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Only Children Weep

By

Lauren Doyle

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

Stray dogs fought and darted in and out of the abandoned warehouse that meth addicts and squatters called home. Their snarls echoed off the blistering concrete walls coated in cheap spray paint. Red-shingled roofs of stucco houses were nestled between the dusty reservation and the tiered buildings of the power plant. The light, yellow and burning, oozed up from those forbidding cement structures. The Pima Reservation sat untouched and the houses that once populated it were abandoned and left to rot under that potent desert sun. The only thing that inhabited it were the piles of trash cast off by the feckless and contemptible individuals attempting to rid themselves of their pathetic twaddle. Beneath the garbage, the land, hardened by summer, was arid and fractured. The cracks in the clay led to a wash that overflowed with water from monsoons that pissed down rain and dirt, and swept up pieces of cactus that had splintered off in the wind.

Near the edge of the power plant, the number 3 bus, coated in thick, gelatinous dirt deposited its passengers onto the scorched earth. Weary, working mothers stepped off after picking their children up from school. The kids, feverish for shenanigans, roared as they sprinted for the wash while the mothers shouted at them to stay out of the cockroach-ridden water. They splattered each other with pungent mud and dove down beneath the shallow surface. They emerged one by one clutching translucent crawdads between their fingers. Sludge coated their exoskeletons and the kids shook them free of the mire that coiled around their claws. They climbed out of the water and held them above their heads triumphantly as they ran back to their mothers. The bus hurtled through the gritty air and left the families to continue their journey along the beige wasteland.

“Dude,” Huggy said, “look at that gnarly one.” He pointed towards a roach that looked like a small car. “Go and touch it,” he nudged. “No way. I’m not fucking touching it,” I said disgusted. He reached down to pick up the floating nightmare. Before he could grasp it, its wings fluttered and it rose up towards the ether, its black body slowly disappearing in the glare of the sunlight.

We ran screaming until we reached the dead lawn in front of my house. “Later,” Huggy said high fiving me and pulling out the burnt down joint he kept in his back pocket. He exhaled and the smoke undulated above his head while he rambled down the street.

The handle dangled from the door and I rammed my shoulder into the splintering wood. Inside, my mother was crying in the kitchen.

“Everything okay?”

Her head hung low over the sink as she wiped away the tears that tumbled down her cheeks. “Fine, just wasn’t paying attention and spilled dinner everywhere.”

“I’m sure some of it’s edible. No need to cry over it.”

The way she avoided making eye contact with me, the scattered orecchiette on the floor, and the perfect splatter of oil seeping into her sundress and crawling up her neck made me think something else happened.

“I forgot. Dad hates orecchiette.” I said bending down to help her pick up.

“Yeah, I forgot that too.”

I looked down at the mashed noodles in my hand. “Man, I love orecchiette and sausage.” The starchy mess ballooned in the garbage can.

“You know what,” my mom said wiping away the mascara that stained her cheeks, “Let’s get some Nogales Dogs. He’ll figure out what he wants for dinner.”

I smirked and nodded in agreement.

My mother and I sat in silence as *Head Hunters* played through the car speakers and we nodded our heads along to the saxophone and distorted bass. She stared blankly out toward the darkening street. The swelling around her eyes retreated but the redness from her salty tears outlined the brown of her irises. She tucked her long hair behind her ears and pulled out strands of the blonde that had twisted in her tortoise shell hoop earrings. “Oh I can smell the bacon from here,” she sniffed the air that seeped into the car. The truck wavered in the distance and the decaying sign became visible as we drew closer.

The plastic tables groaned beneath our elbows as we sat and waited for our food. Grease dripped off the bacon that coiled itself around the hot dog. The sounds of sirens echoed in the distance. We sat in silence, eating and studying the mayonnaise slathered onto the buttery bun and the pinto beans that spilled out over the dollops of salsa verde and avocado puree before we happily ingested it. We didn’t speak or look up. The only time we did take our eyes off our food was when the police helicopter circled above us and its searchlight bounced off the houses across the street and skimmed over the blue pop up canopy we sat underneath.

