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Burning Caracas

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Burning Caracas

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Senior Honors Thesis
Department of English
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Sarah

Sarah,

I wrote you this note so you'd know why I left and why I took the wooden troll statue that we kept above the TV. He was dusty, you know, so I don't think you'll miss him. He's the one with long straw hair and a turtle shell drum set in front of him, as though he were a part of a primal band. If he had drumsticks, I think they would be bones. I have taken him with me. He said he wanted to come along.

I don't know where I'm going yet. Somewhere colder, I think, so I'm going north. It's been so hot in the house lately, have you noticed? I set the thermostat in the blue, and I sweat all day. The house wavers in the heat, the way the road does in the desert, or the air does above a fire. I walk around, and everything slithers. The plants inside are all wilting. They can't stand the heat either. I moved some of them outside and they sprang back to life. Their roots thickened and their leaves turned green again. They sprouted buds and reached skyward. The few that I forgot inside are dead. I buried them in the backyard. Maybe they will still grow, reach up out of the dirt and find the sun. You will have to tell me how they do.

I haven't been able to sleep because of the heat. At night I wake up drenched. You are always asleep, facing away from me. I have gotten to know your back. I love the freckle just below your left shoulder, and the soft feel of my hand between your nightgown and skin. You feel cool, Sarah, not like our burning house. I shower in the middle of the night with only cold water. I come out shivering but heat up in minutes. I sleep in shifts and watch over you.

I looked in the mirror yesterday, and I didn't recognize myself. I stopped aging eight years ago, I thought. But my skin feels different now, like it's not attached properly. My limbs feel dislocated. Do you look different, Sarah? I can't tell. You look the same to me. You have the same smile, I know. Your hair was longer then. Do you feel like you belong in your body? If you stand naked in front of a mirror, do you know who will be looking back?

This troll is going to be my guide. We will head north together and see what lives there. Maybe we will run into some wild animals. I've never seen a wild animal. We saw deer once together on our way back from Philly. Remember how they dotted the side of the road? How their eyes glowed and their ears stood. You made me pull the car over, and we tried to sneak up on them. But they knew we were there. They knew and they left when we got too close. They flicked their white tails and bounded off into the dark woods.

Deer are not wild animals, though. At least, I don't think they are. Maybe you do. Wolves and bears, those would be a thing to see. Or maybe moose. I hear that moose are larger than cars. They live in the north. Maybe we will see one, the troll and I. If we do, I will send you a picture.

I hope you will not be mad at me for leaving. I tried to leave two weeks ago, Sarah. I had all my clothes packed in two suitcases. I stood by the door for half an hour with a suitcase in each hand. I just looked at the door knob. It seemed to move by itself, twisting one way unlocked and then the other. But the door never opened. I could see the heat coming off of the knob. It would have burned me if I touched it, I think. I unpacked everything before you came home.

I did not have the troll with me that time. I am not sure why I grabbed it today. I think he needed to leave, too. Do you remember when we bought this troll? It was on our trip to Florida, soon after I proposed. You called it our pre-honeymoon. There was a little souvenir shop down by the beach. It was in between all the bars and the restaurants. The woman behind the counter was old, very old. You said she reminded you of your great grandmother. I remember that the store was very small, and very dark. She had most of the windows blocked with curtains, because outside it was hot and bright. The sand was bleached a brilliant white. We walked along the lined shelves, and she watched us the whole time. When you saw him, you gasped. You bit your nails like you do when you get excited. Remember how we thought he'd break on the trip back? We were sure his hair would bend or his drums would snap. But he was perfect, Sarah, just dusty on the TV.

You were beautiful on that sand, Sarah. I remember bringing you back ice cream. You turned to look for me, and you had your big sunglasses on. We had to eat the ice cream fast. It melted too quickly in the sun.

You should pack all of your things. I couldn't believe what I had. There was so much of it. I had two suitcases filled, and there was plenty more. There were clothes spilling out of our dresser, lining the closets. I had CDs and books stacked in piles and packing shelves. I had presents, and files, and boxes, and lists, and pictures, and souvenirs. Now I am leaving and all I have are two suitcases and a troll. The rest is just extra. We have closets and cabinets full of extra.

Do you really not feel the heat in this house? Even now, everything is roasting. The air in here is dry and scalding. I can't see how we live here.

I don’t remember when it started, Sarah. When this house turned into a desert. Did it happen instantly? All the furnaces clicked on together. All the heat poured out at once. Or was it a slow change? Did the temperature change as slowly as I, undetectable and misleading? Maybe if our house looked in a mirror, it would not recognize itself. It would think, *that is not me, that can’t be me.* Maybe it would never come to believe it. It goes on burning and it doesn’t say a thing. The plants wither, the air dries, my skin blisters, and it goes on thinking nothing has changed. I can’t see in here. Everything wavers in the heat, slides back and forth in my vision. If you were here, would you notice? You are always so cool, Sarah. I’ve never asked you how you do it.

The troll wants to leave now. His hair might catch fire in the heat. If my hair were straw, I would worry too. His skin is cracking, the bark curling backward. His turtle shell drumset is hissing and spitting. I should put him in the car. I can’t make this trip by myself.

I feel old. I stopped aging eight years ago, but I still feel old. You and I stood together in front of the altar and we both stopped aging. We promised to stay constant. We never promised this heat. I tried my best to stay the same. Maybe I shouldn’t have. I could evolve. I could shed this thick hide, leave it behind like a snake skin. You could hold my toes, and I would slide out of it. The skin below would be pink and soft. It would be suited for heat. I would adapt and we could burrow in this desert sand together. We could make a home beneath the ground, beneath the wild swaying cacti. We could alternate leaving to search for water and food. We would leave all of the extra above us, to melt in the sun. On our trips to the surface, we would notice how it all blended together. How it all congealed into a solid mass. How the layers were indistinguishable.

But I might not be ready. I feel old, but my new skin might be too young. You would pull off my skin, and I would burn in the heat. I would scream and writhe and blister and you wouldn't understand. You would hold my old skin and wonder what was wrong. I would char and powder, and you still wouldn't feel the heat.

Whales. I had forgotten that we saw whales. They are wild. Remember, at Cape Cod? There is a picture of the two of us on the whale watching boat. We had the old couple behind us take it. I can recognize myself there. We are smiling, and the water is spraying up behind us. The wind is blowing your hair onto my face. We're dressed up for winter, with our faces peeking out. It was so cold there. The whales would crest in the water, spray their breath up for us to see. We ran from one side of the boat to another, looking for their dark round bodies, their salty exhales. You squealed and bit your nails every time another broke the surface. You smelled like the ocean, cool and vast.

You can't run on those boats anymore. Did you know that? One of them tipped when the people were running. Everyone was on one side and the boat keeled. Its crusted bottom saw the day. The whales thought it was a new stunt. They were tired of the boats just floating. The whales belly rolled and slapped their fins against the water. This trick was interesting. It was new. A few people drowned, I think. Got caught under something and sucked in too much cold water. While they drowned, did they hear the whales clapping?

Why do I remember our trips? Why don't I think of our normal life in this arid house? We never saw whales here, but we could have. They breach outside in the hazy green. There are deer in the closet, moose in the attic. But I stay in the kitchen. I have made a path from the kitchen to my room. The rest remains unexplored. Buried in the

extra. Remember when we stayed at home, Sarah? I do not. I remember heat and escapes from it.

My friend is burning. I have put him in the sink and let the cold water run. It came out scalding at first, and burned his leg. He is tending to it. He is rubbing toothpaste on the burn. It is blistering already. If the leg dies, he will use the bones to play his drums. He will bang on cracked turtle shells with his femur. He will yell his primal yell.

I don't want to leave, Sarah, but I have to. I cannot survive in this heat much longer. I will burn like this troll. He is more adapted than I. He is wild and untamed. His hair stands straight up and his grin is toothy. He could roam with the toughest wolves and bears. Yet now he is in the sink, covered in toothpaste. Tearing the bones out of his legs.

I looked at all the pictures we have lining the walls. None of them were taken in this house.

Maybe we should leave together. The troll could sit in the backseat. He wouldn't mind. But you would never leave. What will it be like alone? Just me and the troll. I think it will be dark. Maybe it will be too cold. Maybe I am too used to the heat now, and cannot live in the cold. I will freeze up north. He will bury me with my suitcases. I will freeze and think of you while my heart slows. I will not miss this house. I will not miss our extra. I will miss you and me smiling on the edge of a boat with the spray behind us.

I can't see that here. We are not the same in this place. Maybe we left our smiles in Cape Cod, or Florida, or Philly. Maybe we left them scattered around the country, and now we have none for ourselves. I will go back and look for them. When I have enough of them, I will come back.

Look in the mirror, Sarah. Pack all of your things. Tell me if you feel this heat. If we stopped aging, how did we change? Maybe we're lost in the extra. Maybe we burned in the heat.

I will go searching for us, Sarah. I will take my wild friend and scour the country. I will think only of you.

I am a coward, Sarah. Maybe this habit is enough for me. Maybe I need this heat, if only because I can't remember anything else. Maybe not aging is just accepting and settling. The open door is too wide for me. I wish we could go searching together. Last time I didn't make it out the door. This time, I'll probably be back before you go to bed.

Burning Caracas

An old man in our barrio died last night. They found him in the cobbled streets between old stone and clay houses, in the streets where he slept under a tattered rug, but this morning he was a blackened heap. His clothes were all burned off, just a strip of charred cloth here and there, his white hair was singed where it still showed, and his skin was red and black and blistered, cracked in open hardened sores. He was lying on the street, burned from the fire and cold from the night.

Three malandros set him on fire—no one knows why yet, if there even was a reason. People saw them do it, three boys standing around him with a can of gas and a lighter, but it was dark and their faces only briefly lit up in the firelight before the three took off into the ever-darkened streets of our barrio.

Last night while he burned, I was throwing bottles off the roof of Rosa's building. She lives with her parents on the top floor, and from her window we can reach up and grab the roof, feel the gritty stone and dirt under our hands, and pull ourselves up. We drank stolen beer—Polar, el sabor de Venezuela—and tossed the empty glass into the broken streets below.

"We should go to Sabana Grande tomorrow before I work," Rosa said. "I haven't seen Manuel in a while."

"Is he still selling videos?" I asked. Manuel pirated videos at a little table in the middle of Sabana Grande, a marketplace filled with identical booths selling everything from fruit to clothes to video games. I finished another bottle and tossed it. The silence lasted four stories before the shatter.

"Yes, but his spot got taken, so now he's not so close to the Metro stop."

“What happened?”

“The police took it. Said he couldn’t leave it overnight. Figures they pick his table out of all of them to actually care about.” Rosa threw a bottle. Four stories and a shatter.

Rosa and I went to primario together. She dropped out before I did. She’s a waitress at a cafetín/panadería in the city. She spends her days bringing out coffee and cachitos and arepas, dressed in all white with a red apron, long black hair pulled back, lips always smiling. She got me a job there preparing food in the back, making sure everything looked professional even though it wasn’t much to speak of, but I got fired after a few weeks because I was too slow.

“Estas soñando, o echando vaina?” my ex-boss yelled before asking for my uniform back. *Are you dreaming or just fucking around?*

“So do you want to come with me?” Rosa asked. “You never really answered.”

“Oh no, I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I have to take my mother to see the doctor.”

“Her eyes?”

I nodded. “Cataracts.”

Rosa opened another beer. “Well, we can go see Manuel another time. He probably doesn’t give a shit anyway.”

I lay back on the dirty roof. Around us, the other roofs stretched out across the hillside, a brown maze of the tops of the barrios creeping up the sides of the valley. They were all empty, the streets below were empty, and the sky above was empty and still.

“Maybe she’ll get to go to Cuba,” Rosa said.

“What?”

“I said, maybe she’ll get to go to Cuba.”

“Who?”

“Your mother.”

“Oh.”

“Ronaldo’s grandmother got to go. The government paid for her trip, and the doctors over there did the operation. All for free. Free trip to Cuba just for being old.”

“My mother’s not that old.”

“She has cataracts, Julio.”

I looked over at Rosa. She has always been frank. She told me to drop out with her, but it took me a few more years to realize school was a waste and that I couldn’t afford to spend time barely learning and not working. She told me my father was gone, but it took a few months of waiting for the door to open up and show him silhouetted against the night for me to stop staying awake, watching and listening.

Are you dreaming or just fucking around?

“Well, maybe she’ll get to go,” I said. “She would like that.”

“Of course she would. It’s a free trip to somewhere.”

The air was cool but I could feel its weight. In the day, it would be humid and heavy, sticking my shirt to my stomach, carrying the smell of our streets, mixing the rumbling life of the city with the sweat of a million people. But at night it was cool. It was cool while he burned.

“That was the last one,” Rosa said, and threw the bottle.

I saw my mother in the sky, flying through the darkness on a free trip to somewhere.

The morning that they found him burned alive in the middle of the street, his hands twisted and clawed, his lips melted together, his eye sockets empty and staring down the uneven road, that morning my mother and I went to the city. We caught a porpuesto, a small private bus, into Caracas. Like most, it was meant for twenty people but filled with forty, and so we went, bouncing along the roads, sweating in the traffic, and finally paying the man who hung onto the open doorway on the way out.

I'm my mother's youngest child. I have two brothers and a sister older than me, the nearest is ten years away, and all of them have moved around to different parts of the city or different barrios. I'm the last one at home with her. She is getting older—her thick brown hair thin and gray, her back hunched more every year, and now her beautiful green eyes, those eyes that drew my father so many years ago, are clouding over with cataracts.

I noticed the smell of the city first, even while we rode the porpuesto, the familiar smell of dirt and sweat and humidity and leaden exhaust. In the traffic, small motorcycles zig-zagged through the standstill, and the air filled with their buzzing, with cars honking, with the smoke that all of them gasped out into the streets.

We stepped out into the blazing sun, me first and my mother right after, holding onto my arm with one hand and grabbing at the air with the other. She sighed in relief when her foot reached the road, and she thanked the driver as the porpuesto left. I helped her from the hot street onto the sidewalk, her long brown dress swaying, almost brushing

the tops of dark blue slippers. One had a hole near the big toe, and I could see her nail through it.

"Gracias, hijo," she said, and I kissed her hand.

"Vamos entonces," I said.

We walked along the sidewalk as old beaten up cars passed us by, as the vibrant hum of the city surrounded us. Palm trees rose up from a divider in the road. The streets and sidewalks were dirty. And there was always the smell, that comforting smell of Caracas: sweat, exhaust, and humidity. We passed Metro stops with their big M's, and street stands selling all sorts of sweets, Cocosetes, Susy's, Nucita, Bon-Bones. Ice cream men pushed their carts past us, ringing little bells and shouting, "Helado Tío Rico." We walked by all of them. My mother had one arm through mine like I was taking her to a dance with her other hand grabbing my forearm in case the first wasn't enough. We went slowly, sweating in the heat.

Her doctor was in a large white building with a red tile roof. The wrought iron gates opened from the street into a garden filled with more palm trees, flowering plants, and thick grass. The first time we came, I was surprised that her insurance managed to pay for this—it was essentially the one good thing my father had left her. Now, along with the small apartment, my brothers and sister and I split the cost of her insurance, giving her what we can't afford ourselves.

The reception room had fans mounted in all four corners, blowing the black hair of the girl who attended us. My mother smiled warmly at her, smiled warmly with her clouding eyes. She gave the girl her name and insurance information and we sat down while the girl searched through the files behind her. The seats were black and plastic.

“Cómo está Rosa?” My mother turned to me. *How is Rosa?*

“Good, still working at El Cafetero,” I said.

“I’m glad. She’s not still with Antonio, is she?”

“No, no.” That had ended with me standing over Antonio while he bled from the mouth onto our cracked streets, cursing Rosa and telling her she wasn’t worth the shit he scraped off the road every day. “They split up.”

“Let’s go outside,” my mother said. “I love the garden they have here.”

I took my worn shoes off in the grass, watched my mother walk around the garden, putting her face next to the flowers, lightly brushing the petals and cupping them in her tired hands.

“These are my favorite flowers, Julio.” She called over to me, pointing to some brilliant yellow ones. “Your father was allergic to them, but now I could put them all around me.” She smelled them carefully. “How beautiful, Julio.” She stood by them, admiring them but never harming them with more than the breath of a touch.

The girl came out from the reception room. Her black hair splashed on her white shirt as she read my mother’s name from the file. “This way, please.”

I slipped my shoes back on, and held out my arm. My mother took it again, one arm looped through mine, the other across her body so she could grab my forearm. She held on to me and we followed the girl whose black hair moved from side to side.

The doctor was sweating in his white lab coat, and told me to go back to the reception room and wait for a few hours. They had to run some tests and wouldn’t let me stay with my mother. They had to determine the severity of her vision loss, and whether

she was in good enough physical condition for surgery. So I left and told the girl I would be back in an hour or two.

I caught a porpuesto to the park at the base of cerro Ávila, one of the mountains surrounding the city. I hopped off inside a group of people and avoided the watchful eyes of the money collector. When he started shouting, I ducked my head and ran. The hike to the top of Ávila is grueling and takes at least a whole day, but there are shorter paths that lead to landmarks along the way. I remember coming here as a family, swimming in the rivers and climbing up the mossy, wet rocks. I remember my father holding me up under the cold push of a waterfall while I shivered and shouted, grinning with my eyes closed as the water slapped against my body.

