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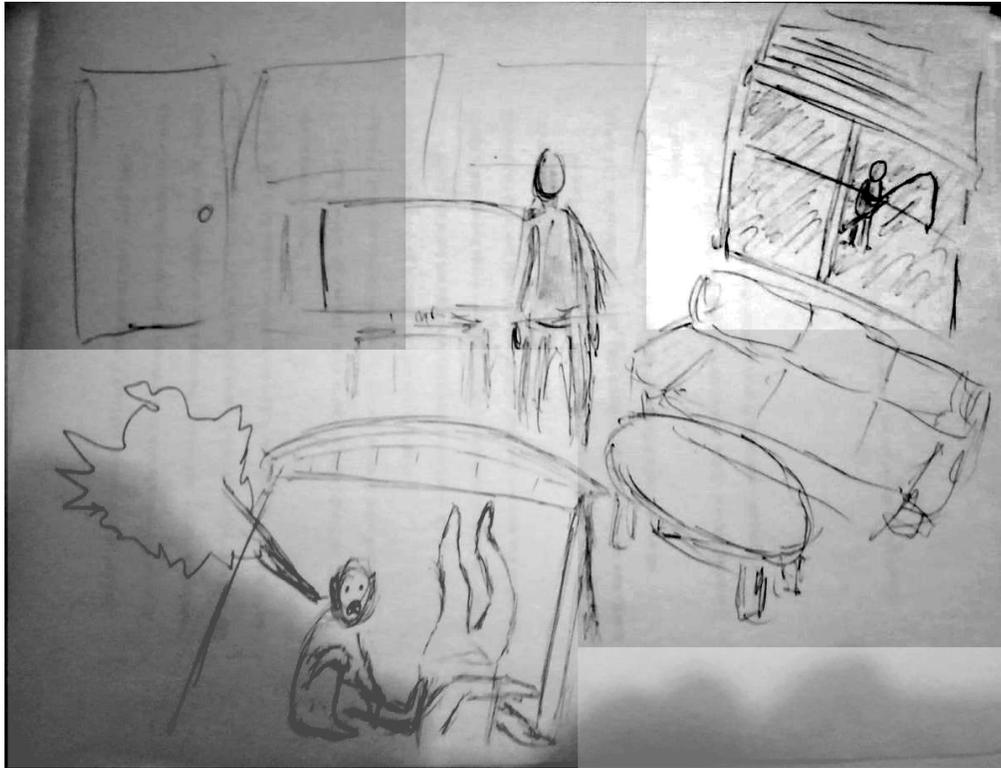
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The Museum Near the Hospital

Stories



by

Robert James Cassidy Smith

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree at
Sarah Lawrence College, May 2019

"What is needed," the prince said, "is for us to destroy the image of the world, no matter what it is like."

—Thomas Bernhard, *Gargoyles*

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Uh-Oh, Love Comes to Town

We were on the roof, smoking pot. Rena had a pair of binoculars. It was the last summer, or any season for that matter, that I would spend with my father, the last before his unfortunate break. Rena was only my friend, and possibly my only friend. There wasn't much else to do and we had no other means of emotional support save each other. That and Rena was in love with me, and maybe I got off on it.

“Huh,” said Rena, and I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes at her coyness, which I found grating. There was a lot about her that I found grating, yet she continued to spend time with me. This was invaluable because I didn't have a driver's license.

I had already hit the joint twice, but in light of her obliviousness, took one last extended toke, which sent me into a coughing fit. My eyes reddened as I coughed and I pushed a wave of nausea back into my stomach.

“What,” I said, extending the joint towards her. She didn't notice me. She was transfixed with whatever her binoculars were pointed at. I looked down at the pool, visible along with a good portion of the wooden deck from where we sat on my house's roof. I watched its surface waver and reflect light.

My father had a routine for swimming in this pool. It was the same every time, every day, every morning. First, he'd walk, straight into the frigid shallow end, down the textured steps, into the water. He'd rotate back and forth, the tips of his fingers gliding across the chlorinated blue. Then he'd raise his arms up into a triangle and dive forward, transitioning into a measured butterfly stroke.

"Where did you say your dad was," Rena said, in a confused voice.

"Grocery shopping, I think," I said. "Do you want any more of this joint or what?"

"Maybe you should take a look at this," Rena said, motioning for me to come look through her binoculars, "Or maybe you shouldn't. I don't know."

I swiped them from Rena's hands. I put them up to my eyes and moved back and forth, adding sarcastically,

"What am I looking for? What am I looking for?" before Rena guided me to the sweet spot with her right hand.

"What is it," I continued, "a blue-jay? An ostrich? Some kind of rare sparrow?"

Then I saw it. It was a scene set inside my next-door neighbor's, Richard Godsen's, hot tub. Inside were Richard and my father. Richard was positioned over my father, hunched over somewhat, and my father, Pete, was leaning back, his eyes closed and his mouth hanging agape. He was giving him a fucking handjob. You could tell from the little splashes of water around my father's crotch.

"Huh," I said.

I'd rather not go into the scene where my father hit my mother repeatedly with a wooden spoon from 7:23 PM to 7:24 PM (I was looking away through most of it and staring at the stove's LED clock), because I'm saving that for the therapist my mother will force me to see once they're legally divorced and she has money.

"Why didn't you do anything to stop him," Rena asked, behind the wheel with red puffy eyes, turning a corner into the parking lot of a local playground and baseball diamond. We were both high and would be getting higher in a minute.

"I guess at the time I wasn't sure it was really happening," I said, answering without thinking, a direct line between my mouth and my brain. I felt a bit queasy because I knew a more honest answer might be something like, 'I didn't want to be hit with the spoon either'.

"Yeah," Rena said. "I guess I can sort of understand that." She enunciated each little word like they all had lives of their own.

We got out of the car and walked up past the playground and towards the baseball diamond, its outfield meshing indiscriminately with the larger grassy area. We walked out and stopped ten or so yards from an ongoing little league game. I sat down on the grass cross-legged and Rena did the same. Sometimes I wanted life to be something bigger than smoking pot in a field, but my life was often little more than that. Five yards away an outfielder stood, his body twisted to eye us with suspicion.

When we drove back, all I could imagine were buildings, warehouses let's say, filled with little stationary cars where moving roads were projected onto windshield

shaped screens. Rena's ever-present shoegaze played on the car stereo, somehow sending me farther into myself.

The only thing that separated my house from Richard Godsen's was a few yards' strip of dirt and pre-autumnal leaves. I wanted it to be the last summer I spent there, smoking pot atop the pool diving-board or throwing a ball at the half-tennis court wall.

"I think I'm getting headaches," Rena said, "headaches unlike those felt by other people."

"Hmm," I responded, "Interesting," while continuing to stare alternately out the side window and windshield.

The headlights on passing cars shone through the windshield and I winced. Rena glanced over at me and I continued looking forward. This was the little thing we did, the talking without saying, avoiding the tension of her want. No emotion resonated out from me.

"Maybe it's a satellite," she went on.

"Or maybe your rising planet," I said.

"Rising sign," she said. "I think you mean rising sign."

"Or ruling planet, maybe," I said, as we curved onto my house's road. Rena snorted through her nose.

We pulled into my driveway and sat there in the parked car, outside of my garage. A jetliner passed above, close enough for us to hear the sound, or me at least, as Rena's ethereal music was blasting from the speakers, bouncing around the inside of the SUV. Rena opened up the glove box to pull out her little acrylic pipe and proceeded to fill it with marijuana from a small glass box. The windows of her car were open and I

wondered if my father could hear us from inside over cable news squall. Then we smoked more, back and forth, the rotating act of it almost better than the high.

“Can we put on something with, like, a beat,” I asked. “I feel like I’m about to drift off into nothingness.”

“Like what,” she said, “what would you have me put on?”

“Something more pop/rock, I guess.”

“You take it, just put something on,” she said, throwing her iPod into my lap.

I scrolled through it. She wasn’t the type of person that listened to music for a hook. I persevered and found something because I was high and didn’t want to agitate her further.

We sat there quiet with just the music for a while. It was fine. I had become adept at thinking it was fine.

“You don’t have any cigarettes do you?” I said, finally.

She pulled a pack out from her cup holder and held it in the dark in front of her torso. Rena looked up at me with a blank face and was silent, then smiled.

“Just the one,” she said, “wanna split it?”

We passed it back and forth for a few minutes.

“Do you want the last drag?” Rena asked, displaying a cigarette that was little more than a cotton filter.

“Sure,” I said.

Rena pulled on it and grabbed my head with her free hand. She moved closer and pulled me in, we met midway. Though she was attempting to kiss me while blowing smoke into my mouth, the sensation I most remember is our teeth hitting.

“No,” I said, “no.” I hadn’t wanted it. Perhaps I pushed back a bit too hard. She was looking at me with a face. I was trying not to look at her.

I walked in the front door and closed it quiet enough so you couldn’t hear it click. My father was passed out on the recliner with a can of coke held limply, resting on his stomach, the blue light from the TV coating him. I wondered if he had slipped some whiskey into the can, but decided it wasn’t worth the risk of checking.

Then the TV started emitting a horrible beeping noise, and a gray box appeared over a pundit’s face. ‘FLASH FLOOD WARNING: 1AM-9AM’ it said in bold lettering. My father jolted awake and spilt some of his drink on himself. He looked up at me, failing to recognize my presence for a good half-a-minute. Behind us the television set continued to blare warning noises.

“I’m going to bed now,” I said to him. I said it, loud, as if shouting over some swell.

“Did you remember to close the door and take your medication?” he asked. It was nonsense. I couldn’t fault him as he was only half awake.

I was lying down in my room, listening to the sound of the intermittent but heavy rainfall. If you stare at a white plaster ceiling for long enough all of its little imperfections will become known to you. Through my laptop speakers black metal was playing, which meant I was not quite ready for sleep. It was close to two in the morning. I’d always had trouble sleeping.

I got up from bed to turn the lights off, then I lay back down, switched my gaze from the ceiling to the standing, oscillating fan in the corner. The rain picked up again, pattering against the window. Outside, I could hear a car door open and close. Its engine started. I heard the sound of tires moving over gravel and onto dirt.

I had thoughts of Richard until my thoughts were submerged.

Rena and I began to kiss. She wrapped her hand around the back of my head and I pulled her pelvis into mine. Then she let go and pushed my hands away, falling back onto the bed. She pulled off her sweatshirt and when that was off, her t-shirt.

I should have felt something different, I know. Instead I felt coldness welling inside of me, enough that it scared me. I slunk back like I was being rewound. I crouched fetally on the floor for a minute. From outside came the sounds of drunkenness and car doors. Rena sat upright, took her head in her hands and began moaning like a deer whose back has been broken through car collision. Her head began warping, though I couldn't tell if it was just my vision failing me, if I was too high or something. Little slits opened up in a ring around the top, columns formed along her forehead and across her temples.

I got up and walked out of my room, down the stairs and to the ground floor, where the garage and laundry room were. I slid the glass door open and stepped out onto the gravel. Richard and my father were leaning against the family sedan. Richard was gripping a bottle of whiskey with a hand connected to an arm wrapped around my father's neck.

“Pete?” My father whimpered. “Is that you?”

It was raining and very dark out. There were rumblings of thunder in the sky. When I’m lit up and remembering being there, this is what I think it was: simply lightning. But then there was the moaning and thumping I heard coming from up and behind me. Looking back I saw Rena at my bedroom window. Light was pouring from the northern hemisphere of her head as she banged it against the glass. Her moaning was loud enough to make out from the gravel lot. The light was bluish-white and almost blinding. It was illuminating the three of us, the parked car, and the edges of the nearby woods.

Burning Through

The light from out the one big window woke me up on my bed, fully clothed in my suit. In my dreams I had been with Selma. I had been at her house.

There was the familiar construction work going on in my head. A dry mouth. The type of morning where you want to rip everything off your body and conform to whatever sunlight remains hitting your mattress, then open your mouth and breath through your open mouth.

Instead I sat up in my expensive suit and took a deep breath. I recovered with thoughts of my bank account and the vial of cocaine in my breast pocket. I scratched myself up and down. Everything was muted, which was normal, except I had my hearing aid still in. I pulled it out of my left ear. My right ear was completely blown, and could not be aided in such a way. The hearing aid was switched on. The battery was dead.

I was living in the attic of a house. It was sort of like a boarding house. I was the landlord. All of the tenants, save me, were addicted to opioids. I slept on a brass-framed bed in the middle of the attic, on top of a loose sheet and a pillow without a case. I didn't care about things like that. All of my stuff was in boxes. I thought of maybe getting a bookshelf, a dresser, but the boxes seemed to match the room's aesthetic qualities. I felt

like a malevolent spirit inhabiting the house—it was more of a haunt than a home. I didn't spend too much time there.