After we finished, my mother intertwined her arm with mine. “Thanks for coming with me honey.” I rested my head on her shoulder as we walked through the parking lot. “You know how happy processed meat makes me.” We got into the car and before my

mom said anything, I popped in the Talking Heads album and let David Byrne manifest our sentiments and serenade us as we pulled out of the parking lot.

We passed along junkyards littered with rusty, liquidated mobile homes and the malnourished dogs that protected them. Faded taco trucks rested along desolate roads, and laundromat owners stood out in front of their eroding operations and let cigarette smoke billow out from their worn and weathered mouths.

When we pulled into the dirt driveway, we saw the black mustang that belonged to my dad parked in the carport. “Oh boy.” I said unbuckling my seatbelt. “I’m sure he’s calmed down by now,” she said. She confidently got out of the car and walked up to the front door of the house. She opened it and went inside. He wasn’t there. I breathed out, relieved and knew that some time alone was all it took to recalibrate his mood. He had disappeared back to his office, but had done all of the dishes. “Guess he’s doin better,” she said.

This was the closest my dad ever came to apologizing. Never once had I heard him [verbally say the words, “I’m sorry.” If I ever did, I don’t know what I’d do with myself. It probably would sound strange coming out of his mouth and I would laugh thinking it was a joke or he was being sarcastic. When he and my mom would fight, mom always apologized and he would reply with, “I appreciate your apology” or “I’m so glad you realized how much that bothered me.” He could never take responsibility for his actions, which at times was fun because it meant there were no consequences. He and I could be mischievous and no one ever got in trouble. Unless mom found out, and then he’d immediately throw me under the bus.

When he wasn't being goofy, his outbursts were random and violent. Growing up, my family became accustomed to them and we based our temperaments off of his. If he was happy, we were happy; if he was angry or irritable, we stayed out of his way. But recently, this rage cropped up more frequently and over trivial things, like pasta being cooked for dinner or when someone would eat his granola bars.

The anger and my confusion from it permeated my thoughts as I went to bed. "We're all human," my mom would say. When he would blow up at me and I'd run to my room and cry from heartache that I'd disappointed him or break things out of frustration and being misunderstood. My mother said, "Just try to think of all the good things you've experienced together." Then I'd think back to when we would sit on the couch when I had my ear infections and couldn't sleep. He sat next to me and sang as I rested on his shoulder. He moved the hair off my forehead and looked at me as he sang, "Goodnight my angel, now it's time to dream." I would fall asleep as he continued to hum and he would pick me up and bring me back to my room.

I sunk further into the mattress and my good memory faded and a more dreadful one materialized. I was twelve years old and we were visiting family in California. The whole car ride there he was trying to pick a fight with my mom. As we drove over the Colorado River she finally reciprocated and defended herself. He didn't talk to her the remainder of the trip. We passed through Blythe and got lunch at the In-N-Out with all the other families and truckers that had stopped along that stretch of dusty highway. We ordered our food. He sat on the curb while we ate at the rounded white table under the red

and white umbrellas. We spent the remaining four hours in silence and when we reached my aunt and uncle's house, he disappeared.

We went out to dinners, to the beach, museums, all without him. It was the last day and he was nowhere to be found. "This time for sure. I know he's gone for good," I thought. He showed up right before we left. Again, we sat in silence. The only thing he said on the trip back was when my mom went into a gas station to get bottles of water and he turned toward my sister and I and said, "I just don't think I can stay married to your mother anymore." I remember my sister and I looking at one another and then nodding our heads pretending like we cared about him or what he had to say before turning our Walkman back on to listen to Dead Meadow and drown out his complaining with scratchy, reverberating guitar.

I loved that about my sister. Growing up she helped diffuse some of the tension or reminded me that sometimes mom and dad say and do shitty things and we can't take it personally. She went away to college two years ago. We talked on the phone, but she wasn't there anymore to anesthetize my swelling anxiety and dig me out from my persistent melancholia. I found myself caught between my parents and the one sided arguments provoked by dad. From their bedroom I'd hear him shout, "You love them so much, but what about me?"

