyperthermia sets in."

"So, you're saying school is like hypothermia?"

"You're saying you actually going to go to your next class to sit down?"

"Touché. So, not that I need to ask, but is there a reason why you're sitting in the rain instead of class?"

"There's a sub in history today and I didn't feel like trying to catch some Z's while he babbled about the teacher not leaving any lesson plans. Besides, I'm pretty sure that I've got insomnia, sleep just doesn't come easy for me." I make a note in the back of my mind about the number of raindrops so far in the puddle below us and turn to face her.

"Insomnia. What's that like?"

"Sucks." She laughs for a second and looks over at me.

"I have happy eyes don't you think?"

"What?"

"I mean, my eyes are happy when you look at them. My mom used to always say that when she looked in my eyes she saw happiness. Well, she said that before the divorce." Her head's bobbing slightly and twisting as she waits for my response. The cross she wears catches my eye with its swinging against her sway, touching her sides for a moment before hugging her with its path around her body. I see my own hands in its place for a moment before I shake the idea out of my head. She cringes her nose as drops of water jump from my hair towards her.

"Sure, I'd call your eyes happy."

"Good, my eyes move a lot. I have trouble looking at one thing at a time. I always want to see more. I don't know. It feels like I know all of my friends inside out but none of them even care about knowing me, or watching me." I focus on a lock of wet hair scratching her eyelashes and reach over and push it over her ear. "So I noticed you watching me and Russell out by the baseball diamond the other day. Nobody likes a voyeur you know."

"My grandmother used to say that." I whisper out towards the raindrops than to her.

"What?"

"Oh, umm, yeah. I said I wasn't watching watching you guys."

"Uh huh. Okay Brandon, whatever you say." I can't tell if she winks at me or winces from a raindrop hitting her face. "So if we're out in the rain we should at least talk about something."

"We could talk about rain." She flicks her fingers at me like a four-barrel shot gun.

"Hmm, no. How about I give a choice and you choose. We can talk about drugs, dreams, or dancing. What's your pleasure?" We stare out at the street for a while until I can't take the sound of the rain.

"I dream of wings. The kind guys used to build when they wanted to fly, before they knew you needed airplanes. Not attached to my arms, but to my back, like third and fourth hands. I've had them since I started dreaming. It's how I know I'm asleep. Mom used to tell me that the way she'd know I was finally asleep was that my body would jerk. She thought I had fallen within my dream and that my body jerking was me hitting the ground. It scared her because she read had an article in the Globe about how if someone hits the ground during a falling dream, the shock will make their body die in real life. So I'd be jolted awake with my mom checking my pulse on my throat." Jennifer laughs and I just stare before laughing silently to myself. "Yeah, I guess it's a little funny. I never called my mom in the middle of the night for water, that's to be sure. But I don't know if I jerk or not, I'm asleep. I only know wings. My friend Josh and I would go to the bridge over the reservoir during the winter and talk about jumping. He talked about how cool it would feel to hit the cement surface of the water and then sink into it after the millisecond impact. I wasn't worried about the impact, but I never had the courage to jump."

"Does Josh go to our school?" The rain is starting to come down in waves sounding like a warped record of applause.

"No." She didn't press the issue. "But we were talking about dreams. Wings. There they are, on my back and flapping. I can't ever stop them from moving; they kind of do their own thing until I wake up. Every now and then they remind me of the boat on the pirate ride at Disneyland. The boat's cool, but it doesn't do much more than trudge along and take you on the path you're supposed to follow without thinking for itself. But I'd probably have trouble with my dreams if I could control my wings. The whole idea of having a situation like eating with your family and then after a blink you're fighting in some sci-fi space war and then your teacher from preschool floats by wearing feathers and balloons seems a bit easier to swallow when you've got the body parts of angels attached to your back. So I just let them flap and they show me whatever dream I'm supposed to have that night." She keeps holding her hand out and jerking it back and forth as she listens to me. I can't tell if she's trying to avoid the rain-

drops or if she's trying to catch them all.

"I hate the rain." I laugh again to myself as she speaks. She begins to lean forward until her hair shades a crescent across her cheek.

"Well, not when it's like God's pouring buckets right on you and the wind's pushing the puddles back up your leg, but when it's a nice drizzle like this."

"Shit, drizzle or monsoon, your clothes still get wet and stick. Though good company makes it better I suppose." I try to avoid her knee as she smiles.

"Yeah, but the drizzle reminds me of going to my grandma's house. She used to live in this little town by the ocean where it was always foggy. My parents would go shopping while my grandma took me to the ocean and I'd run into the water with all my clothes on. I'd stand in the waves up to my waist and jump. It was like floating for a moment before I'd sink and have to fight the current. Grandma would walk the beach picking up rocks and shells. When I was finished with the waves she'd show me what she'd found and let me pick one, and then she'd throw the rest out into the ocean." She reaches over and squeezes a lock of hair from my bangs until it leaks water down her hand. She flicks it off her fingers and picks up a stick from the cement and tosses it. Landing in a puddle, it turns like clock hands as the drops of rain push it about with their waves. I look away towards a car turning down the street, "Now Grandma lives in some condos behind an oil refinery in Ginsville on the other side of the hills. When I go to visit her now, she's always sitting in her chair with her hearing aid off while some soap opera is blaring on her TV. She doesn't even watch the soaps, she just stares at the flame coming from the tallest tower in the refinery."

"Oh" I can see her start to squish her toes together inside her shoes. My mouth is smiling. That's the only thing I hate about the rain, the wet feet. When it first starts to rain, there's always a warm toasty feeling, right before the cold invades. She looks up from her feet to my face. "I've never run into the ocean with all my clothes on before."

"My father would yell at me for not bringing a change of clothes and getting the seat of my grandma's car wet and my mom would complain about how hard it was going to be to get the salt stains out of my jeans."

"Oh."

I jumped once. Grandma held out a hand that held a shell

that grabbed the light before anything else in her hand could reflect. I could feel my eyelids brush against my glasses as I blinked over and over to make sure it was still there. My hand reached out and reached past it. I chose a pockmarked gray rock with veins of white bone swimming in it. It was still damp from water and made the hair on the back of my hand stand up as I watched my shell take flight from her fist. It was still in the air as the pockmarked rock hit the sand. I ran back into the ocean where I'd seen my shell land. I could taste where it landed, but searching through the spin and churn, I figured out my fingers didn't have taste buds. The seagulls taunted me as the waves urged me on with their unceasing battle. Turning my back, one pushed me down as my tears added to the salt in the water. I let it move me until I started choking on the quick of foam rushing up my nose. I stood up and walked back to the shore. Only grandma could find things like that with her hands.

"Your father never chose anything from my hand. He'd just sit there pouting because I wouldn't give him all of the rocks." Grandma sat on our log watching me walk up. She hugged me against her side as I sat. I could smell the doughnuts we'd eaten before coming to the beach. "Couldn't stand to let the best one go again?"

"Dad says..."

"The priest at your grandfather's memorial said some stuff too. He said that if there's one thing that's certain in life, it's that God wants us to enjoy it. If I recall, he also said that it's not a life if you don't participate. I thought it was rather poetic for a Catholic and I'd have to agree. No one likes a voyeur Brandon. You can't just watch, you have to get yourself wet with choice and action. So you lost the thing you really wanted today, at least you knew you wanted it. I'd rather you choose badly than not choose at all." We stared out into the sea, listening to the waves and watching the sandpipers stutter step across the wet sand. I was looking at an oil tanker floating on the horizon when I felt her place something in my hand. Seeing the white lines against the gray, I knew she'd picked up the rock I'd chosen.

I go to the school library on the second floor at lunchtime. Sitting by myself is not a troubling pursuit. I sit at the window seat towards the back because it's out of sight and looks over the winterized Birch trees between the library's building and the baseball field. I'm more interested with the baseball diamond than with the trees though. Jennifer sits amid her group of friends, eating her lunch and

throwing her crust into the field.

Jennifer laughs at almost everything around her. I can't see from here, but I knew her eyes get wide for a moment before her face begins to glow whenever she laughs. I see her talking and imagine the sounds bouncing off the glass in front of me preventing me from hearing. My finger is on the glass, touching where her image comes through until I close my eyes and pull my hand back to my bag lunch. With my eyes open now I sort through the contents of my lunch before I look up again at the smudge on the glass where the grease of my fingertips fade Jennifer's image into blurs.

"Josh!" I started to feel my pinky shake until his head came up.

"Shit! It's fucking cold! Come on Brandon! Let's see what you got!" My whole hand was shaking. I tried to convince myself that everything was okay but my body wouldn't listen. It didn't matter that everybody's brother and now Josh had jumped. My legs felt like I'd been sitting Indian style for too long. Using them to jump seemed impossible.

"What's a matter? Come on I can't stay in this fucking water forever."

"I can't do it!" My words roared through my head like a turning engine. I only heard a small squeaking coming from my mouth as I rocked myself back over the railing back onto the street side. "I'm not going to jump Josh! Come back up. I want to go do something else!" I turned around to look over the railing. I didn't hear a response and couldn't find him in the water anymore. "Josh!" There was no telltale trail of water up the slopes. I ran to the other side of the bridge to see if he'd tried to go up the other side.

I waited for an hour. I knew that Josh liked to play jokes but he never showed up to go to Dairy Queen like we'd planned. The sun started to set so I ran home. I told my mom that I'd spent the day watching the kids play basketball at the high school.

Sundays are for large cathedrals, boys in white and candles, old men wrapped in crosses. Church is a family event. I wear my suit and grandma wears a smirk most of the time. She and I tried to sit apart from my parents once, but my father wouldn't have it. Instead

of sitting apart from my parents, I put a buffer zone shaped like my grandmother between us.

We play small games under my father's nose. She changes the words to the prayers and I try to find new ways to clasp my hands in prayer. We can't laugh out loud, instead we use glances and nods that scream hysterically in our heads. If my father knew, he would have a fit. Church was for rules, and more importantly, following those rules.

"The priest will tell us who we need to be. This is how a family lives without stirring anything up." My mother nods in agreement as my father heads off to confession. When the weather clears up I watch sunlight stream through the colored windows.

I started to steal things from my father's desk. Never anything big, just small things I didn't think he'd miss. I have a shelf in my room where I kept rocks and shells that I brought home from the beach. I would hide the things I took in a box at the back of the shelf. I took carbon paper, sticks of pencil lead, one of his plastic green army men.

He had two desks in his room. One was for reading and computer work, the other was for his battle simulations. He spent months studying old war books and army diagrams until he could exactly recreate obscure battles from the war. He'd call us over when he was done and tell us about the friends he'd lost to Vietnam and how this was a battle they didn't teach in my history books. It was the same speech he gave when we were going to the movies, or eating cereal in the morning. I never took the army men from the second desk, only from the drawer in the first desk where he stored them.

I took some of his slugs that he picked up from his morning walks through the construction sites. Some of them worked in vending machines. Most didn't. I took C batteries once. I didn't have anything that used them and I didn't think anyone else in the family did either. One night dad started yelling at my mother for stealing his batteries. Now he couldn't make his tanks move like it was supposed to and he blamed my mother for putting the workings of her kitchen tools over the remembrance of his dead friends. He started locking his door after that.

The square urn of my grandfather's ashes sits in my grandmother's condo and collects stories about his life reflecting from the pictures that my grandmother cycle through every week or so. Each time I hear them, the stories get longer, grander, and less believable.

My grandfather fixed planes, my grandfather flew planes, my grandfather flew in the war, my grandfather flew in the big battles, my grandfather would curl into a ball late at night and cry if the lights were off and the waterbed made him feel like he was floating after being shot down. My grandmother tells me that my grandfather was chaptered out of the navy because of a stomach virus that made him sick over and over until he was no good to the war effort besides giving the deck hands messes to clean up. She tells me about the fascination he had with planes before they were married. About how his first letter to her was written on a slip of paper and flown over in the shape of a slit inside of a triangle. How he pawned his wedding suit to buy the parts to build a remote controlled plane. About how he wouldn't fly it after he got back from the war because he'd seen too many planes crash to risk it happening even one more time.

Now we are sitting on her couch and staring out the window at the birds rushing through the brush of her back yard. She points over the birds across the water.

"They spill more smoke into the air after the sun goes down." I looked out over the fence and wondered what it was like for a bird to cut through exhaust of the refinery as they flew by. I count seconds in my mind before I turn back to my grandmother.

"What's wrong with my dad Grandma?" I didn't expect an answer, but she started tapping her fingers against the fabric of her seat. I knew she had heard me.

"You mean his military thing."

"Yeah, sort of." She picked up her crossword puzzle and started to count the black squares with her fingers. Outside, I watch as three sparrows dive bomb a hawk over and over until they chase it out of sight.

"Whatever it is Brandon, he didn't get it from his father. Lord knows your grandfather was quite the amazing man before he got back from the war. But that was when he started to change I guess, after your grandfather came back and couldn't do all the things with him that they'd planned. I don't know Brandon, I don't know. Lord knows, I'd always hoped he'd snap out of it and start dealing with things, but I'm old now. I guess we can't always be full of advice and spunk."

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After enough begging my father lets me start collecting kites. They remind my mother of rainbows. Red against green against the rest of the roy g biv spectrum. For my birthday, my father gave me a

string pulley that he rigged up out of a broken fishing pole. It was just the crank and spool so that I could let out the string and wind it back up without having to leave a pool of tangling string around my feet as I fought with the wind to get my kite back.

My favorite was ten feet long and the shape of a caterpillar. Its green was like unmowed grass and its tail twisted and turned like spaghetti around a fork. In a field one day, I took a quick flight before the day ended. Wind is a strange thing, greedy one minute, uncaring the next. I had exhausted myself with running back and forth before the kite was high enough to fly on its own. This time I wanted to see how high it would go, test the limits of what the string would allow. I still had time to pull it all in before the sun went down.

There's hypnotizing hum that comes with a spool of string unwinding, like windmills and airplane propellers. Enough of a hum to put you in a trance long enough to watch all of the string leave the spool and drift away. I stared at the handle crank that was slowing down as the spool spun freely before I realized that all the string was gone. Having never let the string all the way out, I didn't know that my father hadn't bothered to tie it to anything. Snapping my head up, I could see the last of my kite, drifting up over the trees of the park.

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Econ class: lectures, chalkboards and passing notes with Jennifer. I sketch quick words while the teacher faces the chalkboard. I tell her of dropping dandelions off the bridge at the reservoir and watching them turn into whirling dervish paratroopers as they fall. She tells me about her dreams of jumping in the waves of the ocean. I write about how Mr. Wagner's voice is like a plungered trombone. She draws a picture of him with a huge trombone bell as a mouth. She leans over to start whispering.

"Dude, we've got to get out of this class. Let's go to the reservoir. You're always talking about it." I keep my eyes locked to the teacher.

"Can't we wait till class is over?"

"You want to wait for Russell to ixnay our excursion? Go on, I'll meet you out there."

"Good point" I have a feeling that Mr. Wagner and the rest of my teachers think I have problems with my bladder, but they don't complain. One less kid in the class tends to be a blessing rather than a curse.

At the beach, my grandmother sits me down on washed up logs when I'm not running in the waves. Once, she pulled out a picture album and started thumbing through it with me as the wind whipped the pages back and forth. Her fingers fell across the images of her and my grandfather standing by huge planes with teeth painted on their noses. I held the page with the pictures of my dad and my grandfather working on a workbench on what looks like miniature plane parts.