Inside the park it didn't smell like Caracas. Instead, there was a damp coolness under the canopy of green, and the soft trickling of water. I walked over gritty stones with my hands deep in my pockets. The air was buzzing quietly, filled with water, birds, and the soft whisper of the trees. After ten minutes or so, the main trail broke out from under the trees, and became a relatively steep climb on a hard red path. The sun beat down and the air smelled like tall grass.

When the path leveled out, I was pretty high up. Once it flattens, the path snakes along a ridge for a while. I didn't follow it. Instead, I pushed through some trees and stepped onto a rock jutting out from the side of the mountain. My father was the one who showed me this rock, who sat down with his feet hanging off the ledge, handed me a cigarette and looked out over the city. He looked out over the whole valley, the sun bouncing off the metal buildings in the center, the brown barrios looking like sores all

along the sides, the green of the earth slowly being covered up, pushed off the tops of the mountains into the blue sky.

"Míralo," he said. *Look at it.*

"Look at what?" I asked.

"You can always see the city," he said, "but that," he pointed, "that's our barrio. That's us."

A speck on the horizon, an indistinguishable brown point on the side of a mountain, creeping slowly away from the city with the rest of the barrios.

Now, my mother got tested, I sat and smoked, Rosa smiled and served in her red apron, and an old man was peeled off the streets of the speck. He was scraped off the road and dumped into a metal garbage can, leaving nothing but charred bits of his skin and muscle stuck to the cracked stone, tiny burned traces of him left forever in his, in our barrio.

When we got home, my mother went into her room to go to sleep.

"What did the doctor say?" I asked.

"They won't do surgery," she said, and that was that.

Her door clicked shut.

I had an hour and a half before I had to go work. I work in a warehouse in the city, carting box after box onto truck after truck. My mother doesn't like that I work so late—the city in the dark is a dangerous place, she says. But every night she looks out over our barrio with her clouding eyes and sees nothing wrong.

I walked slowly around the apartment, looking at the few pictures on our walls—a few of my brothers and sister, a few of my father and mother. She still keeps a picture from their wedding in her room. I once asked her if she wanted to get rid of it, and she asked me why she would ever erase a part of her life just because it was gone.

I walked around our small apartment as the light outside dwindled and the two lamps we had sat useless in their corners.

I remember stealing electricity with my father. We attached a metal hanger to the end of a wire, and tied a rope to that. We held the rope and threw the hanger up at the power lines, kept throwing it until it snagged and held while we pulled it down, pulled it until there was a connection and the wire buzzed with life. We ran the wire into the house, bypassing the box the electric company shut off years ago. We ran the wire into our dark house and brought light with it.

Outside our wire hung with the rest, thousands of hangers tossed up onto the power line, pulled down until they connected like searching fingers. We joined the masses of lifelines connected to the city, attaching our black homes to the bright epicenter that is Caracas, linking our unseen lives to the glowing spokes that climbed the hills like our own barrios. So the power company shut off the lines and left us stranded.

On the way to work, I stopped by El Cafetero to see Rosa. She was just finishing her side work, cleaning out displays and stocking things in the back. I waited at a table until she came out. She smiled and hugged me, then sat down, eyes glinting.

“So how’d it go with the doctor?” she asked

“They won’t do surgery.”

“Won’t or can’t?”

“Not sure.”

“Guess it really doesn’t matter. What do they care? Are you working tonight?” She put her hands on the light blue tabletop. Above us, fluorescent lights hummed softly, lighting the glass displays filled with carefully prepared food.

“Yeah, not long though. Tonight’s load is pretty small.”

“You should come over. I’ll be bored as hell otherwise. My parents keep going to bed earlier and earlier.”

“Ok. I’ll steal a few beers on the way back.”

Rosa let her black hair fall down onto her shoulders, and slowly undid the top of the apron. Her shirt was a brilliant white underneath.

“I hate this place,” she said.

“No you don’t,” I said, even though I’ve always felt that it’s too sterile for her.

“Well, it was a lot better when you worked here too.”

“Yeah, but I actually hated it.”

“I just hate being so invisible,” she said.

“We’re always invisible.”

She folded her apron neatly, and set the bright red cloth on the table. Once when we were little, Rosa’s mother made her a red dress that flared out just above her knees. Rosa wore it for three days in a row, until boys at school made fun of her and smeared mud on it. After school, she and I snuck behind a building and washed the mud out in a

broken fountain. We sat damp and silent in the water, slowly rubbing the dirt out so she could wear it again the next day.

"This new job's not so bad," I said. "Just a lot of lifting, really."

She reached across the table and grabbed my hand. "Your hands are getting rough," she said.

"You think you could grab me a cachito?"

"Ham and cheese?"

"Always. And some chicha."

She walked off and came back with them on a tray, holding it with just her fingertips along the bottom, chest level and six inches from her body.

"Thank you, señorita," I said. "Tell your manager the service here is always good, and that he's a fat asshole."

She slapped my shoulder, and I ate my free food.

"We should get some real chicha tomorrow," Rosa said. "That El Chichero carton stuff is shit."

"What shift do you work tomorrow?"

Rosa didn't answer. She crumpled up her apron in her lap.

"I need to leave before it gets too dark out." The city outside was gray, the daylight still fading slowly and deliberately. Rosa once told me this was her favorite time, the hour of gray between the hot day and the dark night. She said she always felt most comfortable then.

"I really do hate it here. I feel like one day I'll just disappear." She got up from her chair. "See you tonight, Julio."

I spun a bolívar on the tabletop in front of me, then followed her shadow out the door and went to work.

Rosa and I saw a man get mugged once while we were talking on the roof of her apartment building. We saw him walking, we saw the shadows surround him, and then we saw him lying on his back on the ground. We waited a while before we went down to help him, waited until the shadows were farther away.

They'd broken his nose and his face was to the side; he was spitting out the blood that was filling his nostrils. He flinched when he saw us. He looked about our age.

"Did they get everything?" Rosa asked.

"If you count this week's pay everything. I got blood on my shirt, too."

"I think your nose is broken," I said.

He shrugged, reached up and lightly touched his nose, wincing. "Seems so."

"Do you want us to walk back home with you?" Rosa asked. He was wiping the blood off his face with his forearm, spitting up more of it into the street.

"It's fine. Nothing else for anyone to take now, anyway."

We watched and waited while he slowly got up, spit a lot more, thanked us, and then limped slowly away.

I thought of that as I loaded box after box into the back of truck after truck. How we waited while he lay on his back in the middle of the street with a broken nose, just lay there spitting up blood and cursing, just lay there alone on the uneven cobblestones breathing out his mouth. And I remembered how he walked away—slowly and

deliberately, but resigned, wishing there were less blood on his shirt and more money in his wallet as he faded into the black streets.

I don't know why I went back, but I did. After work I went back and hiked my way up, up cerro Ávila with a few stolen beers and a pack of cigarettes. I went back to that same spot, that same rock where I can sit and see the whole valley, see the city in the middle and the barrios crawling up the sides of the mountains like dying roots. It was night, and at night the view is always the best. The valley was filled with tiny lights, covered with soft glows and shimmering electricity.

The city glowed brightest of all, a collection of a million specks, a million different doors and rooms and sounds and smells. A million lives pulsing and illuminating the night, filling up the dark air with their being. Up the sides of the valley, some barrios added their meager light to the brightness of Caracas, while others stayed dark silhouettes, black spots where I saw nothing but where there must be roofs and streets and no electricity lines running quite close enough.

I sat on the rock for a while, watching all the lights, watching the ebb and flow of the city, of the valley. I couldn't see my barrio, couldn't see the roof where Rosa and I sat and threw bottles, couldn't see the house whose door my father closed silently one night, couldn't see the window where my mother stood looking out while her vision slowly faded. I sat and wondered if last night I would have been able to see a bright flare while he burned, if last night he would have lit up our streets and our roofs and our windows with the fire. I wondered if for a second he glowed brighter than Caracas.

Salad and Fries, Horses and Shadows

Amy thinks I'm getting fat. Last night I shuffled into bed and she pinched my sides.

"Got some love handles, I see," she whispered in my ear. I tightened up my stomach when she put her arms around me, but she didn't say anything. I could feel my skin hanging there until I fell asleep.

Now I'm standing in front of our mirror in my boxers, flexing. I can see my abs outlined, though they're getting faint. I've still got muscles in my arms. A friend once told me jokingly that if his wife ever started to gain a lot of weight, he would circle all the fat he saw with a red sharpie so that she knew what he wanted gone. I can see a few spots where Amy would put a glaring red mark.

When I get to the kitchen, Amy's sitting at the table, eating scrambled eggs and toast and staring at the newspaper. She's in a white nightgown; her feet are slippered, her hair is still messy. The loaf of bread is lying on a counter, the slices near the open end of the bag lying face down as though they fell trying to escape. The bowl she used for whisking is by the stove, its accompanying fork slowly leaking egg alongside melting butter. She likes to let everything get settled before she puts it away.

As I clean up, I watch her chew the tip of her pen. She puts it down every now and then to take a bite of egg covered toast. She knocks the pen back and forth between her open lips, then blows on the end of it.

"Today's crossword hard?" I ask.

"No, it's only Tuesday," she says. She gives me a quick little grin, pushes out the chair across from her with her leg. "There's some left on the stove."

“I’ll have to pass,” I say. “I’m running a little late.”

She makes a tiny pout-face and focuses on the paper again. I kiss her when I walk by, and my eyes stray to her half empty plate, then to the crossword.

“Twenty-three down is ‘grind’,” I say. “I’ll see you tonight.”

My stomach growls all the way to work, but I don’t give in even when I pass my favorite diner. I work for a small software company not far from our little apartment. We’re on the seventh floor of an office building, and today when I push through the double doors I decide to take the stairs. David, a close friend who works with me, is holding the elevator open for me.

“Where are you going?” he asks as I turn away from him.

“Stairs,” I say.

“Why would you do that?” he says, and lets the door close slowly.

I’m sweating a little and feeling light headed by the time I make it to my desk. Maybe I should have eaten something; those eggs did look good. And what I’d give for some bacon. David comes by, weaving through cubicles with two cups of coffee.

“So you’re a stair man now, huh?”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s what elevators are for,” he says, and hands me one of the cups. I hesitate for a second, but take a sip. I can feel it slide down the walls of my stomach. David sits down on the edge of my desk. “Where do you want to go for lunch?”

“We just got here,” I say.

“Yeah, but you always have to think ahead,” David says. “And what are you really going to do until then,” he motions toward my dark monitor, “stare?”

His tie is loosened up already. After lunch, he won’t be wearing one, and the buttons of his shirt will work their way down until the top three are open. His sleeves will roll up, and nothing will stay tucked in.

He takes a gulp of coffee, scratches the side of his face pensively. “I was thinking maybe Charlie’s. Been itching for a burger, just right here.”

He rubs his belly and I think very sadly about all that wonderfully greasy food. Charlie’s has some of the best fries in town, and their Reuben is just—

“I don’t know. Maybe someplace healthier?” I search for conviction in my voice.

David blinks dramatically, then looks at me sideways, slowly standing up. “I’m on to you, Richards,” he says. “No elevator, no Charlie’s…” he wags his finger. “I’d hate to see you waste away.”

“Get out of here,” I say, and turn on my monitor. He walks off shaking his head.

We end up at Charlie’s for lunch. Charlie’s is half a step above a fast food place, complete with walls that are tiled halfway up, booths with plastic benches, and a unifying theme of red and white. Charlie himself still works behind the counter, wearing a paper hat on his balding head. He questions me when I order a chicken salad and a basket of fries, but doesn’t press me when I shrug. David tells Charlie not to worry and orders his usual.

We find a booth and sit. I pick at my salad, pushing chicken around to different lettuce mounds while David munches on his burger, talking about some guy in the break room who always farts when he gets a Twix bar from the snack machine.

"It's like clockwork, he'll just bend over and, bam, right there. It's like he's clearing room out for the candy bar. One thing in one thing out sort of deal."

"How do you always see this?" I ask.

"Where the hell else am I going to be? I go from the break room to your desk, Richards. Nothing stands in my way." He takes another bite from his burger. "God this is so good. So damn good. How's your salad there?" He waves the half eaten burger at my plate.

"Fine," I say, and eat some fries instead. He sets his burger down neatly and wipes his fingers on a yellow napkin. He looks at me closely.

"This is foolish, Richards."

"What is?"

"Your new health trend."

"It's just the first day."

"And you're eating fries."

"I'm weaning off."

"Or weaning back on."

"Eat your burger."

"On or off, you can wean all you want, Richards. I'll eat in your stead."

I push the half-eaten basket over to him. "Have the rest of them."

“Gladly,” David says, and shovels a few in his mouth. “You know,” he says, turning very serious. “I’ve heard of men dying from a lack of grease.”

I pick through my salad. The chicken is the best part.

When I get home, Amy’s in the shower. The small table in the living room is strewn with papers. I set my bag down—a messenger bag, Amy calls it—and begin to separate the mail from her work from my work. The mail from preschool from software. I hear the water turn off, the shower door open, and then Amy is walking through the living room, dripping water everywhere, toweling herself off as she goes.

She stops when she sees me. “Hi there, handsome,” she says, drying her hair, gloriously naked. There are wet footprints leading from the bathroom to where she stands. “When’d you get home?”

“Just a little while ago.”

She walks over and kisses me. When she leans over, droplets fall onto the papers I’m sorting. “Want to do something tonight?” she asks, rubbing her hair with her towel. Looking at her, I feel the love handles she squeezed, feel my flesh hanging loosely on me. She is taut and toned, delicate muscles curving under her skin. I can see them flexing and relaxing as she dries—in her arms, around her belly, up and down her wonderful legs.

I’ve always felt that she was too attractive for me, that one day she would wake up and see the person next to her and realize she could get something much better. When we kiss in the bathroom, I put my body behind hers so the mirror only shows a beautiful woman and a lucky set of arms. When I kiss her neck I hide my face in her hair, press

myself close to absorb some essence of her. She is always perfect—even in the mornings with sleep in her eyes and her hair all tousled, even when we took a pottery class and she had clay all over her, even when we spent a weekend hiking and didn't shower for four days. She is always perfect, and I am flawed. I have to pose just right for pictures. I have to shower every morning to tame my thinning hair, to get the oil off my skin. She's Amy, and I'm fat.

"Do you want to go running?" I ask. She smiles and flicks her eyes over me.

"I just came from the gym." She pulls a chair out and sits next to me, the towel draped over her head. "I feel like something relaxing, maybe a movie. We finger-painted today, so I had to keep chasing paint-colored kids. It was a nightmare to clean up."

"A movie's good," I say, and she stands.

"I'll go get dressed," she says. She studies me for a second, and then smiles and walks off to her room. Later she'll ask me what is wrong, I can tell. For now, I keep sorting. Mail, software, preschool.

Amy loves horror movies. On our second date we watched a marathon of Freddy movies on a faded blue couch in her old apartment. When she moved in, my movie shelf filled with killers, monsters, and ghosts. On our honeymoon, we watched Alien in the hotel suite, the mountains of Chile looming outside our window.

Today, the movie is about a woman who is dead but doesn't know it—not a particularly ground-breaking film on any account. I buy Amy popcorn but resist almost every time she offers me some. Amy giggles when the audience gasps, laughs when the ghosts (who are actually the living) try to exorcise the protagonist.

“This is terrible,” she whispers in my ear. The woman finds out she is dead, and Amy laughs again. I watch the flickering light on her face, loving her open, smiling mouth.

“What’s wrong, Seth?” she asks when we leave the movie.

“Just work,” I say.

“I might have believed that seven years ago,” she says, bumping lightly into me.

“Just thinking,” I say. She understands and grabs my hand. We walk slowly to the car. I open the door for her.

“I’ll cook you dinner,” I offer when we’re both in the car, and she accepts. She talks about work on the drive home, about drawings that her preschoolers made.

“One of them, Lisa, is going to be an artist. I’ll force her parents to let her. Everyone else had smudges and lines, and she had people and horses and shadows, even.” She pauses. “What are you going to make me?”

“You’ll see,” I say, and I try to think of what to make.

When we get home, I search through the ingredients that we have. I make a lemon garlic chicken with buttery sauce over linguini with a tomato and onion salad. We eat and Amy doesn’t bring up my mood again. I’ll have to bring it up sometime soon, that’s what has passed as understood. So we eat, and I can feel her watching me more closely, trying to notice minute differences in how I act, tiny changes in my responses, my tone, the depth of my voice and the position of my arms and hands, how long I look at her and how often I push food around with my fork. We speak silently while we talk about how David will probably be fired one of these days and how tomorrow they are having a costume party at her preschool.

We go to bed and I tense when she runs her hands down my chest and over my stomach. I kiss her and hide, press close enough that I can't feel my skin hanging between us. I can still sense her listening: she looks at me longer, she touches my face more, she runs her nails softly along my back and through my hair.

We speak and she learns and she waits for me.