By the end of my first year of living at home as an only child, I'd get home from school or work and disappear into my room for the rest of the evening. I'd eat my meals in there, do homework, and leave my mom to manage dad's erratic behavior. The yelling would angrily swirl around the house. My mom would travel from room to room picking up laundry and checking on dinner. He'd follow her around, knocking the piled clothes

onto the ground, hurling food onto the recently mopped floor. I'd turn on my stereo and listen to Cro-Mags and The Germs and hoped that maybe the music and the violence of it would slip out through the speakers and coil themselves around his mouth.

I drew my feet back so that they would be underneath the plastic umbrella that groaned as it slowly melted under the desert sun. The tanned backs of lap swimmers glistened underneath the heavily chlorinated water and sunlight bounced off the ripples made by their outstretched arms pulling underneath the surface.

The sun slowly disappeared behind the barren mountains and the lights surrounding the pool switched on and illuminated the last few swimmers sculling and clawing at the chlorinated water. The horn blasted out over the deck and the pool quickly emptied. I climbed down off the lifeguard chair and walked over to the blue, bubbled tarp. "Tarp Wars?" Huggy asked. "Game on," I said rubbing my hands together. We both took the edges of our tarps. He was covering the lap pool and I had the dive tank. "I'll give you a five second lead," Huggy shouted. His voice traveled across the water as he said go and lingered in my ears before I started to run. My feet skimmed across the white, rough gutter along the edge and I ducked down beneath the diving boards that extended out over the tank. I slipped off my shoes when I reached the other side and took a deep breath before stepping off of the gutter and onto the tarp. I attempted to pick my feet up and pumped my arms to propel me forward. I slowly sank down and churned up the water with my writhing body. I looked over and saw Huggy on his back accepting his fate and sinking slowly into his watery grave. He jerked forward off his back and crawled toward the edge of the pool. He hoisted himself up and I sat on the flooding tarp,

defeated. “This is how it ends. Goodbye cruel world. Farewell mom and dad.” I said reaching up towards the ether. The water flooded my ears and crept its way along my face. “Let’s go dude!” Huggy shouted. “Get your shit together!” I wriggled my way across the remainder of the pool, took off my soaked shirt, and threw it onto the deck. We both sat there hunched over, wiping away our tears as we laughed.

“Wow, you sucked at that.” he said shaking his head. “Next time, we’ll surf the slide with guard tubes.”

“Deal,” I leaned back onto the warm pool deck and covered my face with my arms that bubbled with sunscreen.

Huggy disappeared into the guard room. The lights on the deck crackled and shut off. He walked out holding our bags and flicked the last switch.

“I’m assuming this disgusting accessory is yours.” He held up my gray, tattered backpack.

“Yup! That’s the one.”

“Gross.” He threw it to me along with a towel. “So you don’t soak the seat.”

We walked on the pool deck towards the dust lot where the lifeguards parked their cars. I forcefully opened up the back gate where rust clung to its hinges. The Pontiacs and Chevys sat in an uneven row and my electric blue PT Cruiser poked out from behind the battered bumper of a Grand Prix. “Have fun in Havasu,” Huggy shouted. I told him earlier, when we went out to lunch to escape the heat and screaming, sun-burned kids, about the annual trip I take with my dad backpacking through Havasupai.

“I’m sure you’re gonna have a great time.”

“Not with my family.”

He laughed and I heard his car door groan and slam shut.

I turned on the radio and quickly navigated away when I heard the irritating whisper of Delilah creep into the car and the infuriating, stupid problems of people discussing their love lives. “I’ve Seen That Face Before” played on The Blaze and I drove home with all of the windows down and let the smell of dense, desert rain ooze into the car. I pulled up to my house and walked up the driveway, crushing [all of the] olives that had fallen off the tree during the last monsoon. They popped and the juices in them seeped out from beneath my sun baked flip-flops. In the kitchen, I saw my Osprey bag and my dad’s, [sitting] perfectly packed and stacked [up] against the cabinets. He was standing at the sink filling up the bladders that went into our CamelBaks.

“Hi sweetheart. You packed everything you’re gonna need?”