"Your grandfather and his planes, he could never get enough of airplanes before the war." My grandmother looked up at the birds poking at the sand while they chased the waves back to the sea. I looked at my father's face smiling up at my grandfather as they worked on the plane together.

"You know, you should be in school young man." My body jerks. I hadn't heard anyone approaching yet. Looking up, I see Jennifer walking towards me.

"So should you." We walk over to the railing to toss things at the water rushing below for a while. During the spring I spend almost every day watching the water run below the bridge. She knows how to pick spots to cut class. Old habits die hard. "You ever thought of jumping off things?"

"You mean like buildings and stuff? Nah, I like living."

"I meant things like this bridge. I've always wanted to."

"Oh, I get it." She stands next to me on the street side of the railing and peers over the edge. Her hair falls from behind her ears and gets stuck in her mouth as she speaks. "Russell and his friends have jumped before. He says there's some nasty currents around the pillars."

"I've heard the same thing."

"Didn't you once tell me you thought you could fly?"

"That sounds more like my dreams."

"Well you never know unless you try." The clouds are settling in above me. I watch as seagulls catch updrafts of air and play with each other in circles. "I think I'm going to flunk Econ."

"Yeah. You probably will." I wince as she punches me in my arm. "Well come on, you didn't even do your midterm paper." She follows my eyes up to the gulls. "Too bad we can't be like the birds."

They never worry about economics and stuff."

"Well, you never know. We're not doing too well as people; we might as well try being birds. You up for it? We can get our training wings before we hit the water."

"I don't know."

Tell you what, I'll help by pushing you if you want."

"Then who's going to push you?"

"I'll follow right after you. I've got nothing to lose, do you?"

"You'll follow?" I've heard that before. I think of my rocks on the shelf in my room and look up at the birds circling, and then I'm in the air. These things bubble up over time I guess. A bridge is like a launchpad and my first thoughts rush back to Jennifer. I have eternities of air to imagine her legs frozen against the railing, watching as I leave the concrete. But gravity is quick. I feel her fingers fall past my sleeve as my stomach turns itself in belly flops against the drainage water coming up to greet me.

I sprout wings with feathers shaped like knives. My skin folds over into the wrinkled ripples around the pox marks in my skin. My eagle eyes look for the water but my outstretched arms arch my back and they turn towards the shape of sunlight stripping through the clouds.

It's like levitating; I sit upon my falling self and watch Jennifer flail. Arms like carnival rides, she's looking at the scenes beneath her eyelids. Shining sparks from the glitter in her makeup turns sunlight against gravity and back into my eyes. Flat rocks and flung dreams, she's like a fire with glass to replace the walls.

I feel the squeaks and squawks of the seagulls carving M's into the sky. My wings are jet propelled now and I'm fighting in a war over rocks and shells flung from my grandmother's hands. No more worrying about drowning in the waves, I can chase these birds and pull beauty from mid-air with war time quick rifle shots now.

Like silverfish falling from the ceiling, I am broken by my own stomach wailing and a need to reach out for a rock that falls besides me dressed in the clothes of a girl. Looking down again at the water below, I tuck my wings to follow.

A House Needs Tape

I hate the way she looks into her hands when we talk. She rubs her cuticles between her fingers. I look at my own fingers later on, flaps of skin and broken ridges spill up against black pools of hardened blood from pulling off too much of a fingernail while sitting at stoplights. My fingers look like the walls and ledges on Lover's Leap, where rope and quickdraws keep the cracks attached to my own skin. I sit at those stoplights and begin to think that even though I started smoking to make friends outside of clubs in the city, recently I've begun to think that I continue to smoke to give my fingers something to do. Idle hands make the devil's work. The devil in me turns my hands against themselves; they rip and tear to find some sort of calm that lies beneath the surface.

I compare her fingers to my own. I notice the way my fingers eat at themselves to her own wrapping and spinning of her own. I imagine that she feels a wedding ring, tarnished from years of washing dishes in my tee-shirts, clinking the ceramic against the steel sides of the sink. She makes washing dishes sound like the wind chime outside of our window, the wind pushing their fingers against themselves. When she thinks that she's the only one in the apartment that cleans up, the sink bangs back an agitated staccato.

We make a chart to assign days to cook dinner. I found out that Microsoft word has a template for creating a list of household chores. Templates are metaphor to me. When I create plans for heading out into Desolation Wilderness to wedge my fist into cracks of granite as I move up a route I can call my own, there is no template. I create stories about 24 year old priests who can't pronounce words from their gospel readings and there is no template. I imagine my life with her is unique, but there is a template.

The paper goes up on our refrigerator. The silver face rejects magnets and she rolls her eyes when I complain about the lack of nos-

talgia in today's kitchen appliances. We use white sport tape because my fingers need medical tape more than the house needs scotch tape. When I look at the list, I wonder how many times she will let me cook fried rice before she begins to think that I'm not taking our dinner plans seriously.

Toilet Suicide

You are the heart that pounds off beat while your hand holds your body up as you pee. Head swaying, blood drunken and woozy. Each time you use the bathroom the fingerprints and palm prints blur against each other, multiple people standing before the toilet, each hoping not to fall, not to find themselves waking up with their forearm wet and floating in the yellow water that you try not to think of as piss.

You don't tell yourself about the thoughts that go through your head when it is happening. How you can see the cut on your forehead from falling dead-sack crumpled against the porcelain white of the bowl's rim. You imagine the bruise rising from the broken blood vessels beneath the skin and coming to life as a final bloom of color from your quickly cooling body. The thought feels romantic. You provide your own funeral bouquet for your deathbed, or death floor in this case.

More than romantic, you try not to remember the way you breathe slowly and methodically as this happens, hoping to make your heart jump and miss a beat. You become a new age meditation electrical outlet. Plug in your body to a certain amount of calmness so that the electricity of your brain fries itself like a fork jammed into a light socket.

The path to heaven in this case seems secure. A very "I Win" kind of moment. Accidental result of a defective product. The fact that you are hoping for the defection doesn't change the desired legal outcome. Getting past the judgment of God through a loophole is something that Satan has always tried to do, and Satan was nearly God and so in your mind, leaning against the mirror, staring at the stream of piss and evaluating the darkness of the yellow against a possible bought of dehydration makes you almost godly. Kinda.

You imagine the time it will take for your girlfriend to find you. She's the only one with the keys and it being the 6th of the month, your landlord won't worry about your lack of rent check until the 7th of next month. Depending upon the time that passes, what

will your body look like? When does the romantic nature of finding someone you care about lying dead upon the floor turn into finding something bloated and unrecognizable crumpled on the floor. You don't want to be found after you can't pass for yourself anymore. That ruins the romance of it. They have to miss you when they feel the pain of the loss, otherwise it becomes too abstract. Abstract does not lend itself to immortality. You have to be a real image stamped into memory. A cadaver or mashed up road kill will be remembered, but never as a specific thing. It fades into a general horror of death and vulgar schlock that typifies the changing of life from wonderment to numbness.

The blooming bruise against the forehead is the coup-de-grace. It comes from the leaning against the glass that puts your head right above the bowl. It fits into the loophole idea as well because it falls under the category of trying to hold yourself up. God helps those who help themselves. It's like a gift to the person that finds you, delicate pedals, shaped by the angles and crystalline lines of the cells in your face. You want the person to find you in time to see it. Strawberry blotches that grow new bushes over time, each one diluted by the last, but the first one, perfect and etched in their mind.

No one forgets the flowers that their first boyfriend brought to the door, the Valentines Day vase on the table when mom came home from work, the origami bouquet made for the girls that sat next to you in seminar in astronomy lab. You want to make one last gesture before your check out. A not-really-a-suicide note that says, here, I made this for you. A flower says I'm sorry and I'm sorry for making you be the person that had to get this gift, I'm sorry that you have to carry this romance with you.

Playing the Odds

I must have looked like a used up lab rabbit, pug-dogging my face in absurd contractions to try to bully myself back to sleep. I became aware of my foot sending me empty signals from the starvation of its blood over the edge of the couch all night. Now my eyes were open, no turning back now. Sitting up, my back sank into the couch. Sheets of cracking ice sent frantic pulses up my leg as my foot came back to life. The sun wasn't up yet, but the heralds of its light were beginning to compete with the streetlights for the honor of illuminating Johnny and Maria's apartment. Even with the competition, there still wasn't enough to stop the shadows from their nighttime dancing.

Johnny and Maria were still asleep in their hide-a-bed across the room from me. I could see his arm was on top of their heap, rising out and disappearing again into them, a momentary loch monster sighting. With Maria in the shape of an S and Johnny nestled into her curves, they had the look of only one body, one entity sharing different dreams. Maria's side twitched and adjusted its position every few moments. I watched her body sink into Johnny's and then jerk away. Her legs, riding a bicycle in slow motion, constantly shifting against Johnny's motionless calm. He just lay there with his protruding arm holding her anxious side close, keeping her from cycling away. My lips turned up slightly as I exhaled, the unspoken speech of envy and appreciation.

Jetty was still at the window where he had been when I fell asleep the night before. Johnny described Jetty as a gargoyle protecting their little one-room apartment while the world slept. Perched on the stool with his feet wrapped around its legs, Jetty stared out the window into the dawn on the street below. His hand was still holding a cigarette against the opening at the windowsill that looked exactly the same as the one I'd fallen asleep watching night before. A gray mist seeped from its glowing cherry, swirling and playing in the branches of Johnny's dying and forgotten bonsai tree on the sill, before its fluid gray was swallowed by the morning cool. He didn't move. He never moved, not even to light a new cigarette. Though, I'd

never seen him at night without a lit cigarette.

When I had jumped awake in the middle of last night from my dreams and heard Johnny and Maria having sex across the room, loud and unashamed, Jetty was sitting awake, staring out the window, cigarette burning. After getting up later to use the bathroom, I had stopped in front of him on my way back to the couch. He was awake even then, his eyes moving like mad hatters and crazy hares as they recorded the world outside. I murmured something about how cold it must be on the street but he didn't respond. In the same way a person who's asleep wouldn't respond, Jetty was asleep to me. His lips were pursed, waiting for his cigarette. I'd just shaken my head and headed back to the couch.

Now I got up and walked over to him again murmuring salutations. My voice fell out of me with the bass that I so loved of early morning words. Jetty turned his head and dragged his eyes to me. Trolling his shirt pocket, he searched for his pack of cigarettes. He grabbed a roll from the pack with his lips before offering the pack to me. I raised my hand to decline and his eyebrows raised slightly before he turned his head back to the window and lit the new cigarette with the heat of his last. I tried to start some sort of conversation, "Do you have any plans today?" He just brought his cigarette back to his mouth and breathed in its breath. Drumming my fingers against my legs - I waited, biting my lower lip and casting my gaze about our corner of the room. "Whatever..." I said, trying to capture some dignity. I pulled my eyes from him and gazed over his head at the morning outside.

The sun was up now on the other side of the building. The street below was still basking in a nighttime shade and the streetlights held to their fading reign. The parked cars had thinned out from the night before, leaving only the old, beat up wrecks belonging to the likes of us and the huge, meticulously clean boats that the retired people who lived in the building owned. Next to the bushes across the street were some shopping carts dressed in yesterday's McDonald's cups and discarded shirts that didn't quite make the cut.

I turned my head to look down the street at the sound of gunfire and construction work only to see George's maroon VW Bug sputtering towards our apartment. I noticed a new bumper sticker saying, "Eat, Think, and Be Merry" in a rainbow psychedelic design. He pulled in directly across from our window letting the bug slowly die. The morning mist clung to the rust on its hood reflecting the fading yellow of the streetlights slightly. I could barely make out Marc in the passenger seat. The two of them were putting on their hats and

gloves with much hand rubbing and commotion before they would get out of the bug. Like royalty and court jester they stepped out of their vehicle and processed to the middle of the street where they stopped and looked up at us. Marc was dressed in white skintight tee-shirt and wranglers breaking onto the tops of his generic tennis shoes that matched in color with his knit cap upon his head; the same thing he always wore. He called it his liberal cowboy getup, followed of course, by a heaving "Yaaah Soooe!" to make his point. George wore his usual army fatigues jacket with bright yellow gloves that seemed to be made of yarn and fit just a little too tight. He put his hand to his mouth, the bright yellow clashing against his dark complexion and jet-black hair, and called up to us. I waved and walked over to the nightstand besides Johnny's bed to get the keys. Back at the window and with a flick of my wrist, careful not to knock over Johnny's tree or burn myself on Jetty's cigarette, the keys shot out to the two below. Marc and George climbed over each other to catch the keys, both missing and landing in a heap in the middle of the street, laughing as the keys bounced a few feet to the side of them. I couldn't help but join in the laughter as they began to wrestle for the keys, George with his maniacal grin and wide eyes and Marc with his face set to a comical determination. They were oblivious of the cars honking now and waiting for them to get out of the street. Jetty watched and smoked. Dropping my head to the side, I went back to the couch, waiting for George and Marc to come up.

Maria looked beautiful, even in her hurried state. When she had risen this morning she immediately began making breakfast for everyone in the apartment. "She's angry you know" George took a seat next to me on the couch as I watched her. "Just look at her knuckles. They'll give you away every time. See? They're pale, damn near white from her little hell-hath-no-fury-like-a-woman-scorned death grip. The cast iron can't be that heavy. Yep, that girl's got the anger in her."

I nodded absentmindedly as he spoke. I'd already noticed how white her knuckles were as she moved between the three pans she was working like the timpanist in the orchestra George had snuck everyone in the back to see the week before. My eyes were locked with rapt adoration as her hands moved through the pile of food next to her stove. She quickly grabbed a handful of red and green pepper slices and tossed them into a waiting wok, sending a firework show of

oil droplets up into the air as the heat seared the peppers with static. Without noticing she scooped some rice out of a light green Tupperware bowl and spread it out on the pan furthest from her, letting it warm. The chopped sausage was next, rolling in the front pan, sending off a smell that reminded me of Sacramento.

"... and I'll tell you what else, she's damn pissed that her man took off with Marc before she woke up and isn't here to help her to be hospitable with all of us. That is, if you call overt disgust and hostility hospitality. Poor thing. I pity her really. She doesn't really think like we do you know? It's like she wants to have a stable Republican man that'll come home at the same time every day and read the same section of the newspaper while she pays all the bills with his steady paycheck and they steadily eat dinner at the same time so that they'll be able to watch their favorite show at the same time every night before they head off to bed where if its Tuesday, they'll have sex, steadily, until he's done. Yeah, that's what she wants, a nice life, a dull life. She doesn't even realize what a catch she has in Johnny. He's living an exciting unpredictable life that's based on this and that and blah blah you know? yeah, that's it or something and you know what else? I think..."

I wasn't listening anymore and George didn't really seem care if I was or not. I had been watching Maria add peanuts, rosemary, olives, shrimp, raw broccoli, and noodles to the three pans and I now remembered why the sausage had reminded me of Sacramento. I'd had the meal she was making before. Johnny had made it at George's ex-wife Jessica's house in Sacramento when we had all gotten together to celebrate the anniversary of their divorce.