The third floor of the house, the one below the attic, held a bathroom and kitchen I shared with a man named Jeremy. I won't contribute to the stereotype that drug addicts are unhygienic. Some there were cleanly. Not Jeremy, though. Fruit flies had taken over his space.

Jeremy was sleeping on the couch, flies buzzing around him like Pigpen in *Peanuts*. Or maybe he was dead.

Not using the kitchen, or the connected living area, where flies would coalesce on the cloth white drapes, was easy enough. The bathroom was more difficult. They coated the shower curtain. Dozens were on the mirror. When you lifted the lid to the toilet bowl they would fly out, as they had taken to gathering on one side of it. I had become too repulsed to open the medicine cabinet and so had discontinued shaving and flossing. Instead I pushed an electric razor against my face in the attic, without looking at a mirror, and then I'd slather myself with Lubriderm afterwards.

I could have lived somewhere better. I was set for the rest of my life because of the sum of money my parents had willed to me. They had died when their car made its way off road and into the Delaware River. I had been in the backseat. It's how my ears got blown out. We were approaching two years since.

"Jeremy," I said, looking at his prone body. I could not hear how loudly or quietly I was speaking, making out little beside the vibration of my speech. I was standing away enough from Jeremy, at the spot where the floor changed from wood to tile, which demarcated kitchen and living room. It was also the farthest possible spot

from the flies. It would have made me anxious—they buzzing in pockets on all sides, especially as I could not hear them, but I was energized with a sinus drip in my throat and an acrid taste pooling in the back of my mouth.

The living room appeared to me like some distant scene, wavering in heat—such was the life the flies had given it. There were flies on him, too and I threw something at him to make sure he wasn't dead.

He didn't pop up or anything, just opened his eyes. The flies jittered but were mostly still and he closed his eyes again. I rummaged around the kitchen for any booze but the only perishables were boxes of macaroni and cheese and some condiments in the refrigerator.

I walked across town in my nice suit. I smiled and reveled in the absurdity of my form in relation to the sidewalk pavement suburb. I smacked a popsicle out of a child's hand and straight down onto the sidewalk and beamed at him—the little fucker. His silent face drooped up at me. In my ears there was only a little ringing noise.

I was sleeping with this woman, Selma, who was much older than me, my best friend from high school's mother. Irish looking. I liked the way the lines moved on her face when she smiled and laughed. She was chipper because of this idea of hers that everything around her was not, in fact, tilted or intrinsically fucked.

I stood in her house, where the staircase leading up from the basement made a triangular wall. On the wall were a few framed stock photos of nature that were calming to look at. A waterfall, which also had a bible verse on it. A canyon. A mountain. The

open plains. Their purpose was mostly aesthetic as they made a poor substitute for television.

I hadn't noticed Selma walk up but I wasn't riled. She smiled at me and I back. She placed a little metal disk in my hand, which I made haste to replace with the one in my hearing aid. The sound came back just like a TV unmuted.

"Old watch battery," she said, motioning to a watchless arm for some reason.

"Thank God you still wear a watch," I said. I turned back to the pictures on the wall as if my regained hearing would somehow affect my intake of them.

"I got those at Marshalls," Selma said to me.

"I fucking love Marshalls," I said, and I meant it. I leaned in. We kissed. It was a nice moment. Then she walked back to the washer dryer at the far end of the basement and I noticed her ass in her pants.

There was a desire to communicate the horror I had experienced trying to get around that day, even though it was actually fine. It just seemed like the sort of thing a normal, more adjusted person might say. It might have earned me some sympathy points—humanized me. Anyway, I wasn't feeling articulate enough to express it.

Her son Craig and I were still friends. Craig still lived at home at age 23. He was under the spiritual tutelage of his new girlfriend, Rhonda. She didn't seem to be anything specific, just a pot of New Age gobbledygook. Rhonda was the rebelling hippyish byproduct of an overly religious household. Her ideas were increasingly esoteric—increasingly off-putting and weird. Craig thought himself a lost soul, and some new thought on his own spirituality, was sorely needed. It needed to be something farther removed from himself than Catholicism or the like. It's humiliating for a lapsed Catholic

to come back to Christ, tail between their legs. He was growing out his beard because it seemed like the thing to do.

Selma's daughter and Craig's half-sister, Megan, ran down the stairs and beelined for her mother. She bumped into me along the way, looked up at me with blank eyes. I tried to smile at her but it didn't come out right. Then she ran. I always thought the child hated me and could never shake the notion from my head.

Craig was to my left, sitting on a couch at the other end of the basement, watching the television show where they prank people. There was also a loveseat around the TV and sitting there was a teenager named Billy. I can't remember how we met him the first time. For some reason he never wore a shirt. We kept him around because there was something off about him, like he was really seriously mentally ill or however people refer to those things. The sound of his skin peeling off the leather every time he got up is lodged in my mind.

Some time later that day, we had been smoking marijuana around the television. Me and Craig were on the couch, with Billy on the loveseat as usual. Craig's girlfriend Rhonda was positioned above us, perched on the arm of Billy's loveseat, sharing with us her most recent writings on spiritual matters. I listened with my left ear.

“It could be construed that the infamous legend surrounding Robert Johnson, an icon of the early 20th Century Delta blues movement, can be read on a less supernatural level. By selling his soul to the Devil at the crossroads for mastery of the guitar, he turned his back on God and, by extension, everything God represents: family, ascetic cleanliness, even happiness itself.”

“Could it not be said that any producing artist turns his back on God? Anyone giving themselves to their craft is not giving themselves to God, but in fact feeding on the poison knowledge at the crossroads of Death and Doubt.”

She had blue hair and smoked those cigarettes with the mentholated beads you can crush in the filter. It was easy to see how she had led Craig to question his spiritual path, to seek out a new dharma. For me, it was easy to tell that she was insane, in a consistent state of instability.

It would be a lie to say that communication between me and Craig hadn't become labored. There was always the fact that I was having sex with his mother hanging there. Craig would trade only monosyllables for earnest attempts at conversation, and bury his head further into whatever New Age pamphlet Rhonda had put in front of him.

It could have been finding God, but really it was just his nature not to tell me off, to just let things linger. He was too nice, too depressed, and too stupid to have any lick of non-passive aggression at his disposal.

“So, what, Rhonda,” I asked her, a bit heated. “Are we supposed to just sit around in mindful gratitude of our own existence? Are we allowed to make anything?”

“We're allowed to do anything,” Rhonda said, “don't you believe you have free will?”

“Yes, but don't you think your writings fall under the purview of what you were just talking about?”

She looked at me blankly, shifting around in the shawl that hung over her shoulders and enveloped the section of the couch that she occupied.

“That’s interesting,” she said. “They’re just some thoughts I’m writing down. I’m not penning some dogma.”

“He’s just being a cunt,” Craig said without looking up from his Thich Nhat Hanh. “He’s not actually trying to engage with you.”

“Oh,” she said. She focused her vision on the TV set in the corner that Billy was looking at. I did, too.

I couldn’t be with my Selma, because her husband Karl was home, and they were now both in their marital bed.

To say I hated him was moot. He was unilaterally despised by everyone around him, not that it affected him any, not that he cared to notice. He had a build and gait that made him appear racist at passive repose. The clothes he wore didn’t help either, nor his square red face. He’d look you in the eyes like you were game he had been tracking. The guy probably had a Bowie knife hidden on his body at all times. I hadn’t been inside of a gym since high school.

What I possessed was of more value. Or rather, what I had was of value. The only thing of objective value. I tried to put it into my eyes when we made eye contact—that he was less than me.

“Money,” I said. “You know I have money.” I was pleading before Selma. I wanted to really be with her, to support her, if she were to have me. To help take care of her little daughter, even, I said to her. To have a real, solidified place in her home.

“You don’t have anything here for me,” she said, pushing an index finger into my chest. Her long fake nail hurt my skin.

“You hate children, Jonathan,” she said.

“How do you know that,” I asked.

“Your vibe, I don’t know,” she said. “It’s obvious.”

“Yours is alright,” I said.

“My vibe?”

“Your child.”

“Angela.” She gave me an exhausted look.

“I know her name,” I said.

When Karl returned early from work at his landscaping company, I made my way into the closet—nude. And Selma was naked in bed too. I looked into the bedroom from the slats of the closet door, sandwiched between the door and some sweaters.

The door to the bathroom was open. He was invisible around the bend, but the sound of his piss stream was very audible from the bedroom closet. Selma sat straight up, looking at me absentmindedly. She seemed calm. Not anxious. Maybe she wasn’t looking at me at all.

“I’ve got to run to CVS,” he said in monotone, coming out of the bathroom and tightening his belt, “I forgot to on the drive home.”

“Okay,” she said. He leaned down and they kissed. He didn’t say anything about the fact that she was naked. Probably didn’t even notice.

I had shown up at the house a few days or maybe weeks earlier but no one was home besides Karl. I always showed up without notice. He said Craig and Rhonda volunteered somewhere this day of the week—that they'd be back soon. I didn't know what day of the week it was.

Karl was whittling. He didn't know I was sleeping with Selma.

He asked me, in so many words, what I thought of Craig's recent spiritual developments. His face, curved in disgust, said a lot too.

"Whatever makes him happy, I guess," I said.

Karl grunted, not even looking up.

I had my own wariness, my own reservations, about Craig's inner journey, though they were different from Karl's. It seemed to me they were built on the fetishism of something he was wholly unfamiliar with and had no personal attachment to. It seemed less like a stab at enlightenment and more like some pathetic attempt at escape from a static and drug-addled suburban life.

Maybe, also, he thought it would bring him closer to Rhonda, or help him understand her more. It wouldn't do either of those things.

I had exited the closet and begun to dress.

"You're so young, you know. You're mixed up. Like Craig only much worse."

Selma was smiling at me. Smiling and talking and looking at me in the eye, moving her head to try and catch my darting glances. I couldn't look at her head on.

"Craig said, about your parents. Awful, awful. But you know that, don't you? You're so smart you think you can come back here and play dumb and fool us, huh?"

There was nothing to look at but the ceiling and the door. I felt cold as I was naked, save my briefs.

“Someone in your position is liable to destroy his spirit. You’re a child, Jonathan.”

I put on my suit pants one leg at a time.

Most days spent at the boarding house I simply sat or lied down or paced inside. Sometimes I would take Jeremy’s car down ten or twenty blocks to meet my dealer. Sometimes I would do coke with Jeremy. Sometimes I would do it by myself.

I rocked in my bed in the attic and thought of all the money lying unspent, nearly salivating. I subsisted up there on a hot plate. Rice and beans. Ramen. Macaroni and cheese. I drank boxed wine from a plastic thermos with a plastic straw.

All of my expenses were covered by what I managed to collect from the tenants.

The moment would come to me to spend my money. I imagined what it might be in titillating detail—every image and idea heightened by the cocaine. Prostitutes. Stockpiles of drugs and alcohol. A brand new car. High-up hotel rooms or a house that I’d bought in the middle of nowhere. And I imagined these things in tandem with each other as well.

I was pinned against the white siding of the boarding house by the threat of Karl’s knife. He dangled it in front of me.

“I’ve got an inkling of something,” he said. He didn’t even necessarily seem angry, as his voice always had the same tone.

“I don’t want to know more. I don’t want to see anything. You hear me?”

“Yes, sir” I said.

“Don’t be smart,” he said. “I don’t want to see your face anymore, okay college boy?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I get it.”

He holstered his knife and I turned so I could make my way into the building. I was sweating everywhere. Karl didn’t move.

“You little Young Republican-looking motherfucker.” His voice had a different tone now.

I turned only my eyes to meet his angry, red face. Karl punched me in the left side of my head, knocking me, almost pressing me, into the outer wall of the house. Immediately there was a loud ringing. Then there was nothing. I was crouched on the ground, away from Karl. The throbbing pain in my ear was immense, probably elevated by my fear. I didn’t dare touch it, though my hand hovered, shaking, near my head.

Something knocked against the building and I turned back. Jeremy was clinging to Karl like a spider monkey. Karl was shaking, trying to get him off. I could see they were both yelling, making a lot of noise. Then I could hear them again, but I couldn’t say how loud they were being, as the ringing had come back even louder than they were.

It’s hard to say at what point of the night or two before, doing coke with Jeremy and drinking vodka from the bottle—trying to not think about things or the ringing—that this idea had come to me.

I went to the bank with a laundry bag.

I walked back to the boarding house with a big bag of money, a sack—if you will. It was slung over the shoulder of my nice suit. There was that kid again.

“Get out of the way!” And I kicked him. He got out of the way all right. He squirmed towards the bushes bordering a house’s lawn as I neared. I tipped the bag and shook out some money onto him.

“Wow, thanks man,” he said, though his mouth didn’t move and his eyes were that of a kicked dog.