I threw down my swim bag. “Yup, should all be in there,” I said yawning.

“I’m so excited,” he said. “I heard there’s a rope swing by Navajo Falls. You can swing out over the edge and drop into the rapids.” He slid the bladders into the hydration packs. “Alright, everything’s all set,” he said folding his arms and nodding approvingly of his organization. “We’re up at 6 tomorrow.”

I yawned again. “Thanks dad. See you in the morning.”

The disintegrating and yellowed linens shifted beneath my listless body and the thrum of the air conditioner twisted around the corners of the house before creeping along the floor of my room and slowly twisting its way up towards my head.

The voice of my father vibrated in my ears. “Get up, we gotta go.” I teetered forward out of my bed and stumbled to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

I grabbed my giant, pink sunglasses and pushed them up and over my eyes. From the kitchen, the whine of the engine crept underneath the door and along the tiles and I pictured my dad anxiously drumming his fingers against the steering wheel while he waited for me. I quietly slipped out the garage door and he sat in the driver’s seat and scowled. He let out an annoyed huff and put the car in reverse before I even closed the door.

We traveled in silence as we drove to meet the rest of the group. He turned into a cul-de-sac where a black truck and three vans, a cherry red, a white, and a green stood idling. “Course we’re the last ones here,” he said under his breath. Flocks of children, some of them from the Esso’s and others from the Nicholl’s and Lisowski’s hurtled along the blacktop and hopped into the cars. My dad rolled down the window.

“Sorry everyone. You weren’t waiting long I hope.”

The other dads shook their heads. “Not at all,” said Mr. Esso.

“Apparently my daughter is incapable of getting up early.” He gestured towards me.

“No harm done.” Mr. Esso turned back towards the rest of the group. “Ready?”

We led the caravan out of the neighborhood and out onto the broad, decaying freeway. Dad stared straight ahead and made no attempt to speak.

I felt bad about being late. He always got excited for this hike and I worried that our tardiness had left a blight on the trip. Even if it was small it wouldn’t be strange if it caused him to unravel into a callous and seething dirtbag.

I leaned over and turned the radio on. He turned the dial all the way to the left before I drew my hand back to my side. “Let’s just have some silence for a bit.” My body fell back into the seat and I slowly sunk into the cushiony interior. I tucked my lips behind my teeth and side eyed him hoping to see him relaxed or even smile. His eyes seared into the road as he stared down the fragmented white lines that marked the freeway.

We traveled along the citrus orchards with the bleached tree trunks. Our gear rustled in the back as we drove over uneven cattle guards. The sun had begun to set and my dad pulled off the main road onto the rugged earth. He stopped between two large saguaros and popped the trunk before he put it in park. We pulled out the faded green stoves and our chipped enamel cups so we could heat our water for dinner.

As we lit the burner, the rest of the backpacking group arrived. A never-ending stream of children climbed out of the three 15 passenger vans. The Esso kids flung out their sleeping bags and even managed to nail some of the Lisowski kids in the face. One by one they littered the makeshift campsite and children caught in the destructive firing path were struck down by the plush nylon coated insulation. Small groups of children and adults made their own separate fires and cooked their dinner while the sun slowly disappeared behind the red canyons.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked picking up the empty, aluminum packet. “Oh great, Three Sisters Stew. I thought it was going to be something disgusting.” Dad pushed around the mushy, beige contents of the packet.

“Is that supposed to be chicken?”

“Uh, I actually think it’s supposed to be peas.” He held it up to get a better look at it. “I guess peas can be chunky and brown.” He let it roll around the blue, chipped spoon. “Oh well.” He popped it into his mouth. “If you want to eat something else, you could have dinner with the Lisowski’s. They’re putting Spam and Slim Jims into a ‘bare’ burrito.”

“I think I’ll stick to my powdered hummus and granola.”

The smell of frying Spam cruised along the hot desert air and the bubble of boiling water slowly dissipated as members of the group nodded off in their sleeping bags. I fell asleep to the sound of coyotes howling in the distance and the temperature declining rapidly on that open desert where we pitched our camp.