Johnny had made the dish as his anniversary gift to the two of them. Everybody had loved it, as they should have. The rice, pressed to the plate and swimming with egg noodles, gave a perfect virginal backdrop to the dark reds of the peppers and the harsh blacks of the olives. The peanuts and water chestnuts gave the most interesting texture as they cracked in your mouth. And the taste, the taste was like a war with your mind rushing around your mouth like an excited child screaming "sweet! oohh bitter! salty! soft! crisp!" By the time you were finished chewing you were almost too exhausted to swallow. Everyone had come up to him and took his hand and offer to return the favor some day. Everyone's attitude said they were delighted with him, that he had "it"; cooking up a delight to enlighten their stomachs and spirits. Johnny had beamed and spun around like a kid with a gold star. Maria had sat quietly in the next room, smiling quickly whenever someone made eye contact with her.

George was still talking to me as I came out of my memory. "I'll tell you one thing, Nigel, I sure as hell don't want to be here when she finally gets around to serving that food she's making. No sir, I've a feeling that whoever is around for that will get a serving of spicy sauce straight from her mouth if you know what I mean. Well looks like she's ready to serve it up, I'll be making my grand exit now" George stood up before I could respond. "Maria, I must tell you that your cooking smells great, smells great indeed, but I must be getting off to do whatever needs to be done by me this fine day. I bid then my farewell to you and I'm sure we'll see each other later this day. And oh yes, I'd forgotten to tell you how beautiful you look today, that Johnny, one lucky man, one lucky man."

Maria had, during his rambling soliloquy, walked over and opened the front door for him. She let the door close without a word or glance at George and walked back to the kitchen while his good-byes echoed down the hallway. She picked up one of blue ceramic plates she had set on the counter and put it back in the cupboard, leaving four plates next to the stove.

"Jetty, are you going to eat for once in your life? You need some actual food unless you just want to waste away." She called to Jetty without looking up from preparing the food on the plates. Jetty rose up from his sentry post, put out his cigarette in the bonsai tree's bed, and walked to the door. Opening it without a sound he slipped out into the hall and let the door close behind him. All this he did without speaking and without looking up from the ground. Maria looked up at the sound of the door closing and looked down again. "I guess Johnny's not coming back anytime soon either." I didn't know if she was talking to me or not, so I sat there silently. She took the prepared plate of food and dropped it on the counter, looking at me. I jumped a bit at the sharp report of the ceramic dish striking her kitchen's counter. I could see why a lot of their plates had chips along their base, showing the off white of the clay beneath the colored shell. "I hope you don't mind eating alone." With that, she walked quickly to the bathroom and closed the door. My hunger, that had been tearing my stomach inside out moments before, was quiet now and I sat on the couch, staring at the plate on the counter.

George was sitting in his car when I came down to the street, having made my exit before Maria came out of the bathroom. I would've waved at George but he was lost in himself, speaking

animatedly to his reflection in the windshield. He didn't notice me, which was a relief. I had trouble talking with George. Most of the time he was too much energy, too much movement, and too many words. Every conversation felt like drowning. I could never say a word, I was too busy trying to tread water in the stream that would flow from his mouth.

By now the sun had won its battle with the streetlights and George's bug had lost its early morning mystique. It was just a beat up German import again with the amazing George inside speaking to all the world with no one to listen. I turned and followed the sidewalk away from Johnny and Maria's apartment.

I met Jetty and Johnny in the park later on that morning like I'd done every other morning that week. They were sitting on a hill smoking in silence and watching the people walk by on the street below. Johnny noticed me walking to them and jumped up. "Nigel! Good to see you, good to see you. Sorry you were left all alone in the apartment this morning, Jetty told me all about it. Didn't mean for that to happen friend. Come, sit with us as we watch the people and marvel at their beauty." Sitting down and silent once again, Jetty looked up from a letter he was writing and offered me a smoke from his pack which I declined. He raised his eyebrows like he often did and turned back to his writing.

I looked at the other people in the park. There was a small group of kids playing at the edge of the grass where the trees stood their guard, keeping the happy grass out of their ominous forest. There were four boys, each about twelve or thirteen, cutting school but still dressed in their school uniforms. They were wrestling and playing in the dirt, laughing the whole time. One of the kids was slightly larger than the rest. His red hair flying about as he did most of the pushing and wrestling, though not the most laughing. I wondered how they would explain all of the muddy knees on their gray polyester pants and scuffed shoes to their mothers when they got home. It seemed like they were now playing some sort of distance jumping game, with each lining up to some invisible point in the grass and jumping as far as they could from that point. One of the boys would mark where the other had landed and another would jump.

Down by the bathroom building on the street, an old lady pushing a shopping cart was taking a drink from the water fountain. She was dressed in layers of clothing: red and orange flannel shirt

over a cream sweater, ripped gray sweats over her jeans, a thin blanket with a brown interwoven design sewn into a background of light blue wrapped about her head. A policeman walked by with his back straight, swinging his nightstick in circles from his left hand. Walking up to the lady, he stopped in front of her, bringing himself to full stature and towering over her. They exchanged a few words, and the lady moved back to her cart and continued slowly down the sidewalk.

Johnny touched my arm softly and pointed back to the kids playing their jumping game. Two of the boys were standing chest to chest, shouting obscenities at each other. The other two boys stood behind the one with the red hair. Johnny began to laugh as the redhead hauled off and hit the other boy in his right temple sending him flailing to the ground. He then started to kick the boy while the other two joined in, all three laughing the whole time. Seeing this, the policeman blew his whistle shouted for the boys to stop. Still laughing, the three boys ran off into the forest leaving their comrade to deal with the policeman.

"Wasn't that great!" Johnny was giggling and his eyes moved quickly taking in the scene as the policeman dragged the young boy away. "Wasn't that simply beautiful?"

"I don't see what's so beautiful about three kids beating the crap out of another kid and then leaving him to deal with a pig."

Johnny looked at me with half of his mouth turned up in a smile. "You're not looking with the right eyes, Nigel. Remember when the boys were playing? Their laughter sent shivers through my soul. And when they started fighting? The smaller boy knew he was right and that the other was just trying to push him around and yet he stood up to him, ye'no? Wasn't that just pure human spirit shining through the argument? And of the argument itself, the red head was scared. Didn't you see it? He knew he was wrong and he was scared of losing whatever it was that he had over the group. That's fear, that's emotion. All emotion is beautiful and it's not often that we get to see it without everyone covering it up in their daily monotony. I'll tell you one thing about beauty. I was in that bathroom down there before you came and I'll tell you what I saw in the stall. Written on the door with one of those big fat black markers someone had written 'My mother made me a homosexual.' It seemed rather stupid to me at first, but underneath it someone had written with a smaller blue pen, 'If I send her the materials, will she make me one?' and under that, someone had written 'FAGGOT' and tried to scratch out what the second person had written. Oh man, Nigel, I tell you, I nearly fell off the seat from laughing so hard. That's what I'm talking

about It was beautiful because of its crudeness. It wasn't the joke that was so wonderful, it was the person who tried to cross the joke out and yet still found it necessary to write "faggot" after doing so. You know? Most people only let down their guard and shine when they let loose their foulest or most shameful beliefs. Tasteless and muddled with hate they may be, but isn't that humanity? Isn't that what we're looking for? Isn't it worth wading through the mud to see someone without their dull masks? What's beauty but the human spirit shining through, the chaos that our stupidity creates, the joy that our souls feed off of. If you only see the bad, you'll never see the good. Look around Nigel, every moment the world is turning and lives are being lived, but if you don't see the world like a kid sees a candy store, you'll never see any life but your own, and wouldn't that be a shame you know?"

He put his hand on my shoulder to help himself up. "Well Nigel, it's time for me to go home and pay penance to Maria. No doubt she'll want to have a go at me. Come by later though. We'll go to the Marina Grill and have a few drinks." And with that, he headed off to his apartment bouncing off every step, his head looking this way and that the whole time.

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Once again, I was alone with Jetty, not knowing how to start a conversation. I tried to look around at the park but there was no one left in it now. I looked instead at Jetty. He sat there, blond hair falling over his face as he stared down at the writing in his lap. He'd taken his heavy denim jacket off and laid it next to him, exposing his emaciated arms. His freckles stood out like land mines against the chalky pale they covered. His arms always drew my attention though. His upper arm and his forearm were the same size. George had been joking lately about how Jetty was so skinny, you could exchange the two parts between his body and hands and nobody would be any the wiser. Now thinking about it, I'd never seen Jetty eat. He looked up at me surveying him, his gray eyes moving slowly. Once again, he offered me his pack of cigarettes, never taking his eyes off me. I couldn't bring myself to refuse him again and took one from the pack. His eyes lit up as the sulfur from my match overpowered the smell of the noontime grass.

"Johnny's a fool, but sometimes I think he's wiser than any of us." I don't think I was able to hide my surprise that Jetty was speaking to me. I focused upon keeping the cherry of my cigarette lit as he

began to smile and turn away, looking across the grass and taking another drag from his own cigarette. "Johnny plays the odds. He figures that you won't go down to those bathrooms over there and see that there's no doors on the stalls. They got ripped out two months ago and used in the encampment in that forest behind us. Johnny knows that and I know that, but Johnny also knows that you don't know that."

"Then why..."

"Because, it's not the truth that's important to Johnny, man. It's the meaning. He told me the other day, 'Sometimes I tell lies Jetty, that much is true' then the fool started laughing for a while. He thought it was hilarious to say it's true that he lies. But he wasn't finished. When he stopped laughing he went on and on about how his 'enlightenments' came to him at the weirdest times, like when he was choosing cans of peas at the supermarket, or brushing his teeth in the morning. He said that people don't want to hear about anyone's ideas when they're surrounded by such mediocre stories, so he spices up the edges of his stories. If you ask me though, he spices up the edges, the middle, the inside, the outside, and anything else his mind can get a hold of. He tried to convince me that it wasn't wrong for the story itself to be a lie as long as the idea behind it is true. He said, 'If someone gets the idea, does it matter if the story is true?' I didn't answer him when he asked that question. I just would have said he was a fool and I think he knew it and didn't press the question. We keep our silence for the sake of our friendship." Jetty was more animated now than I'd ever seen him. His body jerked and pantomimed his story as he spoke.

"It's strange sometimes. I think about Johnny and me being friends. I think about how he used to be, and how he is now. You know, George just messed him up man. He filled his head with these grandiose ideas and fantasy. Pure fantasy, and Johnny can't see it. He loves thinking and I'll be damned if I take that away from him just because the direction he's taking himself is futile. It's becoming hard to see him following George like a dog, nipping at his heels for a scrap of bunk theory."

Jetty took his jaw into his hand and pushed his head to the side until I heard it crack then repeated the action to the other side. He picked a blade of grass from the ground and held it to the tip of his cigarette, letting it go to flame before blowing it out again. The blade went beneath his nose where he inhaled the small lines of smoke rising from it. His eyes were closed, but it seemed like he could still see.

"There's no doors on the stalls?" I couldn't believe it. I fell

back onto the grass and closed my eyes against the sun as I began to laugh. Great big gasps of air that left my stomach shaking and my shoulders heaving. Johnny sure had changed since his Sacramento days.

Jetty took another drag of his cigarette, its embers growing closer to his shaggy mustache and beard. "I was watching Captain Kangaroo this morning at one of those electronic shops before the manager kicked me out. What a great show, what genius. Have you ever watched that show Nigel?"

"No, I tend not to watch kiddie shows. They're always a little too corny for me."

"Yeah, I get you. A lot of people say that man, but you just got to watch it with your mind turned inside out. Forget what your damn parents taught you, forget that they hate what you are, just get inside the meaning man, and you'll see what I mean, or you won't, it's up to you." When he spoke his hands moved about pulling the words from his mouth. Making blades, they sliced through the air like Maria's knife had sliced through the sausage that morning. His whole body was in motion with his speech, jerking and swaying like a robot on a new battery buzz. It must have been exhausting for him to speak. One moment he was inches from my face, looking into my eyes trying to find a glimmer of understanding perhaps, the next minute all of the muscles in his body were tense, and ready for flight. I wondered if his mind was always moving like this even when his body was at rest.

"Jetty, do you ever sleep?"

"I write."

"But I've never..."

"Johnny took over that routine. Some activities that are not mother-approved tend to take precedence over time. Johnny has his notebook. We agreed that he'd take over the responsibility: experience is key, Johnny once convinced me of this in one of his less foolish rants. So I stick around, Maria sticks around, Johnny tries somehow to be the keystone in the bridge between us."

Jetty took his last drag of his cigarette, pulling the cherry up to the filter before flicking the butt away with his middle finger like a medieval catapult. Sitting up with his lungs filled, he looked straight ahead, no longer seeming to notice me. He let the smoke escape through his nose before gathering his papers together, folding them into squares and then placing them in his front pocket as he stood up and walked away.

I watched him wander off, once again drumming my fingers on my knee and wondering what I'd said. I took a last drag from my

half finished cigarette before tossing it into the ground and watching it melt a blade of grass. "Johnny would say that was beautiful," I said to myself.

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I never liked walking down the hall to Johnny and Maria's apartment. Their door was at the end of a long line of open doors with most of the tenants staring out as I walked by. Today was no different and as I stood in front of Johnny's door, his neighbor had his door open and was sitting in a rocking chair staring out at me. I must not have looked like a younger member of his family come to visit because he turned back to his TV and rocked without moving his body. Back and forth. Back and forth.

I began to knock on the door but hesitated; I could hear the two of them yelling behind the door. Maria's voice sound like an agitated bird, tense with force and raised up an octave. Johnny's matched her voice in volume, but failed to match her stress. Through the door I could hear every word as if I was in the room. Now did not seem like a good time to interrupt them.

"How many times are you going to run off like you did this morning Johnny? They're your damn friends. I shouldn't be in charge of taking care of them just because the person they came to see decided to take a short walk that lasted all day. Do you think any of them wanted to see me? No. How do you think that made me feel, how do you think you made me feel? Can't you be more reliable like you once were before this damn 'experience life' thing happened to you?"

"Maria, remember when this 'experience life thing' first started, when we lived our life instead of just being spectators? Do you remember when we didn't even have a phone bill one month because we never had a chance to get home? Do you remember the things we used to..."

"Oh shut up Johnny. You talk and you talk and you talk some more about what life is and what this and that means but still here we are. You say remember... Remember? How can I remember when I'm too busy trying to deal with all the shit that those memories are causing today? Do you notice anything anymore besides your 'little details'? Yes, we didn't have a phone bill one month. Have you looked at our phone bill this month? Have you looked at any of our bills?"

"Maria, I'm growing sick of this. Hell, at least I'm growing, full stop. Tell me, when did you stop growing?"

"Yes, Johnny, I stopped growing, but I stopped because I real-

ized that I couldn't depend on myself or you for that matter when we're always changing. Why do you think we still have a place to stay? Your high flying ideas? How much have those been getting you these days? Who brought home more money last night, you or the homeless man on the corner selling his story of The Man got him down?"