When I got back to the boarding house Jeremy was gone but he had left his keys on his coffee table. I left a more than fair amount of money for him.

I shoved the sack into the back of Jeremy’s car.

I pulled up to Selma’s house in Jeremy’s car, one wheel on the curb. I hadn’t driven a car in years. I rammed on the horn a couple times—barely audible to me over the inundating ringing—and got out. I positioned myself in front of the car like a floor show model. Then I put the backseat window down, imagining the cash from the bag leaning against it would flutter out. When it didn’t, I pulled a bunch out and threw it up in the air myself, all the while screaming for Selma to come down. This was her last chance to come away with me—things to that effect, which I yelled over a swell only I could hear.

I don’t know how much time passed. They were all standing out there on the lawn, even Karl. Craig with his in-progress beard. Rhonda in a shawl. Billy shirtless, as usual. Selma stood there with her child, whose name I admittedly couldn’t think of. They all stood, warily, some heads cocked. All with a tired look in their eyes.

I would have to go someplace else.

Praying Hands

If I had been born right, I would've been born out the cavity at the bottom of my adoptive mother's torso—not out of that of some anonymous woman, probably on the non-sanitized floor of a mobile home. But Mother hadn't been blessed, health-wise.

We were killing time, walking the insides of a museum not far from the hospital. It was a perfect time for my father to hammer home a sentiment he held, and expressed repeatedly, as though he thought I was too stupid to pick up on it.

It was an art museum. It was called The Museum of Artistic Oddities and Ephemera.

The universe presented my father with these opportunities because it loved him. The jury was out on how it felt about me, though I had vivid dreams—premonitions, I thought—of living alone and dying in a one-bedroom apartment.

I wanted to look at the paintings and I did my best to look at the paintings. Father walked forward with his shoulders up high—his head like a turtle's going into a shell. I did not have time to look and linger at the paintings much. I tried. It was difficult to meet my own needs while abiding, and I did know Father had other things on his mind.

Mother was really sick in the hospital and it was a shock to me that that could happen to her. I thought we were Loved.

I was so taken by the museum, its strange design—by all of it, like the long hallway where only big sad clowns looked down at us from their respective frames.

“Is this the sort of place you’d like to be commemorated,” my father said, frowning like one of the clowns looking down at me. “You want to put yourself up for everyone to gawk at, huh?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “maybe.” Though I could tell, looking around, that artists were clearly defective in some ways known by God and foreign to medical science.

Our car was parked on the curb outside the museum. From the top of the hill—the street sloping down from the museum—I could see much of the city and its life in the form of moving cars and building lights beginning to flicker on against a background of waning sunlight.

I thought, what’s so great anyway, about being kept alive through art? I didn’t want to exist anywhere at all, let alone in something so abstract and potentially unending.

In that dusk, before the street lamps had lit up, with my adoptive father of ten years finagling with the car door a few yards ahead of me, I thought about bolting. But I didn’t. I walked to the car and got in the passenger seat.

I had just turned sixteen years old.

We walked out of the automatic hospital doors with Mom in a wheelchair. She was very still and wasn’t talking. Her grayish blonde hair was fallen around her

shoulders, looking dirty like a mop. He whispered to her in her ear, I couldn't make out what, his body bent over the chair as he pushed it forward—his ass swaying back and forth in my lower nine o'clock.

We stopped and stood on the curb. One large hospital employee moved Mother, while retaining her sitting position, into the passenger seat, while another folded the wheelchair and stuck it into the trunk. I got in the back and Dad got in the front.

He started up the car and we pulled out of the hospital and headed home.

“BILLY LOVED THE MUSEUM,” Father said, saying it loud like it would help Mother hear but really so I could hear in the back, “HE LOVED ALL THOSE WACKY PICTURES—YOU COULD IMAGINE.”

When we got home, the workers had finished installing the stair lift and were pulling out of our driveway. We both stood facing the staircase watching Mother travel upstairs.

The staircase was in the big marble foyer when you first walked in. It was a spiral that went up to the landing on the second floor. I wondered, why isn't he going up there to get her?

He was looking right at me, I noticed, when I looked down.

“Are you going to help me here, Billy?” He asked, talking under his breath as if it were possible Mother could hear even if she wasn't sitting on the chairlift, idle, at the top of the stairs.

“What?” I asked, flatly, giving him the side-eye.

“Are you going to help me here, Billy?”

“Yes,” I said.

I followed him up the stairs.

Coming downstairs later, I found Mother downstairs again. She was sitting in the kitchen in her chair outside the sliding glass door that went out onto the deck. Sunlight framed her around the frame of her wheelchair. She sat perfectly still—her eyes aimed straight forward.

“Hi Mom,” I said, walking up to her. She looked past me.

Father was sitting out on the deck. I could see him in profile through the wall-length windows in the foyer. The deck was wrapped around the foyer and the one side of the kitchen. Father was sitting with his head back, sunglasses on—ambiguously asleep. The wooden patio hung over an intensely sloped, nearly vertical hill, filled with brush and thorny bushes to be snagged on if you were to fall down it.

“Ian?” Mother asked. She lifted a weak hand slightly, towards me. Her mouth hung open slightly. Her eyes were far off somewhere.

“Ian?” I said. “Who’s Ian?”

She put her hand down. Her eyes returned to where they were. I felt something sink deep into my chest and a brief prickling all over my body. I turned around and exited the house out the back door. I did not go out the front door.

The backyard was nearly half an acre. It was barren with the grass a bit overgrown. There was high sheet metal fencing that enclosed the property—my father said it was the only really effective way to keep out deer.

I sat down on the grass and gritted my teeth and opened my lips and breathed through my gritted teeth. I ripped out patch after patch of the half tall grass while nearly hyperventilating. After a while I got tired and I laid down in the sun and fell asleep for a bit.

At dinner, we sat around and ate at the dining room table. My father was teaching himself to cook, for obvious reasons. We were eating some kind of chicken stir-fry. It was okay. The chicken was a bit overcooked—little bland tough overcooked chunks in the bed of vegetables on my brown plate on the brown table.

My head hurt and I drank Pepsi from a clear plastic glass with circular ice cubes in it.

“So you really loved that museum, huh,” Father said.

Father had reached the point of his eating process where he was no longer shoveling food into his mouth, and this allowed him to speak in this way while still eating intermittently. I continued eating at my own pace.

“You should have seen him in there, Mother, he was so enamored,” my father continued, in some kind of affect, “You’d think he might start painting clowns and midgets and crop circles himself.”

We were sitting at the dinner table and Mother was doing nothing but sitting there in her wheelchair staring at something behind my shoulder.

“Is that where you’d see yourself hung Billy?”

“I think you liked it there,” I said, in a rush of energy.

My father looked at me and my mother did not look at me, obviously.

“Yeah,” I said. I went on autopilot. “I found him in there, Mother, in a little alcove completely by himself. It was just a small cube of a room like my room upstairs. The whole museum was like a maze and I had lost him. He was against one wall, completely out of it. I had to shake him awake. I don’t know what came over him. The only thing in the room was on the opposite wall, it was a framed drawing of a bear done on loose-leaf paper.”

I laughed at him. For about five or six seconds he looked mortified. Then his entire face contorted in a kind of fitful rage before he began laughing himself. It was convincing sounding but I had stopped already.

When I laid in bed that night I replayed what I had said at the dinner table. I thought of him slumped against a wall, maybe sitting on the floor, in a kind of stupor. Maybe when I found him, before I nudged or shook him, there was some spit trailing out from one end of his mouth and onto his shoulder.

My room was small and cubic. There was an attached bathroom and room enough for a small couch and a TV set. I had it made, really. I wondered why I was so miserable.

On the wall opposite my bed was a poster of a photograph of the musician Johnny Cash flipping off the person taking the photograph. I hadn’t heard him but I’d seen the poster once in a television show about high school students.

The more I thought of finding him at the museum near the hospital, the more it seemed less like something I was making up in my head and like something that maybe had actually happened.

I heard Father skulking around downstairs. This had been happening recently.

I was lying in bed. I had turned the TV to face my bed and not the small sofa. I was watching a digital cable channel that had been skipped over in the mass parental block. Late at night it played a program that interviewed women in bikinis—models—and was intercut with shots of them walking around a pool and white cement patio, palms of palm trees hanging above them. I watched it muted with closed captioning, and every so often the black boxes of text covered up their bodies. Even though I was there to look at them I felt bad not to hear them out, and in the end no one was the winner. A drawing I had made myself, an approximation of what a woman looked like naked, though I had no idea where the nipple went on the boob—which spanned three torn out pages of yellow legal pad paper for attempted accuracy’s sake—was missing from my dresser drawer when we returned from the hospital. I found this upsetting.

I imagined that Father was up these nights because of Mother’s condition. I imagined her lying in bed, in the same position she sat in her chair but facing the ceiling: her legs out straight and bent at the knee, her arms straight out with her hands down like they were falling off the ends and edges of her arm rests. Maybe it unnerved him to be lying next to someone like that.

I could not sleep much. I turned and turned in bed, glancing at the digital alarm clock on the dresser a foot from my head. The last I remember it was nearly four in the morning. I woke up early, at 6, before I would normally get up for homeschooling at 7:30. I had done this before and I did this so I could have time to work on my paintings, which were in the basement.

The basement was less redone, less taken care of than the rest of the house. There was one room that housed an unmade bed—just a mattress on a frame—for the company that was never there. The other room had a couch and a Ping-Pong table, but was mostly used for storage. Boxes of crap and old books were piled around.

There were centipedes scurrying everywhere down there. Sometimes on the walls. Sometimes they'd even find their way upstairs, and onto the walls up on the main floor.

In the Game Room, such named because it had the Ping-Pong table—though there was never anyone there playing on it—was my easel covered in a sheet, and all of my completed or abandoned paintings stacked up against one wall.

I walked downstairs to the basement, in my socks, careful not to make noise, to miss the squeaking step. I walked through the short hall past the bedroom with the empty bed. I walked into the Game Room.

There was my father. There was a towel draped over his head, and a comforter wrapped around his body. His body rotated slightly, in an unconscious way, like he had been spun at one point and was now finally running out of momentum. It seemed like it was one of the sorts of things the body does when it feels itself to be completely alone.

“Oh, hello,” he drawled, turning slowly to look at me, “Billy.” I'd been standing there ten seconds. He got up and walked past me in a slow gloom. I watched him disappear up the stairs, dragging the comforter up behind him.

I went to the corner where I painted. My finished paintings were stacked against one wall. I never looked at them. I decided I hated what I was currently working on. It

was a picture of a pregnant seahorse I was painting, using a picture from an encyclopedia as a reference point.

I stared at my blank canvas and what came to mind was the little boy who was staring at me in church.

I had dreaded going to church with Mother in the wheelchair. It wasn't because I was ashamed it was because I didn't want to have all the eyes on me. I didn't want everyone gawking because then I felt like they were gawking at me.

I remember I was wearing a very creased button-up. It was buttoned all the way up. My hair was still damp from the morning shower. My hair was unevenly damp. It was mostly dry at the top of my head but I could still feel the moisture in my scalp. There were very wet patches around the back at my neck. It had grown long, and the sensation of it brushing against my neck would make me shiver a bit in disgust.

And it looked so awkward.

And all those hairs growing on my upper lip, oh God.

I was at the end of a cramped pew with Father next to me, and Mother next to me on the other side, in the aisle. The day's minister stood on the stage up front, which was only slightly elevated from the ground. She was a short middle-aged woman in a red pantsuit, tiny glasses and bun hairdo. She said something into the microphone she held that made my father scoff. It was about praying not only for the American soldier but for the enemy soldier as well. For he was one who had been led astray but was still a child of God.

Father said something like, "Please," or, "Come on," or, "Give me a break," under his breath.

When she was done she got off stage and the projector screen came down. Christian rock music played. We all had to stand up on our feet for half an hour. People put their hands in the air. Some people shook their bodies and fell to their seats. I stood there with Father while Mother was still sitting there and it felt awkward. Father had his hands clasped while mine were at my side.

I looked around at the light pouring in from behind the panes of stained glass. It had made the projected lyrics faded and hard to read on the screen. On the second floor of seating, appearing like a balcony from where I stood, was a little boy looking at me from between the wooden posts of the railing in front of him. He stood at a diagonal to all the people around him that were faced the screen and singing. The light bounced off the top right side of his black bowl-cut hair. He stared at me. He was wearing a button-up shirt, white with green lines. He was wearing khaki pants.

It turned out I didn't need to wake up early anymore, as Father had decided not to continue Mother's homeschooling regimen.

My father had a second stair lift installed, this one to the basement. My mother was put in the guest room and in the nights following I imagined the centipedes crawling all around her, and on her. I hoped that at least fresh bedding had been put on the bed, but with the state that my father was in, who knew.