I stood at the rim looking down at the switchbacks where early morning hikers had begun their 13-mile journey to the campsite. I turned on my headlamp and clutched the shoulder straps as I slowly walked down the plunging trail. My dad followed behind. I adjusted the volume of the speakers imbedded in my pack and Trish Keenan’s voice vibrated through my chest and crawled its way into my ears as she sang about scarred mountains and the watchful stillness echoed in my body. The sun steadily rose up from behind the coral walls of the canyon and my head was swaddled in distorted violins and piano.

Emaciated horses wandered aimlessly along narrow ridges and the sound of our large group with the bellowing laughs of middle-aged fathers and shrieks from children echoed down the trail. I kept a steady pace, but my dad had begun to quicken his gait. I watched as he became smaller and smaller as he traveled further down the path. The rest

of the group began to splinter off. I heard the scuffle of boots behind me ebb and flow as I crested boulders and slid down their smooth surfaces. Casual conversations and laughter evaporated in the hot and dry desert air and after three miles I found myself alone.

Silence bound itself to me, apart from the occasional hiker walking past or the rattle of a snake [somewhere] nearby. The trail curved around petroglyph covered rock faces and walls where lizards sunned themselves on their warm surface. I could hear the trickle of water from the creek grow steadily and heard the susurrus of leaves from trees that hung low enough for them to be gently swayed by the current.

The village was made up of barren farmland and decaying signs that were a decade old, advertising their peach festival and beauty pageant. Children played on the rotting jungle gyms and wrinkled, elderly women cooked their fry bread in battered, shallow pots. There was only one mile left from the village and the smell of bread frying and sound of children playing slowly dissipated as I walked further away. The current picked up, and the trees, which were sparse, became denser. There was a crackle above me. Two hikers sat on the twisted branches of a Juniper tree. One gripped a machete [in his hand] and hacked away at the branch, the other sat in a crook a few feet above the ground. The glint of sunlight bounced off the blade as it twirled between his worn and weathered fingers. There was a snap and a branch splintered and fell to the ground. Dust billowed up from the earth. One of the men sprung out from the tree and stood a few feet away from me. He advanced as the soot melted away. I looked at him and the boots [he wore] that he slammed against the ground when he walked. His eyes, cloudy and intrusive, seared into me. I clutched the straps on my shoulders and sprinted down the trail. I ran [away] panting and desperately trying to reach for the field knife I kept in my

pack. My boots skidded along loose rocks and I stumbled forward. My hands struck the rough trail and kept me from face planting. I turned around and looked to see if the man was behind me. The trail was shrouded in a bloody haze. Once my eyes focused on the path behind me, I saw nothing, nobody. I stood up and dug out the pebbles that shredded my hands and embedded themselves in the cuts dribbling with blood. I wiped them off on my shirt. Up ahead was a family of hikers who saw my wipeout. I smiled and waved to reassure them I was okay. I continued to run to make it seem like that was my intention and be less embarrassed about my ungraceful tumble. “Great day for cardio,” I said jogging past them.

I ran for over a half mile before I saw my dad up ahead in his tan bush hat, also hiking alone. I shouted at him and teetered down the path. He turned around, “Where’ve you been?” I tried to catch my breath before I spoke.

“What the hell dad?”

“You were right behind me.”

“You hiked for ten miles and didn’t bother to check if I was there?” I looked up at him. “You were walking so quickly I thought you were trying to get away from me.”

“It’s not my fault you’re a slow hiker.” He was trying to be funny.

“What if something had happened to me? Or to you? We would’ve been alone.”

He exhaled loudly through his nose. “You’re being a brat.” He tipped his hat so it rested on the back of his head. “We’re both here and we’re both fine. Let’s not let this ruin the trip.”

“Whatever,” I said pushing past him. “I’m going to Mooney.”