"Now you know there's a huge difference between him and me. I'm just trying to live with the fire of life. I'm trying to suck it down like it was a shot of whisky, not with sips but in one fell swoop. And you know what? It burns that way. Yes, you can't just throw whisky down the hatch without losing your neck in the process, but tell me, at least it's done and finished and there's more time to experience the effects. Don't you see? With life, if you keep sipping, you may never get drunk and you may never realize the point of the whole encounter. Oh, I'm different. The bum on the corner doesn't even sip his whisky now. He doesn't care about the way a person who gives him money squints his eyes at the sun. He doesn't care about the waves of summertime scorch rising off the concrete. He never sits for days wondering if it's possible to sit for days. Yes he made more money, but what can he, or you for that matter, do with it?"

"What can I do with it? WHAT can I DO with it? Maybe keep the rent on this shithole for another month? How about putting a little bit more food in the fridge? Go ahead take a look, after this morning's little Houdini affair; all of our food is spent entertaining your friends who didn't even have the manners to stay or to eat if they did. Or maybe get the fridge fixed for that matter? Don't you realize that you can't live your life in any way when you're dead from some disease you got because your food went bad?"

"Maria, you know that fate and life will provide. We'll never have to worry about losing the things we need if we only need the things we have."

"Oh yeah, that's fucking cute. Just great. Which one of your slimy friends thought that one up? Was it Marc right before he conned you into giving him your watch so he could pawn it for whore money? Or was it George, while you two were whooping it up at the Marina Grill on the credit card you stole from my Aunt. Or was it one of your other slimy friends, drunk with the prospect of losing good ole Johnny of some possessions who put those words into your head? Can't you see what you're doing? Hanging out with those men who are more like snakes. I hesitate to call them men, they're more like babies, egotistical and narrow minded, slithering around doing their baby snake things. Don't you see where they're going? Don't you see

where you're going if you follow them?"

"No. I don't see. Obviously you don't see either. You call them snakes, I call them fire. They don't take advantage of me, I take advantage of them. So they get a watch or a piece of your Aunt's credit, big deal. They're content to let me sit there and leach that fire right from them. I can warm my hand on their excitement; I can live a thousand lives through their eyes and hopefully, they through mine. I can truly feel like I haven't missed a thing in life when I'm around them, like I used to feel with you."

"Oh, how you used to feel with me? What the hell is this, a break up? You want to waltz out of here with four months left on our lease? I should have gotten a fucking lease on our relationship. What am I supposed to do? Work all day and then into the night like I've been doing? Come to think of it, fine. Get out. I haven't needed you here for the last few months anyway. Maybe this time I can get someone to share this shit hole that will actually contribute to its cost. So go! Get out of here. You want excitement? You want to live life? Go live it. Go get excited out there if you can't get it with me anymore."

"Maria, you're getting worked up over nothing. I didn't say anything like that."

"You didn't say anything like that?! Are you fucking speaking to me? How stupid am I? Now I know I'm a girl and that makes me too emotional in your books but I know, I know what you said. Don't give me this shit Johnny."

"I'm just trying to wake you up, Maria. Listen! Listen to the meanings and disregard the words. That's not what's important anyway. You have to stick to what's important. What's important, you know?"

"Tell me then Johnny, what is important to you? I know it's not me. You keep saying experiencing life but I can't see how wasting your life is experiencing. Tell me then because right now I can only see the words."

"I don't know how to say what's important. It's in my head, bouncing around in metaphors and colors of people's faces, but I can't get it out into words you'll understand. George keeps telling me to just slow down and not try to force these things. He says they'll come in time."

"Well, maybe I should be talking with George right now, though what I'd have to talk about with a Mexican, I don't know. But even someone like him would make more sense than you right now. I'm sorry Johnny. It's time to make some decisions. I've let this go on for too long, so I guess it's my fault too. I'll give you one more chance

then, it's your choice, it's always been your choice. Your friends or me. What's it going to be? You going to live your life or dream your life? You going to grow up or walk away like you always do, because I'm just not going to sit around and wait for one or the other anymore. I've made my choice and I chose me and God help me I'd thought I'd chosen you, so I've got to stick with that choice. I need you to pull your head out of your ass for just a moment and tell me what it's going to be, stay or go. There's only black and white right now, Johnny. No more gray, no more of your 'beautiful indecision' so tell me, what's it going to be?"

I brought my fist to the surface of the door, stopping Johnny's response before it could start. I should have walked away, but Johnny was my friend, and I couldn't let him get snared in a trap like that, even by someone as beautiful as Maria. Besides, I couldn't take the neverending sound of their neighbor's rocking chair going back and forth and back.

Maria's face appeared in the place of the door as she opened it. Her eyes surveyed me with a quick up and down flick and she turned away to let the door slide open. "Johnny, your friend is here" She let the statement hang in the air before going into the bathroom and slammed the door. Johnny brought his hands to his forehead for a moment and didn't acknowledge me.

I began to organize the pile of clear-windowed mail by the door until Johnny shook his head and leapt up to embrace me. As his arms surrounded me, I could feel his chest shaking before he pulled back and greeted me. "Nigel, never have I been so happy to see a friend. We must go out to the town. We must go see what there is to be seen, and experience what there is to experience. George is set to meet us at the Marina Grill in an hour or three so time is of course never of the essence. Dear!" He threw his head back, addressing the bathroom door, "My friend and I must be off now. We shall return tonight though, as we've nowhere else to sleep but in our home. Please, I beg of you, wait up for us. There is much to discuss, much to discuss. Come, Nigel, grab your coat, the night doesn't look kindly on the unprepared and narrow sighted."

I asked Johnny if he was ok while we walked from his apartment. He just ran his finger along the chipping paint along the stairwell as we descended. He hadn't looked at me since we'd left the apartment. Out on the sidewalk he stopped walking and sat down

against a trashcan. He started to scratch his head and spoke as I stood above him, shielding him from the sun as it began to set.

“You know, we always seem to fight now, Maria and me. All day long and into the night. She just doesn’t see, or I guess I don’t see. Who knows? I try to think the way George does, I try to see the larger picture of life, but she has a point you know? What am I doing, what am I doing? It’s the nighttime that makes it better you know? We never seem to fight in our dreams, and every once and a while I’ll wake up and smile at her, it’s funny how we only get along when we’re unconscious. But maybe we’re not unconscious, if we get along then maybe sleep is the only time we are conscious. I never used to sleep as much, but lately, I think I’ve been sleeping more, maybe as a way to get along with Maria.

It’s all new to me though, this sleeping thing. Maria says that it’s because I’d begun to eat correctly again, that all those years of one-meal-every-three-days binges forced my how-to-live sanity into a hole. I used to imagine a cave when she said that, deep in a mountain somewhere with my sanity, weak and emaciated, sitting in the corner, knobby knees resting in its eye sockets as Gollum lashed out in fury over “his precious” on the other side of the cave. I’d laugh to myself out loud and Maria would always ask what was so funny about my semiconscious desire to turn myself into a UNICEF poster child. She was right too. I loved to cook, but I never wanted to eat. It always seemed like a waste of time. I never knew how to respond and just stared at her, trying to pull my eyes wide so she’d coo at me and forget the question.

Sleep, oh I loathed it. Just couldn’t see what it could do me for. And I wasn’t tired anyway. Four hours a night and sometimes less and yet I had more energy and alertness than anyone I knew. And experience! Experience! Experience! How could I give up the frantic pace of 1 AM feet thrashing about without a care? The spinning insanity of lights strobing through the man made fog turning mid day drudgery zones into intergalactic phaser fights amid an appropriately sci-fi sounding bass THUMP? The cling of clothes, too wet to wear anymore, or the cling of others, desperately searching for someone to share a few more moments before the sandman danced them away? How could I give up the silent sidewalks of 5AM when the world would sleep while orange clouds made Buddhist rock gardens in the sky? How could I give up the diagonal path across the intersection of Oak and Fillmore empty of other travelers and silent as their cars prepared for another day? Or any time in between? How could I give these things up for sleep of all things? The worlds of a dream never

held the taste of real air, never rose the skin like true cold.

Sleep. Eat. "It's important to keep ourselves fit', so we can face what day is left once we open our eyes and shake the dreams from our embrace. I never wanted to sleep though. The world said 'eat or you shall die' and I saw the wisdom in that. I eat now. I'm a good boy, but I never wanted to sleep."

He picked up a silver gum wrapper from the ground and began wrapping it around his fingers. "I've found a shiny bit to pull from this though. Sleeping in a bed for one kills me, but another changes the story. Maria and I fit well together at night. Cradled against her back, she holds me in her shape as her arms would hold a child. It's funny, really. In a moment I feel so much. Against her skin, my fingers move slightly, tracing small pilgrimages over a kingdom centimeters in size. I don't know if she even feels it. The uneven expand-and-contract rhythm of her breath as she takes in and stops, contemplating the moment before releasing the breath again, over and over like a badly looped sample makes me fight to keep my breathing mine. The spare strands of hair, flying through the air, defy gravity to find my face and brush against it. It reminds me sometimes of stories I read about painters. Some painters would use human hair for the bristles of their paintbrush, preferring the heft that it brought to the artist's stroke. I know that in Asian countries, lovers would use paintbrushes to paint beautiful designs upon each other as a form of foreplay. I'd sit there, wanting to move, but imagining that her hair was painting pictures and designs of irritation upon my face as she slept. I'd be so uncomfortable and yet I couldn't be happier and so I'd lay there, matching breath and movement and trying to keep my arm from racing me to the finish line of sleep as it lay smashed between the two of us.

She said I looked funny trying to get to sleep sometimes, like a wrinkled old man trying to look menacing. I was just trying to force my eyes into rest, and besides, I thought I looked like a bunny with my face all scrunched up. She'd tell me sometimes about how she'd watch me fall asleep. She said she liked to feel my limbs jerk as I fell asleep. She always said that I looked cute, but I never quite knew what that meant, and never asked for some reason."

Having wrapped the wrapper around his finger, he took the cone shaped wrapper and placed it in the hole between his thumb and forefinger made by his fist. Slapping his other hand into the fist the wrapper was sent shooting into the air before it came down in the street. He started again.

"It was always as I slowly began to drift and felt my lids resist

as I tried to gaze upon her, that I began to feel the kind of peace and wholeness I'd felt upon the streets in the morning cold, or in the music among the sweating and excited. Here was another form of my sought beauty, mere inches from my face and resting somewhat in my arms. Swirling with other thoughts of fantasies and delusions I'd know that sleep would come from the jarring shakes that'd rattle through me during the falls and impacts of mid-mind visions. Slowly the jerks that traveled my body would lessen as my consciousness numbed and I'd wonder for a moment if Maria could feel me falling too.

It's something Nigel, for all of fighting she and I go through every day, nothing would make me give up my nights with Maria. George looks at me with these eyes that tell me to leave her, but the truth is, I'd endure worse. Hell, I'd endure this shit for the rest of my life, if I can just keep sleeping with Maria after everybody's counted their chips and went home. You know?"

His eyes were dish plates, chipped bottoms from the impact of the conversation. "Come, let's see what tonight holds for us."

We found Jetty in front of a bar, three blocks down from Johnny's apartment, sitting on the curb. He didn't notice us approaching; he sat on the curb, smoking a rolled cigarette that smelled like pot more than tobacco. Johnny had told me that Jetty was quite a connoisseur of drugs and oft used drugs neither of us would ever recognize. After a moment Johnny and I decided to sit with Jetty for a while and so we took up residence in the street with him under the streetlights as they proclaimed their reign yet again. We formed a circle with Johnny and me sitting in the street. I shifted back and forth, feeling the heat from the day seeping from the black asphalt into the seat of our pants. Jetty looked at us for a moment and offered his cigarette to us. Johnny took a drag, dainty and shallow like one might eat French food, savoring the smoke as it crept from his nose and mouth, suspended before the exhale. I began to hand the cigarette back to Jetty but Johnny grasped my hand and pulled it back towards my face. Jetty's eyes were on the cigarette and Johnny's eyes made connect-the-dots motions with his eyes between Jetty, the cigarette, and me. I took a quick puff before offering it back to Jetty. He looked at me so I brought the cigarette back to my mouth and breathed its fumes in once again, then passed it to Jetty who brought it to his mouth slowly and surely. He placed his lips around it and took in a breath that

seemed to never end, his eyes fixed on the glowing end of the roll the whole time. He paused a moment before passing the cigarette back to Johnny. "I talked with my mother today guys. She's doing ok, thanks for asking." Johnny stopped smoking and focused on Jetty. I could tell something important was happening because Johnny stopped his usual nervous shifting of weight and head jerks to look simply at Jetty. "She said, 'I read an article today son,' then she went on to tell me about some fucked up kid who died from a drug overdose. What the hell is she trying to do? I guess she gave up telling me she's disappointed in her son, 'It's such a shame Jetty, the son of a school teacher and a West Point graduate shouldn't be acting in such ways' She thinks this little subtle nudge nudge is going to push the hair down on my back. As if her constant muddled thought explanations of insecure motherhood weighing the other hairs wasn't bad enough. Jesus, I was too busy thinking of the party tonight to be dealing with her oh-god-did-I-raise-a-good-son bullshit. So some mutherfucker in Iowa is huffing paint and acting like some cracked out ghetto shit. God, if she only knew that the good little white kid was probably cracked out on actual crack. or meth. or ice, or cat, whatever. What then? Or if she could accept that her little boy was the one cracked out on cat and ecstasy and all the rest of those 'bad' drugs. Hell, you guys might be able to see her come on down here and rip off my white skin to purify her race. You know she wouldn't let me have whiteout when I was a boy because she found out you could huff it? God, what a bitch." He reached for his cigarette and stole another drag from it. Johnny looked at Jetty and I remained silent as the cigarette made its rounds. "Well, whatever guys. Jetty is strong without his damn parents and Jetty is going to prove that he can still have fun even with a disapproving breath breathing down his neck. Come, as our wise friend George would say. Join me friend Johnny, join me friend Nigel, tonight we will miss our responsibilities as we pass them to enjoy another party without the usual crowd. We'll see things only others could see and experience pleasures only others could tell of. Come, tonight we learn of new lives, and new paths to follow" Johnny laughed heartily and Jetty stood up quickly leaving the two of us to scramble to our feet to follow. I grabbed Johnny as we moved. The ground was playing tricks on me and the store lights were beginning to burn too brightly for nighttime.

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A mile away we stumbled up to the party we were appar-

ently looking for. I didn't care, I'd seemingly lost my ability to think about the future a few blocks back and could only see the world in hectic still shot photos of the future turning to present. My head had become too heavy for my neck to hold up and kept falling from side to side. Johnny made a joke about how I reminded him of this toy with a floating head he had on his car dashboard that bobbed as the car drove. I tried to tell them about the way my sight grabbed onto an image for just a moment before giving way to the lines of unfocused falling, but Jetty put his hand over my mouth to shut me up.

"Johnny, what the hell did we... what the hell, what the hell..." I heard the words in my head but my mouth seemed to be in a different time zone, speaking long after I'd finished talking in my mind. Johnny seemed to understand though and assured me that everything would be fine, just fine.

"Don't fret Nigel, not knowing what you're on is part of the experience. Besides, Jetty never tells me anyway"

Jetty began to hug people and faded away while Johnny continued to help me stand. We began to climb a stairway on the side of the building leading to a door on the second floor. I began to laugh as the lights spilled out and sat on the railing for a moment before flitting away back into the room. My eyes became captive to the wood making up the railing and steps. The holes and knots in the wood were calling to me and speaking whispers through their aged cracks. I couldn't bring myself to move any further and I let my legs fall, leaving me sitting against the wall of the building facing out, seeing the wood of the stairs and the shadows of the park across the alley peeking through the spaces where the air spread the wood apart. Johnny just smiled and sat down next to me, exchanging words with the trickle of people coming up and down the stairway.