Every day, the door to the guest bedroom was locked. Every time I went past it, it was locked.

A doctor made a house call and went into the locked room. I walked past it to get to my painting. My father was standing outside the door in tremulous worry. I was

painting when the doctor came out, and I heard them behind me. I heard the hushed tone of the doctor and the blubbering of my adoptive father.

I was close to completing my painting. There stood the little boy again, staring out between the posts of the railing. But there was something about approaching completion of this piece that made me incredibly tired. I made eye contact with the little boy as I had in church that day and felt just as drained of everything.

It was also the most beautiful thing I had ever painted—a willfulness and stylishness to it, while still being startlingly accurate to my memory. I looked at it while my father held his head in his hands behind me, out in the hallway.

I was left in the dark about everything, as I had been my entire life.

My father made filet mignon for dinner. I said it was good.

“Oh you like this, huh,” he asked, or said, I wasn’t sure. “You like the good stuff.”

“I guess,” I said, “I like this.”

“Hmm,” he said, and we ate the rest in silence.

For an entire two weeks we ate filet mignon. Halfway through the second week I had become disgusted by the cut of meat—how it would fall apart in my mouth as I was eating it.

That fuzzy TV channel fuzzed out completely, but I had become too depressed to masturbate at all anyway. My father started buying me video games, which I had never been allowed before. I played them one after the other, every day of the week. There was something dumbly meditative occupying crude, pixelated worlds instead of my own.

Still, I prayed to God in my head for anything to give, especially when lying awake. I couldn't imagine going on another more year. I couldn't do it.

My father rented some sentimental movie from the TV one night. He forced me to sit and watch with him. At the end of it, when the lady was taken off life support, he shed a single tear and got at it with his finger.

"I'm sensitive, you know," he said, "I'm sensitive even if it doesn't seem like it."

I looked at him.

After the second week of filet mignon, my father switched to some bland whitefish he had bought in bulk and kept in the freezer. It was nearly as bad.

"I'm not a fan of this," I said, one night.

"It was cost effective," my father said.

I shoveled a bit more into my mouth.

"You can't expect me to keep buying steak for you, night after night," he said.

My eyes were burnt out from the video games. I lied awake in bed until I'd reached a half sleep. In this state, it was as if the entire house was shaking around me. I then perceived myself to be floating outside watching from the sky above the street, past the metal fencing. I watched as the house was ripped from its foundation by an invisible hand and lifted in the air. It was segmented like a Rubik's cube. Its segments spun as if it was being effortlessly solved. I could see the basement it had become detached from in the ground. I could see my paintings and my mother and the Ping Pong table.

Then I was back in my bed and I was waking up and it was morning. I didn't feel like I had slept at all.

I went downstairs and to the dining room. I was confused to see Father dressed in his work suit. It was blue with a blue tie and he was wearing a dress shirt under the jacket, too. Then I saw the spread of food out on the table. Mother came out wearing a long floral dress, beaming. We all pulled out our chairs and made scratching noises on the hardwood and sat down.

There was none of the simmering resentment I had come to expect from the two of them, which was intermittently applied to me. Instead they were happy—earnestly happy, it seemed. They started talking about starting up my homeschooling again. Also, were they supposed to be paying for my art supplies, as well as these video games, now? Sometimes it was the time to put these childish things behind us. Father was looking forward to getting back to the office, after being away so long. To get back in the swing of things. Mother was looking forward to getting back to the paperback she had left with its spine cracked. To have a drink with this object in the chair out on the overhanging patio. And even though it seemed like everything was fine I felt so angry that I simply ate in silence.

Shore Leave

At the end of the day I put on an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and I take a Klonopin and I lie in bed. I pick up where I left off on Netflix. It all becomes a mish-mash of pastel colors. Patrick Stewart pointing at things and saying something—sometimes shouting.

“Turn it down,” my aunt yells, banging on the wall separating us. Two minutes after I turn it down she bangs on the wall again.

I am 25 years old and I am living like a child. I recognize this. I am living with my aunt, for Christ’s sake. The woman who raised me. My not dead mother. I go to drug counseling. This is all voluntary though it feels like I am consigned to it—living with my aunt and living off her money and all.

Me and my aunt are in a row of houses, a connected chain of apartments, and ours is on the end. From my bedroom window I have a view of the house across the street. The only thing that separates us is a row of low metal fencing and a few feet’s width-worth of tall grass and weeds taking over the fencing. A light on a telephone pole—which is more on her side—illuminates the distance between us.

I am regressing, in my depression. I try not to think about it, but it is hard. The only escape I have now that I am sober is the Star Trek and the prescribed Klonopin I use to sleep. My hair is growing out, getting shaggy and weirdly asymmetrical. I desperately need a new haircut. I need new clothes, too. This is not to mention the other ways my physicality has been ravaged by the side effects of my psych meds. Acne wrapping my face like kudzu up a building, and I'm getting fat—really. Always thin as a rail with clear skin, never even thought of my skin. Now I'm polka dotted. I can see my second chin easily in the mirror.

The first time I see her she is half-undressed in her window. Then the next time she is sitting outside of the house in a plastic white chair smoking a cigarette wearing sweatpants and a tube top. Her blonde hair, pulled back in a ponytail, is tinged with colors I now passively associate with Star Trek. I imagine the different brands of cigarettes she could smoke, like it holds some significance or it was something we could hold a conversation about. The hypothetical conversation between us plays out in my mind in wah WAH wah Charlie Brown noises because I can't think of actual dialogue, and then it blurs into a scene of me moving my hand under her top and her writhing euphorically.

The apartment complex is mostly elderly, mostly widowed, mostly with dog. I stick out, which makes me even more self-conscious about my weight and the skin on my face. At night it is barren and I can sit alone on the pool diving board in the complex's center. The lights under the water make the pool glow a deep, unnatural blue which reflects back on my body and everything else in the dark August night.

I drive into the city to attend drug counseling because I lived there when I was admitted to the psychiatric hospital and the psychiatrists thought I was moving back into my old apartment. I don't bother to correct anything because it is the only excuse I have to drive into the city and be by myself. After the drug counseling, that is.

In the city I often go to a British pub a few blocks away from the counseling center. I used to go there with friends in college. Usually, I'll just drink water with a fish sandwich and chips. Dip the sandwich in tartar sauce. It's good. Sometimes I will get coffee. If I drink too much of it, anywhere from three-quarters of a cup to two—depending on the day—I will get tremors in my hands, which I find very embarrassing. When you are drinking a cup of coffee, say one that has been given to you on a little plate, it is even more embarrassing. Your cup is refilled to the brim and you struggle to move it to your face—you crane your neck down to meet it somehow up but it doesn't really work. Coffee drips down and pools in the saucer. Everyone notices—ha ha, like I'm so important, right? Like anyone would care.

One day I get a snakebite, which is a British pint made of half lager and half hard cider. Afterwards my head feels incredibly foggy. I sit down on a bench in a park and chain-smoke a pack of Camels for half an hour while drinking a large bottle of water.

Everyone at drug counseling seems much worse off than I am, and for that reason I keep quiet. There is a dissonance between my body and height and age and my actual body and height and age, like, I feel like I am 12 and small but in fact I am 25, slightly above average height, and slightly overweight.

Most people's problems are with alcohol or cocaine/crack. Pretty much everyone at drug counseling is black or Latino. There was one other white guy, a meth addict, who left pretty early on. He was mildly effete. Gay. His hair was always disheveled and his eyes were always wide open—peeled almost, like in *A Clockwork Orange*.

I feel like a fucking idiot being there. For taking up space in a service for people in worse economic condition, who are themselves worse off, or those are my thoughts anyway. At my intake, I told the group moderator—Puerto Rican man, bald brown head covered by a rotating series of fedoras and trilbies—empathetic and a sense of humor but I don't let him in—that my only problem, my reason for being recommended there from NYU Langone, was a past addiction to marijuana. This skirts over the much larger issues I have had with alcohol and cocaine and benzos—things that not only might allow me to connect more immediately with the others in my group, but would also allow me to constructively engage with my own addictive, compulsive behavior when it comes to drugs and booze. Instead I sit there, painfully aware of my status as a sore thumb, listening to people recount the ways in which they have alienated their loved ones.

There are days I spend drinking coffee pot after pot, its effects potentiated to horrifying levels by my medication. The kitchen and dining room are connected together in a kind of circle, and I pace around it in unending motion, ringing my hands and thinking endless cascading thoughts. After a while my calves start to hurt and my feet start cramping. Then I crash hard. Want to do nothing but lie in bed, meditate on my sins. I really must be a drug addict.

It is a few days after seeing her from my bedroom window and I have spent my day doing this. Does being in poor condition physically make you think of your greater deficiencies, as well? In the holodeck, in a simulation of a speakeasy in Chicago during the Prohibition era, Captain Picard smokes a cigar. I become antsy for a cigarette but I have none, and then I think of the Star Trek hair girl.

I walk out the apartment's main gate, walk on the sidewalk along the complex's fencing towards its end.

There she is, smoking on the plastic lawn chair in sweatpants. Baggy sweatshirt. Big sunglasses. Hung-over, maybe.

I am walking over. Her head tilts and my body is blocking out a bit of the mid-day light, I imagine.

“Cigarette?” I say, indicating toward the pack next to her on a little wooden table.

“Yeah,” she says, after a moment.

You know now that we are this close you look like someone so familiar.

“Here,” she says, holding out a cigarette.

Are you lonely? I think.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Do you live at Crescent Moon,” she asks, “I thought it was mostly retirees.”

“No.” I am lying for some reason. I suppose I am ashamed. It is happening all very fast, now. Getting nervous. I realize that I am still holding the unlit cigarette.

“Uhm, lighter?” I make a hand gesture like I am thumb wrestling. I can't tell where she is looking behind the sunglasses—like the tinted windows of some sedan in a gangster movie, rolled down slightly.

“Yeah,” she says. Then we are standing there smoking, it is quiet—I am imagining it is a good quiet. Maybe a minute passes in this good silence and my mind goes elsewhere.

It was embarrassing when a guy from my group flagged me down, walking out of the center and down the street. He caught up to me and started talking to me. Told me I had to stop being so hard on myself, asked me if had any creative outlets. It was nice of him, but forced on my end. Wanting to leave. Feeling embarrassed. Then the next week some white kid, like 19 years old with dreadlocks comes in, also for “marijuana addiction”—and immediately opens up. Nobody makes fun. There is engagement. There is dialogue. And I suddenly realize that the problem has nothing to do with my leeching off of others’ resources or being unworthy, in some way, of benefiting, but just the fact that I’m a dumb asshole with no social skills and a worldview limited to the ways in which I am suffering—in which I am the cause for suffering—a self-hatred that does nothing greater than cause me to live a severely muted life. In fact, all of the shit about me not feeling comfortable was probably just a means to engage—

“Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.” She is looking up at me in the big boxy frames and I look down meekly.

“It’s just...uh, my sister volunteers at this homeless shelter,” she says, “it isn’t that far from here if you need me to...”

My aunt is asleep on the couch with her head back. The curtains are drawn and her body is coated by the light of a crime procedural. The wine glass on the coffee table in front of her is barely touched. I drain it.

I take my Klonopin and then an extra dosage. I turn on the wall mounted TV. I nestle in bed, under the cover, depressing into the many pillows I arrange around my body. I consider getting up, taking a shower, but I'm asleep before Patrick Stewart can say,

“...where no one has gone before.”

I have a dream, and when I wake it continues to play in my mind. I sit up in bed thinking about it.

I am dressed in Star Trek Yellow. I am at a conference table and around me are Captain Jean-Luc Picard, of the U.S.S. Enterprise-E, Captain Kathryn Janeway of the U.S.S. Voyager, and Benjamin Sisco, Captain of the U.S.S. Defiant and commander of the space station Deep Space Nine.

“It's troubling to have you here, Ensign,” Picard says.

“That's certainly an understatement,” Janeway mumbles in her vaguely transatlantic accent.

“What you have done here is a disgrace to Starfleet,” says Sisco in his staccato. “It is an affront to the very ideals that bind together our Federation.”

They begin walking around me in a circle, berating me about how much I've fucked up without actually indicating anything that I've done. Sometimes they follow each other around in a circle, hands behind their backs. Other times they walk in a more erratic fashion, in different directions, as if they were planets or moons orbiting me.

A monitor fizzles on, on the wall at one end of the conference table. On it is Admiral James T. Kirk, most famous for his tenure on the U.S.S. Enterprise—though I believe at this point canonically he should be dead.

“I’m sorry I’m late.” He scans the room and me with tired eyes.

“To think you had such a promising future in Starfleet, Ensign. Well, let’s begin preparing for the tribunal.”

At this point I wake up—because I am weak from it.