David is waiting by the entrance the next day. My stomach is growling again, though I gave in to a piece of toast before I left. He brightens when he sees me and walks over purposefully.

"Come with me, Richards."

I shake my head at him and follow him. He walks right to the elevator.

"This is an elevator. It's a brand new creation. It takes the pain out of stairs. It will, and stay with me here," he pauses for effect, "carry you up vertically to the floor of your choosing!"

"I'll meet you upstairs," I say, and head for the stairs.

"You're a crazy man, Richards," he shouts after me. "I'm going to have to commit you one of these days."

I'm sweating and light headed again when I reach my desk. David walks over with two cups of coffee. He hands me one and sits on the edge of my desk.

"I'll give you until the end of the week," he says. "If that."

"Don't you have work to do?"

"Please. Why don't you just go to the gym, anyway? What's a flight of stairs and a chicken salad once a day going to do for you?"

“I’m going running later.”

“One step ahead of me, Richards. I like that about you. Always keep me thinking. Anyway, I got you something, to show that deep down, I really do support you and your quest to not use any of our modern conveniences.” He points to my desk drawer. “Open sesame.”

The drawer is filled with granola bars with green and blue and red wrappers. They claim to be all natural and healthy.

“You can bring those to Charlie’s today,” he says, and then his straight face cracks and he starts laughing. “Sorry. Can I have one of those actually? No, Green. Thanks.”

“You came here early and loaded my desk with granola bars?”

“Guilty.” He smiles and loosens up his tie.

For lunch we go to Charlie’s. I order a chicken salad again with a small basket of fries. David comments that I’m downgrading, and then orders a burger with a salad.

“Don’t even start,” he says when he sees my eyebrows raise. “I told you, I’m here for your support. Except those stairs. That’s still a useless idea.”

“It probably is.” I take a bite of my salad and then savor a fry.

“So tell me, really, why are you doing this?”

“To lose a few pounds.”

“Just up and decided?” He takes a bite from his burger, leaning back in the plastic seat.

“Yeah.”

“Seems like a half-assed venture to me.” David looks at me seriously, a rare moment for him. He waits expectantly, but then shrugs it off. “But what do I know, right? I mean, I must be crazy. Why the hell am I eating this salad? You know who likes salad? Dale does. Dale in cubicle seven. That man loves his salads. I think he keeps dressings locked away somewhere at his desk. Every day he comes in with just a salad. I think he’s dying.”

David goes on about Dale’s salads, moves on to someone who brings stacks and stacks of sandwiches and never takes a lunch break. I wonder how he has time to notice all these things. He finishes his burger, his salad, and half of my fries. I get through the salad and wish I’d gotten something else.

After work, I go jogging. I brought all my gear with me—running shoes, shorts, and a t-shirt that already has sweat stains on it. I changed in the bathroom and then headed out into the streets. David watched me go and shook his head, saying that at least it was better than the stairs.

It’s still light outside, it’s only five in the afternoon or so. The sun is hanging behind surrounding buildings, swollen and orange. I count my steps up to fifty and then start over. I pass by a park and see kids laughing and throwing sand at each other. I pass by fountains and feel water in the air, run by stores and look at the displays. I end up by the glass front double doors, sucking wind and holding my knees. I catch my breath, go to the garage and drive home, sticky in the car seat.

Amy’s out with her friend when I call her, so I shower and then call David. He’s up for a drink, he says, so I drive to pick him up. He’s hungry, so we go to the Firepit,

one of David's favorite places. They make superb pizzas in a wood oven stove, and have barbeque ribs that fall off the bone. He orders a rack tonight, and we get a pitcher.

"No food for you, captain?" he asks.

"I'll eat something at home."

"You know, you shouldn't eat very late. It's bad for your metabolism or some nonsense. Anyway, cheers. To your new-found fitness." We toast.

His ribs come, and he pours extra barbeque sauce all over them. He sucks the meat off the bone and licks his fingers while I nurse my beer. He's so engrossed in the food that he forgets to talk.

Finally, he has bones in front of him. I'm on my second glass. He cleans his hands and mouth with a wet-nap.

"Amy said I was fat," I say.

"The secret revealed!" He lifts up his hands in celebration. "I figured the ribs would do you in."

He wipes his mouth again, then empties his glass.

"So what, she just said it? 'Husband of mine, you are getting fat, also can you please not steal the covers?'"

"Yes," I say, "essentially."

"And you really think she meant it?" He pauses, pensive. "I dated a girl who called me fat. She was kind of chubby herself, though, so I would just say 'right back at you,' and then I guess we had sex or broke up or something, I'm not really too sure."

"I'm just trying to lose some weight for her."

“By not eating burgers and taking the stairs?” He rubs his chin. “I don’t think you’ve thought this through, sir.” Our pitcher is empty. David flags down the waitress, but I tell him no, so he orders a bottle for himself.

“I’m jogging now, too,” I say, and it sounds defensive.

“Those five extra pounds of yours will be gone in no time.” He laughs. A waiter walks by and takes his plate.

“All I mean,” he raises his hands, “is that I don’t think you’re serious about this. I think you know you’re being dumb.”

The waitress comes back with his bottle and he takes a long swig. I finish off my own drink. He leans on the table. “And you are being dumb, Richards. Just take the elevator.”

The waitress drops off our check, leaving it delicately on the side of the table without drawing too much attention.

“Cheers,” I say and tap my empty glass on his bottle.

The place is starting to get crowded, and I can hear plates in the kitchen and conversations all around me. David brings up his favorite topic again—the odd habits of people that we work with—and soon I’m dropping him off at his house.

Amy’s in bed asleep when I walk in. I undress quietly and slip in next to her. I can’t remember when I started sleeping well next to her. There was just a shift at some point, silent and unheralded. I do remember waking up constantly in the beginning, before I got used to having her close by, before I internalized her breaths and movements, how her shoulder rolls just before she turns over. I can’t remember feeling a change, just like I can’t remember when her messes became something I looked for, when a wet

bathroom became a part of my house. Her quirks just became new things to love. I started sleeping better with her than alone.

She doesn't wake up when I lie down. I press my face against her back and fall asleep.

I wake up early the next morning and cook breakfast. I make omelets, hers with cheddar, mushroom, tomatoes, and ham. I fry some bacon and toast some bread, and have it all out on the table when she comes out. She's still in pajamas, her eyes half open, her slippers dragging on the floor.

"What a treat," she says, and kisses my cheek.

She sits down and I pour two cups of coffee. The loaf of bread is back in the fridge, the dishes in the sink to be washed.

"How was the costume party?" I ask. She laughs silently into her cup.

"A disaster. I'm not even sure what any of them were. They had fun though."

"I went jogging yesterday," I say.

She smiles and takes a bite of her omelet. "You don't have to," she says.

We eat together, and she tells me more about the party. She waves and points with her fork, covers her mouth when she laughs. I tell her about David's latest obsessions, and she mentions a new horror movie. We speak and we learn and we wait.

Bobby Vash

I ain't no snitch. I ain't no snitch, but I saw Bobby Vash going down Helman Street on a ten speed, and he was wearing an orange shirt. He was riding like something was chasing him, and he was wearing an orange shirt.

Everybody knows Bobby likes Miss Susy. Miss Susy, that's our teacher. She teaches us adding and reading and this guy named Clumbis. She's pretty, not old like our teacher last year. Mrs. Martin, she had gray hair and fake teeth and when you'd talk she'd watch you like a frog. Like you was a fly. But Miss Susy, she's got nice teeth, you can see them when she smiles. And when she walks by you she smells like good dreams. But everyone knows Bobby likes her. He never paid no attention to Mrs. Martin. She'd go "Bobby…" in her frog voice and he'd be putting paper in Beth Villa's hair. He was always getting in trouble from the frog. But he only got in trouble once from Miss Susy. He came late one day and she said, "Why are you late, Mr. Vash?" She's always calling us mister and misses. Well, Bobby just froze and started turning red. I ain't never seen Bobby Vash turn red before. He was all red in the face and trying to say something, but all we heard was him stuttering. Finally Miss Susy said, "Don't be late again, Mr. Vash." And boy you oughta seen his face. Like she just saved him from Lucifer.

He pays her attention too. If Miss Susy asks a question to us, he's always mumbling the answer. Don't ever raise his hand like the kids in the front, but they'll raise their hands for anything. I bet they sleep with their hands up, just for practice. Lying in bed looking like a bunch of zombies. But Bobby, he just sits in the back and mumbles, and sometimes Miss Susy, she'll hear him and say, "What was that Mr. Vash?" And he'll stutter whatever he said. Vash ain't stuttered since before kindergarten, more than a

lifetime. He used to stutter bad but his mom sent him to some camp and he came back clean.

We all hated Mrs. Martin. I like frogs and collecting them from the pond behind my house, but she was a big mean one. She'd ate too many flies and wanted more but couldn't find any, so she ate us instead. Jenny Sapp had a dream that Mrs. Martin rolled her inside a bread and ate her up. If it weren't against the law, I bet Mrs. Martin woulda done that to everyone, and still wanted more flies. But we all love Miss Susy. She's everything that's not Mrs. Martin. It's apples and oranges, like Miss Susy says. But I don't think none of us has seen her house. We all know where it is, but I don't think no one's seen it.

But I ain't no snitch. No, sir. A year ago when Mrs. Martin sat us all down and asked who put the dug turds in her desk, I didn't tell no one who did it even when I knew. When I saw Robby Roland stealing a candy bar from Mr. Patter's store, I ain't said nothing. But everyone knows Bobby Vash likes Miss Susy, and everybody knows she lives on Helman Street. And I ain't seen nobody ride a bike that fast in my whole life. Fastest bike I ever seen was when Dan Patter took a dare to go down Fairmont Hill with no brakes. He got halfway when the bike turned and then we saw a lot of dirt and grass and then Dan was crying and the front wheel of his bike was all crooked. But that wasn't fast at all once I seen Bobby Vash flying down Helman.

Another thing is: Bobby Vash don't have no ten speed. Back when he was Stuttering Vash, he'd got a black one speed. We used to see Vash on it day and night til it got stolen. He rode it to take out the trash and to get the mail and he rode it to everyone's house even if it was next door. When it got took, Vash didn't talk for weeks, and he

walked slower, like someone'd stole his legs too with his bike. And even when I seen someone with a red bike a lot like Vash's old one, I ain't said nothing. I didn't tell not a single soul. I kept my mouth right shut.

Orange is Bobby Vash's lucky color. Everybody knows that. When he fought Mike Ester after school, he wore his orange shirt and knocked the teeth out of Mike. When we had the Big Race to see who was the fastest on Earth, Vash wore his orange shirt and beat us all. He even won a cake at a cake walk cause he was wearing that orange shirt. He wears it cause his dad used to. I seen a picture at his house and his dad was on a team wearing all orange. Vash don't got a dad no more, though. He got buried a few years ago while men shot off some rifles. That's why Vash wears orange. His dad made it lucky for him.

I know what I saw. Bobby Vash was riding a ten speed down Helman Street, and he was wearing his orange shirt. I think this morning Vash got up and decided to go see Miss Susy. He looked at himself in the mirror and put his foot down, and then got his orange shirt. He stole a ten speed and got some money for a present and then he left his house knowing that on this Saturday, he'd be the only boy to ever see Miss Susy at her house.

I ain't no snitch, but it's the truth. I ain't no snitch, but I gotta tell it for a hero. Maybe Vash is knocking right now and waiting for that smell like good dreams. Maybe he's inside her house and she's laughing and asking him questions and when he mumbles now she can hear him. I ain't no snitch, but I gotta tell it like it is. Today Bobby Vash stole a ten-speed and wore his orange shirt. Today Bobby Vash rode like something was chasing him all the way to Miss Susy's house, and when he got there, he knocked on the

door.

Dream Stone

The rain here always falls brown and when it hits the dirt, ghosts rise up in hisses. This is a land of loss, dry and cracked and barren except for my shack with barely enough room for my hole-ridden cot and walls that bend to stronger winds in resignation. Out here the wind has a mouth and it swallows up the world. Out here the sand has a voice, and it whispers *you are dead*. I am here to forget, but when the rain falls, the world bleeds out its secrets, those buried deep in the boiling heat.

It was raining when my son came back, as though the land coughed him up, a black dot on the horizon. He walked slowly, and I watched him approach all day through the downpour. I sat on my doorstep, wet and watching the dot sprout legs and arms and shift slowly toward me. I sat and expected him to sink back into the ground.

When he got close enough to see me, he raised his hand in greeting. He was wearing jeans with black sneakers, and a loose gray shirt. He was soaked through, his shoes and jeans covered in mud. Soon he was standing in front of me, short dark hair plastered to his head, scraggly signs of a beard on his face. His left arm hung limply at his side.

"Good afternoon," he said.

"Good evening," I said.

"Crappy weather," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said.

He drew his left arm closer to his body. He winced. The rain was still pelting down on him, slicing into the land around us, spraying dirt and mud like bullets.

He pointed to the door behind me. "Can I go inside? Maybe get out of the rain?"

I shrugged. “Of course.”

He thanked me, gingerly stepped around me, and went inside. The door creaked closed behind me. I sat and let the rain hit me, fat drops thick as my thumb. I watched the dirt swallow it all and heard the land hiss.

* * *

When the rain stopped, it was night. Already I could feel the heat coming up from the ground, and I slowly opened the door to my shack. He was asleep on the floor next to my cot, wrapped up in a tattered sheet where his own bed used to be. I liked that he left mine open for me. I stripped off my wet clothes, hung them on the line near my door, next to his. I used to have a line outside, but the wind would always take my clothes, lift them right off and trip them along the sand, shirts billowing like sails, pants running like there were legs inside. I could hear him breathing slowly, and I remembered the sound of company, the sounds that another body makes. I stepped over him and lay down on my back, looking up at the tin roof. I felt the land shift.

I couldn’t remember how long I had been alone. Out here, time flows so smoothly that you can’t see the ripples. Out here you remember how old everything is, how long the mountains have stood just as they now stand, how many winds the sand has taken in its nomadic quest across the land. You remember that when the first man stood and marveled at this desert, it already looked like it does now, it had already seen the birth of stars, it had already loved and killed and lost.

That’s why it understands. It knows this ache, remembers loss and pain. It soothes and absorbs and leaves me barren.

I wondered why he had come back. He had left so long ago. He had said goodbye

and left at night, carrying next to nothing and marching off to god knew where. His face had been smooth then, and when he left he became a part of the constant world around me. Now he was back, and he was change.

I stayed quiet and watched my roof. I stayed quiet and listened to our twin sets of breathing.

* * *

He was already awake when I got up. Our clothes were still damp on the line so I stepped outside wearing only a pair of briefs. He was sitting in the shade of the shack, clothed the same as I. He looked older. He had more hair on his body, more muscles under the skin.

"Morning," I said.

"Afternoon," he said.

"Hungry?" I asked.

"Sure am," he said.

"Ok," I said, and walked around behind the shack. I pulled up on a metal ring sticking out of the dirt, stepped down through the opening and into the cold dark. I didn't have much in the way of food, some dried jackrabbit, yucca, clay jars of mashed prickly pear, fleshy oval cactus leaves. My storage was just a small square hole that stayed cool. Everything was sealed in jars. I took a little meat, two cactus leaves, and a jug of water. I crawled out of the ground and closed it back up.

He was laying out his clothes in the sand in front of my shack. He set rocks down on top of them in case the wind decided to pick up. His skin was white where his shirt had been, brown along the arms and face. He must have been walking for some time

before he found me. I watched him closely, trying to see where he had been, where the limpness in his arm came from. Eventually he realized I was there and turned around.

"Here," I said, and handed him his food.

"Thanks," he said. I sat down and he sat down next to me. We ate slowly and sipped from the jug.

"I'm going to get more water when the sun goes," I said.

"I'll go with you," he said.

I nodded. I finished my food and stood. The sun was more than halfway across the sky. I usually woke up late enough to not spend too much of my day in the sun. I looked down at him, noticed again his scraggy beard. His hair was flattened down on one side. I could see the skin on his back reddening, and I watched him slowly chew on the tough meat.

"What made you come back?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, and kept chewing. "Thought I owed it to you, I guess." He turned his head away from me.

"But you don't like it here."

"I feel small out here. Tiny. Like I don't matter at all. I don't know how you can stand it."

The wind blew his hair back from his forehead. I looked at his arm and saw a scar running from the elbow up past the shoulder.

"It keeps me," I said. "I'll be back."

"Okay," he said.

I walked off to check my traps. I could feel the heat of the sand beneath my feet,

the pulse of the sun on my back, but it's been a long time since I was new enough to hurt from it. I walked across the sand in my briefs, scratching my beard.

The first trap was empty, as was the second, but the third had a recently caught rabbit in it. It was dead, but the blood around it was still fresh, not yet a part of the air. Here everything joins the air and the sand. I pulled the body off the metal mesh carefully, and then reset the trap. The other five traps were all empty, so I took the one catch back to the shack, collecting brush along the way. He was not there. I set to cleaning the rabbit. I watched my hands as they skinned, pulled, gutted. They moved so deftly, so thoughtlessly. I separated the meat into small bits, and speared them on metal.