I walked along the creek where other backpackers had thrown down their packs and sipped on their warm lemon-lime Gatorade. I shooed away the lizards gathered beneath a cottonwood and resting in the fractured rays of sunlight. I unfurled the hammock attached to my bag and hooked it up between the cottonwood and the Colorado pinyon. Its sheer blue and red nylon cocoon slipped smoothly underneath my fingers and wrinkles dissolved under my palms. My sandals sprung out from the opening on top of my bag. A buildup of rocks fused to the soles of my shoes and the socks on my feet clung to my flesh sticky with sweat. I threw the boots aside and tucked the socks into them. I took up the sandals heavy and warm from baking inside my bag and slid them on my feet.

Water gushed out from the top of the falls and plummeted down onto the travertine rocks at the base. I waited for other hikers to descend down to the pool where the water accumulated. The rusty chain was hammered into the rock and I held onto it as I repelled down, checking often to make sure I didn't end up stepping on someone's head that was slicked with sweat. I turned around and slid down the rock face for the last ten feet using my feet and hands as brakes before I collided with the ground. The dust plumed in a red vapor around my body and I made my way over to the water, slowly inching into that arctic pool that churned with great strength and life. It washed over me and stripped off all the sweat and dust that had collected on my body earlier. Calm flooded through me beginning at my feet and slowly inching its way up my body until I was completely swallowed up in it. I floated on the surface with my eyes closed staring at the muted red of my eyelids. My face twitched as water splattered on it from the falls and before I drifted any closer I swam back to the stillness of the shore.

I could see my dad creeping down the canyon wall and tossing his Camelbak onto the chalky earth just below his feet. He walked over to where I was resting. “I didn’t wait for you earlier and you didn’t wait for me when you ran off to Mooney, so I guess we’re even.” He paused. “Wanna hike down to the green room?” I looked up at him. “Sure.”

We crawled down rocks glistening with fresh spring water and moss and jumped into the gentle current of the river, letting it lazily carry us downstream. Dad floated like a corpse and I banged my limbs on jagged rocks treading behind him.

We reached Beaver Falls and jumped into the pool below. Dad didn’t come up and disappeared into the cave behind the cascading water. I took a deep breath and tried to navigate my way through the silt and small cave opening. A hand hovered above my head before the palm drove into the soft part of my skull. It crushed down the hair woven into a bun on top and waded through my curls. Pressure seized the back of my neck and the fingers wound around my throat and jerked me upward. The tension felt like my tendons and tissue were being slowly ruptured and my head would cleaved away from the rest of my body. I popped up into the grotto saturated in green and choked on the air that deluged my lungs. “Watch out. Don’t want you to hit your noggin on the edges,” my dad said. “Thanks.” I swam over to a bench made of rock that had been carved out from other backpackers. I looked up at the stalactites that dripped down from the ceiling and at the water that surged and spat in the small space of the cave.

One of the Lisowski kids draped himself in the multicolored bivy fastened between a pair of oak trees. The dads sat around disintegrating, wooden tables, discreetly drinking beer from flimsy tin cans. I rolled around an avocado with green, blistery skin. I

sunk my knife into the emerald flesh until it collided with the pit and twisted the halves apart. I peeled away the rough rind and the meaty inside burst in my mouth as I pressed it up against the roof of my mouth with my tongue. A group of Esso, Lisowski, and Nicholl kids darted out from behind forbidding yucca plants. "We're gonna go smoke this cigarette. Wanna come?" Robbie Nicholl asked. I turned around and told the crowd of ten year olds that I was gonna pass. He leaned in, "Okay. Just don't tell our dads." I nodded my head and touched my nose. "Got it." They stood in a circle, unconcealed and puffed away on the unlit cigarette, passing it around allowing everyone in the group to draw in the faint taste of nicotine. I laughed and went in search of my own obscured space.

The spring, shrouded by cottonwood trees, seeped out of red rock fused with pulpy moss. I took out the joint [I slid into my bag before leaving for the trip] and clutched it between my lips. The lighter snapped beneath my thumb and fire leapt out from the oval opening. The smoke singed my nostrils as I exhaled and coiled up along the canyon wall. A frog, microscopic with eyes uninhabited, embraced the rock it rested on. I sloped down to meet its gaze. It was unconcerned with my presence and sat confidently as I leaned in closer. I blew smoke out of the corner of my mouth and gently batted it away to not disturb it. The frog shifted. Water beaded down its glassy back and it elevated itself off the slick boulder. Its unblinking eyes fixated on my face and grew wider as I smiled at it. My teeth, vast and colorless, reflected in its inky pools. The frog suctioned back onto the rock and quivered, as if it were building up strength to strike. It submerged under the thin flow of water before inching its way along the wall towards the desiccated patch of stone.