My aunt works as a bank teller a few days a week. I think she is fine—well off enough from the money my uncle left her and social security. She has the job mostly to get out of the house. She berates me to clean up after myself—not to leave dishes lying in the sink, to do my laundry, etc. Instead I tell the cleaning crew making rounds—room cleaning is provided free of charge but my aunt refuses, like death will take her once people start picking up after her—that my aunt forgot to put her name on the sign-up sheet. I grimace and make eye contact as I give the head maid thirty dollars. Our hands brush.

I feel so restless from the dream and general bad sleep in spite of my Klonopin intake that I feel the need to lose my mind with a pot of coffee—to become slightly manic, to pace continuously around the kitchen and dining room. That would have to wait until the cleaners left.

I decide to put something else in my coffee, but my aunt doesn’t have any whiskey, or any brown liquor at all, so I use the gin that’s in the freezer. She puts enough of this stuff back that she won’t notice a drink’s worth—or two—missing.

The two tastes do not merge at all and it tastes exactly like I am drinking coffee and gin at the same time. It smells even worse than it tastes and wafts out of the mug.

I sit on the balcony while the maids clean the apartment. I lament that the fall won't kill me, looking down—barely enough to break a leg. I can see elderly women rotating in the shallow end of the complex's pool. They are being led by a woman in her 20's in a one-piece suit. Steam drifts off of my hot cocktail. I cringe thinking of the maids inside cleaning my room—picking up plates of moldy food and seminal napkins.

I become somewhat drunk from my drink because I don't drink anymore. The maids have left after about half-an-hour which is just as well because some wasps have started circling above me.

“Another cigarette?” I ask. I am standing next to Star Trek girl again. The caffeine and alcohol have made me brazen.

She seems perturbed by my sudden presence for a second, then she says,

“Yeah, man.” She hands me a cigarette. I realize that I have not once seen her eyes. Or her hair down. Or her off of this chair—besides the moment in the window.

“I'm sorry about the uh...” I trail off. She doesn't seem to notice. She is staring blankly at the sheet metal fence bordering the lot opposite her house.

“I do live in Crescent Moon.”

“Cool, man.”

“...Because the other day I said I didn't.”

“You did?” She finally turns her head to look at me.

“Yeah... you said your sister had, uh... and I walked away, then, after.”

A flash of recognition in her face—or what’s visible. A flash of recognition in the lines around her mouth and the skin on her forehead.

“Oh, hey,” she says, “it’s you.”

Another couple days later and I have drug counseling again. I drive past her smoking in her plastic chair. I am dismayed to see she obviously recognizes me, because I planned to turn around at the end of the street and drive up the other way. I don’t know why I didn’t think this would be a problem beforehand. I panic and my brain goes blank and I go with the original plan—to turn around at the end of the street. It’s all very awkward and embarrassing—I wonder how obvious I’m being. I slow down, stop in front of her—she’s watching me this whole time. I roll down the passenger seat window a bit.

“Driving into the city,” I shout, impromptu of nothing, like the statement is impressive in itself.

She walks up to the car with a swagger, a cigarette dangling from one hand, the sunglasses hanging from the end of her nose. It scares me a little. She leans in.

“You seem fucked up,” she says. “I like people who seem fucked up. All of my good friends seem very fucked up, and most are, in fact—very fucked up.”

“Cool,” I say. I am hunkered in the front seat of my aunt’s sedan like a clown in a clown car. She is smoking fervently, a hand on the window where it meets the car door—hanging off, barely gripping it because the window is half rolled up.

“I’m having a little party here tonight if you feel like coming.”

At drug counseling all I can think of is meeting up with her later. I am excited and horrified. I have little hope that it will go well. I play out nightmare scenarios in my head while actively pointing my face at whoever is talking.

“I want to know what he thinks,” an older man says.

“Who, him?” the group moderator asks, motioning his body towards me. Someone has just finished speaking and people are giving their reactions.

“Yeah,” the man says, “he always just sits there.” Even though his head is turned towards me, one severe lazy eye makes it difficult to tell if he is looking at anything at all.

“I want to see if he’s actually listening or just sitting there.”

“Uh, yeah, it’s like, what he was saying was,” I begin, my eyes set halfway up the blue polo shirt of the man sitting a few feet in front of me in the cramped oval formation we are all, 15-or-so of us, sitting in in this small room, “you can’t expect people to know what you’re feeling if you don’t talk about it. People can’t read minds. Like, you can’t hold people so accountable for not picking up on stuff that you never clearly expressed to them.”

“Wow, he is listening.”

“Ha, I told you he’s listening,” the moderator says, “doesn’t talk but he’s listening.”

The discussion moves on.

I am terrified of meeting her—and her friends, but I know that I’m going. It’s like if I don’t try to socialize now it will mean six more weeks of winter.

Still Crying

A car parked in the parking lot, not ten yards away, blasting Roy Orbison's "Crying", and it poured through the open window of Alex's apartment. A daddy long-legs on the ceiling looked down at the whole maudlin mess in embarrassment. Alex writhing on the mattress, its sheets mostly undone under him, sobbing in a big gasping way: clutching his chest, wailing and kicking his skinny legs around.

At Bertie's apartment he had unfolded his little heart. Now here he was in consequence, with some animal taken over.

Out on the street, he swallowed enough of Bertie's pills so as not to feel anxious and to be sending out the air and image of normalcy—his anxiety and this image being very interrelated. There was something about her mysterious opioids that made him emotional. He was also eating from the unmarked bottle in which she had mixed her downers up with melatonin. It looked like children's cereal. He ate both in equal measure, pill for pill.

It was dusk or twilight or crepuscular or whatever it's called when the sun's going down over the horizon. It was right at that moment when the sun was winking at him.

He appeared to be on some slope, the pavement somehow in perverse abstraction, and the sun there a white dot winking in and out of view.

Alex clomped around in his work boots in a city of some increasingly notable distortion. People passed slowly out of shops, into the sweaty end of summer days, when any rational human being might find some peace. This made it especially important that Alex not draw attention to himself. This winking sun though had set in a bit of a calm and he felt at a kinship with his neighbors, in the ease of the heat, in some cosmic way. He had all the awkwardnesses of a person constantly strung out—too tired and preoccupied to engage in the minutiae of any given social interaction.

He had first met Bertie through some old college friend. And then they kept bumping into each other. At bars and such. Then she started showing up where he worked as a bartender. He found the way she was always stuffing pills into her mouth had at first flattened her, in his mind, to a cartoon character. Always popping pills in. And in this way she had endeared him. Somedays she buzzed, others she drooped. Once in a blue moon she'd have yayo, and they'd go into the bar's bathroom together. This was how they'd got to knowing one another.

Walking into the bodega near his apartment, he cut off a group of teenagers. The counter was right next to the door and they came in a minute later and poured rain water that had collected in a container on the curb down his back as he was trying to buy some tallboys for the walk. He mouthed, "What the fuck," to the Yemeni kid behind the counter and looked at him with the big-rimmed saucer eyes of a cat. It was a grotesque

sight—to see a man debase himself in such a way, to posture like a kept animal. But why should it have been debasing for him to show his true colors?

He whipped around and wailed indiscriminately. His shaggy shit-wet hair flipped back and he howled moonward like the wolf, and the teenagers jumped back in their own ‘what the fuck’ moment—flinging stream after stream of Gatorade at him like it was holy water.

He clomped off, abandoning the idea to brown bag some beers. He remembered the last time he had seen Bertie and the state that it had put him in.

He had gotten off of work early and they sat at the outdoor patio. There was something wrong with her. A mood. Something. It unnerved him not to see a drink in front of her.

Bertie said what is wrong with you? He didn’t know what she meant. What she meant was how he was nearly 30, going after a person her own age, wearing clothing that was too tight—making him Frankenstein-like considering his height and pudginess, and looking, generally, like he was having an anxiety attack while suffering from meat sweats.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, hunkered down on the wooden table, on the little stool—his head somewhat forward, then, in alternation, aimed straight down at the tabletop.

“Tell me,” she said, “what was the worst thing you remember happening to you as a kid?” She had clearly been thinking about this herself.

“Hrm,” he said, straining even more then to make himself smaller—to turn into a ball, maybe. “I do not know.” He strained to conjure images of his mother and father.

Of his one brother. Trying to separate actual scenarios from situations on television that had seeped into his consciousness, coming out with only hazy images of them standing in his childhood home or some local establishment. Hearing only vague sentiments, sentence fragments and names and signifiers and inside jokes that not only did not mean anything but were perhaps complete fabrications.

He drank from his beer.

She told him about an incident in which she had spent half of a day locked inside of a closet, her parents' argument outside—approaching and moving farther—creating a horrible din of which there was infinitesimal respite and no escape.

“Oh,” he said, “wow.”

Was that all he had to say?

One night Alex had taken Bertie across town to his apartment.

There were guys who would sit on folding chairs on the corner—which he was walking past now. When they walked past the guys that sat on the corner—outside the abandoned building on folding chairs—a lewd, sexual comment was made and directed at Bertie. Alex was already tense—he and Bertie had broken up ten times in the half hour walk from her apartment to his—and when the comment was made and the two of them stood near to the men he felt truly overwhelmed.

He stood rigid and still, staring forward at no one. He shook almost imperceptibly like a vibrating dildo.

“It's fine, Alex,” Bertie said.

Alex began making a high pitched noise, which became increasingly like the bleating of a goat and he grabbed his head in his hands, massaging his temples, while doing it.

“What the hell,” one of them said, slowly. They leaned back in their chairs as if to distance themselves. They were formerly relaxed and unprepared. The smell of the blunt they had just finished smoking still hung on the corner. A younger guy got up and was moving a few paces back rotating his body away and then towards the cacophony.

“Uh, what?” he said quietly.

“I don’t like this,” someone said. A half-minute had passed of Alex noisily vibrating. Bertie stood there, arms crossed, tapping her foot, looking around in low anxiety. She placed a pill in Alex’s mouth and rubbed his throat like a dog until he swallowed it. He started blubbering big tears, still vibrating in the middle of the block.

He did not know if Bertie would let him in, but if Bertie did not let him in he had one of her keys. Bertie had multiple sets of keys. She was always losing keys, leaving them places, so she had made many sets. Every other week she would pop one of her pills and go to the hardware store a block over, give a man money and come out with a dozen keys—their jangly sparkle in her hands a promise of something unobtainable in morning’s dim light, where she might awake alone and sober and radiant, staring at the ceiling, or worse, with Alex’s doughy form fetal next to her.

Bertie lived a half-hour walk from Alex. The subway route necessitated a train transfer and took longer than walking. He was too antsy to wait for the bus.

Bertie lived only blocks from her college campus. Intimidating college students, radiating sex and opinions, milled in that area. It put a fear in him that he would be bullied like a child—like he'd be suddenly cast in some pubescent anxiety dream, the kids all laughing and pointing, him struggling to catch up with even the basic details of his occurring humiliation.

Though he now, by some divine grace, lived in an apartment on the same block as the bar he tended—he had spent years tumbling from one living situation to the next. Compared to Bertie's apartment, a lush luxury condo not ten blocks from her college—beautiful amenities: a giant stainless steel refrigerator, a stove with gas burners, a chandelier lighting the den, video intercoms between the apartment and building doors, a soaking tub—his was just a shack. His was a mattress and a kitchenette.

Alex rifled through his pockets looking for earbuds, thinking to keep his mind clear of Bertie by playing music. He found a Christian pamphlet someone must have shoved in his hands weeks earlier. Images of his own childhood, of being implicit in life's misery, quickly faded as he thumbed through it. Painting the black void of his head was only Bertie in bed in a negligee.

His feet stomped on forward. He stared absently at the pamphlet as he flipped through it, his mouth open.

He couldn't remember if the negligee was something she really owned, but it was her bed—a student's bed, pushed up against the corner wall and the dirt on the edges of its bottom sheet hidden only fractionally by shadow.

When her facial features formed completely in his mind, into an expression she would never make, the dissonance caused the whole thing to drop and he realized he was

walking—about halfway there now, past the community pool fenced off by twenty-foot concrete.

He started trying to formulate what he was going to say when he arrived at Bertie's. He thought he would say something about middle school. How the kids mocked him. Again, the way these images of his youth meshed indiscriminately with episodes of *Full House*, *Boy Meets World*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *The Cosby Show*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *The Golden Girls* (his father might have wandered into the living room once or twice, ambiguously drunk, standing five or ten feet behind him, repeatedly asserting, "These are girls' shows. These are shows for girls,") *Family Matters*, *Happy Days*, *That 70's Show*....

He remembered the television itself. Encased in wood paneling, the speaker strip below it, the cat warming itself on top of the cable box above. Nights and days spent sitting in front, absorbing the low-level radiation. Though he also knew deep down that these nights and days in themselves were actually, fundamentally inextricable from images he had absorbed, from television or movies on television, of children sitting in front of television sets, coated in the glow.