When he left he took nothing. I always thought if he came back he'd have something to show me. That if he came back, he'd bring something to show me what he had done out there, where he had gone. Something to show me that he was not like me.

I piled up the brush and lit it, everything already dry from yesterday's rain. I set the speared meat at angles around the small fire, close enough to cook even when the thin wood smoldered. The flames flared, sank, died.

* * *

Back before the deserts were deserts and the seas were seas, before green had color and water knew wet, the gods made a stone. They made it from the being of the earth, from the essence that would create everything we have come to know and to name. The gods crafted this stone and then the world, and set the stone in the very center of the earth. There it beat like a heart, solid black but shimmering, its surface always swimming with the thoughts of the world. The earth fed the stone, fed it soil and water and fire, fed it the pulsing life of the surface down through rock veins, and the stone whispered secrets

back. It breathed new life out into the world.

In the beginning the gods visited their new children often, but soon grew tired of them. They grew tired of prayers and rivalries and petty disputes, and so turned their backs on everything. When they did, they tore the stone from the earth and took it with them. They took it and set it apart in a room of eternal darkness, left it to shimmer alone to no one, to whisper to not a single ear. They closed the door to the room, and there the stone stayed forgotten for some time.

One day, however, one of the gods noticed a light coming out from underneath the door. He opened the door slowly, warily, knowing only that he didn't want the other gods to see it, whatever it was. What he saw was the stone, burning in the darkness. He approached cautiously, though gods should have nothing to fear. The stone roared silently, blazing in pitch black, shifting the emptiness around it in brilliant flashes and searing tongues. The god was drawn, pulled to the burning stone. He finally reached it, and looked within the licking flame.

What he saw were dreams, rolling and boiling within the stone. Dreams of love, of loss, of hope. Dreams of beauty and pain, dreams that circled one another, dove beneath the stone's shimmering surface, dreams that writhed unwatched and unanswered. He saw dreams that drifted to the stone from the minds of men, dreams that searched for answers, searched for muted whispers from the stone. He looked and found that he could not look away. Here was a pulse forgotten. Here was a silent blaze.

He wrapped his hands around the stone, focusing, trying to see what the dreams encircled, trying to see what lay beneath their shimmering dance. But he could not see. So he stared longer, and still he could not see. So he stayed.

And the god stared at the stone, lost forever in the shifting dreams of man.

* * *

He came back lugging a few jugs of water. He was wearing jeans but no shirt, and his body strained under the weight. The sun was almost gone. My clothes had dried, so I'd put them on.

"Catch something?" He nodded toward the ashes.

"Yes," I said.

"Right on," he said. He walked around the shack, and I heard him open the storage door.

He came back and sat down next to me. He winced and set his left arm out in front of him. I looked at it but couldn't think of a way to ask him anything.

So I asked him simply. "What happened to your arm?"

He stayed silent and looked at it.

"I've got nothing, dad," he said, finally.

The sun dipped into the horizon and the ashes smoked in front of me. He sifted sand through his fingers, drizzled some onto his thigh and then brushed it off. He shook his head and laughed quietly.

"Why did you come back?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I came looking for something, and just sort of ended up back here. I don't know how you just end up in the middle of a desert…" He tossed away the sand he was holding onto, and the wind grabbed it, sent it spinning away. The sun was halfway gone, red and glowing, a huge ball of heat sinking into the land.

"I mean, I wasn't even planning on coming. But when I saw where I was, I

thought I owed you a visit."

"You don't."

He scratched his head. "How do you live out here? I don't even feel human out here, just empty."

"What happened to your arm?" I asked again.

He laughed and looked down at it. "Car accident. Can't move it, pretty much."

The wind was picking up, blowing louder across the land, begging to be heard. It whistled around the tin roof of my shack, opened its mouth wide and tried to swallow the earth. His shirt rustled under the rocks he had set on it. The ashes swirled and smoked.

"Don't you get tired out here?" he asked.

I looked at the sun, the tip still peaking above the boiling land. I felt the hot sand underneath me, looked at the jagged rocks and ageless mountains. A man forgets himself out here. A man becomes the land, and it becomes him, and they share each other's stories. They bleed into one another, and the man discovers just how much of him the land can hold. Just how much of him the land can erase.

"No," I said. "I don't notice."

"Maybe that's what I don't like," he said. He was looking out across everything, but he suddenly turned and looked at me. I noticed his beard, his eyes, his reddening skin.

"I didn't think you'd come back," I said.

"Me neither."

He propped himself up, and slowly slid his legs beneath him. Then he got up and walked toward his shirt, rippling beneath the rocks. He freed it and held it chest level for a moment.

“I thought if I came back, I’d come back with something,” he said. “Or for something.”

He let the shirt go, and the wind grabbed it. It puffed out the arms, inflated the chest, filled it and carried it over the dark sand. He turned and watched it tumble, jerked this way and that by something invisible, something invisible but more present than either of us.

“I don’t know what I wanted. But I didn’t find it,” he said.

The sun was gone now, the land turned to a humming gray.

“You will,” I said.

“Good night,” he said, and he limped inside the shack.

I stayed outside in the gray.

He wakes up and thinks that I’m asleep, and I keep breathing deep and letting him think so. I can feel him looking over at me, making sure my eyes stay closed. He moves slowly but deliberately, rolling on the flesh of his feet. I hear him lifting the clothes he laid out on the floor, hear the soft swish of the fabric against the wood. I feel him moving again, this time toward the creaking door. I hear him take a quick breath and then the door closes again, squeaking on its hinges.

I move slowly, rolling onto my side so I can look through the wooden slats of my walls. I see him outside, walking around to the back of the house, and I lose him for a while. But I still hear him, opening the storage door carefully, rustling in the dead of the night.

He comes back into view and he turns. He doesn’t see me looking through the

slats, or maybe he does, but he turns for a moment and looks back at the shack. He looks so young with the moon behind him and the mountains rumbling in the distance, calling in deep throated whispers. His face is smooth and his hair stands up in the back from sleeping. He's holding a jug of water in one hand, and has wrapped food into his shirt which is slung over a shoulder. I watch him and know that I want him to go. I want him to follow his eyes across the bend of the earth.

He's just a pale little shadow in front of a deathless world. I look at him and he looks at the shack. And then he's gone, walking slowly into a gray night, the wind erasing his footsteps, fading like a ghost into the quiet waiting land.

In the Subgrade

This job was killing me. I was sitting on the back of a pickup truck, groggy as hell, wishing it wasn't so late, dropping a giant orange cone every few feet. Tony, the driver, was muttering on in the front seat. We were driving along the outer lane of the highway just outside the city, part of a crew that was working on expanding the current shoulder into a new lane. Mornings here saw congestion like no other, and rush hours became standstills with less than a fender-bender, so they sent us. They sent us under the cover of night to stealthily extend the highway without further stressing the rest of the population. So we worked midnight to five, blocking off and clearing the lanes half an hour before we did anything else, and then hammering and chiseling and laying out the subgrade.

There was something strange about working at night that put me on edge. We were a gang of phantoms at work, sweat making us glow, eyes pale white and colors blurred at the edges. Every day I woke up to a setting sun, woke up only for a cold dark night. The chill sank in while I worked, the fog moved into my lungs, the haze settled into my vision. I was a ghost: forgotten, alone, trapped between worlds.

I dropped another cone. Tony was talking about the song on the radio. Something about the singer only getting anywhere because of her father or sister or some type of relative. In front of me, a mostly straight line of orange trailed over a rise in the highway. We'd section off about two miles of road and then head back.

"You heard this song, Frank?" Tony called from inside the cab.

"I can't even hear it now," I said, and turned around. He had his arms around the passenger seat, and was staring back from the cab through the open window. "And keep

your eyes on the road."

"I know what I'm doing," he said. "Just got to drive straight anyhow. I'll turn up the music for you."

Some terrible singing drowned him out, floating softly into the cool night. I dropped another cone, turned and yelled, "I'd rather it just be quiet."

"What?" He turned the music down and looked back at me again.

"I said, I'd rather if it were just quiet. And watch the road."

"Was almost my favorite part," Tony said. "The drums come in all loud and he just starts screaming. I can't do the scream, but I like it. My son told me what it was called, but I forget."

Another cone joined the line. The music went up a notch again, and I heard Tony drumming his hands on the steering wheel. I'd known Tony for a few years now. He talked a lot on every job and usually I could drown him out. But at night his voice just hung around me, filling my air. It seemed too loud in the whispering dark. We reached the end of the section before the song ended.

"Alright, that's it, Frank. Let's head back."

I closed the back of the truck bed and leaned against the cab. "I'm good, you can gun it."

"Ok," Tony said, and we drove back to our site, the wind whistling around the truck, wet with the night.

I'd always liked working construction. I'd worked it for more than ten years, but never at night. I built houses and repaved streets and tore down old schools and churches

and apartments. I've always liked the immediacy of it. People drove on streets right after we finished them, bought homes before they were even done, sectioned lots before the last wall had fallen. We didn't build because someone might want it, we built because someone had already paid.

This job didn't have the same satisfaction. Maybe when it was finished, it would. But when I went home I was translucent. I floated through the night into my sunless room of closed blinds and triple drapes.

Tony parked the pickup along the side of the highway, and we joined our crew. Everyone was wearing orange vests with yellow stripes, hard hats, and some people had goggles. The night was cold and we breathed out smoke. There were a few floodlights here and there, and they cast a strange haze on the highway. Whites were too bright, our vests and stripes glowed like ghosts. We'd stripped the topsoil and cleared the shoulder, so now we were leveling out the land, filling it with subgrade. Eventually we'd gravel it, smooth it, pave it, and then move on to another section.

We worked in pairs, spaced out along the section of highway, haunting the whole dark stretch of it. They heavy machines rolled between us, flattening and trimming and planing. Since we laid the cones together, Tony and I worked side by side. The nights were mostly quiet. Just the clink of work, and the rush of a few passing cars.

Tony had picked up a new habit on this job. He would watch approaching cars very carefully. I think he was afraid one of them would just barrel into us, send us flying in a splatter of yellow and orange and red. He held his shovel above the ground, and eyed an on-comer.

“Oh, I hope this guy turns,” he said, face filling with headlights. His eyes got wider and wider, but he didn’t flinch.

The headlights covered him, and then disappeared as the car went by. He seemed to wake up and went back to work.

“What would you do if he didn’t turn, Tony?” I asked.

“I don’t know. What would you do?”

“Get hit.”

“Very funny Frank. Some of us have a wife and kids.”

“Low blow,” I said, and spat near his shoes. Tony was always talking about his family. He had two boys and a wife who was pregnant again. They hadn’t planned on having this one.

“Ass,” Tony said, but his eyes caught sight of another car. I shook my head. “He’s weaving,” he breathed, and watched transfixed.

I watched the headlights roll up his body and then blink away, a pale scruffy man with the beginnings of a beer belly.

“Really, though, what would you do?”

“Why do you care so much? Don’t bust my ass.” Tony said, and his shovel went back to preparing the ground for the machines and the road. His helmet jogged on his head as he worked.

“I was just wondering if you had a plan. Or would you just watch as he drove right into us?”

“I’m just talking, Frank, just talking.” He adjusted his helmet and shook his head. He looked like he was going to say something, but shut his mouth again and went back to work.

The ground was cold and dark with whispers of white where the floods hit the grass just right. We could have been digging graves out here, graves for all the lives the highway connected. Just clearing out the space so the state could dump the bodies in later. The lights flickered.

I’d only seen one death my whole time working construction. A man had slipped off a beam and fallen just about twelve stories into some rubble. I was on the other side of the site at the time. I just remember seeing him fall and disappear on the horizon, just a dark outline against the blue sky. He yelled the whole way down, but all I heard was a distant gasp and the silent rush after. One guy had been working next to him when he fell, even reached out a hand and grazed his shoe as he went. I imagined that, touching his shoe. Had it felt colder? Had it felt rougher? Or had it been so smooth that it slid right off the fingers. No one was near the rubble where he landed. They taped off the whole area and sent us home for the day, but I remember finding blood when we cleared out where he’d landed a week later. It was there, mixed in with the dirt and the rocks, marking them with his passing, making us remember he had been there.

If I got hit, I would evaporate. There would be no blood, no scream—just a sigh and a click and then the night would suck me in.

Another car was passing. Tony looked up again. “He’s gonna slide,” he said, “slide and plane right into us.”

“Want me to go flag him down for you?”

He didn’t say anything. Just watched until the car sped by, lights piercing the black beyond the floods. It was getting misty, a thousand particles catching and reflecting in the beams.

“You’re sick, Frank.”

“I just don’t see why you say it.”

“Maybe it’s good luck,” he said, and shrugged. “Haven’t gotten hit yet, have we?”

“Not yet.”

He shrugged again, and walked off to the truck. He opened up the driver’s door, took out a bottle of water and drank. Then he walked back, but more slowly than he’d gone.

“Wish we had some music or something,” he said when he got back. He patted down some more subgrade.

“I like it quiet,” I said.

“It’s kind of creepy sometimes. Don’t you think?”

I didn’t say anything. Above us, the floodlights hummed. The mist shone sharply around their burning bulbs. I leaned on my shovel and looked around.

“Yeah,” I said finally.

He looked up, maybe surprised I’d agreed with him. He smiled and shook his head. We spent a while in silence. Our shovels scraped softly, our breaths puffed. The night and the floodlights surrounded us and sank in deep.

“I forgot to ask you,” Tony said finally. “My wife wants you over for dinner again. She says she hasn’t seen you in a while.”

“Well, no one has really. I just go home and sleep.”

“I know what you mean. How’s Saturday for you?”

“I don’t know. I’ll let you know,” I said. Weekends were miserable. I’d wake up at night and not know what to do. I’d tried switching to regular hours for the two days, but it made Mondays unbearable. So lately I’d sat in my dark room, the only light coming from the TV, blue and flickering. I’d fall asleep and not realize it, wake up with a cold TV dinner and a warm beer. I existed in the in-betweens.

“Well, if you come, she’ll go all out. Make something real fancy. So I hope you can make it, is what I’m saying.” He smiled at me.

When I was young, I used to drive alone at night. I would leave my house and drive for an hour in one direction, then U-turn and come back. I wouldn’t play any music or roll the windows down. I would just watch the road roll under me as I went. It was a way to relax. It was simple too. If something bothered me, I would just get in my car and leave. I would be one of these passing cars, speeding off to nowhere in the darkness.

Now I didn’t drive. I worked on the side of the road and watched them all fly by.

“We’re ghosts out here,” I said aloud. Tony seemed not to notice. He just kept laying out the new street. The lights blinked and we shone, disembodied, floating orange and yellow above the road.

I went camping in my backyard once, when I was a child. My father helped me pitch the tent. I had a tiny sleeping bag, and a green stuffed frog that my mother had given me. I tried to sleep, but I kept hearing noises. Footsteps outside, dogs barking, twigs snapping. I imagined they were monsters, roaming around outside. I couldn’t stay in the tent, but I couldn’t run to the house. They would get me along the way.

They were faceless fears. They were formless. They roamed around as noises in their imagined beings. I trembled in the tent, watching for shadows but never seeing anything.

“I’m going to take a break,” Tony said. “I’m hungry.”

“I’ll go with you.”

We sat in the bed of the pickup and ate. We seemed more human then, fuller and solid. The night swirled around the truck, feeling us. Tony talked about his wife, about his boys. The dark seemed thick on the boundaries of the truck, as though we’d found a gap in it, one small space where it couldn’t reach.

“I’m sorry, Frank.”

“About what?”

Tony looked down for a moment. “You know. The car thing.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t know why I do it,” he said. He was wringing his hands together. “Just I keep imagining it, you know? I feel like it’s happened already, over and over, and we just haven’t noticed yet.”

He took a bite from his sandwich. He stared at it while he chewed. We finished eating in silence.

We went back out to our spots. We scraped our shovels against the asphalt. We patted the dirt down flat. We leveled the earth off and prepared it for the road. The night swirled around us, buzzing and whispering. We breathed smoke. We glowed all wrong. The floodlights found us no matter where we stood.

Tony was talking again. His eldest boy had gotten in trouble at school. He had to go down to the school tomorrow to meet with a teacher.

“He’s always trouble, that one,” he was saying. “I just hope…” he trailed off.

His face lit up with headlights. His lips moved but he said nothing. I turned around this time and watched the car. The headlights were blinding. I just saw two blazing orbs, and a silhouette of black. It lasted only a second. Then it drove on, illuminated us for a moment and then rushed on. It stayed burned in my vision.

If I got hit, there would be nothing left. Imagined shadows, wisps of air. No blood, no scream. Just a soft sigh and a muted click.

Lead and Gold

Summer months are when your drains drain slow, like they've got nothing much to think about except the little bit of water they let through. It doesn't matter how much is piling up above them, 'cause all they can see is that little silver sliver they let run through. It's all carefully regulated—clean and efficient almost year round, but nice and slow in the summertime.

The winds blow green sails across my house, and the noon sun swelters above, pregnant and slow like all my sinks. It's August now, many, many years since I saw him, and his mother is moving away. That house will be empty again, just as it was before I met him. We lived here together, sweat beneath the trees and smelled the rush of vanilla through the tall grass. He lived two houses from mine, but that was a hike across the swaying fields and unseen mud puddles. I can't count how many times I took that walk—in daylight, at night, even once in a storm. Like my summer sinks, he kept piling things up on top of him.