I began to notice a small man in the space between the boards of the railing and began to giggle. "Look Johnny, a munchkin, living in the stairs. He's there, right in front, right there." Johnny just smiled and watched me. I began to think that perhaps he couldn't see the man so I reached out to grab him to show Johnny. My hand closed around him and brought him into the gaze of my hanging head, but nothing was there upon the opening of my hand. Now Johnny was laughing. Looking up, I saw the man was still in between the wood of the stairs.

"He's across the alley Nigel, in the park. He's not here in front of us." I didn't understand it at first, but began to laugh. I almost fell down the stairs but Johnny's arms held me firm to my step. I couldn't take my eyes from the man though. He sat on one of the benches and

fed his dog from a small aluminum foil ball in his hand. The light from the park lamps reflected again and again against the foil and reminded me of meteor showers. He looked like one of the pimps who shopped in the supermarkets by my apartment back in Sacramento, covered in too many clothes with a shopping cart filled with alcohol bottles and expensive presents shaped like cola cans. He wore bags at his waist tied with strings to his belt as necklaces and rings. I tried to describe these things to Johnny who sat and smiled at me, nodding his head and still greeting the people who passed.

Jetty was coming up the stairs now. I tried to show him the man but he'd already stood me up and moved me into the door at the top of the stairs. I called for Johnny to follow but he was already behind us.

With a thump, the vinyl started to spin. The buzz of the amps turned to the buzz of the bass notes hanging in my chest between the sharp pain of the snare drum in my head. Over and over, again and again, looping around, the bass and drum screaming right through my head on down to my spirit, an unrelenting child, whining and pulling on my pant leg, "Dance Nigel, Dance" and my body listened. Suddenly my head was in my stomach as the throbbing of the drum disappeared leaving sheer beauty floating in the air. I felt Aphrodite herself, incarnate in the sounds of strings and synthesizers moving above my head. I heard more than the instruments singing from the spinning records though, I heard rain falling into the footsteps of animals left on the banks of rivers never seen by people, atoms spinning in harmony with themselves and the others around them. All these things I could see in the spaces between myself and the other dancers until the dancers disappeared, leaving only the images. I felt my muscles tensing before I heard the bass and drum starting to fade back in. It ran up my body in a wave, paralyzing me. As the beat got louder, the beauty of the string soundscapes began to mesh into it. It seems like the beauty itself was speeding up, chasing the beat as everything became more and more frantic. I could see the images of the young girls, the rain, the atoms, moving faster and faster until all that was left was a blur of colors and shapes moving to the beat and existing in the beauty. My hands, drawn into fists, were tight against my chest and my head had begun the shake back and forth with the music. I was standing on my toes trying to rise up like the music was, sensing the explosion coming. My whole body could feel it, my eyes opened and I saw the people around me again, everyone waiting for the music and beat to reach its climax. They could sense it building like a flood behind a levy, pushing, pushing.

The guards outside were pushing more people in, crowding and crowding, I lost track of myself in the group. The sense of drugs and fantasy filled the scents in the air and the heat and power of the thump thump drugged the sober. The crowd began to spin and move as one, each part moving to its own beat, together it seemed like we were rising against the will of our logic. We danced upon our toes, some simply jumping in time with the beat, and still we waited, moving faster as the music pushed. I couldn't see Johnny anymore and my strength ran, I didn't know where I was or who was around me. In the momentary panic I just wanted to find Johnny. I tried to sit down but I felt hands behind me lifting me back up, turning around, I was face to face with a smiling Jetty. He opened his mouth to speak to me but no words came out. I looked down to see if the words had falling to the ground but only found the bass rising from the floor and turning my legs to springs. Thump went the bass rhythms, thump went the feet, thump went the hearts, sped up beyond our human capacity but thump we went. The music rose higher still, pushing, pushing, until... boom. Words I'd never spoken slipped from my lips. Thought I'd never seen and ideas once foreign rested in my consciousness as we traveled to a new world using our dance as a vehicle. Things impossible to be seen were before my eyes as they began to dart about to the beat of the music. On and on I danced, drinking the sweat from my face I continued though I didn't know who I was. Locked in a trance of the beats tearing me apart, my hand shaking so fast I saw two in the place of one, each transparent and glowing against the red and blue lights chasing each other through the crowd. Everything began moving much too fast and the thump began to smooth over in my mind becoming a drone of bass pushing me but no longer making me jerk about. I couldn't lift my arms anymore but they flailed about anyway like liquid spraying from my torso. I couldn't feel my legs anymore as I fell to my knees, exhausted or praising the music, it was all the same to me. My eyes closed but I could still see Jetty and Johnny dragging me to the back of the room and propping me against the wall before moving back into the mass. I was muttering, "boom boom bang" under my breath and I didn't know why.

Still people were coming into the room. I felt a puddle of sweat form around me and moved over when I felt myself sinking into it. On the floor next to me a cigarette with a girl attached to it moved about in time with the music about us. Its glow traveled through the air leaving a comet's trail behind it. The trail burned itself into my mind and the designs looked like Sanskrit written in the air.

I tried to get up to join the mass but fell as my legs gave way

again. "No matter", I thought, "I'll dance in my head." Drawing my knees to my chest I fell to my side and stared at the tips of my knees as I lay on the floor. Seeing the blur of far away feet moving as I focused on my knees through my closed eyelids.

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I tried to open my eyes before I realized they were already open. Johnny's apartment slowly came into focus. I was wrapped in a blanket, lying on the linoleum floor of Johnny's kitchen. I tried to find some sleep but I couldn't get to that state yet. My eyes and body could see the world now, but my mind was still trying to tear itself out of my head. There was just too much going on up there. My eyes weren't merely open, they were coins, wide and bright against the night. I saw the off white ceiling nine feet above my head, shadows from the life floating about between the streetlights and the window, dancing a jig on the ceiling.

I picked myself up and moved back to the couch where I had been the night before. Sitting up I noticed Jetty once again by the window. Looking out with his cigarette lit and held against the sill. Turning to the hide-a-bed across from me, I could see that once again Maria and Johnny were asleep together as one, their sleeping bodies unaware of their daylight fights and turmoil. Next to them upon the nightstand I could see that Johnny had left out his notebook that he had always spoke so proudly of. Resting between the lamp and the telephone it called to me with all of my desire to know about Johnny and his push to understand life. Johnny told me at the beginning of this week that every night he sits with his notebook and writes what he has learned and experienced during the day. I'd seen him at the second window in the apartment a few nights with his notebook in his hand and his pen to the page. I'd wondered all week what someone like Johnny would write in it. He seemed so eager one moment and so sure the next. I ached to get into his head, to see where his drive came from. I wanted to see what he'd say when no one was around to listen or watch. I wanted to see if he really was a fool like Jetty said.

And there it lay, trying to blend into the shadows of my respect for his privacy but not succeeding. I crept over and picked it up, taking it over to the window to read in the streetlight. Opening the cover I saw the first page was blank, turning the page produced the same. I sped through the rest of the notebook, my thumb marking the blankness of each page. Nothing. He'd written nothing. Nothing

learned, nothing experienced.

He was a fool.

I sighed to myself and looked down at the sidewalk across the street. I saw the shopping carts that were there in the morning and the cars resting from their daily toil. Staring at the bushes I thought about the things Johnny had said to me over the week, one phrase stuck out in my mind, "It's really a question of balance Nigel. You know, we have emotional responsibility and social responsibility and the two are usually opposites. I used to think you had to choose one and make do, you know? But it's really a case of neither being better than the other. Maria has made me realize that sometimes you have to neglect yourself and Jetty and George have made me realize that sometimes you have to neglect the world. It's a battle to find your place and no one left instructions." My head cocked itself to the side as I continued to look at the bushes. I fingered the notebook again, marveling at the blank pages and began to smile, maybe Jetty was right, maybe Johnny is wiser than the rest of us, fool that he is.

I placed the notebook back on the nightstand and sat back down on the couch, watching Jetty look out the window and smiling at him, though he didn't notice.

Early Drafts

Cherry Skin Early Draft 2 (We Don't Sleep)

My mom bought me one of those over the shoulder carry all bags from Old Navy. I shouldn't complain; after all, I asked for it. I just wasn't specific. She brought home one of the yellow ones with the silver strips presented it to me, saying the strips were so "those drivers in their cars can see you when you walk home." If only it was just the drivers. It takes a certain character to pull off wearing a bag like that to high school. I am not that character. So I sit in class and reach into it to pull out my history book, or my math book, or just to get some paper, and the fork falls out. For some reason, no matter how loud the classroom is, there's something about the aluminumware of ornate MacFrugals utensils clanging against the cement floor of the room that cuts through every other sound and pulls everyone's gaze towards me. Laughter usually starts before the source of my embarrassment can echo back from the walls that Ms. Flannen decorated ten years ago and forgot about.

My parents make me bring the fork.

"What's your name?"

"Brandon Simoncini."

"No, it's Brandon SimonCINI." My father makes his mouth look like a beaver as he over pronounces the last part of our family name to make it sound more Italian. I can see chunks of oatmeal in the spaces between the white and his gums. "Remember Brandon, you've got pride leaking out your pores. Fucking use it or else the pride that has gotten our family so far sinks down into the damn sewers."

"And don't forget your fork dear." After seventeen years of marriage, my mom had perfected the art of butting in whenever my father took a breath. "Lord knows, if they're going to make you eat their excuse for spaghetti during lunch, the least they could do is give you something more civilized than a plastic fork to eat it with." I didn't eat the spaghetti at school anyway. My mom had it in her head that if they offered spaghetti to eat, any self-respecting Italian boy

would have to choose it over any other food. She didn't know that I usually made a ham and mustard sandwich for myself at night when I couldn't sleep.

It's called a spork mom, not a fork."

"It's called a darkie stick is what it's called son. Don't forget that" My father always found a way to steer the conversation to his favorite topic. "Remember, those animals that live, if that's what you can call it, across the reservoir use plastic sporks or whatever your school teaches you to call them to eat their 'gumbah' or whatever it's called. You, My Son, will not eat an Italian creation with something niggers use to shovel the slop they're forced to eat."

"Yeah dad." By now, I knew when to agree and let him be.

So every day the fork would fall out and people would laugh and my face would break out in hives from the stress of it all and I'd have to pull my inhaler out of the yellow bag as I quickly put the fork back in. I didn't need that kind of attention. The cars may have missed me due to the reflective silver strips. The older boys saw me walking through the yard like a lit up silver and yellow bulls eye, glinting in the sunlight. And they didn't often miss their mark.

Last Thursday was no exception. You'd think, well I'd think, that with the rush of kids streaming out of school that I'd be hard for Russell (He always made people pronounce it Roo Sal) and his boys to find me, but there I was, being pushed against the wall, with Russell's friend Jeff's class ring making a week long bruise on my ribs as he held me in place.

I could understand it if it was a good old fashioned shake-down. Plenty of guys I knew brought extra money that they'd hide in the toe of their sock so they'd still have money for food after Russell took what was in their wallet. Tim even faked a note to his parents saying that the price of food had doubled. Now he makes a pretty good profit on weeks where Russell skips over him. Russell never skips over me. He doesn't care about my money, or at least he's never told me to give him any of mine. All Russell seems to care about is public humiliation. The first day of school, he'd pointed at me in the halls and yelled through the crowd.

"I don't like the lok of you kid!" and everyday since had been like today.

As Jeff backed off a bit to let me breathe, Russell dumped out my bag and kicked through the pile of books and fork with his black Converse All Stars. He'd grown tired with the normal books and stuff months ago. He bent over and picked up the inhaler in a motion like a bird grabbing the early worm and tossed it to Jeff who shoved it into

my jacket pocket before Russell began his show.

Sifting through the remaining pile, a smile chased across his face as he held a flowery pencil that Tabitha had let me borrow in Chemistry when mine broke. Holding it aloft like a trophy, Russell presented his prize to the gathering crowd of people. "Looks like our little Brandon here wants to be a Brandy, or maybe... Brandina? Which would you prefer geek?" I could only respond by looking at the floor. I'd yet to discover how to respond to his questions without having a knee make rapid contact with my stomach join my response. "I always knew you were a pinky Brandy. What do you think kids? We just might have caught ourselves a fairy today. Half the kids laughed as Russell kicked through the rest of my stuff.

Picking up the sandwich that I didn't feel like eating during lunchtime, he picked through it while snorting to himself and showing the sandwich to the crowd, mustard dripping from the upturned bread onto the ham and oozing onto the plastic bag. They all made puking motions as they knew Russell expected them to. "You know Brandina, if you don't finish your lunch, you'll never outgrow your geekness. Remember, I sincerely care about you man, I do this for you. All of us do, right guys?" His friends let out a chorus of chuckles as Jeff pressed me against the wall harder. "But seriously, if you're not going to help yourself, we're going to have to take it upon ourselves to help you."

One of his other friends came up to help Jeff as Russell started to press the sandwich against my face. I should have just opened my mouth and tried to eat it, but human nature takes over sometimes I guess. So pressed against my closed lips, the sandwich started to split apart as the slices of bread began to fold up and down my face. When Russell saw what was happening, he started to make more of the sandwich go towards my nose. As I felt the burn of mustard taking over my nasal packages I open my mouth to cough and got a mouth full of ham and bread instead. I started to gag on the parts of the sandwich moving to the back of my throat and probably would have thrown up if Russell hadn't started laughing so hard that he fell over and started to roll on the floor. After about four minutes, he got to his feet and kicked the rest of my stuff down the hall before blowing me a kiss goodbye and off with his friends. By the time I was finished picking up my stuff and spitting out chunks of ham and bread, the crowd was gone. I looked down the hallway and saw Jennifer standing at the door looking at me. She held my gaze for a second before dropping her head and walking out the door. I picked up my bag and went to the bathroom to clean up my face before I went home.

Every week, Russell gets me to come along for one of his grand plans. He never even tries to make it different, every time he grabs his keys and yells, "Let's go babe" in front of his friend and expects me to follow like some puppy dog.

I only follow because he makes his keys crash into his leg when he says it. We were at his grandfather's funeral when I first noticed it. He'd been playing with his chain the whole service, never once even looking us towards the casket but in front of his grandfather's casket his tears started rushing from his face as he started banging the chain against his leg like some sort of background music. I think I'm the only one who knows about his need to make metallic jangly noises when he doesn't know how to feel.

He had this great idea that apparently came up with his puked up bottle of Jagermeister, about going down to the post office where his father worked and spray painting the front window. An idea that got a mixed reaction from his friends. Half of them made the point that it was raining and that dry streets were hard enough for people in Russell's state to drive on. The other half brought up the fact that his dad would probably know who did it anyway and have him arrested like he did when they stole the principal's mailbox. Which normally would make up for the whole group but this time, Jeff's eyes swimming from King Cobra sips, decided to break the vote.