He dug in his pocket for his cereal in the pill bottle.

He thought of an incident from middle school. He had come into class in the winter as a Gore-tex orb like George Costanza or the little brother in *A Christmas Story*. When he removed his hat from his head—this happened on any given, frozen day—his hair would be a birds' nest. There wasn't enough time for his hair to dry, between getting out of the shower and his mother shoving the knit cap on his head. (Wearing a particularly colorful one one morning, not that one, walking past the kitchen table at 6:45

AM, his father had said “Gay,” in a monotone without looking up from the paper.) When he removed his hat in class and his hair was exposed, some girl whose name he did not remember but whose image was perfectly stored in his crystalline shame stood up and said,

“Don’t you ever comb your hair?”

And all of the children laughed at him. When he looked at the teacher he was laughing a bit to himself, before he quieted everyone. If it had stopped there it would have been much better, but the teacher went on.

“We all have bad hair days.” It was the perfect time to launch into a moral lesson. The teacher got down on one knee, knelt next to either Alex or the girl. Was he remembering this from somewhere else?

Wherever it was from, it was getting to him. A tear or two streamed down his face, aimed at a 45 degree angle at the pavement, as he continued to clomp towards Bertie’s apartment.

Bertie had put down her copy of *Mrs. Dalloway*—it was lying next to her on the bed. She had to read it for class but she liked it all right and it wasn’t hard to get through or anything. She was watching some crap on her laptop, drinking a beer.

She wished she had weed. She had spent the better part of the day trying to get some. She had gone to the bodega on her block, where the young guy who worked there sold it under the counter. He kept telling her to come back later because there were always too many people there. Bertie alternated between a zombie stare and something more amenable to maintaining their relationship, in low anxiety as people milled about

the store behind her as she stood at the counter. He called her “sweetie”. Finally, the third time she went back he said that he didn’t have any, some problem with his supplier.

Did he just not have any the entire time?

Also, she was missing one of her bottles of pills.

The buzzer rang.

Bertie got up to check.

Even on the little black and white screen of the intercom, Bertie could see the tension in Alex’s body—the anxiety that he radiated. Before she could make up her mind, he had entered her building of his own accord. She cracked open her apartment door and went back to her room and sat in bed, facing her doorframe.

Then he was standing in it, all sweaty and smelling like shit.

“Um, do you have my pills, Alex?”

There was something Bertie should know: when Alex was in middle school he was crying and whining all the time. Because he hated the people in the middle school. Because they did not wish to interact with him.

“Should I know this?” Bertie said flatly.

Alex began to moan. A steady “Uh” at moderate pitch cracking every so often into Tarzan holler. He was gripping his head. Standing off frame in the doorway, his body slightly obscured before Bertie looked back at her computer.

The show she was watching on her laptop ended and it still hadn’t stopped.

“Please go,” Bertie said, looking over again. He was now rocking in the corner by the front door, still clutching his head.

She unseated herself from her bed and walked over to him. She pushed the vacuum cleaner over to him. There was an unplugged lamp in the other corner, and she brought that over, too.

A few throw pillows from her bed. A space heater she got when the central heat stopped working the previous winter. Then she noticed the large unopened package that had come for her earlier in the day, on the island in her kitchen.

When a number of things had been used to cover him it still did not make to adequately dampen the sound.

In an Orchard

Oh, how perfect death
computes an orange wind
that glows from your footsteps,

and you stop to die in
an orchard where the harvest
fills the stars.

—Richard Brautigan, “Oranges”

I was a cheery-eyed boy. Rose cheeked, and that. I took a great fall from a stepladder out apple picking with my family. I woke up from the physical trauma in a hospital bed, unaware, as people are, of how much time had passed or where I was. Due to a clerical error on the hospital’s part I had been permanently separated from my family. I was only a child, barely out of my teens.

I was cared for by a rotating series of nurses: female and male, boys, girls, men and women. The androgynous and the grossly sexual. The one that stood out was a woman ten years my senior, whose name was Rose.

The nurses were kind in letting me stay as long as they did. For I waxed maudlin on my plight. I had no money.

Rose was kind but not more so than anyone else. She seemed to speak only in aphorisms and koans, and above her head was always the distant cloud of her thinking. It was as if she existed primarily in a background. Only when pressed did she present a genuine sentiment, and soon there was conversation.

“I think people have the right to live, to living—to stop dying.” I remember her saying that once with some conviction.

“Wowee,” I said. I said it in earnest even though I didn’t really know what she meant—I was just a kid, barely twenty-two.

I could only stay so long. When I was discharged Rose let me stay at her apartment. It was a little studio with a twin bed, but we were neither very big. At night Rose would sleep like a corpse—she would be dreamless, dead-tired from her shift, her body straight and pale like the rigor mortis was just setting in. Sometimes one arm would be under her head, and spit would dribble out from her pushed open mouth.

I studied Rose in the dark. Her long areolas whose color frayed and speckled out into her white skin. The cesarean scar. And the faded scars on her wrists.

I slept in a ball next to her. I had dreams in which I was rotating endlessly in a black void—my body unchanging, hunkered down almost like a sumo wrestler, but in constant turn.

One night we were playing Scrabble. She wasn’t working many shifts at the hospital around this time, and asking why seemed impolite.

Rose was losing. She was beginning to get drunk from the jug of whiskey she was drinking from. When she started on the jug it was nearly three-quarters full and now it was not nearly one quarter full.

She was frustrated because she wasn't getting the words she wanted. I got the word I wanted, over and over. Up and down the board—double word score, triple word score—I spelled APPLE, APPLE, APPLE.

At the candy shop, we took lollipop after lollipop down from the shelves. We walked out to a bench and sat and eyed each other. We were sucking on our lollipops. We were smiling at one another, cheerfully.

Rose was in white scrubs. I was so happy she was working again.

At home, the jug of whiskey sat on the windowsill, drained, and a breeze rolled in to blow on it.

After we had finished our suckers she pulled out something from her candy store bag that I hadn't seen her buy. It was a candy apple.

"This is for you," Rose said to me. "Gosh, I—it means so much to have this time with you. I just wanted you to know that."

I smiled at her and took the candy apple. I stuck my incisors into the hard outer layer and they stayed there. A twitch ran through my body and my bowels grumbled. At the same time, my heart brimmed. A light shined out of me.

On the day of my proposal she had taken me to a playground. It was cool out. I wore my jacket with the racing stripes that she had bought me. Rose wore a black pea coat and a light-gray knit cap.

She sat on a park bench. I cut through the park like I was cutting through autumn—the red and yellow and green leaves spreading out before my form like a surf. I ran up and down the jungle gym and she watched me from the park bench. I used the monkey bars and looked at her smiling. She smiled at me.

I fell straight down from the monkey bars, walked up to her in the cool autumn—the wind whipping the colors up and all around me again.

I presented to Rose a Macintosh apple. She was sat on the park bench and when I did this she looked at me puzzled.

“Rose, would you be my mommy? Would you adopt me? Would you take me for good?” I asked breathlessly. The breeze was approaching a standstill—the leaves hanging still like a pretty picture, behind me.

“Oh!” she said. Then she said it again, breathing it out.

I fluttered my eyes like a doe.

“But how,” she said, almost to herself, as our lives had ended and now begun again—and all else was fine print nagging at our immensity.

Curb Sofa

I came home from work and sat in the sofa we had dragged off the curb a few weeks earlier. I say ‘in’, rather than ‘on’, because I would sink into it. It was way too big for one person, but not big enough for two. The sofa cradled me like a hammock.

I spilled beer and it pooled under me and soaked into my jeans, in an area whose center was the small of my back. I put a towel under me—even though the sofa absorbed the beer within fifteen seconds—and did nothing else about it. I did nothing about it and drank five more beers while watching old sitcoms on Netflix. I had bought a six-pack of craft beers—pretty much the only alcohol I drank was IPAs.

My roommate came home and went into his room.

I slept in my bedroom, which had never aspired to be anything more than a mattress and the boxes I moved in with. I had put a crucifix I’d bought for a dollar at a thrift store on the wall as an ironic nod to its sparseness.

When I walked around the next day, in the cold, wet early December, the spot at the back of my jeans seemed perpetually damp from the humidity. It agitated my anal fissure—which I had gotten after some bathroom trouble following a week where I ate a cheeseburger every day.

It felt like a colony of termites eating away at my foundation. One minute it would be fine and in another I would be using all of my willpower—nearly crying from the irritation—not to scratch and pull at my ass through my jeans.

Jean buzzed me into her apartment. I thought we were going to hang out. Have a drink or two at her apartment then maybe go to a bar later. I arrived with a six-pack of hoppy, seasonal beer. She said she couldn't actually hang out because she had too much schoolwork to do. I cracked open a beer and thought to linger for a minute anyway.

I was standing up. She was on her laptop at her coffee table on her sofa.

I looked at the framed picture of her and her mother on the wall. I walked in a little circle again. I looked towards her, at the long couch she sat on. I felt myself feel very tired. I lifted up the brown bottle to my mouth—resisted the irritation in the seat of my pants.

“Last night I spilled some beer on the sofa, and it pooled around me, and then I was just sitting in it,” I said. “I’ve smelled like dried-up beer all day today.”

She looked at me with revulsion or bewilderment.

“Why would you tell me that?” she asked.

“Because it’s funny, I guess.”

She looked at me. I made a little shrugging motion with my body.

“I thought it was funny,” I said.

I smiled. She looked at my mouth.

My mouth tasted like burnt.

Pacing

My head seared. I huddled against the little fence bordering my building. I didn't want people to see me, not out of embarrassment or fear, but because I wanted some peace and quiet, and I wanted to be outdoors. To have these two things simultaneously in Brooklyn is not easy, if possible at all. It was close to trash day, Tuesday. I was sitting amongst a pile of black trash bags. I thought I felt, or intuited something, around my crotch. I pushed up my pants with my thumb to peek inside and saw dozens of tiny ants swarming up and down along the strands, the hills and valleys of my pubic hair. Hmm, I thought, strange.

I moved my hand from my pants and looked up to the sky, a bright bluish gray. It was a bit overcast but also humid. I liked the humidity. I liked the warmth against my skin and the way everything smelled. I felt primal. I felt connected to myself, to my body, to the present, in a way that, for me, is usually obscured.

In the bathroom I pulled down my pants to find the ants gone. It did strike me as odd but I didn't spend much time thinking of it. The shower was right there, no one was home and I was slick with sweat and grime, yet I felt no compulsion to bathe. In fact, I reveled in the grime. It was a welcome change.

I paced the apartment, the areas uncluttered by trash, for an amount of time indiscernible to me. When I started it was dark, and when I ended it was slightly not dark. My legs hurt from the walking: long strides, the same path every time. Up and down the narrow hall, through the kitchen, into the living room stepping over the trash bags demarcating the two areas, around the coffee table. Big, firm steps with soft landings so as not to wake my roommate, Trevor, whose room was connected to the living room.

On the sofa, which faced a little flat screen used to watch Netflix, I had left a notebook which detailed in graph, summary, as well as bulleted lists how my family line could be traced back to some primordial, patriarchal evil. I felt great and I felt boundless in my energy. The two things were one in the same.

I remembered the sluggishness felt beforehand. I had retaken up the bad habit of muttering "I hate myself" or some variant when alone. I say muttering but it might have been too loud for that. Maybe I knew other people were home and I wouldn't have said it otherwise.

I had spent so much of that school semester listening to my other roommate fuck his girlfriend. Our rooms were separated by one thin wall. We were living in one of Bed-Stuy's few residences that was newly built, not some old brownstone whose walls are thicker than bank vaults. It was not intentional listening, I mean. It would often wake me up. It was always the same monotonous thumping. Him huffing, her moaning, always on beat like they were just playing a recording to fuck with me.

I wasn't particularly sexually experienced at the time but it seemed kind of depressing to me—the lack of variant, that is. I had no way of knowing what they were

actually doing but I imagined him behind her and her on all fours. It matched the noise, in my head, which was again, unchanging. No talking, or screams, exaltations, or whatever. Just huff huff huff, moan moan moan, THUMP THUMP THUMP.

Harriet, the girl I was seeing, who was not, she continually reminded me, my girlfriend, was convinced I was exaggerating.

One night I stood outside with my roommate's girlfriend. I don't know if we had stepped outside to smoke, or if we were waiting for somebody to come down or what. It was in the early days of the break. I was not yet completely gone but everything was coated in a certain lens, like I had not so much lived my life up until that point but had instead been watching a film. She was talking about a film too, but I have no idea what movie it was or if we had just watched it. When we watched things in the apartment in those few weeks I could not focus for the life of me. I would keep my head forward while thinking of other things, and make irreverent commentary to prove I was paying attention, which I wasn't, and which mostly just annoyed those around me.