I met him in the same pond where he drowned, the same pond where he turned limp and bloated and drained away into the still water. It was my pond; I called it my pond because I went there, but it was also on my father's property so it really could have been mine. All it needed was a sign and some flashy letters and it could've really been my own. I think part of the reason everything slows down in the summer is the heat, and that year, the year that I met him, there was plenty of that. So I spent a lot of time in my pond, my skirts and shirt in a little pile away from the water's edge, my underwear dangerously closer to the water and mud and scum, left where I'd abandoned it to run quickly to the pond.

I must have been underwater when he came. When I popped the surface into lazy ripples, he was there.

“Whatcha doing?” His voice was low and curious. My eyes were still closed with water, and I screamed.

“Whatcha screaming for?” he asked, but his voice stayed low and calm. “I turned around if that’s what your scared of.”

He said scared like skeered, so I started to trust him as I wiped my eyes. He was facing away from me, but in front of him were my clothes, neatly folded and stacked under the same tree as always.

“Don’t turn around,” I said, and I heard him laugh. “It’s not funny.”

“I think it is,” he said, “But I won’t turn around on you.”

I took a good look at this stranger, standing two steps from my underwear, staring at my clothes, chuckling at my naked blush. He had no shoes on; mud stained the bottom of his jeans; he had his hands shoved deep into his pockets, and a yellow baseball cap on his head. I waded over to where I could stand a little better with only my head breaking the surface.

“She’s a nice pond,” he said, and I liked that he called it a she.

“She’s my pond,” I told him, just so he’d know.

“She’s nice.”

“We thank you.”

He chuckled. My pond was shaded all day, had enough trees to keep covered no matter where the sun moved to try and find her. It was always cool down here, not sticky

like under my porch, under a tree, or in his room. I liked the cold, the shade, the frogs that hopped along the grass until they plopped into the water.

“Are those your clothes over there?” he asked, though he must have known the answer.

“No. They’re the pond’s.”

“Does she want time to get dressed?”

I didn’t want to get out of the water. Outside the shade the sun swirled lazily, looking for a way in. “No,” I said, and he sat down in the grass. I spit water in an arc and eyed him curiously. I already liked his yellow hat, too.

“Tell your pond not to worry about me turning around.”

“You tell her,” and he must have heard that I was smiling.

“Don’t worry,” he said. I sank a little farther into the water.

I dove underwater, went down where it was colder to wash the heat from my body. I was careful when I came back up, but he was still sitting in the same spot, not moving. The frogs croaked and the birds sang and I swam with my body underwater, and he sat there motionless, asking me questions here and there but mostly staying quiet.

“Are you new around here?” I finally asked him.

“Yes, just moved here a few weeks ago. My dad just bought the land, said our old one was cursed.’

“Cursed?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and shrugged his shoulders. He took his cap off and resettled it on his head. “My dad’s not all there, sometimes.” He spit in the grass. “Do you want to get out yet?”

“Soon,” I said, and he stood up.

“Well, I’ll leave you alone then.” He put his hand on the back of his head in a salute. “Sorry I scared you.” And the he left—trudged out of the whispering shade without a glance back. I waited for a while, let the water feel me, cool me, know me for long time before I ran to my clothes, eyes scanning the quiet trees for a sign of yellow. But everything stayed quiet, and my pond talked to the trees about him when I left.

* * *

The sun is moving slow and I’m sitting on my porch swinging with the breeze and sipping down pliant memories.

They buried his father last week. I went to the funeral only to watch the earth swallow him up. A few people were there, but the air was only damp from the morning’s rain, and no one stayed to watch as the dirt shuddered on the wood coffin. His widow held her two children’s shoulders and stared ahead stone faced. They buried them next to each other, father and son, but the flowers all clustered on the son.

I swing on this porch and thing about her face, the face of the widow.

There must be more to summer than the heat, more in the whisper of faded spring smells and the bright shock of recollection in greens and yellows and blues. My drains drain so slow that I can’t see the swirls of water leaving, but I know it’s going down. They like to savor the water in the summer, feel it as it slithers by, taste it with their leaden tongues. They caress it as it glides by, and I run my hands through the silk.

* * *

The next time I saw him I was gliding through the tall grass, weaving in and out of imagined barriers with my arms spread wide, catching the wind beneath them. I was

watching my feet as they crisscrossed, as they danced a frantic dance through the grass, and suddenly he was in front of me—a spot of yellow above a brown shirt and muddy jeans. He put his hands out and stopped me from running him over, and I felt his grip on my arms just below the shoulders.

"Woah, where you running to?"

"Home," I said, out of breath. "Just going home for a bit. It's too hot out anyway." His eyes studied me, and I began to hope he wouldn't recognize me.

"I'm Jane," I said, and stuck out my hand.

He took off his cap and bowed a little, turning my hand and kissing it instead. "Please to meet, you Jane." He stood and poked his chest with a thumb. "I'm Dan."

I took his hand, turned it and kissed it. "Pleased to meet you."

He was looking at me curiously, probably still trying to match the voice to a naked girl in a pond. "You really running home? I'd never run home."

"No reason not to."

"You've got grass in your hair," he said, and picked some out of a loose strand near my face.

"It makes me more natural," I said and shook my hair out. He laughed.

"Where do you live?" he asked, and I pointed.

"Just up the hill a ways. You can just see the tip of our house from here."

He put the piece of grass from my hair between his teeth, rolled it from one side of his mouth to the other. His eyes were still watching me very intently. He tugged his hat down.

“I gotta get home, Jane,” he said, “though nowhere fast as you. Was a pleasure meeting you.”

I curtsied daintily, and he started walking past me. Then he turned and smiled and said, “You’re kinder with your clothes on,” and the grass swallowed him up. I went the rest of the way home red-faced.

At home, I sat on our little porch swing, held my hot face in my hands and wondered about him—his quirky eyes and his yellow baseball cap. The wind blew his smell from far away, his accent and the piece of grass he had been chewing. I rocked back and forth on the swing, back and forth in the lazy shade.

* * *

I kept seeing him at my pond and in town, in the grass fields that flowed out behind my house. I found out from my father that he lived in the old Shoots’ house—they were an old couple that moved away to live with their only son. One day, I decided to visit him.

I left my house shoeless, bounding off the thudding wood of the porch, soft ground beneath my feet, tall grass rushing, kissing my face. The sun shone hot above me, moving languidly through the summer sky as it watched me, intent on my long legs pushing through a green and yellow sea. I wondered if he would be home, rocking back and forth on the Shoots’ old chair, sitting with his hat pulled low over his eyes so he wouldn’t see me coming. If he would smile.

I saw the old wood of the Shoots’ house sticking out of the grass. Slowly it rolled out over the horizon. I stopped running when I was just a few yards from the empty

porch. The sun watched more intently, and now even the grass was listening. My feet felt hot.

The house looked as it had before, except the rocking chair was gone. The three steps led up to nothing now except a bare landing and a door. Everything was quiet, leaning forward and breathing only when it had to. I stopped by the bottom step. I had hoped he would just be outside, almost waiting for me. Instead, he left a door in the way.

The porch was treacherous, watching me and waiting, so I went along the side of the house instead. I can still remember how dark it seemed even in the sun, how I noticed my breathing, how I was conscious of every movement. I wondered how it was to go home for him—if it was always so slowed. So loud, so detailed, so painfully slowed.

My footsteps screamed up from the soft ground and roared through the lazy afternoon. I crept along the wall, feeling the sun's eyes, the grass's ears, the house's knowledge. I looked in each window as I passed, saw dark rooms, a large bed on a metal spring frame, small cots, open closets, an empty dinner table. I turned the corner and passed into the cool shade in the shadow of the house. The sun craned to watch but couldn't see.

I knew his room when I saw it, when I saw the tidily made bed with the neat rows of clothes underneath. The room was too small for anything besides the bed, but he had a few books stacked near the headboard with a tarnished alarm clock on top. I stared for a while, imagining him on the bed reading, feet touching the wall, yellow cap on his chest. I imagined him sleeping.

I walked out of the shade, and the sun was jealous. It whispered as I ran back home, grass whipping my legs, its light brushing my face. I decided to visit him again that night.

* * *

My sinks whisper to me about him. They remind me of holding him up in the water, of holding him up in my pond.

He drowned slow in the cold water, frogs sitting and watching the water fill his smile. I kept pulling him up, my wet clothes hanging on me like he hung on to that cold, but he didn't move. I pulled him up and he let everything take him slowly back down into the pond. He just kept smiling while I tried to keep his head afloat, while I tried to keep the water out of his mouth and out of his lungs. My legs burned and my chest pounded, but I couldn't keep him up, couldn't drag against his drag to get him to shore, couldn't pull against his pull to keep him afloat.

He drowned slow in my arms, while my legs tread hard to push his mouth up just an inch more, while my arms shook to raise him just a hair above the surface. That cold moved in slow and deliberate, and filled his smile forever.

My mind drones on and my sinks drain slow. Him and his yellow cap, his accent hanging words in the dark air of his room, letting them float by so I could see them turn in peculiar ways before they popped like bubbles. I have to think of him a bit at a time, savor each memory like my sinks taste the coppery water.

I go into my hot house, my parent's old house but my house now, and get two glasses of water. One I fit in as much ice as I can, the other I only fill halfway. My sinks

stare back at me, waiting in their slippery ways for the water I stole from them. I go back to my porch and leave them alone.

I keep seeing his mother's face. I wondered for a while what she had been staring at during the funeral, what her eyes stayed fixed to while she her head shook off a few last words, while the priest quietly went through his routine. It was his grave—the old one, not the new—I think. She was staring at her son's grave while they buried her husband, while they buried his father.

I can feel her eyes. They search the waters for a speck of reason, taste the lead for a hint of gold. They look through all the piling water for the smile that only I saw.

* * *

The wind was blowing hard when I went back that night, filling the air with the smell of vanilla. The heat was gone for the moment, settling into the ground under a waxy moon. I walked slowly, feeling the ground beneath my toes, feeling the dark and the wind and the chirp of crickets. I loved nighttime in the summer. It was as though the world waited for the sun to leave before coming alive.

There were lights in a few of the windows when I arrived at his house, candles flickering inconstantly near the panes. I went immediately to his window and ended up crouched beneath it, unable to stand and look through. I wiggled my toes in the dirt, feeling him behind me, pressing up against the wooden side of the house, listening.

I heard yelling. At first I wasn't sure, so I pushed closer, felt the wall rough against my cheek. This time, it was loud enough that I didn't need to be close. I couldn't make out any of the words, they made it through the house muffled and clustered together. I stayed quiet, and the yelling went on. Someone else yelled, and then I heard a

door behind me open and shut, and knew he was in his room. He shuffled around, and I could hear him clearly.

"Goddamnit," he said, and kept repeating it, stressing the damn more each time. The yelling had stopped.

I heard the window above me crack open, and I froze. Both of his feet were out before I could move, and then he was sliding out next to me, yellow cap tucked in his back pocket, hands on the windowsill. He hadn't seen me. Slowly he lowered the window, putting a stick under it so it wouldn't close all the way. Then he turned and jumped back when he saw me. Another "Goddamn" slipped from him. His hat appeared in his hand and went to his chest.

I felt like I was burning; if not for the night, I would have glowed red. But there he was, standing in front of me, squinting now to see who I was.

"Boo," I whispered.

"Jesus, Jane, you scared the hell out of me," he said, and set his cap on his head.

"That's what ghosts do," I said.

He looked at me sideways. "What are you doing out here anyways?"

"Haunting," I said. "For the old Shoots."

"Who are the Shoots?"

"They lived here before you. Their son never came back from the war, so the father, in grief, killed his wife and himself."

He smiled. "So why're you haunting?"

"I'm a standin-in. They're tired," I said. I was starting to feel the cool of the night again, and not just the flame of my blush.

“So what are you really doing?”

“I told you.”

He pulled the cap lower. “Well I’m going for a walk. You want to keep haunting or come with me? I don’t really want to stay here.”

“Ok,” I said. “I’ll let the Shootses haunt again.”

He shook his head and chuckled. “They’re gonna have trouble haunting from Florida. You know, with their son.”

“Let’s walk,” I said, and started off quickly. I heard him laugh softly behind me. He jogged to catch up with me.

“Why’re you walking so fast, Janey.” I liked Janey, so I let him have it.

“I thought you wanted to leave.”

“I wanted to walk,” he said, “not run. Got my exercise for the day already.”

When he smiled his teeth shone white like the moon. He kept looking at me and smiling in the corner of his mouth. He grabbed a piece of grass and chewed on it as we walked. I slowed down my pace; the wind blew swirls of grass around us.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “You wanted to walk.”

“So I did. I don’t mind where we go, though.”

“Not a place in mind at all?”

He took the grass out from his teeth and flicked it aside. “Well, back home I had a place to go. Here, I don’t got nowhere just yet.”

“Where did you go back home?”

We fell into a slow rhythm stepping through the grass. He pulled his cap lower and put his hands in his pockets. I watched his lips form words as he spoke.

“Well, we had a little shed quite a ways from the house. Never kept anything in it, really. Just smelled musty and dry all the time.” He looked at me for a second, then back to the grass. “Had a sort of metallic smell, too. My mother told us not to go in there, cause there were all these nails sticking out of the wood. Once my sister Paulie got one through her hand when we were playing tag. Cried for hours. Anyway, it was small and dark and dry, so I’d go there. Just like a place to be for a while, is all.” He coughed.

His hat looked pale in the moon, and his eyes flickered and danced. I walked quietly next to him. “I dunno,” he said. “Just haven’t been here long enough, I guess.”

I nodded to the dark, and we walked along.

“Why was your old house cursed?” I asked.

“Just my dad’s thing, I told you.”

“But why does he think so?”

“I don’t know. He started getting spooked at night. And nothing was growing and there was nothing worth eating, so I’m glad we left, anyway. This house I get my own room. I guess you saw, though.”

He smiled at me and I blushed.

“You’re too quiet for a ghost, you know,” he said.

“Maybe.”

“Do you know where we’re going?” he asked, and I realized I’d been walking to my pond.

“Yes.”

“Alright,” he said, “Just don’t leave me all lost.”

He kissed me that night at my pond, and when he did I dragged him into the water. We floated along in the dark, our clothes bobbing around us, our bodies close together. My cheeks were burning but the water was cool. He was burning and the water was cold.

* * *

It was toward the end of the summer when I found him, when I found him and his smile face-down in my pond. He was still breathing when I ran in, his eyes rolled in his head while I tried to keep him afloat. But what my sinks always whisper of is his smile. How he smiled as the water filled him up.

In a few months I managed to take a part of him and keep it for myself. I took a piece before he walked into my pond and let the water drain everything out of him. I took a part that he willingly gave to me, a tiny bit that I came to know and remember, but in the end was not complete. I wonder how he hid the rest so carefully, how he showed me what he wanted me to see.

But there was his smile.

When they buried him I watched his mother and wanted to tell her, and now at his father’s funeral I wanted to tell her again. My sinks have been draining his smile slowly all these years. They have been tasting it, trying to understand. They sift through nights in his room and runs across the grass fields to his house. They savor his yellow cap and his twisting words. But they drain slow, letting one silver sliver of water through at a time.

Defunct

My goddamn leg hurts. I don't even know why. I was just walking and then I got this sharp pain right at the hip, like it's falling out of the socket or something. Maybe I'll be dragging my leg around in a few days while it dangles uselessly. Maybe it's payback for it carrying me all these years; it's just tired of all this dead weight on it. I think that's a shitty way to get back at me though, cause it isn't helping either of us.

I was walking to the bathroom to brush my teeth when it first started to hurt. It was in the middle of the afternoon and I'd just been sitting watching TV, so when it hurt, I tried to think of what I could have done to it and drew a blank. How badly can you fuck up your leg just by sitting on a dirty couch? I've heard of people dying from clots or whatnot when they sit for too long on fifteen hour flights, but I don't think a few episodes of crappy afternoon sitcoms really put you at risk. Who knows though—seems everything puts you at risk for something these days.

Before I could make it to the bathroom, the phone rang. It was some idiot who wanted to buy one of my trash sculptures. Actually, he had requested a few months ago that I make him something intricate, to embody all sorts of his bullshit emotions and feelings of loss and disenfranchisement. I don't know. He's been buying my shit for a while now, so I agreed to it. Thing was, I hadn't even started on his goddamn emotional expression of his own whatevers, and didn't even have enough trash to throw something together for tomorrow, when he wanted it. I told him I'd have it ready and hung up.

When I got to the bathroom, I noticed we were almost out of toothpaste, so I decided to go to the store and buy some more. I have this thing about brushing my teeth. Sometimes for no reason I'll need to go brush them. I always carry a travel toothbrush

that folds over itself and a tiny tube of toothpaste just in case. I've brushed my teeth in McDonald's and at Don Lucci's, this fancy-ass Italian joint downtown that I mistakenly dragged a date to. I've left lines in the bank to go brush, and I keep a cup of water in my car just in case. I work from home, so that's not a problem, but once I had a retail job and had to explain to the manager why I went to the bathroom so often. He told me he didn't give a shit, and I quit a little while later. That job was shit anyway. Maybe it's weird, I don't know—but I've never had a cavity. I've never had any sort of problems with my teeth, except the dentist usually says I don't floss enough. But I don't need to fucking floss.