We all woke up early on the last day to hike out. I rolled over in the hammock and reached for my headlamp. As I scoured the earth for the elasticated band I felt what seemed like an electrical shock shoot through my hand and up my arm. Prompted by my scream a flash of light illuminated what had caused the pain. A scorpion stuck up straight out of my hand and its pincers desperately tried to cling to my balled up fist. I felt the stinger slowly detach from my skin and the ridges of its tan body as I flicked it away with my fingers.

“Shit. Fuck.”

“Was that a scorpion?” my dad asked.

“Yeah, its somewhere over there,” I said holding my hand.

“Let’s have a look.” He examined the puncture and used his bandana to wipe away a spot of blood that had begun to coagulate. “You’ll be fine.” He threw a bottle of biodegradable soap into my lap. “[Just] go wash it off in the spring.”

One of the kids came over to examine the sting. “Does it hurt?” He went to touch it, but quickly pulled back his hand. “Sorry.” He looked up at me and the burst of light from his headlamp made me recoil.

“Oh I’m sorry,” he said turning away.

“No worries, it’s all good.” I rubbed my eyes with my fist.

“Can I see it again?” he asked.

“Sure.” I presented it to him and he took up my hand in his and rotated it in the glow.

“Ugh. Gross”

“Let’s hustle. Wanna get to the switchbacks before it’s too hot,” Dad said.

I dipped my hand into the water and squeezed a thin stream of the green substance into my palm and gently kneaded the wound. The pain curled around my fingers and clenched onto my wrist. I grimaced and dunked it into the cold, dark water. I finished washing up and dried my hands on the hammock before rolling it up and fastening it to my pack. We walked upwards out of the campsite in pairs and the tunnels of light from our headlamps fell onto the sandy trail we trekked along. We could hear the thunder of the waterfalls and followed its sound until we had reached the village. We quietly crept past the houses and the huddles of dogs that slept together to keep warm.

By the time we had hiked up and out of the village my hand had turned to a vibrant red. I reached behind me to try and grab the mouthpiece to my CamelBak, but numbness had fully seized my fingers. All I could manage to do was bat it around and try desperately to catch it with my mouth as it flew around my face.

“How’s the hand?” my dad asked.

“It’s fine. I can’t really feel it.”

He looked down, pointing his headlamp at the sting. “If it’s really bothering you stay and wait for the helicopter.”

“I’m fine.” Couldn’t afford it anyway.

“First ride is in an hour. Are you sure?”

The sun was only just beginning to rise and there was another 10 miles ahead of me before I would even reach the 2-mile long incline of switchbacks. I looked back down the trail descending into the tree line along the edge of the village.

“I guess I’ll wait for the helicopter.”

“Alright, I’ll meet you at the rim.”

“Wait, you’re not gonna go with me?”

“No, but you only have to wait an hour and then I’ll see you at the top.”

“I don’t wanna wait in the village alone.” I looked back at him. “And I didn’t bring enough money for the helicopter.”

Mr. Esso overheard our conversation and offered to hang back.

“I can stay with you. My knee is bothering me anyway.”

“It’s okay Sam. She can’t afford to pay for it.” My dad said.

“Not a problem, I got it.”

“No, no, really, it’s okay Mr. Esso. I can hike out.” I said.

“All that blood rushing to your hand won’t be good for the swelling. Please let me get you a ride out.”

I stared at my dad who shrugged his shoulders. “If you wanna go, go. But you’re gonna have to pay him back.”

“Alright.” I turned to Mr. Esso. “Once we’re back I can find an ATM and pay you. Is that okay?”

“I’ll think about it.”

My dad nodded his head and ascended the trail. “See y’all at the rim.”