What she had to say about the film, what film I can't remember, once again, but what she had to say was about how it furthered preconceived notions of submissive-dominant sexual relationships. All of her words seemed so codified with THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP. The depressive lilt to her speech took on a new meaning, and her face, her veiny bug eyes which made it look like she cried all the time, etched itself on my memory like a fisheye photograph. It made me feel sad, but also horrified, like I was like looking under a rock.

I had thought I had soured on most things romantically since my last relationship. I mean, it wasn't a relationship and neither was this. I had never been in a relationship.

But the first person I loved before never indicated any of the same feelings, and I hung around, never making a move or really doing anything for far too long.

Then I met Harriet, who was hotter than anyone I had encountered in my formative suburban murk. I was already an idiot before we even got to know each other.

For a long while we only made out. I was a virgin, and it didn't take her long for her to figure out as much. I was twenty-one years old, and she was twenty. I was a senior in college and she was a junior. She held over me an ocean of sexual experience. And she could talk, and I had difficulty talking in social situations, even amongst people I knew, at least without alcohol or some other inebriant.

We would kiss. She didn't like tongues involved, but she would take soft bites of my lip and I would copy her. Then I moved down to her chest. I didn't mind the slowness of it all. It was new.

She claimed she wouldn't have sex with me because she didn't want the responsibility or accountability of taking my virginity. In retrospect, I think it was a relief for her to be in a relationship without sex proper.

I could describe the two of us but we were children, there wasn't much to either of us. The traumas of our respective youths had not caught up to us fully. I knew a lot about music, which enamored her, made a case for my worth. I would alter the make-out playlist and we would kiss more.

My quietness made her think I was intelligent. When you speak little it adds weight to what you say, and allows you to say weighty things. When I did talk though, when alcohol or something had loosened me, my speech was often weighted with sarcasm, irony, and other mechanisms of defense. I could make fun of things without

other people realizing, sometimes even myself. It was all about the monotone of my voice. I was too depressed, steeped in myself, to really think about it.

After we had sex we both changed. I wanted her more and she wanted me less. There were many instances where I would sit in her apartment—we didn't go to my apartment because I felt it was too dirty—and we would talk. If she didn't like what I was talking about, or if I said something she disliked, but was not enough to cause an argument, she would open her computer, scroll through social media and respond to me in monosyllables until I would get up and leave.

By the end of my semester I was addicted to Xanax and compulsively smoking marijuana at all times. I did not have a Xanax prescription and I was buying bars at outrageous prices. I wasn't getting good deals for the weed either. Previously in college I had struggled with my alcohol and cocaine abuse, and while I had largely removed cocaine from my life, my problems with alcohol lingered. My roommates were both painkiller-cum-heroin addicts, and my substance problems seemed paltry in comparison and therefore not warranting analysis.

I had, in my mind, effectively broken up with Harriet. At the post-thesis reading gathering, at a bar near campus, she trailed the senior classes. She paid me a hug there. She was wearing a low cut shirt and a plaid skirt. Her hair was in two long braided pigtails. It was difficult to look at her. On one hand, my eyes could not betray the anger and hurt I felt towards her and on the other my eyes lingered on her, and she sort of noticed, and it really seemed to belie the point I was trying to make by being passive aggressive.

I was milling about, mostly avoiding her until she left with her friends. My roommate had won the thesis prize. We had both been in competition for it. There weren't really too many people to choose from who were actually good. I congratulated him, he said, "Thanks. That means a lot." or something to that affect. He was in a cocky mood. He said he thought he had a shot with a girl in the program, and then he casually mentioned he had broken up with THUMP THUMP THUMP. Seeing him high on his own shit, better dressed and shining with health, only embittered me further. Everyone was mingling with their drinks in the backyard of this bar, but I felt way too inside of myself to have any interaction that did not seem weighted in social erring.

The other thing that was going on was that I was desperately sick, I couldn't even drink to escape the night. It had come on in the last month or so of school and persisted. I felt like death, but the doctor I saw deep in Crown Heights just said it was a bronchial infection and gave me some weird cough syrup. Perhaps my drug and alcohol use had lessened in an effort to curb my sickness, but I was not capable of forgoing it altogether. For the thesis award submission, in order to fit all of the pieces of writing together in time, I had spent a weekend alternately taking Ritalin, smoking marijuana, and drinking straight vodka in order to enter some kind of work fugue. It had mostly worked—though I don't remember much, the writing had been completed in a competent fashion. The Thursday before the weekend was lost because Harriet had broken up with me and I spent that day drinking and watching comfort movies on my laptop. It was for naught though, as I hadn't won. Now I was just sicker, without romantic companionship or the award—a little token of my own worth whose meaning I had elevated to stupid heights.

I woke like a vampire rising from the tomb. My body moved on my bed, a mattress on the floor, from a horizontal position to an L shape. My hair, which was long, was stuck to my neck and body in a way that disgusted me. My head pulsed and I gasped for air as if surfacing. My underwear was moist and my entire body cold from sweat.

I wandered around in the hangover that would last me until I was hospitalized, a drill going down off-center into the top of my skull. It would be some days until then, but during that time I littered my living room with tallboys of beer and malt liquor, the majority half drunk then abandoned, or more accurately misplaced, forgotten about.

My other roommate went away for most of that summer. He was couch surfing around the Pacific Northwest. His friend, Brian, who had stayed with us before, was subletting his room.

We were staying up, watching movies. It was still early days of summer vacation, at that point where you could still do nothing and not feel bad about it. That sort of feeling was in the air. We were done with college. I went out to smoke with Trevor and his girlfriend. I was animatedly describing a scene from a movie. There was an expressiveness, and a fearlessness before physical proximity that was new to me and of this mode I had entered.

As I held my phone in front of Trevor to show him a clip from the movie, he moved his body next to mine, to look over my arm. He looked over at me for a moment and smiled, before turning to the video. I noticed, I could see him from the corner of my eye. His look was happy but weighted with trepidation, like he saw something new in me, that he was happy I could open up in this way. It made me weak-kneed and took

breath from somewhere deep inside of me, but I just stood there holding my phone horizontally. The saddest part was that I knew none of the things he thought about me were true.

Less and Less

It was strange that my father had the house and I had the shed. It seemed like to compensate for the emotional toll of the divorce and separation from my sibling I should have been the one allocated the larger living space. My twin brother and my mother both lived on the other side of town, or so my father said.

The shed was just a box. A single-size mattress took up half of the floor space. I had taken a little table and chair from the house patio and put it in there as well. On the table I placed a typewriter that had been given to me by my mother on my thirteenth birthday. As a gift, it had seemed threatening—imposing. Now it was a decoration and a reminder of a time in which I had with me my brother.

In the house my father spent the majority of his time at the little island in the kitchen. Every time he drank from his mug the creek out back drained. Then when he was good and loaded he would go out back and piss in it and fill it right back up.

He was a crazy motherfucker but absolutely terrified of me. Always had been. Scared of both me and my brother. It was the sight of us that hurt him so he kept always to his drink and the television. I take that to be why me and my father couldn't live in the same house.

Me and my brother hadn't spent a moment of our lives in New York City, this is true. We were born in Louisville, Kentucky and in our fifteen years on Earth at that point in time we had never ventured farther east than the Pennsylvania border. But every night he had convulsed with a vision of that Eastern city.

Don't take it as romantic, because it is not. My brother was closer to me than anyone but he was dumb as shit. The boy hadn't aspirations of the city or anything. He would have been content to spend the rest of his life watching cartoons—on the loveseat, his hand stuck in the hem of his shorts.

All I had for my own entertainment was a shovel. I liked digging. I spent days in the abyss of the half-acre yard.

The highlight of my times digging was when my shovel hit something one day and a few hours later I had unearthed a wooden coffin. I propped it up against one side of its fresh grave. Something inside begged to be let out. I could identify with the sentiment and I opened the coffin.

It was my grandfather.

My grandfather was to live in the house. He wore my father's clothes. It was good having another person there but not as good as my brother.

He was a terrible man, my grandfather. This was told simply by his presence and the way his scoliotic backbone contorted him. He could not walk, instead shuffled, bent forty-five degrees. Still, I held an affection for him that I find hard to articulate. I think a big part of it was that he was then there as my father became even more erratic, and as the echo of my brother's presence left my body, place and mind.

I almost never slept. That's how I knew my father was leaving every night. I would hear his feet slapping against the blacktop and the car easing its way into the cul-de-sac proper. I imagined him going to see my mother and brother, and it angered me so—the prospect that my existence in the shed was some kind of elaborate punishment. But what had I done? If he was back the next day he would deny ever leaving. If he wasn't back I could sneak into the house.

I had lost this privilege—of being permitted inside the house—early into us moving to that plot, before I found Grandfather. There was only one bedroom inside. I wondered where my grandfather slept. It wasn't in the vacated grave in which his coffin was propped up on one end, its limp lid lilted now and again in these summer breezes.

I yearned for those days alone with my grandfather. My father had found a refuge in his angered silence. Grandfather was quite verbose. He would sometimes sit on the front porch smoking, with a glass of bourbon he would refill from a bottle by his feet. He reminded me of an old Confederate veteran: proud, despite the burden of near objective disgrace. He had spent much of his life's energy into the publication of one book, which he had written in his thirties. Upon the genius of it he staked all of his deluded grandeur. It was an homage to some old novel by some great writer, set in a park in upper Manhattan, in which the stand-in for whatever nobleman is some impoverished, college-aged dog-walker.

It wasn't until I went out into the cul-de-sac looking to socialize—the concept had just occurred to me one day—that I began to see my home life as somehow off.

I met Amy playing in the street and after we acquainted ourselves she led me to her house.

I charmed her entire family around the dinner table. I told them I lived in a shed, which they thought was hilarious. I took them to be a hateful bunch, impressed, as I was, by their cruelty.

In her bedroom, Amy asked why she didn't see me at school. Did I go somewhere private? I didn't go to school. Amy laughed. I didn't see what was so funny. She touched me. I hadn't bathed in well over a month. It seemed to speak poorly to the more adjusted members of my demographic that she didn't seem to notice. As we made love, as we heaved and hoed, as it was, my attention drifted to the blown up and framed photograph of the New York City skyline above her bed. When she got on top of me I rotated our bodies so I could continue to look at it.

I wasn't itching to leave my father, I know it might seem that way, but I wasn't. There was a catharsis to spending my days digging in the yard, lying in the dug hole, then staring at the immense Kentucky sky. Loneliness never occurred to me. Only later in life was I taught to desire. Back then I had routine and a steady supply of food. Sure, I had to take it for myself, get it when my father was occupied. Sure, I had to structure my life around a man who would sometimes come home, then destroy a room with a ballpeen hammer. It was still free food. It was still free living. The bad part was the separation from my brother, which was of course awful.

It was like a hole dug in me, like every sentence I uttered to myself had only half of the words they were supposed to—though I didn't know why it felt like this as my

brother barely talked. Whenever I was struck with a bit of anxiety I would dwell on the fear of my memory of him beginning to degrade.

Father was more of an entity than a person in my conception of this period, but what a glorious a-hole my grandfather proved to be. On the days my father was gone, Grandfather would come out onto the porch to goad me inside. My grandfather had told me that courting a beautiful woman was like courting the absurd: what drove you to them was like what made you laugh at your highest easement. I told him that I'd made it with a neighborhood girl.

"Was that your first time?" he asked me, sitting on a recliner amidst the debris of Father's latest episode.

"God, no," I said.

He poured me a glass of bourbon, handed it to me. I drank from it. I was an estuary. I was draining a river into an ocean. My head felt full—muscles relaxed—as I leaned back against the side of the recliner, which was inhabited by my grandfather.

I called upon him to tell me more of his book.

I continued to see Amy. In her perception, her conception, as it were, we were two things entwined in love. Not necessarily in mine. Whatever's really true, though? That is, who is to say I wasn't in love with her in any given, immutable moment?

Here's something I found: Amy's father had a grow lab of pot in his basement. He worked at a pharmaceutical company during the day and tended the crop at night. Amy's mother, herself a botanist and adjunct professor at the local university, also tended to her crop.

I had been so quick to weigh them as one of these local nuclear families I had yearned to see explode—little did I know I was amongst professionals and academics! More important was my new means of acquiring drugs, the only type of which I'd indulged in before were pilfered opioid-analgesics taken from my fathers' medicine cabinet.

As I lay in my dug hole, each moment felt stoned opened a fractal, crystalline shard in the Kentucky sky.

Her parents were eager to provide me with cannabis, though it was the cannabis that had induced me into a newer, more analytical self—one that asked: why am I being provided with drugs for free?

I began to see that it was an incentive, perhaps unconscious on their part but there nonetheless, to continue “spending time” with Amy. I started looking for things wrong with her. Were there physical defects, or more likely—as we'd become very familiar in that respect— emotional or mental ones?