"Fuck yeah man! You should fucking do that. Man...it'd be so fucking... rad, besides you could ride your bike things andyeah..." his last words echoed from the hall and were quickly followed by the familiar gagging sound of Russell's midweek parties, but the damage had been done. The rest of the group had gotten excited and everyone was trying to talk louder than the guy next to him about how Russell should go about spray painting the post office and what he should write. I noticed that none of them were talking about the group going, it was just going to be Russell "representing" for all of them. Russell's face reflected his white shirt as he went for his keys. I knew he felt he had no choice, and I also knew that I had to go with him. We borrowed some bikes and headed off through the dark towards downtown. I followed behind Russell and could see him talking to himself, his lips moving faster as we got closer to the post office. I knew what was happening. He liked to play out internal battles with his voice. Every now and then I'd hear little snippets of his conversation with himself, "It'll be easy", "Shit man...", and "Dad said next time..." By the time we got to the post office though, most of what he called his

doubting-pussy voices were gone and he was trying to pump himself up by repeating "Fuck yeah" over and over and over.

"You sure you want to do this?" I suppose my voice was wasted on the words. We both knew he always felt his position as alpha dog in the group was in danger. He didn't even answer me, just went over to the curb and sat down to go through his backpack.

"Every week babe, every week shit's always got to go down. My dad's been talking to my mom about sending me to live with her."

"But your mom lives across state!" I sat in the space next to him and placed my head on his moving arms. My heart started to beat faster as I worked out the driving time between here and his mother's house. Coupled with the Boone's Fuzzy Navel already in my system, this was too much for one night. Putting the spray paint in the gutter he lifted his hand to run it along my arm for a moment before walking his fingers up my spine and scratching his nails in a waterfall down my back. I suppose there's moments when I don't feel like I'm the only one who cares.

"Let's go back to the party. We can break the damn nozzle and they'll forget about it after they sober up." But he had already started to shake the spray bottle against his leg as he stood up, shook his head quickly, sat down, and got up again, turning towards the front of the post office.

"What to tag, what to tag.... How about I write UPS Rocks?"

"How about you write something about how riding a bike in the rain with jeans that are too tight sucks my ass? ... or whatever you think the boys will like Rus." I went to get the bikes ready in case a quick get away was required when headlights lit up our area of the parking lot.

"Shit!" Russell was running towards me before I could even make the connection between the lights and the car in the parking lot. I realized what was happening at the same moment that I heard the spray can hit the ground. Russell was still a bit drunk and he got to the bike without bothering to slow down which made him fall into it instead of getting onto it. As he struggled to get up I started laughing as the car drove off and I realized that it was just dropping off a video at the drive through slot of Hollywood Video.

"What the fuck are you laughing about? We got to fucking go! Damn, my dad's going to kill me!" I shook my head and pointed to the car driving away.

"It's not a pig Rus. You can calm down." His body, which had been moving like firecrackers a moment before, collapsed into a heap of wet clothes. "You okay?" His breath was making more noise

than the rain hitting the ground and I could tell he was about to have another asthma attack. "Shit, where's your inhaler?" I followed the direction of his finger as he pointed in the direction of his house. "Shit! How could you fucking forget your inhaler? How stupid are you?"

"I... was drunk... don't yell at... me... doesn't help."

"Okay, just focus on my face okay? Don't think about breathing; just focus on my fucking face okay? You remember when we first met? How you came over and asked me if you could just touch my face for a moment. Then you promised you'd leave me alone? Come on, just focus." He started to smile a bit as he looked at me and slowly counted his breath. After a few minutes he let his head fall a bit and got up from under the bike.

"You're the only one who's fallen for that pick-up line, you know?" By now he was bent over with his hands on his knees breathing shallow breaths so I smacked him on his head.

"Fuck you bastard. Tell me you never used that line on any other bitch."

"You want me to lie?"

"You want me to tell your dad about last week?"

"Okay. Okay. I've never said that pick up line to anyone else before." "

"Because...."

"Because you're the only one who's beautiful enough to deserve such a comment."

"That'll work for now, in the future work on your sincerity okay? Are you going to be alright? I can't believe you forgot your inhaler, you can fucking die you know."

"I know, I know, shit who do you think fucking told you that?"

"Probably some stupid guy with bad pick-up lines. But seriously, this is too much, no inhaler, vandalizing your dad's job, and these fucking wet pants."

"I like the wet pants..."

"Shut up. I want you to go back home and get your inhaler. This isn't worth it okay?"

"I got to stay and finish the shit I came here for."

"No! I said go home. I'll fucking finish the spray painting okay? You tell your drunk buddies that I went home after we finished up. Okay? God, I'll see you tomorrow at school" Russell was about to say something but my hand was over his mouth before he could. "I don't care what you have to say, go. I'll take care of things for you okay?"

"I know. Thanks. I was just going to ask if I could tell the guys

we fucked in the rain after I tagged the post office." His smirk was half of why I hated him and half of why I loved him. I shook my head slowly. The Boone's was definitely fading away quickly now.

"Fuck you Russell, How about this, you tell them what you want, and I'll keep on making fun of your dick in the locker room after gym class with my friends. Deal?"

"Ouch. Point taken babe. You sure you're okay with this?"

"Who do you think fucking told you I was okay with it?"

"Probably some girl who falls for bad pick up lines." I walked over to hit him but he was already on the bike, laughing and pushing away toward his house. With a quick wave he rode off in a less than straight line hitting the curb a couple times before settling for driving in the middle of the street where the only hazards were cars. I turned towards the post office to pick up the spray paint to finish what Rus had started.

The strange thing about vandalism is the difference between the fear and the action. There's so much in the preview. With spray paint in hand and the heft of its weight seeming to pull your hand down and away from the action. On the fifth time that I stopped just before starting to spray in order to look around and make sure no one was coming I knew I had to either do it or just leave, but leaving was impossible. This wasn't for me, it was for Russell. Upon actually starting the spray and watching the line from nozzle to glass, I found it more exhilarating than I'd imagined and the fear and doubt that had so heavily pulled my spirit down a few moments before had vanished.

At first, I was so drawn to the spray that I just kept painting the same circle spot until the space it occupied overflowed and it started to drip down the glass. Laughing when I noticed this I started to move my line about, experimenting with how it looked when the nozzle was right against the glass and when it was further away. Nothing else really seemed to matter because it wasn't as interesting as the painting. So I didn't notice anyone walk up and I was sure as hell surprised when a voice said, "Hey."

"Shit!" I took a few steps away from the voice before even looking to see who it was. I had visions of jail and my dad beating me and having to do community service for the next six months rushing through my head all at once. Focusing my eyes on the person who had spoken I saw that it wasn't a pig or even a rent-a-cop, it was the guy that Russell always messed with every day after school. "What the hell are you doing here? Jesus, you fucking scared the shit out of me."

"Sorry about that. 'UPS Rocks' on the post office window? Funny."

"Glad you like it. What the hell are you doing out at like three in the morning?"

"A lot less than you it would seem. I'm just walking around. I've had insomnia since school started so I can't get to sleep until I get to class. So I get bored in my house. If I walk around there my parents will think I'm on drugs or something so I just sneak out and wander."

"Okay... you're not going to tell anyone about this are you?"
By now we had moved ourselves away from the front of the building.

"Yeah, like I'm going to make Russell mess with me even more than he is now? I don't think so. Your secret's safe with me. But what are you doing spray painting the post office?"

"Some things are best just not talked about you know?" I sat down on the curb of the street behind the post office and let my bike fall to the ground. "By the way, what was your name again?"

"Brandon. Your name's Jennifer?"

"Yeppers. Insomnia huh? What's that like?"

"Sucks. But at least it makes the few dreams I have hella vivid."

"Really? I love dreams, I'm always telling Russell about my dreams but he doesn't really listen and always says he doesn't have dreams when I ask him about his."

"Why do you want to tell him about your dreams? It's always seemed like a rather personal thing to me."

"My dreams scare me sometimes. I want to know sometimes if they seem weird or different to other people too. I don't know, maybe I need mental help. Aren't you cold?" I noticed for the first time that he didn't have an umbrella. He just stood there letting it rain on him. Dressed in a green t-shirt and jeans, I could see droplets of water bouncing off the saturated fabric and running over the surface towards the ground.

"I don't really care if I get wet or not. What do you dream about?"

"You really give a fuck what I dream about?" I looked up to see if he was serious. He just looked back at me with his eyebrows raised. "Well, okay, but don't call me weird or anything."

"I thought the point was to figure out if you were weird."

"Yeah, well... yeah. Anyways, my dream right?"

"Right." He bent his knees until he was sitting in the puddle in the gutter before turning around and taking a seat next to me on the curb. We watched a car drive down the street to our right before I

started.

“I keep having the same dream. My dad let me go with Russell to an Ozzfest concert last semester, and now it’s in all my dreams. Last night I was sitting on a tightrope over the side-stage watching Slipknot play. Russell’s there but I can’t see cause he won’t look at me and it’s misty because there’s fog washing in from the ocean. You see, in my dream, Ozzfest is happening right in the middle of the huge beach that Russell always takes me to when we cut class. We always go out and drink MGD’s in the dunes or whatever else seems fun to do.” Brandon looked away from me quickly when I got to that point and I smiled to myself. He was thinking Russell and I messed around or something like that at the beach. It’s interesting that everyone assumes that Russell and I have sex. Oh well. They don’t know Russell like I do. “So the concert is surrounded on all sides by sand dunes where all the kids set up camp and go to sleep at night or do their drugs. I was already tired of the set and my knees were hurting like they do when I don’t get enough sleep so I got Russell to walk with me back to our camping area. Here’s where everything goes a little haywire. We were visiting our friends, bullshitting like we usually do but only this time no one was smiling. Jeff was passed out on some of the tall grasses that grow out of the dunes. I’d been here before it felt like, maybe in the 7th or 8th grade. It was happening now in the present though. I started to snap my fingers because that usually makes me feel better but instead a butler showed up and then I felt bad because I’d made him trek all the way through the sand with his silver tray and tuxedo when I really didn’t want anything. I knew Russell would want a drink so I made him order something and he started to yell at the butler ‘give me a damn rum and coke, but make it cherry coke okay? And not fucking wild cherry Pepsi like last time okay dumbfuck?’ The butler disappeared and I felt even worse because Russell was mean to him for no reason so I wandered off to some of the dunes away from where everyone else was. I sat down and put my head in my hands try to understand what was happening when my head popped up like a jack in the box and I noticed that he was sleeping in the sand across the dune from me. There were bits of sludge mixed with sand in my hair so I guess I had passed out after puking. Russell was sitting there next to my sleeping self running his palm over my sleeping self’s arm. He was holding my head against his thigh like a pillow while he looked away towards the concert. He wasn’t touching the skin of my arm, just the hair. I could tell because I could feel the wave of tickling on my own arm and I looked to my right and saw that Russell was sitting next to me and rubbing my

arm instead of the sleeping me's. So I jumped up. This was more than I thought I could handle. I looked back over at my sleeping self and saw that I'd woken up. I was staring into my own eyes. I have happy eyes don't you think? I said, don't you think?"

"What?"

"What do you mean, 'What?'"

"I thought you were going to ask me if I thought you were crazy. Most people ask if you think they're crazy after they share an elaborate dream, but you asked if you have happy eyes."

"Well, I mean, my eyes are happy when you look at them. My mom used to always say that when she looked in my eyes she saw happiness. Well she said that before the divorce. Do my eyes look happy?" He stared at me for a little time and no one said anything. I started to notice that the rain made a roar against the ground when our voices went mute.

"Sure, I'd call your eyes happy, maybe concerned sometimes, but right now I'd definitely say happy."

"Thanks. You see, my eyes move a lot. I have trouble looking at one thing at a time; I always want to see more and more and more. But the sleeping me woke up and her eyes weren't happy. They just sort of sat there staring at me. They seemed gray more than my usual green. I was just staring straight at myself without looking away or saying anything. I don't know. I just got really sad because I, or the other me, seemed so sad. Then I woke up. I always wake up at that point and then can't sleep for the rest of the night. You think it means anything?" He just looked at me for a little bit before pushing the wet hair off my forehead and shaking his head back and forth. We stared out at the street for a while until I couldn't take the sound of the rain anymore. "Do you ever have any recurring dreams?"

"Yeah, sort of. I dream of wings."

"Wings? What do you mean?" He started scratching at the knee of his pants where a small hole seemed to be slowly working its way open.

"My dreams start with wings. Feathered, white or sometimes black. The kind guys used to build when they wanted to fly back in the days. Before they knew you needed airplanes not wings to float. But not attached to my arms, they're attached to my back, like third and fourth hands. I'm not sure how to describe them; I've had them since I started dreaming. It's how to know I'm asleep. Mom used to tell me that the way she'd know I was finally asleep was that my body would jerk. At first she said that she thought I was already asleep and had fallen somehow within the dream and that my body jerk-

ing was me hitting the ground. Which scared her at the time because one of the tabloid newspapers she read had an article about how if someone hits the ground during a falling dream, the shock will make the body die in real life. I got used to being jolted awake with my mom's fingers at my throat, checking my pulse, which in my groggy state seemed like I was waking up to my mom choking me." I started laughing and he stopped talking to look at me. At first he just stared but then he started to laugh slowly, silently to himself "Yeah. I guess it's a little funny. I never called my mom in the middle of the night for water, that's to be sure. But I don't know if I jerk around or not. I'm asleep at the time so how would I know? I only know wings, which is appropriate I guess. My friend Joshuah and I would go to the bridge over the reservoir and talk about jumping. He always talked about how cool it would feel to hit the cement surface of the water and then sink into it after the millisecond impact. I knew if I jumped though, I would fly. I wasn't worried about the impact, but I never had the courage to jump."

"Does Joshuah go to our school?" I thought I knew everyone at our school and I'd never seen Brandon hanging out with anyone anyway.

"No, he moved to Miami when we were in Jr. High and never answered any of my letters. But we were talking about dreams. Wings." I raised my hands to show that I wasn't going to object. He nodded and continued, "There they are, on my back and trapping. I can't ever stop them from moving; they kind of do their own thing until I wake up. Every now and then they remind me of the boat on the pirate ride at Disneyland. The boat's cool, but it doesn't do much more than trudge along and take you on the path you're supposed to follow without thinking for itself. But I'd probably have trouble with my dreams if I could control my wings. The whole idea of having a situation like eating with your family and then after a blink you're fighting in some sci-fi space war and then your teacher from preschool floats by wearing feathers and balloons seems a bit easier to swallow when you've got the body parts of angels attached to your back. So I just let them flap and they show me whatever dream I'm supposed to have that night."

"That's kind of a dry way to look at dreams."

"I'm kind of a dry guy I guess" He kept holding his hand out and jerking it back and forth. I couldn't tell if he was trying to avoid the raindrops or if he was trying to catch them all. I tried to figure it out but I couldn't ignore the suck and squish of my pants against my legs. When is going out in the rain on a bike ever a good idea?

"I hate the rain."

"Oh I don't know about that, I like it. Well, not when it's like God's pouring buckets right on you and the winds pushing the puddles back up your leg, but when it's a nice drizzle like this."

"Shit, drizzle or monsoon, your clothes still get wet and stick."