I went to the store, and my goddamn leg hurt the whole way. I looked like an asshole limping along the side of the road, like I was old or crippled or something, when really it was just this random pain in my leg. The store's just around the corner, anyhow, so I didn't have to go far. But then there were aisles and shit, and I limped everywhere. I kept punching my leg to see if that would help, and some lady gave me a strange look.

"My leg hurts," I explained, but she didn't seem interested and went on searching through yogurt.

I finally got to the toothpaste aisle and grabbed a bunch of boxes so I wouldn't have to come again for a while, at least not for toothpaste. We still buy food sometimes. My roommate and I go on cooking sprees, so we'll buy a ton of shit one week and then cook half of it and let the rest rot away until we decide we're some sort of chefs again. In the interim, we eat old to-gos and cold pizzas.

The cashier eyed me carefully when I set down eight boxes of toothpaste, like a guy can't buy what he wants without getting shit for it. I just smiled and said, "Gotta keep them clean."

She smiled back and it was clear she didn't share that sentiment.

Stef was home when I walked in. She was lying on the couch watching TV, and turned around when I opened the door.

"More toothpaste?" she asked. She always gives me shit about brushing, but she uses extra paste every morning and night. She loads it on, brushes, and then loads it on some more. I think she's getting it from me, though, because I don't think she used to do that.

"Also, some guy called about your art. Said to tell you he was very excited."

What an asshole. Who calls back to say they're excited? All he's getting is a bunch of trash glued and welded together.

"I'm fucked," I said. "I haven't even started his sculpture. And my damn leg hurts." I went to the bathroom to stack up all the boxes of toothpaste under our sink.

"Did you do anything to it?"

I finished arranging everything before I walked back out to the living room. "It's just pissed," I said, and sat down next to her.

"No food?"

"There's some Chinese."

"I ate it. I mean, didn't you buy any while you were buying your toothpaste?"

I shook my head. Some home videos show was playing. Stef loves that crap—pet videos, funny videos, any sort of video, really. Oddly enough she doesn't have any videos

herself; she just likes watching other people's lives. She also loves world record or amazing feats and stunts shows. She oo's and aa's and asks our TV a bunch of questions like why someone would do that, or how did he train in hanging from hooks. I just think they're all crazy and want a twisted sort of attention.

"I'm going to the dump later. I have to get shit for his sculpture. Want to come?"

"No," Stef says. "Aaron wants to go out to dinner somewhere." Aaron's this asshole she's recently started seeing. She usually picks pretty shitty dudes to date, but this guy has most of them beat. He comes a close second to the one that used to hit her, I'd say. I don't think I've ever seen him sober, not even when she forced me to join them for brunch. It was eleven on a Sunday and he was taking swigs from his flask. I could see his damn eyes shaking back and forth.

"I still don't like him."

"You don't like anyone."

"I'll bring you back something," I said. She nodded and watched another kid get hit in the nuts. Half the videos are just someone getting hit in the balls. It seems like that never gets old, like if you send one of those, it's a guaranteed in. I wonder if people stage the shots, take a hit right in package for a chance at fame.

Stef left before I did. The assbag honked his horn from outside, and she grabbed her bag and went.

I think we're good roommates at this point. It was rough at first, but three years seem to have smoothed out some of the edges. Before her, I had a relatively worthless roommate who everyone called Toilet. I don't really remember why, but sometimes when

I said it I remember thinking just how well it fit. One day Toilet tells me that his girlfriend is moving in with us, and five minutes after he does, she walks in, a skinny thing with long arms, dirty blonde hair, and thin blue glasses. She made a disgusted face when she saw the place, and I didn't blame her. Back in the days of Toilet, there were boxes and bottles everywhere, some empty, some not, some covered in a layer of mold. Toilet also loved to throw his clothes all over the place, even on the boxes, so that sometimes lifting a sweater revealed a month old pizza. My art was everywhere too, not contained like Stef has trained me to keep it. Anyway, I was in boxers and finishing off a forty, but I got up and shook this new girl's hand. She told me her name, and I said, "Like, Stefanie?" and she said "No," and then I sat back down to watch more TV. I drank, Toilet passed out somewhere, and this girl started cleaning the place up.

She stayed for a few months just using our shit, but eventually she showed up with her car full to the brim and we all unloaded everything into our apartment. There was more room now without all our trash everywhere, so her stuff fit in easy. That's not to say our apartment was spotless, it had just transitioned into its current state—a contained mess. Stef's big on containment. Messy but controlled.

I think when Toilet saw her clothes in his room and her hairspray in the bathroom, her tampons boxes next to my stacks of toothpaste, I think that's when he flipped. I think he thought her moving in just meant more fucking, not this invasion and sharing bullshit. So he left a month or so after she moved her shit in. I didn't even notice for a while, because he used to disappear for a few days at a time and come back looking like hell. But after a week or so I realized some of our stuff was missing too—a few pots, his clothes, the TV remote—and I figured he had booked it. I drank and got ready to tell Stef.

She came in late from work still wearing her server's clothes and I was hammered. I stumbled up and gave her a forceful hug, mumbled, "Toilet's gone," as coherently as possible. She said, "I know," and went to her room. She paid his half of the rent until the lease was up, and then re-signed with me, and when that one was up, we signed again, and then again. I never really asked her why, she just quietly signed her name and I did the same. I don't really ask Stef to explain herself, things just go understood.

She used to give me shit for leaving my stuff everywhere. She almost threw one of my sculptures away once. "What the hell is this, anyway?" she asked, holding it up. I can't remember which one it was, but since they're all made out of trash, it probably didn't look like anything spectacular. "I don't care, but someone'll buy it," I said. "Well, keep your shit in your room," she said, and I do, or try to. When I leave trash out she lobs it onto my bed, so I try to remember.

Stef doesn't care about much else besides containment. She doesn't complain when I bring girls home, and I don't complain when she brings assholes over. She makes fun of all the toothpaste, but a few times when supplies were low she bought some more. A while ago, she took a sculpture of mine and put it in her room and it's still there in the corner, some of her clothes hanging off it, not quite finished but fine just the same.

My leg still hurt like hell on the way to the dump. I usually try to walk as much as possible, and the dump's not too far, but today I wished I had just driven. I left a little while after Stef got into the car with asshead. I think as long as there's "ass" in front of some body part, I can use it to accurately describe Aaron. It just has that feeling that it's right, like Toilet did. I practiced hiding my limp as I walked, but every block or so I

screamed “Fuck!” and punched the shit out of my leg, so people were staring anyway. Assholes.

The guy at the dump knows me already. His name’s Earl or Evan or something, I’m not too sure. I used to go dumpster diving for materials, but figured it’d much more efficient to go to the motherload. The first time I came, Earl or Evan—I think it’s Earl, but that might be just because he works at the dump—anyway, the first time I came, he gave me a hard time about going into the dump. Apparently there’s rules on taking the shit that people throw into huge rotting piles.

“I need it for my art,” I said, and his eyes lit up a little.

“What sort of art?”

“I make sculptures. Trash sculptures.”

“Why trash?”

I get that question a lot, and I don’t really have an answer or care enough to think about it. I just started using trash cause it was free, and don’t see a reason to switch.

“To show that what we throw away still has life and beauty.”

“Like a Louise Nevelson thing.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t know what the hell a Louise Nevelson was, but it turns out Earl’s a pretty smart guy. He quotes poetry to me sometimes when he helps me find usable trash, usually e.e. cummings, or rather, E.E. Cummings, since Earl insists Cummings didn’t like his name in lowercase.

Once he was convinced I was an artist, he let me in. “You should show me your work sometime,” he said as he opened the gate.

“Sure,” I said, and eventually sold him a few pieces.

Today, he greeted me as usual, but added, “What’s wrong with your leg?”

“I don’t know. Hurts like hell.”

“Did you do anything to it?”

“Not that I can remember. Just hurt for no reason this afternoon.”

“Maybe you slept on it wrong,” Earl said sagely, “or over-extended something yesterday and just didn’t notice.” He got up from his chair and stepped out of his little wooden shack of an outpost. “You should stretch it out,” he said, and then showed me a few stretches.

“It’ll be fine,” I said.

“Be sure to hold them out long enough,” he said.

“I will,” I said. I wasn’t sure how to take a slightly overweight man doing stretches in front of a city dump. He stopped after a while, went back into his shack and opened the gate.

“Mind if I join you for a little while?”

“Never do,” I said, and so he came along with me.

We walked through the dump as usual. I search methodically and he goes off alone and comes back with an armful of trash that I pick through to see if he’s found anything good. Earl’s pretty good at finding interesting shit; I usually fill the backpack I bring much faster when he decides to help out, and with much weirder things. As we walked around today, he talked about books he’s read recently, and movies that he’s seen, littering E.E. quotes where appropriate.

“How much do you make selling these things?” Earl asked. I was looking through his pile and found a round, multi-colored piece of metal that was strange enough to

accept. I don't know what my criteria is for the shit I take, it just has to please me momentarily, I guess.

"Not enough," I said. "That's it for this pile. Mind if I brush?"

He shook his head. I took out my toothbrush, put on some paste, and started brushing, while Earl absently looked around for more sculpture worthy trash. When I was done, I swished from my water bottle and spat into the dump.

"Actually," I said, wiping my mouth, "I have to make a piece for this guy by tomorrow. That's why I'm here."

"You can make one that fast?"

"It's fucking trash. I don't know what people think is so deep about it."

"I like the ones you sold me. Maybe you've got innate talent."

"Well, it doesn't make much money."

"So you're still working that marketing job, then?"

"Yeah." By marketing Earl just means that I call people and offer them shit which almost all of them refuse. I expect rejection so often that I've hung up on people who said that they definitely wanted my magazine subscriptions or useless exercise machine. It's not a bad job though, cause I get to sit on my ass at home. As long as I get through a list of numbers and get a few purchases a month, the guys that pay me don't give a shit if I'm ass naked and jerking off in my kitchen while I make the calls.

"That limp's pretty bad. Hope it's nothing serious."

"Maybe it'll kill me."

"How do you like your blueeyed boy Mister Death."

"Cummings?"

He nodded and quoted the whole poem. I don't understand why Earl works at the dump; I asked him once and he said he got a sense of power from guarding the city's trash, but it seems like a pretty shitty deal to me. I don't know half the shit he knows, and I don't have to sit around trash all fucking day—it just seems a little unbalanced. But a lot of shit in this world doesn't really seem fair.

When my bag was full, I limped back home, leaving Earl in his dump-smelling shack by the dump-smelling dump. He asked me to bring him another sculpture, and I told him I'd give him the next one free. The least I could do for the guy is give him some poorly organized trash.

Since I got home, I've been sitting in my room, blowtorching and gluing and nailing trash together into strange shapes my idiot buyer might think are just artsy enough to pay for. I'm actually pretty tired, but Mr. Idiot is coming in the morning, and Stef isn't home yet from her date with asstooth, so I keep getting more beer and meshing random shit together.

I can't stand that Stef is out with assfinger. I don't know how she can settle for such an alcoholic, worthless bastard. I stick a circular, half melted, corroded chunk of metal onto the side of the sculpture and imagine what Mr. Idiot will think it represents. I finish another beer, get another from the fridge. At least making these goddamn things is therapeutic. And when I'm done I get to sell trash to those assholes on the street.

I drink and weld and wait for Stef.

Eventually I hear a key in the lock, and she swings the door open, stumbling in and falling on the couch, leaving the door wide open behind her. I get up and close it, then join her on the couch. She's groaning and twisting her head around.

"Feeling alright, Stef?"

"Fuck you," she says and then giggles before groaning again.

"Don't puke on the couch," I say, and then I start laughing too. I don't know why the fuck I'm laughing.

She rolls onto the floor, and I flop backward onto the couch. She gets on her knees and doubles over, like she's praying except she's holding her stomach and still moaning.

"Everything's spinning."

"I'm not."

"I can't see you."

"Stop looking at the ground."

Stef tries to look up, and I can see her eyes shaking back and forth like assfoot's did at brunch. I don't like assfoot quite as much as some of the other combinations.

"You're going to puke," I say, and she folds over again. "I'll get you some water."

I walk shakily to the kitchen, trying to remember how many beers I had while I was waiting, and I fill up a glass with water and drink it and then I remember it was for Stef. I bring it back to her and she drinks a little bit of water and then spits it back into the cup.

"It tastes bad," she says, holding out the *a* and rolling her head limply.

“Drink the damn water.”

She tries again and spits it out again. Her hair’s all in her face now and I want to brush it back so I pick her up and take her to the bathroom and set her down right by the toilet in case she has to puke.

“I’m going to puke,” she says.

“Puke, then.”

“Go away,” she says, and she holds onto the sides of the toilet. “The toilet smells bad.”

I go to the kitchen again and my goddamn leg hurts again and I limp back to the bathroom with some paper towels and all purpose cleaner like there even is such a thing. I spray down the toilet and dry it off.

“Go away,” she says again. “I can’t puke with you in here.”

“Just fucking puke.”

I leave the bathroom and I’m missing the paper towels. I wait outside the door listening to make sure she’s fine but I don’t hear anything, and then I have to brush my teeth so I walk back into the bathroom and start brushing at the sink. Stef waves an arm at me but stays holding onto the toilet with the other.

“I can’t puke if you’re listening.”

I spit and rinse and say I’ll go play some music. She waves her arm at me again so I go out and sit down at the shitty keyboard I bought for twenty bucks at a garage sale and realize I still can’t play keyboard for shit. I play chords with my right hand and single notes with my left hand, and mumble the words to some song I must have learned a long

time ago. I sing loud enough for her to hear me but I don’t pay attention to the chords or the words, I just listen for her.

Finally I hear her retch and I play a few more chords and then limp to the bathroom. I kneel down next to her and keep her hair out of her face and rub my hand up and down her back while she vomits everything up. She feels small and warm while her body retches, and I steady her as best as I can. She dry heaves a few times and I hand her a tissue and flush the toilet and her eyes are red and watery and she won’t let go of the toilet. So I stay kneeling next to her while my goddamn leg throbs and she waits to make sure there’s nothing left.

Cucaracha

My father woke me before the sun came up, shaking me and whispering, "Despierta, cucaracha." *Wake up, cockroach.* Across the small room, my two older brothers slept soundly on their cots. My father stood silently above me for a moment, then turned and walked out, his bare feet making the faintest sound on our concrete floor.

I kicked the sheets off, revealing my skinny seven-year old self wearing white briefs and socks—one to my knee, the other barely past my ankle. I stared up at the ceiling and slapped the mattress with my palms to wake up.

"Shut up, cucaracha," said one of the cots, and my brother rolled over, half asleep. The room still smelled cold and dewy from the night, and I slapped the mattress once more to spite him and the missing sun. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, letting them dangle just a few inches above the ground, my heels swinging in front of the box spring mattress resting on the floor below me. I dropped the rest of the way and padded out into the main room.

My father had my bowl and the milk out, and had already poured me some knock-off cheerios. I asked him for more sugary cereals, but we always ended up with tasteless Os. He was washing dishes when I walked in, scrubbing them quickly with a soapy rag, and stacking them back in the sink.

"Do I have to go to school again?"

"Yes."

"But Tio and Tonto don't go." We called my oldest brother Tonto because he never seemed to think. He'd been swindled out of paychecks, tricked into scams, and

even mugged once when he followed a few thuggish men down an alley to help them with their car.

At the sink, my father shook his head. “I told you before, they work.”

My father walked me to school every day: rain or shine, healthy or sick, it didn’t matter. I munched on bland soggy Os and watched him finish the dishes. He was already dressed for work—fading jeans and an old maroon polo shirt that he kept tucked in. From his boots to his baseball cap, my father always looked like he wore a thin layer of dust, like it was soaked so far into everything he owned that nothing would ever get it out. He moved from the sink and started making me a ham and cheese sandwich: no butter, no mayo, no mustard, just a little lettuce and a slice of tomato to go with it.

My mother died when I was only three, and I have very few memories of her, just hazy snips of recollection and a few clear features. I have many memories of my father, but they all feel worn and lined, like a photograph that has been unfolded and refolded so many times that the grooves mixed with the gray scenery. He looked tired every morning that he woke me up for school, went through the motions very quietly but lovingly. He must have thought of her on those cold mornings, felt her black hair on his fingertips as he set out my breakfast, prepared my lunch, left a lone dent in his pillow. He must have kissed the cold side of the bed as he lived and breathed where she should have been.

“Where’s your water bottle?” my father asked.

“I think I left it in my backpack,” I said through the cereal.

He went to the peg on the wall where I hung my backpack, and unzipped the pockets until he pulled out a slightly crushed Aquafina bottle that barely had a label. He

filled it up in the sink, and then put it and the sandwich wrapped in tinfoil into my bag. He came over and sat down at the table.