It was my burgeoning neurosis that led me to more courageous drug taking. When my teenaged queen slumbered I tip-toed down to the sitting room/library and began thumbing through her mother's books on Botany.

I knew the thing with Amy. It was that she was an artist, but not a very good one. Amongst intellectual parents, finding this out is a shame. They lose esteem in their child, then give them a look like they're an aged dog.

She showed me her drawings because we were “going steady”. That’s what she said. We were at the moment of divulging some greater chunk of ourselves to each other. I’d been dreading this sort of a development.

The drawings were bad, I could tell.

Her work, which aimed to be heady and political, were simply drawn on paper, 8x11, #2 Ticonderoga pencil w/ store brand magic markers. They were reproductions of those sort-of-kitschy rugs made for and sold to occupying American troops in Afghanistan.

I should say, I had scoured their entire library—I’d long since blown through Botany, and moved onto everything else—and was now something of a genius on a majority of topics.

In bed, after sleeping together, we sat half tucked into the covers, propped up on pillows like she’d orchestrated this from some set piece on TV. She would give me some banal commentary on a current event or some popular book or piece of media. I didn’t like her at all though I told myself I did. I was grateful to be spending so much less time at the shed.

One night, downstairs, I was caught. There I stood with the fluorescent lighting then on me—the library was just one corner of the grow lab not forested by pot— at full force with Dr. Mother, Ph.D. in the doorframe. Around me were books, removed from the shelves and stacked around me in a way that I imagined seemed affected or intentionally comical.

“You’ve gone through all these, huh,” she said, haughtily, as if I was not to be believed.

“Yes, I have,” I said.

“You must be a genius,” she said. She opened her mouth to smile showing a row of pearly whites that made mine look like corn.

“Yes,” I said, “something of one, yes.” Keeping my mouth mostly closed.

She smiled again. For a moment we talked of how unfortunate it was about her daughter’s pictures.

“She wasn’t even born early enough to remember it!” she said. I wondered if she had been to New York.

“It seems to me that the buildings could not have been brought down by the aircraft and resulting fires alone,” I said. She looked at me and I remembered the grease and dirt on my skin.

Perhaps they had taken an interest in me because their own daughter was such a disappointment, lacking as she was not only my intelligence but my tenacity in the face of abject physical and spiritual impoverishment. The fine clothes, from a store outside of the cul-de-sac—a department store—that they brought me, were quickly reduced to dirty rags. They soon began to refer to me as “The Werewolf”—a pet name—and around the dinner table Amy glowered more and more each night.

We were no longer having sex and it was hard to say what our relationship was. That didn’t seem to matter to the rents. I slept on the floor of the lab downstairs in a haze of my own smoke—lulled by the smell.

My grandfather was no longer at the house. I did not know where my grandfather had gone to. My father was there less but when he was his rage had seemed to grow ten-fold. I could even hear his screaming and wrecking some nights when I was sleeping down the street.

I was lonely but excited at the prospect of what my life could hold for me. It was a new idea.

One night my new parents—Amy’s parents—approached me. I was familiar, of course, from my varied readings, of the fabled drug Soma, which had been taken by the ancient Indo-Aryans to enter the plane of the gods. Amy’s mother informed me that she had been studying it—that she was part of a university research program into finding out specifically what Soma “was”. They were successful. She, along with her husband, had been growing it hidden amongst the cannabis in the basement. I honestly don’t know how I had missed it in the state of heightened cognitive functioning that I was in.

They told me this because they knew I was interested. We had all become very close. I wondered later on if it was naïve of me to be the guinea pig. Was the university truly so lacking the funding that they’d exploit some itinerant shed-dweller instead of a paid volunteer?

A few nights later, Amy’s father, less useless than he appeared, made a fire of books—outdated textbooks, pharmaceutical catalogues, DSM manuals, etc. On top was a bale of cannabis that had been lit a fire. I knelt in front, coughed, winced from contact

with embers. I looked up at the ceiling, a bit too low for comfort, getting paranoid we'd run out of oxygen.

Amy's mother stood in front of the counter, which was in front of where I slept most nights. I'd stuffed my things in a crawlspace. Amy's mother opened up a cabinet behind her while I knelt in front of the counter with the fire going there. There was a small wine rack in the cabinet and glasses. Amy's mother took out a bottle of red and three glasses. What I would be drinking was already prepared—in a mason jar on the counter. She poured out the wine for her and her husband. She poured me mine.

My surrogate mother turned shamanic to hand me the cup of Vedic brew.

Chin chin—we hit our glasses.

It tasted like shit.

I put down the glass—tried to focus on the flame, the wafting currents of burning and dark gray smoke taking my breath away. My head seared: some immense pain. Horrible reverberating noises, like I was standing under a revving helicopter, inundated me from all sides. I gripped my head.

I felt twitchy, then hot. I sensed an impending world. Like a cut in some cable production, a field of vision overlaid my own in strips of running candle wax.

It was towards the end of the day and I was left only with a golden retriever named Lucky. It kept pulling me. I was struck with a headache, and it made me realize how hungry I was. I figured it must have been a blood sugar thing.

I stopped, bent over and gripped the stone siding around Carl Schurz Park, wrapping Lucky's leash around my arm, as a bright white light overtook my field of vision and then faded away. Then the headache. Blood sugar.

I spat on the sidewalk ground and felt nauseous.

I spun a globe and put my finger down when I was young. It landed somewhere in the deep, deep south. When I spun it the second time my finger landed more towards Appalachia.

It was a globe I got for my 8th birthday. No video games. Thanks Grandma.

That was, what, 15 years before?

I woke up in my bed that morning in the old dilapidated house in Bushwick I shared with a bunch of college students and twenty-somethings. "Artists".

My bed was a single bed. Besides that, there was a dresser and a little night table and a pile of clothing on the floor that would've taken a full day to sort through.

From my laptop, I played Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash and the Louvin Brothers. I wore a Stetson, sometimes. I always wore my boot cut jeans and cowboy boots, and generally wore some frilly Western button-up.

My housemates gave the veneer of liking me but behind my back they called me "Skynyrd" or "Tex". I was from Long Island.

To make money I walked dogs uptown. That was where the real dog walking money was made.

Lucky pulled at me. I stood up and squinted around.

I walked back up towards the apartment building on 88th street. One of those days where you feel like you're on acid. Must be a cosmological thing, I thought. Everything was bright and people seemed like either arbiters of peace or hostile aliens.

I met Amy on 88th street by chance. I met her through an old roommate of mine, who I went to college with. We had been seeing each other for half a year.

Watching her, almost ass up in her attempt to curb a Dachshund while moored to a St. Bernard, was endearing.

“Nathan Hello.”

“Amy Hello.”

“Do you want to meet up at Arnold's later?” It was a bar near my apartment.

“Yeah.”

We kissed and I brought the dog to its apartment and I got on my train and I was barely cognizant of any of it even happening. I was so attentive of the city then, in all of its gray. I found myself smiling on the subway with the people there quietly hating me.

One night when we were in bed together Amy asked me what I liked about her—why I was with her. When I tried to think of something it made my head hot and it made my heart beat nervously. What I said eventually was that I was touched by her sadness and the way she could chain-smoke those menthol cigarettes.

I don't know if she liked it or not. She buried her head into my side, and then fell asleep not long after.

I thought about other things I could've said. I could've said like, about how she never made her problems other people's problems—and how I really respected that.

She had tattoos up and down her arms of flowers and cartoon characters. On her cheek was an emoji of a frowny face.

It terrified me sometimes, the living from paycheck to paycheck, the constant nebulous void of everything past two weeks from now. At least she had her art. What did I have? I stayed up late that night staring at her ceiling.

The pain that came on as the train rattled between Manhattan and Brooklyn was immense. It was like thumb tacks being placed all around my brain. I hollered and banged the subway door with my fist, then I sat while grabbing the pole in the middle and began screaming.

“Please, God, make it stop,” I was screaming.

I was vaguely aware of some people looking up as I was bathed in both light and darkness. I was lying down on the cool of the floor, swaying with the movement of the train.

My vision wavered again, and I found myself returning to my previous soul. Yet something was off. I was chained to a wall, in a wood paneled room with the curtains drawn. I huffed and puffed. Portions of the skin on my back stung.

The curtains were drawn, but I still saw the light dip in the room as the sun fell. I felt weak—hungry and dehydrated and in pain. Fluorescent lighting came on above me. I heard footsteps. Two people had come in and were not saying anything, and I too, somehow, knew to keep quiet. They opened up a trunk—though my head was fastened

forward and I could not see— removed some things and closed the trunk. They began whipping me in tandem. I do not know how long they kept at it, as I no longer had the movement of the sun to gauge time.

To distract myself I tried to think of New York Amy.

The discoloration of her one eye. The way she wore neon sneakers. Her irony and curved flesh of unknown symbols. Were it not for the pain these things would have been lost to me like a hazy dream.

Before leaving they undid me from the wall. I was too haggard to even meet the faces of those who had hurt me. It would turn out they were wearing masks—the man that of half of a rabbits head and the woman's like something out of celebrations for Fat Tuesday further south.

I had been propped up on a wooden chair. They leaned the guitar on me as if I was only a means of buttressing oddly shaped objects. They waited a bit, presumably so I had time to catch myself, before they began screaming and hollering atonally. They stomped on the floor. So much were they like baboons, like something animal but human-enough to make one's skin hairs stand end-up.

I was made to play songs of Appalachia: Roy Acuff, The Louvin Brothers, etc. I had the ability somehow and the voice. I faltered sometimes, when my stripped back made contact with the wooden chair—gets stuck too it for a moment maybe. Still there was familiarity and the unconscious awareness that this had happened many times before.

We all found the sound of the guitar beautiful—it was a nice one—and my voice wasn't so bad. My parents swayed in front of me to the music in that house on the other side of town. When I had played a dozen songs they clapped.

“Finally,” my mother said behind her party mask.

Then they filed out of a door that I was surprised to find unlocked.

I walked thirsty and miserable through my hometown, a place that had become nearly as foreign to me as the Soma's dream since my life in the cul-de-sac. I was naïve—I now felt so abundant with naiveté—but I didn't cater the idea I was still under the drug's influence. In the snippets of Manhattan I could recall, the sun bounced from slick high-rise to pigeon eye. Here it simply hovered in oppression over the gray. I walked along the highway then the main road, past strip malls, gas stations, and little markets with long faded advertisements in their windows.

I had walked outside wearing a white muscle shirt I had found in the room, but the humidity made it stick painfully to me. For the majority of the walk back I was half naked, my whipped and bloodied back out in the open to little reaction from the few motorists and vagrants that crossed my path. I felt like the bloodied Lord of the country gospel I had expressed in pain to my mother and father so many times.

I first went to my own property, or rather, that of my fathers'. There were loose papers fluttering from my shed, still I went to the house first. No one was home, not even Grandfather.

The papers came from a stack sitting on what little room on the desk in the shed was not taken up by the typewriter. Even though I was too tired to read—even look at

the words—I shed a tear to think that my grandfather had thought to type out and leave me his novel.

In the yard, I ran my hand over the cool, smooth wood of the coffin. I had more than half-expected to find some letter of his leaving, feeling shame for a brief moment at the prospect that my absence from the shed was the grounds for his departure.

The top-most, non-blown away paper seemed to be of a man convulsing on the ground in a public setting. I skimmed the next few to the best of my ability, trying to read through the glossy filter and dots of fatigue that plagued my vision. It went on like that, it seemed. A few pages at least just describing a man having a seizure and making a scene.

I understood then that I was not an artist and I put the papers back on the stack and I walked out of the shed and off my property, dodging all of my dug holes as I made my way out and into the cul-de-sac. I felt an unfamiliar tension well within me.

I walked through Amy's front door. I went down to the basement. On the way: there was Mr. Amy's father, mouth agape. There was Dr. Amy's mother, mouth agape. In the basement, I looked at the spot where I should lay like I was seeing something but I wasn't. There was nothing there. It was only at that moment that I felt another part of myself screaming somewhere in agony.

In Amy's bedroom doorway—with her parents who had trailed me upstairs—I realized it was not a cry of pain. There were I and her in the throes, as it were, on the bed. And I stood away—with Mom and Dad, there.

At first I felt it was my brother, but then I could see it was me. Both naked, breathing heavy and slick with sweat, me and Amy were draped over the bed at odd

angles. They were wiped. Too wiped to register the me standing in the doorway, or the parents behind me.

Eventually my brother on the bed cocked my head to look at the framed poster of a city that was not far away.

“I’ve been to New York,” I said with his head. He turned mine and gave himself a look of recognition.

I was awed to know that I was my brother, and that he was I, but I knew that I had already been made a kneeling drunkard, pleading before God, to have gone and found myself something I had never even thought of before.