"Yeah, but the drizzle reminds me of going to my Grandma's house. She used to live in this little town by the ocean and it was always foggy whenever we were there. My parents would go shopping in town while my Grandma took me to the ocean and I'd run into the ocean with all my clothes on. I'd stand in the water up to my waist and jump as the waves hit me. It was like floating for a moment before I'd sink and have to fight the current to keep from getting washed out to sea. My Grandma would walk the beach picking up rocks and shells. When I was done playing in the water, she'd show me what she'd found and let me pick one, and then she'd throw the rest out into the ocean." He reached up and squeezed a lock of hair from his bangs until it leaked water down his hand. He flicked it off his fingers and picked up a stick from the gutter and tossed it into the parking lot. Landing in a puddle, it turned like clock hands as the drops of rain pushed it about with their waves like radar. He looked away from me towards a turning car down the street. "Yeah, now she lives in some condos behind an oil refinery in Ginsville on the other side of the hills. When we go to visit her now, she's always sitting in her chair with her hearing aid off while some soap opera blaring on her TV. She doesn't even watch them. She stares out the window at the flame coming from one of the towers at the refinery."

"Wow." I started squishing my toes together inside my shoes. It's what I hate the most about the rain, the wet feet. Which is strange because the best part is when it first starts to rain, there's always a warm toasty feeling, right before the cold invades. "I've never run into the ocean with all my clothes on before. It sounds fun."

"I guess. My father would always yell at me for not bringing a change of clothes and getting the seat of my Grandma's car wet and my mom would complain to my dad the whole trip home about how hard it was going to be to get the salt stains out of the clothes."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Well I've got to go home I guess. My dad gets up early to go to work." He got up and shook his head quickly sending a halo of water out of his hair. I closed my eyes and wipe the drops from my nose, laughing. He looked down and saw what he'd done. "Oh, sorry about that. I guess I wasn't thinking."

"It's okay, I'm already wet. Which way are you heading?"

"I've got to go up Travis towards the reservoir. You?"

"Oh, I go the opposite way. Fuck, oh well. I'll see you in school tomorrow."

"No you won't." His face scrunched up for a second, before his eyes started to look around quickly, focusing on everything in the parking lot around us but me.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." He didn't answer and just started walking away as I picked up my bike, feeling how wet the seat was now that we'd been sitting out in the rain for so long. "Shit." The word shot out into the night without someone to listen.

"What?" Brandon had turned around and was looking at me.

"Oh, I was just talking to myself." I tried to laugh as he nodded quickly as he turned around and started walking again as I got on my bike and moved in the opposite direction.

Ms. Flannen was drawing circles on the chalkboard, explaining how to figure out how much fence to buy to surround your future circular pool when Russell walked in with a note for someone in the class. I'd heard that he spent so much time in the after lunch detention class that they'd given him the responsibility to passing out the call notes to the rest of the kids who had to take the class as a replacement for his math class that he had been failing. There were advantages it would seem to having your mother work as the secretary to the vice principal. I had been hungry during the lecture but now I was trying to look busy by moving my papers around my folder while the back of my throat started to water. Russell tended to find a way to humiliate me when he came through class to pass out notes. Once he'd bent over the desk next to me to hand Jeremy his call slip and while he was still bent over, lifted his shirt and let loose with the loudest fart lid ever heard. Even the teacher was smirking as I tried to ignore that it had even happened.

I could feel my muscles respond to the weight of my expectation as he walked down my aisle towards me. Stopping in front of my desk, he looked down and brought his face within inches of mine. His eyes wide, trying to follow his eyebrows up. He smelled like pot and winter green gum as he whispered, "Try not to sleep in class, okay buddy?" I stared back at him waiting for the punch line until he straightened up, slapped my back a couple times and walked out of the class. I continued to rearrange my papers while Ms. Flannen continued with her board problem and my stomach started to grunt again.

After school Russell and his friends found me as usual and played football with my Old Navy I'm-a-walking-target bag, complete with touchdown dance and ball/bag spike. This time Jeff's ring left a bruise on my shoulder that lasted about three days. When they were done I picked up my things as usual and threw away the fork so my mom wouldn't notice that its prongs had been bent.

Cherry Skin Early Draft 1 (Flight)

Joshua and I stare at the rushing water below. During the spring, rain from upcity goes through an enlarging machine, turning single drops into oceans racing beneath our feet before we can run from one side of the bridge to the other. It grabs at the chain link fence that separates the alleyways of the housing projects, its fingers turning white when it can't reach any farther.

It isn't always in a hurry. When spring is over they turn the machine off and the flow disappears. For a day there's just concrete. It trickles, flowing like a swallows path turned on its side. Every few feet it dives under the concrete through the cracks, spitting up small glows of algae that buzz with gnats. Just for a day. When you blink, the clap of your eyelids like a magician yelling "Presto" small grasses and weeds appear running along the side of the water while snakes jump from plant to plant without leaving the ground.

But it's not summer yet, and the trickle that comes with it bores us anyway. We drop acorns and sticks with ivy leaf sales. We fight over how they'll fall through the air. We fight over where they'll be tossed in the water. We fight over how far down they can float before they get sucked under in the whirlpools around the cement pillars. Joshua shows me a new trick he learned the week before. Take a dandelion that's turned to fuzz, drop it, and watch as the seed parachutes grab the air as gravity grabs the stem.

"Maybe that's what it's like when you skydive." Joshua's brother went for his twenty first birthday. Josh is itching to jump too. "You fall and fall until your body gets to the ground. Everything important is still in the air, floating away to someplace like china or something,"

After the first rush, city workers attach plastic signs to the fences with those white ties the police use to handcuff rioters. My dad watches on tv, rooting the police on. The signs say "No Trespassing, Flash Flood Danger." There's a picture of an androgynous person being sucked towards a storm drain below the warning. I wonder why the person has his arms above his head. If I were stuck in a flood, I'd

at least try to swim.

There's no fence on the bridge. A kid was walking on the rounded handrail when he fell and broke his leg. That was three summers ago. The parents tried to get the city to put up a fence but it took too long and they found other causes. My dad said someone has to die before they'll spend money to make things safe.

The bigger boys jump anyway. We watch from the alleyways. They come in groups of four or five, yelling at each other and stripping to their swim trunks or boxers. For a while they'll stand around, looking up and down the street, gauging the sky, or smoking until one of them lets out a scream and leaps over the railing. The rest of the group follows in seconds trying to land on the person who leapt first.

We've always wanted to jump. Today we will. We left home with our swim trunks in our back pockets and enough time to dry off before we had to be home for dinner. Climbing over the railing, we face the road with our heels bouncing in the air between the water and us.

"I'm going to do a half gainer with a somersault twist into a roundhouse to finish off. What are you going to do?" I don't know enough about diving to answer. I stare at the clouds above us.

"Don't know. Think you'll have enough time to get all that done before you hit the water?" Joshua spits on the railing and watches it drip onto the road.

"Hell, my brother says when you jump, you've got enough time to do anything you want. He says you could write a novel before you even lose sight of the airplane. At least that's what it seems like. Shit, we'd better jump soon before some cars come." I look to my left to check for cars and feel him jump. I whip my head around in time to see him hit the water and go under. I try to figure out where his head will pop up.

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Ms. Flannen teaches fourth period geometry. Sometimes she curses to herself as she writes on the board about having to teach a math class right before lunch, but I can never make out exactly what she says. When she turns to face us, she wears a smile that's so wide we're supposed to think it wasn't her who was cursing. I don't pay that much attention. All she does is repeat the readings from the night before on the board, complete with the same examples. She teaches the same stuff year after year. Most of the class flunks the same material year after year.

Spring is my only salvation. The bushes outside the windows

have their berries for entertainment. Against the suffocating green of the bush, the berries stand out as spots that bleed out droplets of blood that harden and stick. I imagined them as scabs from some recent war. Every day, the red darkens until they lose their youthful tightness. These days they hang by the last breathes of their weakening skin, barely holding in their fermenting guts. Birds have begun to spend most of their time bouncing around the bushes, fighting over who would get which berry. I watch as they gorged themselves before trying to take flight. They get about ten feet before crashing to the ground. This one bird keeps trying to fly after it hits the ground. It keeps flapping its wings as somersaults across the grass, colliding with the bushes and disappearing. I didn't know birds could get drunk.

I mumble something about the bathroom and leave class. There's something about walking the halls while class is in session, you need sound to hear silence. The sharp echo of footfall makes me notice the sound that wasn't there between each returning echo. I always use the bathroom at the end of Wing F. It's the farthest from any of my classes and takes me passed the baseball diamond that the PE classes never use. Usually there's people there cutting class and I watch before I wander back to geometry and my avian sideshow.

Russell and Jennifer sit next to each other on home plate, laughing through cigarette puffs and obscenities. Jennifer and I have Econ together during sixth period. She smiles a lot and we help each other with homework when the opportunity presents itself. Russell had a habit of trying to look nonchalant while they wait for the next projectile of food. Everything Jennifer throws they snatch from the air, fighting with each other over the little bits that fall to the ground. They don't eat any of the bread that Russell throws. He laughs out loud each time they avoid his food. I start walking back to class as they kiss. Nobody respects a voyeur.

"Never forget Brandon, your grandfather used to fly in the war." My father turned from his WW2 Generals Memoirs to face me. I was named after grandpa but my gaze was focused on the plastic trash can on the top of dad's desk, its red washing against the side of dad's computer monitor. I could make out the lego pieces shadowed between tile lamp over his desk and their bucket jail cell. "Your grandfather knew what honor and self sacrifice was. He left us a hard message when he died. No one likes a greedy man. Understand? You're from average stock. A Simoncini is never rich, but we're never

poor. We sacrifice to better the group. We think of the group before ourselves. People see that. People respect that. Then you'll rise above your averageness with the group. The group helps those that have the dignity to let help pass them by. Understand?"

"Yeah." I shifted my stance when he looked away.

"What do you understand?"

"But what if the group doesn't like you?"

"Are you listening to what I'm saying? If the group doesn't like you, it's probably a fault of your own. You've got to stop trying to be different." He ran a finger from his jaw to the tip of his chin, looking towards the ceiling. "It'll probably help if you hang out with that Joshua kid less too."

"Can I play with my legos now dad?" He looked at my feet and exhaled while his shoulders fell from their military speech position. I stopped looking at the bucket and tried to look him in the eyes.

"Go help your mom cook dinner." I didn't move. I was hoping I'd still get to play with the legos or that he'd look back at me before his book. I looked at him for a while before looking back over at the bucket. All I needed to finish was the wings.

My grandmother never spoke about my grandfather in hushed tones. He spent his time in a square brass box on the top of the piano adorned with pictures of him fishing, playing baseball, smiling. At home we only had his military pictures on the wall. Grandma would smile in his direction and tell me stories about how he'd hit on her in a bar in Plymouth and how they'd walked around the town square before his shore leave was over. She's not old like Grandpa was. Her skin folds itself into origami but without the dust and crumpled edges that show up in pictures of him. She was in the Salvation Army during the war. She marches when she walks, floating over her own feet with a smile that she said they stamped on her for so long that it finally became real.

We went to the beach together because it reminded her of how they'd take my father to play before Grandpa died. She had an eye for beauty. She could find shells and rocks whose color writhed in her hands. I hated it. When she'd present me with a handful of treasure and ask me to pick the one that I wanted, I froze up, hearing my father's voice, wanting to be a responsible Simoncini. Each time I'd watch as she threw beauty I could never find myself out into the wave. The seagulls would dive into the surf, finding my choice among the churning sand and defeated water. In my dreams I saw a boy with

wings reaching into the chocolate malt mess of the water to grab the cherry with his teeth before flying away. As fast as he flew, he never bit through the skin.

The birds would always fight with each other over the food they though my grandma threw their way. They could trust her. At school, we wrap alkalaseltzer tablets in bread and pizza crust before tossing it towards the clouds. Our poison never has the speed to break gravity and ends up bouncing off the ground. When we only throw bread, they snatch it from the air before it can even start its arc back to the earth. They can smell our jealousy in the form of medicine deep inside their food.

I never told my dad about what I did. He changed the subject whenever I talked about the rocks grandma found. I sat in the back-seat as he bounced the same taunts and screams at me from the front seat. I would remember the rock that I'd chosen from my grandma's hand sitting in my pocket and begin to feel it pulling my pocket down so that I was stuck to the seat that was stuck to the car that was stuck to the ground slipping between Grandma's house and ours.

Grandma noticed how my neck snapped with her slingshot toss. She noticed how I never looked at the rock I'd chosen. How I slipped it into my pocket while I stared at myself flying away in the belly of the bird. She knows that I'm not here. She knows that when my dad yells at me I'm flying away in the belly of a bird, wings growing out of the back that finally chose to stop staring at the water below the bridge.

I take walks at night when I can't sleep. More and more since school started. I lay in bed staring at the Christmas lights out of the window and wait for my parents to go to bed. Once the house has been quiet for a few hours, I sneak out my window to wander around the town. Lately it's been raining, but my mom either doesn't notice the mud I track into the house or she ignores it.

"I'm walking past the post office when I notice Russell and Jennifer riding bicycles. They're tumbling as well as people can on bicycles. Jennifer told me that they usually party every other night at one of his friend's houses. With all the traveling their parents did, someone's house was always empty for a "study night." I move behind the Hollywood Video across from the post office to see what they're doing. Their apparent drunkenness projects through the rain to where I stand.

"You sure you want to do this?" Jennifer drops her bike next to

his and walks over the curb where he's standing. Russell takes a spray can out of his bag and starts to shake it.

"Every week babe. Every week shit's always got to go down. My dad's been talking to my mom about sending me to live with her."

"But your mom lives across the state!" Jennifer sits in the space next to him and tries to lay her head on his moving arms. I wonder if she's been drinking Boone's Fuzzy Navel, her proclaimed drink of goddesses. Putting the spray paint in the gutter he lifts his hand to run it along her arm for a moment before walking his fingers up her spine and scratching his nails in a waterfall down her back. I turn away until I hear her speak. "Let's go back to the party. We can break the damn nozzle and they'll forget about it after they sober up." Russell is already standing in front of the window thought.

"What to tag, what to tag... How about 'UPS Rocks?'"

"How about you write something about how riding a bike in the rain with jeans that are too tight sucks my ass?"

Jennifer walks over to the bikes and starts to pick them up. She ducks behind them as headlights light up the parking lot.

"Shit!" Russell's running towards Jennifer before I can even make the connection between the lights and the car that just pulled in. Russell crashes to the ground in front of the bikes while Jennifer starts laughing. The car drops off a video at the drive through slot on the other side of the building from me and drive away.

"What the fuck are you laughing about? We got to fucking go!" Russell's moving in quick jerky motions as Jennifer stands above him.

"It's not a pig Rus." He stops for a moment and collapses into a heap of wet clothes. "You okay?" His breath is making more noise than the rain hitting the ground, Jennifer uncrosses her arms and reaches out to him "Where' your inhaler?" Russell points away into the night.

"What the hell? How can you be out here without it?"

"I... drunk when left... don't yell at... me it doesn't help." Russell's still sitting under the bikes. Jennifer is bouncing around him like the birds eating the berries out side my class. It looks like she's trying to touch every part of him at once.

"Okay, just focus on my face okay? Don't think about breathing; just focus on my fucking face okay? You remember when we first met? How you came over and asked me if you could just touch my face for a moment, then you promised you'd leave me alone?"