The window in the main room let in only the glow of a streetlight outside. My father folded his hands together, peaking his index fingers and resting them on the bridge of his nose.

"They didn't move you into the ESL class, did you?" He said it "eh-sol," almost like *the sun*.

"No. You told them not to."

"I know. If they try to put you in anyway, you must tell me."

"Why can't I be in ESL?" I stressed the E.

"You won't learn there. Tio never learned anything and got stuck." Tio had stopped going to school when he was in the third grade for the third time, before I had even been born. I was in first grade now after repeating kindergarten for not knowing English well enough, and both of my brothers had been out of school for more than ten years.

"What if I can't learn?"

"You'll learn. You're smart, cucaracha, smartest boy I know."

I munched some final Os, more than a little proud.

"Did your brothers make sure you showered last night?"

I nodded, but he looked at me skeptically. He reached over and rubbed a thumb behind my ear.

"Go shower again. Are you finished eating?" He took the empty bowl, and started washing it in the sink. "Don't take too long."

Our bathroom was dark. Icy water came slowly out of the shower, black dots in the lightless room. I jumped in holding my breath, rubbed myself down quickly, and got out of the frigid stream breathing heavy. I soaped up in the dark, making sure to scrub my ears well. I took another deep breath and rinsed, then shut off the water. My skin was tingling, my breathing quick, my body shivering. The cold set in deep.

My father was asleep sitting at the table when I came out, his eyes closed, chin on his chest and hands in his lap. My backpack was on the seat next to him and his own satchel for work on the floor by his chair. He looked peaceful and alone. I stopped in the doorway when I saw him, wondering whether to wake him up or go back to bed. After a moment, though, his eyes opened and he looked over.

"All done?"

I nodded.

He looked down at his watch—a scratched up digital Casio that lit up with the push of a button. "Just on time," he said, and the watch beeped twice. He smiled and I'd never seen him look so tired. He stood up slowly, grabbed his bag. "Let's go or you'll be late." Before we left he put a twenty dollar bill on the table and set the salt shaker on top of it. Money for my brothers—they always needed money the week before pay day.

My father unlocked the door in front of me, and stepped out holding onto my hand.

The Western sun was still hidden, our run down neighborhood quiet and masked in a sleepy dawn. My father locked the door behind us and took a crunching step onto the gravel that led to the main road. He held my hand tightly, his palm calloused and rough against mine. The world was silent. He fished a pack of cigarettes from his left pocket,

and let my hand go only long enough to light one. Then he tugged on his Astros cap, took a drag, and we started walking.

It was a three mile walk to my school, through our dusty neighborhood, past a few bodegas and markets, alongside a stretch of highway, and finally down the road to the old brick building where I was supposed to learn English. We walked without talking, listening only to our footsteps and the occasional sounds of a world waking up. My father sucked his cigarette down to the filter before flicking the stub aside. In the dark bodegas, store owners yawned and opened up their doors. My father waved to some of them and they waved back. We never stopped walking.

"I used to own a bodega," my father said. "Not too far from our house. Way before you were born."

"Did you get to eat all the food you wanted?"

"No. I had to sell the food, cucaracha."

"Couldn't you eat a little of it?" My father smiled at me and shook his head.

"No, it's bad to eat what you have to sell."

"It's a good thing I have nothing to sell," I said.

"Maybe it is."

The sky was gray above us, covering everything in a colorless film. We kicked up dust as we walked along. My backpack bounced along low on my back. My father adjusted his satchel across his shoulder, reached for another cigarette but decided against it. I couldn't imagine my father working in a bodega.

"What happened to it?" I asked. I'd never heard this story from him before.

"I lost it."

“You lost it?”

“Yes, I lost it.”

“How could you lose a whole bodega?”

“Sometimes things just get lost, cucaracha.”

I frowned. “Did someone else take it?”

“No,” my father said, but I thought he wasn’t being honest anymore.

We walked past more stores, mothers cradling babies in one arm and pulling open large metal store fronts with the other. A newspaper boy, a position both of my brothers had held more than once, rolled slowly by on his bicycle. I saw a man loading tortillas into the back of a truck.

“Look how many tortillas he has,” I told my father, and pointed.

“He probably sells them.”

“So he can’t eat them?”

My father chuckled. “No, he can’t.”

“How sad,” I said. “I never want to sell anything.”

“It’s not so bad,” my father said. “I used to give your mother things from my bodega.”

My mother loved chocolate bars, or so I knew from stories my brothers and father told me. When she was little she would steal them and eat them right outside the store. She couldn’t even wait long enough to get away safely before she ate them. Once her father caught her and hit her raw, so then she ate secretly in her bed, hidden under the blankets. I imagined my father in his store, and my mother eating chocolates right outside.

“I thought you said you couldn’t take things?”

“Well, I would pay for them.”

“You bought them from yourself?”

“Yes, cucaracha.” That didn’t make sense to me.

“What did you get her?”

“Flour. Eggs. Butter. Milk, sometimes.”

Those didn’t seem like good presents. I couldn’t see her eating those just outside of the store. I didn’t say anything, though. I liked hearing about my mother, and my father rarely talked about her.

“She would visit me all the time when I worked there,” he said. “She would keep me company.”

The one thing I remember vividly about my mother is her hair. I remember that it was long and black, and fell over the right side of her face until she tucked it behind an ear. I imagined my mother—a beautiful woman, sparkling eyes to go with her long hair, always smiling, always happy—I pictured her swishing into a bodega with my father behind the counter; she was laughing and throwing her head back, and he was smiling just from watching her.

“What else did she do?” I asked. He had been silent for a while.

He let go of my hand and lit another cigarette. We were almost to the highway. “Get on the sidewalk, cucaracha.” He grabbed my hand again and walked between me and the road, slowly smoking. We turned onto the street that joined the access road further ahead. Now there were cars driving by, kicking up dust and adding a vibrant hum to the air.

I pulled on the leg of my pants. They were one of Tio's old pairs, and much too big for me, so they dragged along the concrete. My father noticed and stopped me.

"Don't mess up your pants," he said. He knelt down and rolled up the legs so they wouldn't drag. He rolled the left one first, then the right, brushing the dust off each one as he did. "And tuck in your shirt." I pushed the ends of my shirt into the pants. It hung out like a belly in front of me.

My father stood and we kept walking. We merged onto the access road, and started walking alongside the highway. The jeans started to drag again. He kept me as far from the road as possible, hugging me to the concrete barrier and always staying on my left.

Tio told me that Tonto had gotten hit by a car once. He'd been out delivering newspapers on the bicycle my brothers had shared. He wasn't looking forward, was tossing the papers slowly left and right when he'd heard a horn blast and the screech of tires. The car hit the front wheel and flipped Tonto over onto its windshield.

"I hit the glass so hard that it shattered and I fell into the car," Tonto said at this point in the story, but Tio shook his head at me, smiling.

The bike had been ruined, and my brothers had lost their jobs delivering papers soon after. Tio had to work at a car wash to buy a new bicycle before he'd been able to take up his own route again. My father hadn't let Tonto get his job back, saying he was too stupid to even do that right. My brothers told me paper routes were the best job, always interesting. They would trade favorite stories to impress me. Tio had once been chased for two blocks by a man whose window he had hit with a paper. Not broken, he would assure me, just hit. Then Tonto would tell me how he found a fifty dollar bill just

lying on the sidewalk. They would go back and forth until one of them lied and the other one caught him. That meant they were out of stories.

My father and I were still walking along the highway when we came across a dog dying quietly in our path. It must have been hit by a car, not head on but probably just clipped and sent spinning into the dirty shoulder beneath the guardrail. There was blood coming from its mouth, slowly spreading on the ground, matting the fur along its neck and chest. Its sides rose and fell very slowly, but its eyes were wide open. It made a soft whimpering noise in its throat as we approached.

"Poor stray," my father said, and I stopped walking. "Don't look at it."

"Who would hit a dog?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They probably didn't see it. These strays get hit all the time."

I bent down next to it while cars sped past us, some honking, most ignoring. It was not a very big dog, and its fur looked soft. There was a bloody gash across one of its back legs.

"I've never seen other ones," I said. I reached out my hand to pet it. The dying dog looked at me, and its tail thumped softly on the bloody ground.

"No lo toques," my father said. *Don't touch it*.

"Why not?"

"It might bite you."

"I don't think it will," I mumbled. My father tugged on my hand, but I stayed watching the dog. It kept whining and breathing out droplets of blood.

"Can't we help it?"

"Come on," my father said. "You're going to be late for school."

“We have to help it.”

The dog started to whine again, and now its sides jerked. It had stopped moving its tail. My father tugged on my arm again, more forcefully now.

“Let’s go.” He pulled again. I shrugged him off.

The dog’s tongue was moving around in the dirt as it panted. It kept staring right at me, and I stayed crouched beside it.

“There’s nothing we can do,” my father said. I reached out to prove him wrong; I reached out and pet the dog’s side, and it shivered. My father jerked me up by my arm and slapped me on the side of the head.

“I told you not to touch it. It might be sick.” He shoved me forward, leaving the dog behind. My head stung.

“I just wanted to help it,” I said.

“You can’t help it. It’s dead.” He pushed me forward again and started walking. I looked at the dog. It didn’t look dead to me. Its tail still twisted, its sides still wrenched raggedly up and down. My father pulled me along, and I walked backwards, watching the dog until it was out of sight. We walked along the rest of the highway in silence. I started to cry but didn’t know why.

“Don’t touch strays,” my father said. “They could be sick. I’m sorry I hit you.”

“We should have helped it.”

“We couldn’t.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.” I thought he wasn’t being honest again.

He let go of my hand once we were off the highway, letting me walk freely a little ahead of him. The road to the school was through a nice green residential area, sprinklers hissing in the morning air, cars parked in twos and threes in driveways. The sun was just coming up in the sky.

My father walked me to the front door of the school, just like he always did. I saw other children hopping out of their cars or filing off of the bus. I looked at my father in his dusty clothes and worn Astros cap, and it struck me again how tired he looked. He bent and kissed my forehead. “I’m sorry, cucaracha.”

I hugged him. He smelled like dust and bodegas. Back home, Tio and Tonto would be waking up for work. They would be sitting down at the table my father had left set for them, eating the food he had gone out and bought the night before.

My father stood finally and put his hand on my cheek. He looked at me for a long time but didn’t say anything. Finally he dropped his hand, and I shifted my bag on my back.

“Perdoname,” he said, and then he turned and walked down the steps.

In class we drew pictures, so I drew one of my mother. I drew her in a flowing dress with her raven black hair. I colored her teeth white because the paper wasn’t white enough. I drew her first, and then drew her helping the dog while my father and I watched. I drew her sweeping it up in her long arms and carrying it back home. She whispered softly in its ear as she carried it, stroked its head very gently and it stopped whining. She kissed the bridge of its nose, right between the eyes, and its tail wagged again. She cleaned the blood from its fur, the dirt from its glazing eyes. She laughed and my father laughed with her. She smiled white and smelled beautiful.

Making the Weather

Dear brother,

It's strange to write to you, but I felt after twenty-five years it was time. Twenty-five years ago our mother found you cold in your crib, hands curled into tiny little fists. Your mouth was still open and your eyes too, but you were cold, small and cold.

The month after we found you was silent. No one laughed or smiled or talked in our house, and we moved like we were afraid of disturbing someone. We never mentioned you again. Our father threw out the crib and stripped the wallpaper from your room, and we filled it with books and a computer. I was the only one before you, and no one came after. We all forgot and filled everything with something else.

I used to have dreams that you were alive. They were never very exciting; we played catch or I taught you how to throw a football, to wrap your finger on the laces and let it spiral out. You always learned quickly and by the end you were throwing touchdowns and fastballs.

I wasn't planning on writing, but yesterday I was reminded of you. I was waiting for a bus when I heard bagpipes. I've always loved their slow hum, the steady deep notes and the wavering melody. I turned and saw a man walk out of a church behind me, playing. Behind him came six men bearing a coffin and struggling to keep it still. Their bodies were strained, but their faces were somber. The coffin tilted as they descended the steps, and I imagined the body inside rolling slowly left and slowly right to the solemn bagpipes. The men laid the coffin down on a stretcher and rolled it to the hearse. The bagpipes played by the car.

I watched them file off, saw one of the bearers grimace now and then to keep from crying. But what reminded me of you was the red headed boy who walked out with this mother. He was pouting and his suit was crumpled and untidy. His mother walked holding his hand, stopping now and again to whisper something to him. He kept looking toward the coffin and looking away.

I can't believe it's been twenty-five years. I was only four when we found you, but I can still remember wearing my suit. I remember how our mother smelled during the service, how she kept leaning over to kiss my forehead. Our father sat quietly next to me. We had one of the few pictures of you up at the front of the church, and the priest said what he could. Not many people came, but the coffin was not heavy.

I'm doing okay these days. I went to college and graduated, but now I'm stuck. I feel like I'm stuck, anyway. I work at a local TV station, trying to get my break, but I don't see how it's going to come from reporting the weather to a small town. Every time I stand in front of that green wall, I feel less important. Lately I've been saying things unprompted, and no one notices. I could make up a storm front and nobody would care. Floods in Georgia, heat waves in Michigan. Nobody would notice. Nobody would care. No one bothers unless it's happening to them.

I don't think anyone ends up where they think they will. I don't remember what I used to think, but it certainly wasn't this. Most of the people who work with me want to be somewhere else. Only the anchors are close to satisfied, but the station is so small—they can't feel like they're really giving news. They should make up news, like me. Five dead in Jackson county. A peace treaty was signed. If we say it, it's true. We give people

their view on the world, we form their perception. A bomb went off in D.C. Flu epidemic in California. There's power here in every word.

I can't read anymore. I've tried to read new books but I get bored. I tried to re-read my favorites but already knew what happened. Yossarian lives, Nick ends up fishing. I want to be able to shape them, to invent a new ending. I want to stop George Wilson, I want to tell Tom that there's nothing out West. I want to craft and imagine and believe.

We never forgot you, brother. I said we did earlier, but that wasn't true. Until I moved out I would see our mother stand outside your room sometimes, looking in on all the books. Our father always got very quiet around your birthday. He would buy things for me and for himself when it drew close, as though he had to give your gifts away to someone else. And I taught you how to throw and catch.

That boy that I saw at the bus stop funeral, he reminded me of you. Well, he reminded me of myself. I remember looking at your coffin and thinking about you sleeping inside. You weren't rolling left and right, just sleeping. I don't remember if we ever took your blue pajamas off, the ones with the little moons on them. I don't think we did. You went to bed and stayed that way, even while the doctors cut you open, even while the morticians filled you up. I always just imagined you asleep, waiting for some alarm to wake you.

Our parents are fine. They're still together, which is surprising. These days everyone is divorced. I'm not even thirty and I'm already divorced. But they're still together, despite the fights they get in and the silence that I feel when I visit them. I go and I sit at the table and they ask me about work and Leana, and I notice that they don't

talk to each other. Leana is my ex-wife, you know. Our mother's hair is graying, and our father is bald. They are going to retire soon, I think. I don't know what they'll do then.

They moved out of our old house a few years ago, so maybe you've stopped getting visitors. Our mother doesn't stop by your room anymore. I wonder if the new owners feel anything when they walk by. I would sometimes, you know. I would pass your room and have a strange feeling that if I looked in I would see your crib and not shelves of books and an aging computer. I would see everything the way it was when we found you, except you would be yawning and crying in your blue moon pajamas. You would be waking up from a dream.

I used to talk to Leana about you. She never understood how I still remembered so much, and I guess I don't either. We found you after less than a year. You hadn't even said a word yet. But I remember your pajamas, and your room that our father tore down. I married her early, maybe too early. We never had any children, but that was probably for the better.

I think you're lucky, brother, because you are remembered. Our parents remember you. I remember you. Our old house remembers you. There are few pictures of you, I think we got rid of most of them, but they are unnecessary. Somehow you left some part of yourself behind, some part that asks passing eyes to look in and see things how they were. You know, I never did look. I wonder if one of those times I might have seen you.

It would have been a storm. A storm all the way from the cold tundras of Canada. Low pressure air moving south and high pressure air moving north. They clashed right above our town and raged all night. There were tornadoes, howling winds outside and rain beating down on all the windows. I was walking by your room to get a candle

because the power was out—all the power was out all across the town. And just then, the clouds opened up like an eye and the sun burst through. I looked toward the window and there you were, glove in hand, ready to learn. You smiled and I smiled, and that's how it happened. The whole town knows.

Our parents got me a shirt when they found out you were on the way. It said, "World's Best Big Brother," and they made me wear it when you were born. I wonder if you remember it. The first time they let me hold you, I had it on. Your eyes were closed, so maybe you didn't see it, but know that I wore it for four days before I saw you because you were late. We kept waiting and you just wouldn't come. When you did, they said you were heavy, but you were light when I held you, almost weightless. Our father picked you back up with one arm and cradled your head in his free hand.

I did look in, once, you know. I walked inside your room and stood by your crib. It was dark and you were asleep. I came to look at you, to make sure that you were safe in your big room. I stood by your crib in the dark and I looked at you for a long time. I remember how quiet it was, how the white sheets helped me see you and your moon pajamas. I remember watching over you while you slept, and waking up the next morning when our mother found you.