"Yeah, you're the only one who's fallen for that, you know?" By now he's bent over breathing shallow breaths. She takes a step

back and smacks him on his head with the back of her hand.

"Fuck you bastard. Tell me you never used that line on any other bitch."

"You want me to lie?"

"You want me to tell your dad about last week?"

"Okay. Okay. I've never said that pick up line to anyone else."

"Good. This is too much, no inhaler, vandalizing your dad's job and these fucking wet pants."

"I like the wet pants..." Her smile echoes across the parking lot.

"Shut up, I want you to go back home and get your inhaler."

"I got to stay and finish the shit I came here for." He starts towards the post office again but Jennifer grabs his arm.

"I said go home. I'll finish the spray painting okay? I'll see you tomorrow at school." Russell tries to speak but her hand's covering his mouth.

"I don't care what you have to say. I'll take care of it okay?" Russell turns around and heads back to the bikes.

"I know. Thanks. I was just going to ask if I could tell the guys we fucked in the rain after I tagged the post office." Jennifer shook her head slowly, if she had any Boone's in her, it was definitely fading away.

"You tell them what you want, and I'll keep on making fun of your dick in the locker room in gym class with my friends."

"Ouch... Point taken." Laughing, he hits the curb a couple times before settling into the middle of the street. Jennifer watches for a moment before turning towards the post office.

I watch as she starts to spray the front window of the post office in sweeping motions. Once she finishes writing she starts to play with the stream of paint, putting the nozzle as close as she can to the glass and then pulling it back before repeating. I start to walk over to her and see that she's spraying the same spot continuously until it overflows and drips down the windowpane.

"Hey." My voice comes out like a croak.

"Shit!" She takes a few steps away before even looking towards me. I can see visions of jail and her dad beating her reflecting in her eyes. Once she sees that I'm not a pig or a rent-a-cop, she lowers the spray can from the direction of my face. "Jesus, you fucking scared the shit out of me."

"UPS Rocks' on a post office window? Funny." I follow as she

starts walking behind the post office.

“What the hell are you doing out at like three in the morning?”

“I’ve had insomnia since school started so I can’t get to sleep until I get to class. If I’m up around the house my parents will think I’m on drugs or something so I just sneak out to wander.”

“Insomnia. What’s that like?”

“Sucks. But at least it makes the few dreams I have hella vivid.” She stops walking and looks at me.

“My dreams scare me sometimes. I don’t know, maybe I need mental help.” I see her eyes looking for an umbrella in my hands and finding nothing but droplets of water bouncing off the saturated fabric of my sweater and running through the surface towards the ground.

“What do you dream about?”

“You give a fuck what I dream about?” I bend my knees until I’m sitting in the gutter taking a seat next to her on the curb. We watch a car drive down the street without its lights on.

“Last night I was sitting on a tightrope over the side stage watching Slipknot play. Russell’s there but I can’t see him. It’s misty because there’s fog washing in from the ocean. Ozzfest is happening right in the middle of the huge beach that Russell always takes me to when we cut class. We always go out and drink MGD’s in the dunes or whatever else seems fun to do. The concert is surrounded on all sides by sand dunes where all the kids set up camp, go to sleep and do their drugs. My knees were hurting like they do when I don’t get enough sleep. I made Russell walk me back to our camping area. I wandered off to some of the dunes away from where everyone else was. I sat down and my head popped up like a jack in the box and I noticed that I was sleeping in the sand across the dune from me. Russell was sitting there next to my sleeping self running his palm over her arm. He was holding her head against his thigh like a pillow while he looked away towards the concert. He wasn’t touching the skin of her arm, just the hair. I could tell because I could feel the wave of tickling on my arm and I looked to my right and saw that Russell was sitting next to me and rubbing my arm instead of the sleeping me’s. But I don’t think it was Russell. You know when someone looks like one person in a dream but you just know in your head that they’re someone else? It was like that only I didn’t know who he was supposed to be. I just know that I didn’t belong there. I jumped up and looked back over at my sleeping self and saw that I’d woken up. I have happy eye’s don’t you think?... I said, don’t you think?”

“What?”

"I mean, my eye's are happy when you look at them. My mom used to always say that when she looked in my eyes she saw happiness. Well she said that before the divorce. Do my eye's look happy?" The rain is making a roar against the ground when our voices don't compete. Her head's bobbing slightly and twisting as she waits for my response.

"Sure, I'd call your eye's happy."

"My eyes move a lot. I have trouble looking at one thing at a time. I always want to see more. The sleeping me woke up and her eyes weren't happy. They seemed gray more than my usual green. The other me seemed so sad. Then I woke up. I always wake up at that point and then can't get back to sleep. You think it means anything?" I don't know what to say. "I don't know. It feels like I know all of my friends inside out but none of them even care about knowing me." I focus on a lock of wet hair scratching her eyelashes and reach over and push it over her ear. We stare out at the street for a while until I can't take the sound of the rain.

"I dream of wings. The kind guys used to build when they wanted to fly, before they knew you needed airplanes. Not attached to my arms, but to my back, like third and fourth hands. I've had them since I started dreaming. It's how I know I'm asleep. Mom used to tell me that the way she'd know I was finally asleep was that my body would jerk. She thought I had fallen within my dream and that my body jerking was me hitting the ground. It scared her because she read had an article in the Globe about how if someone hits the ground during a falling dream, the shock will make the body die in real life. So I'd be jolted awake with my mom checking my pulse on my throat which in my groggy state seemed like I was waking up to my mom choking me." Jennifer laughs and I just stare before laughing silently to myself. "Yeah, I guess it's a little funny. I never called my mom in the middle of the night for water, that's to be sure. But I don't know if I jerk or not, I'm asleep. I only know wings. My friend Joshua and I would go to the bridge over the reservoir during the winter and talk about jumping. He talked about how cool it would feel to hit the cement surface of the water and then sink into it after the millisecond impact. I knew if I jumped, I would fly. I wasn't worried about the impact, but I never had the courage to jump."

"Does Joshua go to our school?" The rain is starting to come down in waves sounding like a warped record of applause.

"No, he moved to Miami when we were in Jr. High and never answered any of my letters, but we were talking about dreams. There they are, on my back and flapping, I can't ever stop them from mov-

ing, they kind of do their own thing until I wake up. Every now and then they remind me of the boat on the pirate ride at Disney Land. The boat's cool, but it doesn't do much more than trudge along and take you on the path you're supposed to follow without thinking for itself. But I'd probably have trouble with my dreams if I could control my wings. The whole idea of having a situation like eating with your family and then after a blink you're fighting in some Sci-Fi space war and then your teacher from preschool floats by wearing feathers and balloons seems a bit easier to swallow when you've got the body parts of angels attached to your back. So I just let them flap and they show me whatever dream I'm supposed to have that night." She keeps holding her hand out and jerking it back and forth as she listens to me. I can't tell if she's trying to avoid the raindrops or if she's trying to catch them all.

"I hate the rain." I laugh again to myself as she speaks. She begins to lean forward until the streetlight shades a crescent across her cheek.

"Not when it's like God's pouring buckets right on you and the winds pushing the puddles back up your leg, but when it's a nice drizzle like this."

"Shit, drizzle or monsoon, your clothes still get wet and stick. Though good company makes it better I suppose." I try to avoid her knee as she smiles.

"Yeah, but the drizzle reminds me of going to my grandmas house. She used to live in this little town by the ocean where it was always foggy. My parents would go shopping in town while my grandma took me to the ocean and I'd run into the water with all my clothes on. I'd stand in the waves up to my waist and jump. It was like floating for a moment before I'd sink and have to fight the current. Grandma would walk the beach picking up rocks and shells. When I was finished with the waves she'd show me what she'd found and let me pick one, and then she'd throw the rest out into the ocean." She reaches over and squeezes a lock of hair from my bangs until it leaks water down her hand. She flicks it off her fingers and picks up a stick from the gutter and lets it fly into the parking lot. Landing in a puddle, it turns like clock hands as the drops of rain push it about with their waves.

"Wow. I like you, you're a cooler guy than most Mr. Brandon" I can see her start to squish her toes together inside her shoes. My mouth is smiling. That's the only thing I hate about the rain, the wet feet. When it first starts to rain, there's always a warm toasty feeling, right before the cold invades. She looks up from her feet to my face.

"I've never run into the ocean with all my clothes on before."

"My father would yell at me for not bringing a change of clothes and getting the seat of my grandma's car wet and my mom would complain about how hard it was going to be to get the salt stains out of my jeans."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Well I've got to go home I guess. My dad gets up early to go to work." I get up and my head quickly sending a halo of water out. She closes her eyes, and wipes the drops from her nose.

"Sorry."

"It's okay, I'm already wet. Which way are you heading?"

"I've got to go up Travis towards the reservoir." I pointed towards my house.

"Oh yeah, I've seen you at the reservoir overpass before, actually more than a few times. I guess that would explain it. I live the opposite way though, fuck, oh well. I'll see you at school tomorrow."

"Maybe." Her face scrunches up for a second before smoothing out like bed sheets.

"Yeah, maybe." She picks up her bike, noticing how wet the seat is now that we've been sitting out in the rain for so long. "Shit" The word shoots out into the night without someone to listen.

I jumped once. Grandma held out a hand that held a shell that grabbed the light before anything else in her hand could reflect. I could feel my eyelids brush against my glasses as I blinked over and over to make sure it was still there. My hand reached out and reached past it. I chose a pox marked gray rock with veins of white bone swimming in it. It was still damp from water and made the hairs on the back of my hand stand up as I watched my shell take flight from her fist. I was still watching it in the air as my rock hit the sand. I ran back into the ocean where I'd seen it land. I could taste where it landed, but searching through the spin and churn I figured out my fingers didn't have taste buds. The seagulls taunted me as the waves urged me on with their unceasing battle. Turning my back, one pushed me down as my tears added to the salt in the water. I let it move me until I started choking on the quick of foam rushing up my nose so I stood up to walk back to the shore. Only grandma could find things like that with her hands.

"Your father never chose anything from my hand. He'd just sit there pouting because I wouldn't give him all of the rocks." Grandma sat on our log watching me walk up. She hugged me against her side

as I sat. I could smell the doughnuts we'd eaten before coming to the beach.

"Couldn't stand to let the best one go again?"

"Dad says..."

"The priest at your grandfather's memorial said some stuff too. He said that if there's one thing that's certain in life, it's that God wants us to enjoy it. If I recall, he also said that it's not a life if you don't participate. I thought it was rather poetic for a Catholic. So you lost the thing you really wanted today, at least you knew you wanted it. I'd rather you chose badly than not chose at all." We stared out into the sea listening to the waves and watching the sandpipers stutter step across the wet sand. I was looking at an oil tanker floating on the horizon when I felt her place something in my hand. Seeing the white lines against the gray I knew she'd picked up the rock I'd chosen. I looked at her as she smiled at me and turned to watch a couple of hang gliders take off from the cliff side above us.

"Joshua!" I started to feel my pinky shake until his head came up.

"Shit! It's fucking cold! Come on Brandon Let's see what you got!" I couldn't let go. My whole hand was shaking. I tried to convince myself that everything was okay but my body wouldn't listen. It didn't matter that everybody's brother and now Joshua had jumped. My legs felt like I'd been sitting Indian style for too long. Using them to jump seemed impossible.

"What's a matter? Come on! I can't stay in this fucking water forever."

"I can't do it!" My words roared through my head like a turning engine. I only heard a small squeaking coming from my mouth as I rocked myself back over the railing back onto the street side. "I'm not going to jump Josh! Come back up here. I want to go do something else!"

I turned around to look over the railing. I didn't hear a response and couldn't find him in the water anymore. "Joshua!" There was no telltale trail of water up the slopes. I ran to the other side of the bridge to see if he'd tried to go up the other side.

I waited for an hour. I knew that Joshua liked to play jokes but he never showed up to go over to Dairy Queen like we'd planned. The sun started to set so I ran home. I told my mom that I'd spent the day watching the kids play basketball at the high school.

I should be in school but it's too late to worry about that kind of thing. I was in Econ with Jennifer when I freaked out. We were passing notes when my eyes were drawn to her backpack spilling open under her chair. I could see her plastic pencil bag filled with folded notes and band-aids that matched the ones on her arm. I glanced over her box of allergy pills and rested my eyes on the top of her notebooks. They were sticking out just enough for me to see a feather in the space between the binder and the plastic that surrounds it. My eyes locked onto the feather and I started to think about the days at the beach with my grandmother. I could start to feel the weight of the rocks I chose and the rocks I didn't choose in my hands. I started to see myself dropping dandelions off the edge of the overpass for years after Joshua jumped. I looked up in time to see Mr. Werger standing over me and asking a question. I couldn't understand him because his voiced was buzzing. It reminded me of the teacher's voice in those Charlie Brown specials my Mom made me watch. If I were not so confused I would have laughed at everything. Instead I said I had to go to the bathroom and left school. I didn't know where else to go so I ended up at the overpass, staring at the water and hanging my feet over the edge of the railing.

"I thought I'd find you here. You know, you should be in school young man." My body jerks. I hadn't heard anyone approaching. Looking up, I see Jennifer walking towards me.

"So should you. Aren't you a long way from home?"

"I've been wondering where home is these last few weeks. Everything's confusing. I wish I had it all together like you do."

"I don't think I know anything you don't Jennifer." I turn back towards the water below us. During the spring I spend almost every day watching the water run below the overpass. Old habits die hard. "You ever thought of jumping off things?"

"You mean like buildings and stuff? No. I like living."

"Do you? I meant things like this bridge. I've always wanted to fly."

"Oh. I get it." She stands next to me on the street side of the railing and peers over the edge. Her hair falls from behind her ears and gets stuck in her mouth as she speaks. "Russell and his friends have jumped before. He says there's some nasty currents around the pillars."

"I've heard the same thing."

"Have you ever jumped?"

"I, no, I wanted to, but I'm too scared."

"Didn't you once tell me you thought you could fly?"

"That sounds like me. I'm worried about the effects if my hypothesis is wrong."

"Well you never know unless you try." The clouds are settling in above me. I watch as sea gulls catch updrafts of air and play with each other in circles. "I think I'm going to flunk Econ."

"Yeah. I probably am too. I didn't even bother to do my paper. Too bad we can't be like the birds. They never worry about economics and stuff."

"Well, you never know. We're not doing too well as people; we might as well try being birds. Why not start with this bridge? We can get our training wings before we hit the water."

"I don't know."

"Tell you what, I'll help by pushing you if you want."

"Then who's going to push you?"

"I'll follow right after you. I've got nothing to lose, do you?"

"You'll follow?" I've heard that before. I think of my rocks on the shelf in my room and look up at the birds circling. "Okay, Push."

A Deathwatch Bloom

I ask myself why I remember this,
When we walked through a cow town graveyard.

Through a literary device,
Where, early in the day, we sidestep plots and stones.

But I know about flowers reused,
From gravesites to adorn house parties,

Where I first saw you in a dress.
When I first wanted to touch the ink in your exposed back.

These dusk eyelids know where the living end up.
They know those reused blossoms, still wilted from a sister's grave.

Saltwater waves of Ocean Beach,
Replaced by caverns of Emeryville live-work lofts

Gunfire pantomime across after-party crosswalks,
Replaced by hangover cures in single-serve packets.