That boy at the funeral. I wonder why he kept looking at the coffin. I wonder if that was his father, or his grandfather, or maybe a much older brother. I wonder what he was thinking with his red hair and rumpled suit and the bagpipes playing a pulsing heartbeat in front of him. Were you breathing when I came to visit you, brother? Do you remember me watching over you?

Is it strange to want to be remembered? Maybe it would be enough to have one person remember, to have one person watching my coffin and wondering.

It will happen like this:

The town lake will flood, but the weather will be warm, hot, scorching. People will wear bathing suits and swim around their sunken homes. They will swim to my funeral, gather and talk and know that this was my last report. An eclipse will come, blotting out the blazing sun and leaving everything dark and muggy and wet. You will be there, and you can tell them everything.

You can tell them I created the weather. You can tell them I never managed to leave this town. You can tell them I taught you how to throw a perfect spiral and pitch a ninety mile-an-hour fastball. And when they ask to see, you can show them.

Oysters

The boy was thinking of a girl he had seen when he stepped on a bit of glass. He didn't notice until each step stung, and he looked down to find blood. He was coming home from the dock, walking along uneven cobblestone through his village and leaving red smears behind him. He was shirtless and barefoot, his skin dark, his hair black, his chest and arms muscled. From here, he could still smell the beach and the ocean, but he could not see or hear them. The boy set down the bucket he was carrying. Inside were fish he had caught this morning, gutted and cleaned. He stood on his left foot and spooned salt water from the bucket onto his right. The blood washed away for a moment, and then spread through the cracks in the sole of his foot. The boy sat down in the street and washed his foot again. He poked his thumb where the blood was creeping out. It stung when he pushed it, but he couldn't see the glass.

The boy stood, picked up his bucket, and kept walking home. He walked on the heel of his right foot. The gray streets behind him were dotted with red. The air was still cool from the morning, but he could feel the heat sliding in already. There were some palm trees around him, but mostly small stone houses with broken tile roofs. Newer ones had sheets of tin instead. The windows were dark, covered with sheets or multicolored curtains. People sat on steps and watched the boy limp along.

He had seen her the day before while he was selling oysters. She had been lying on her towel, wearing a blue bikini, somehow distant from the crowd on the beach. She must have been staying in one of the hotels. He had waved at her, and she had smiled, but then put her head back down. Today he would go and talk to her. First he had to drop off the fish.

His sister opened the door when he knocked. She looked like him, only not as dark. She eyed him curiously, peered into the bucket.

“How many did you catch?” she asked. She was a year younger, but often he felt it was the other way around.

“Seven,” he said. She hugged him and kissed his cheek. “Be careful,” the boy said. “I stepped on some glass.”

“Where? Which foot?” She looked down. “Come sit, and I’ll get it out.”

The boy set the bucket inside the doorway, then hopped a few feet through the kitchen and sat in an old wooden chair. The kitchen was tiny; a table and three chairs barely left space to move. There were two other rooms adjoining, one where the boy slept with a blanket and pillow on the floor. The other had a small mattress for his mother and sister, sewing and weaving supplies, jars of shells and string, half-finished shirts and blankets that they were working on. They sold them in the village and by the hotels along the beach.

The boy watched his sister. She liked to take care of him, so he let her. She left for a moment and came back with a needle. She knelt and grabbed his foot.

“It’s here,” he said, and pointed. “I couldn’t find it, though.”

She nodded. Her hands were soft on his foot. He watched as she pushed down with her thumb along his foot where he had shown her. She poked the tip of the needle lightly on his skin, until she found the opening the glass had made.

“I found it,” she said when she felt the hard glass against the needle. Slowly she dug it out. It was stuck to the tip of the needle when she was done, red and tiny. “All done,” she said.

The boy thanked her. “I have to go sell,” he said. “I’ll leave the fish here.” He was anxious to get to the beach.

“Wait before you leave,” his sister said. “I have to meet mother.” His sister disappeared again into her room. The boy examined his foot. The skin was red where the glass had been, and there was a little blood. His sister came back with an armful of handmade clothes to sell and a box of hooks and coarse wool. She also had a small strip of cloth.

“This is for your foot,” she said, and gave the boy the cloth. It went once around his foot and he tied it at the top.

“Let’s go,” he said, and they left the house empty.

His foot didn’t sting as much anymore. There was only a little twinge if he stepped on it the wrong way. People were leaving their homes with bundles of things to sell at the beach. By afternoon, the village would almost be deserted. A man with a cart full of candy passed them by, bumping along the road. Children in their underwear were racing through the streets. After a while, the boy and his sister reached the edge of the village. There was a low wall that marked the boundaries, crumbling on the sides. The street became a dirt road.

“We need our own boat,” the boy said.

“You always say that.”

“I could fish when we needed,” he said.

“You know we can’t afford a boat.”

“We could also give rides to the *hoteleros*,” the boy said. “They love to go around to other beaches nearby. Or to the reef. Let me help you.” He took some of his sister’s

bundle.

"How's your foot?"

"Not bad. Maybe if we just bought a motor, we could use someone's boat."

His sister shifted the clothes in her arms. Palm trees hovered around them, lining the road and spotting it with shade. The air was warming quickly. The boy could almost smell the ocean. Up ahead he could see the hotels, taller than any tree.

"Just don't talk to mother about it. She gets upset."

"I know," the boy said.

They split off the path. Sand worked its way under the cloth and rubbed the cut on his foot. The palm trees thinned out, then stopped altogether. The boy and his sister broke out onto the beach. They turned and walked along the border where the trees hedged in the sand, kept it from reaching the towering hotels. There were people all over now. They were laughing in the water, stretching out in the heat. Children built sandcastles, couples drank under umbrellas. The boy's arms were hot under the blankets he was carrying.

He scanned quickly for the girl, but didn't see her. He hoped she hadn't left.

His mother was sitting under the shade of a palm, her blankets and shirts hanging on a rope behind her, on display. In front of her were shell necklaces and earrings, laid out carefully on a box. Her tree was just outside the fenced off hotel grounds. The *hoteleros* walked by her to get to the beach. A man who sold candy and ice cream sat next to her. Next to him, a woman with umbrellas for shade. Every hotel exit had its set of salesman.

"Hijo," his mother said when she saw them. Lately the boy noticed the wrinkles around her dark eyes, the white *canas* in her hair. She was not even forty, he thought.

“He caught seven bonitas,” his sister said.

His mother clasped his hands. “I will make some for tonight.” She looked at what they had brought. “Help me put these up.”

They strung up a new line between trees, and carefully hung everything so it was visible. A man in a bathing suit stopped and bought a necklace for his wife.

“Are you selling today, hijo?” his mother asked him.

“Yes, I should go,” the boy looked toward the beach. He could hear the hum of people talking and laughing, rolling in the waves. The boy kissed his mother on the cheek, gave his sister a hug. His sister was finishing a blanket, weaving the thick wool around itself with fishhooks. He turned and went to the beach.

The boy paid for his bucket of oysters, and a little extra for some lemons. If he sold a quarter of the bucket, he would make his money back. He walked along the beach shirtless, calling, “Ostras! Oysters!” His eyes scanned for lifted arms. His eyes scanned for the girl.

The oysters sold quickly today. The second family that stopped him slurped down half the bucket. The boy cracked open shells and laid oysters on the lid of the bucket, which he had covered with ice. If the people wanted lemons, he cut one and set the wedges on the fringe. If the family spoke Spanish, he talked with them. If they spoke English he listened to them. Sometimes he would even have a few oysters to encourage them to keep eating.

When the bucket only had ice left, the boy went back and bought another.

“Is it a good day?” the oyster seller asked. The boy nodded and took his bucket.

The sun was blazing now, the sand white hot. The boy's dark skin shone. He cleaned the cloth on his foot as it filled with sand, rubbed ice on the cut. A man with two bottles of wine next to him flagged the boy down. One bottle was half empty. The man's chest was covered in hair. He had sunglasses perched on top of his head.

"How much?" the man asked in English. The boy told him, shifting the heavy bucket. The man motioned for him to stay, so the boy opened the bucket, set up the lid with ice and some oysters.

"Lemon?" the boy asked.

The man nodded. The boy cut one into wedges. The man had a few oysters, and took a swig of the red wine.

"Would you like some wine?" the man asked in English. The boy turned up his hands to let the man know he didn't understand. The man extended the bottle, and the boy nodded. The boy took a long drink from the bottle.

"Gracias," he said, and the man waved it off. The man bought oysters for the boy, and kept offering him more wine. The man talked constantly, but the boy couldn't understand most of it. He understood "wife" and "vacation" and "beach" although he sometimes confused that with "bitch."

Finally the man finished off the last oysters on the lid, and motioned for no more. The boy stood and packed up the bucket.

"Hey," the man said, and the boy took the tip he was holding out.

"Gracias," the boy said, and the man rolled over in the sand.

The beach was filled with people now. The boy had to maneuver around umbrellas and beach towels and wet running children. He stepped around kissing couples

and sleeping people. The sun was relentless.

He was on his third bucket when he saw the girl. She was wearing a red bikini today, not the blue one, but he was sure it was her. She was lying on a towel, tanning her back. The boy approached her slowly, ice and water and shells rattling in his bucket.

“Ostras! Oysters!” he called out loudly as he approached. She didn’t look up. Her back was bare. The boy moved toward her, weaving through other people, past umbrellas and towels. Finally he was next to her.

“Oysters?” he asked, pronouncing it very slowly. The girl turned her head, squinting up at him.

“No, gracias,” she said, and put her head back down.

The boy stood fast for a moment, glad that she spoke Spanish. He slowly set the bucket down. “Do you come from the city?”

“What?” Her head came up again, her squinting eyes.

“Do you come from the city?” he asked again, resting one knee in the sand.

“Yes, I’m here for a week,” she said. She looked him over and gave a little smile. The boy could see beads of sweat on her back. She reached behind her back and tied the strap of her top.

“Are you sure you don’t want oysters?” the boy asked.

“I’ve never tried them,” she said. She sat up. Her long black hair spilled over her lightly tanned shoulder.

“They’re very good,” the boy said. “Best with lemon, I think. I’ll let you try one for free.”

She smiled. She was very pretty when she smiled, the boy thought. He opened the

top of the bucket and reached his hand into the icy water. He pulled out an oyster, cracked it open with his knife, and handed her the half with the meat in it. He grabbed a wedge of lemon from the bucket and gave it to her too.

"What do I do?" she asked. She was holding the shell on the tips of her fingers as if it were dangerous.

"Put some lemon on it," the boy said, and waited until she did. "Then just suck it off the shell. It'll be a little slimy."

She eyed the oyster, bit her bottom lip as she thought. Very slowly, she moved the shell to her lips. "It smells salty," she said, and the boy smiled. She closed her eyes and tipped the oyster. She stayed very still for a moment, the shell right by her mouth, empty. The boy watched her closely.

"It's good," she said finally. "Slimy like you said."

The boy smiled. "Do you want more?"

"Do I have to pay?"

"No," the boy said.

She smiled and crossed her legs in front of her. "Ok, then."

A single cloud moved in front of the sun, and for a moment the constant heat on his skin was gone. She watched him very carefully as he set up the lid—laid out the ice, cracked all the shells, wedged the lemons. The beach was milling with people, and in a moment the sun came back. Blinding white sand, blue water, dark blotchy bodies.

The boy talked to her about fishing, about searching underwater for oysters. She thought it was all interesting. She couldn't believe that he fished with no bait, that he found shells scattered on the seafloor with a mask and snorkel. She leaned forward while

he talked, looking at him sideways and smiling. He liked the interest in her eyes, the attentiveness of her body, and so he told her stories about reefs and the sea.

When the lid was empty, the boy asked if she wanted more oysters.

"No," she said, "and I'll pay for them, anyway."

"My pleasure," he said, but when she offered again he didn't refuse her money.

She leaned over and checked a gold watch that was lying on her towel. "I think I'm going to go back to the hotel," she said. "It's too hot out here."

"Ok," the boy said. He stood and put the lid back on the bucket.

She was gathering up her things, putting her towel and sunscreen, her sunglasses and hat into a stitched bag. When she looked over at him, her eyes moved back and forth between his. She turned away and picked up the bag.

"I'm on the fifth floor," she said, her back to him, "room 512." She walked away slowly, not looking back.

The boy picked up his bucket. It was almost empty. He watched until he saw which hotel she disappeared into, then turned to the rest of the beach. He walked and the ice and shells rattled.

The boy had never been inside one of the hotels before. He felt strange walking onto the fenced off grounds, stepping through the doors that slid open for him with a breath. Inside it was air conditioned, plush. There were pots with fake flowers and carpets with more. There were cheap paintings on the white walls. The chairs were wicker and the tables shone spotless.

He had returned the bucket before coming, and now walked empty handed,

shirtless, and barefoot through the lobby. The floor was cold on his feet. The boy watched the men in uniform attending to the *hoteleros*, men from the village dressed well to blend in. They bowed and smiled and spoke in English, carried bags and offered drinks. They watched him closely when he walked by, but said nothing. He would never want to be dressed neatly and stuck inside the whole day, the boy thought. He got on the elevator and rode up to the fifth floor.

She answered when he knocked, smiled her pretty smile and let him in. She had changed into a simple white dress. She offered him wine, which he drank, and she sat very close to him, pressing her leg against his. He didn't say much, and she kept looking down at her wine glass. When he kissed her, he thought he could still taste the oysters on her tongue. Her dress slipped off easily. She moved predictably, pushing herself onto him, running her nails across his chest, pulling his head down and breathing in his ear. He kissed her all over, remembered when she responded, gave her what she wanted. She felt like village girls but completely apart. He smelled salt and sweat and fish but she whispered of the sea. He smelled perfume and wine and loved his dark skin against her light. He felt the softness of the sheets, the coolness of the air. He felt the white walls and cheap paintings all watching him, the fake flowers and tiled floor listening intently to every sound. He became the most exotic thing in the hotel.

The boy sold one more bucket before the end of the day. Once the sun left, the beach emptied, the *hoteleros* streaming back through their fences and into their rooms. His mother and sister were gone already, so he walked along the beach alone. The waves crashed softly behind him, the trees swayed and whispered in the night breeze.

He looked up at the hotels, the hotels that had claimed the sand and pushed his clay huts and cobblestone streets further inland. They sat quiet silhouettes, dark rooms and flickering lights. He turned back to the ocean and sat down in the sand. In his hands he had a few oysters that had been left over. He cracked them open and laid them out in front of him. He ate them one by one, trying to think how they must have tasted to her. He smelled the air and watched the waves.

When the oysters were gone, the boy stood up. He left the shells in the sand, a perfect line. He turned his back to the beach and left. He walked along the sandy road, feeling the sting in his foot. He walked past the broken wall, along the dirty streets. He walked into a village settling down for tomorrow.

The boy yanked the starter cord and the boat's motor hummed. He was shirtless in the morning light, his skin cool in the air. He sat in the front of the boat and waited. He played with coils of nylon, flicking the hooks on their ends.

Eventually the owner of the boat came, sat in the back and gripped the throttle. The motor puttered and they turned away from the wooden dock. The boy smelled the ocean in front of him. They headed straight out, away from the beach and the dock and the village. Straight out into the morning. The boy looked toward the shore. The beach was starting to lighten with the sun, but was still abandoned, the hotels dark against the sky. His village was not visible from here.

The driver pushed the boat faster. The boat skipped along the surface of the water, and the two bounced in the white wooden seats. The boy passed some nylon through a ring on the left side of the boat, and another reel on the right. Then he let the hooks out

slowly, bait-less, decorated only with a thin strip of metal to weigh them down and make them glitter underwater.

How stupid the bonitas are, the boy thought.

The driver stayed quiet, looking ahead.

In a few minutes, the left line snagged. The boy slowly pulled on the nylon, drew a flapping fish on board. He pulled the hook out and threw the fish in a bucket. The fish sloshed around inside. The wind lifted the hook and it shimmered in front of the boy. The boy let the hook back out.

He caught ten bonitas in an hour.

“Enough,” the boy said, and the driver turned the boat back to shore. The salty air whistled through the boy’s hair. The fish flopped on each other’s scales in the bucket.

When they got to the dock, the driver took the motor off his boat. He laid the motor in a makeshift carrier. “Tell me if you want to go out again,” he said to the boy.

“Of course,” said the boy. “Gracias.”

The driver smiled and walked off with the motor on his back. The boy stayed on the wooden dock, feet hanging off the edge. He looked at the fish inside the bucket, squirming and flapping. How stupid, was all he could think.

He took the fish out of the bucket one by one and cut their spines with his knife. He slipped the edge of the blade in behind the gills and pushed down until the bone snapped. He cut off their heads and slit their bellies to clean them out. He threw their remains into the sea and stacked their emptied bodies next to him.

When he was done, he put the fish back in the bucket. The water lapped at the dock, the insides of the fish drifted and bobbed below him. Smaller fish came and picked

at the entrails, biting and darting away. He watched them eat. The boy rubbed his hands on his pants and stood. He turned and walked toward his village, carrying his bucket, smelling of the morning. Smelling of salt and sweat and fish, but not of the sea.