I turned to Mr. Esso and thanked him and insisted on paying him [back] once we reached the top. He continued to refuse, saying that I was young and to save my money for something more important. He and I and his 16-year-old son, Wes, [stayed back and] waited for the helicopter. We posted up on some tree stumps and watched as dawn steadily engulfed the village. We turned off our headlamps. Mr. Esso asked, “You start college in the fall don’t you?” I nodded.

“You must be excited. Do you know what you’re gonna study?”

“Not yet. I was thinking business, but I don’t know.

“You’ve got plenty of time to figure it out, but I’m sure no matter what you choose you’re gonna do great.”

As the temperature began to increase, murmurings of life stirred in the village.

Wes disappeared and emerged holding bags of beef jerky and pop tarts. He pulled out the leathery meat from its package and gripped the edges as he tore it. Bits of it flaked off and slowly drifted down to the ground. “Want some?” The marinade had seeped out of the dead and dried flesh he held in his hands. “I think I’m good.” He wiped away the sauce and grease that laced itself between his fingers and then shredded the package of pop tarts with his teeth. He broke off chunks of the strawberry flavored pop tarts and sandwiched a piece of jerky between them. He talked while he chewed up the horrifying concoction in his mouth. “Honestly, this is a great combination. The frosting on the pop tarts really brings out the sweetness of the jerky,” he mused. “And the conflicting textures,” he looked up and contemplated the spongy cud he mashed between his teeth. “Mesh well together.” He swallowed and wiped his hands clean on his shorts. “I mean all together I give it a 10 out of 10.” Mr. Ezzo shook his head. “That’s disgusting.”

In the distance we heard the buzz of the engines and the hum of a fierce propeller beating against the firmament. I looked up at the grizzled, metal machine warped into the shape of a helicopter. As it drew closer the ground began to vibrate before it landed on the edge of the canyon wall. Mr. Ezzo and I glanced at one another. Our nerves drained all the color from our faces. The blades of the helicopter twisted, kicking up the dead grass and leaves that littered the field it landed in. “I guess we’re getting into this thing?”

I shouted. The rust had eaten away most of the metal and the propellers looked as if they would deteriorate right before our eyes. Mr. Esso's face contorted into an artificial smile. "We'll be okay." It sounded more like a question than statement. My fate materialized before me. The rest of the group would arrive at the rim before us. They'd all open the trunks of their cars and sip on Kool Aid in the cloudy, plastic bottles with the detachable tops. They'd wonder where we were, but wouldn't panic yet. My dad would be the one telling everyone that we were fine, just running late. He'd probably even make roadies for everyone with the bottle of gin he kept in the car. He'd find someone who had ice and maybe even tonic water. They'd mix them and drink together. A few more hours would pass and they'd get word that the helicopter went down. The group would run to the edge of the canyon and look out at the column of black smoke rising up from the soil. The tribal police would find them and describe how they wrenched our bodies out from the crumpled metal heap. "They died on impact and likely didn't suffer," they would say in an attempt to quell their despair. We would be too charred and unrecognizable for our families to identify and all of the dads would drink heavily while they waited for the wives and mothers to come north.

The pilot opened the door and we ran toward it covering our heads from the flying debris. "At least we'll all go down together." Mr. Esso said before clambering into the rickety slab of steel. I climbed into the back with Wes. We put on the cobalt headsets the pilot thrust into our hands. "Ready kids," the pilot said clutching the worn, steel throttle. It gradually lifted off from the ground before it flipped over upside down off of the canyon wall it sat atop. We closed our eyes. I wound my hand around Wes's wrist and he dug his fingers into my arm. I hesitantly peeked. His face flattened and the skin cohered

to the bones beneath it. Through the headset I heard him recite, “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.” The sky, azure and vast, sat below our feet while the ground and lush vegetation suspended themselves above our heads. The trees outside the window looked like they grew from the atmosphere and sunk their roots into the crimson clay and the village dangled atop us like a city from a sci-fi movie. I secured the headset around my ears before the pilot evened out the aircraft and turned us right side up. The trees, now below us, lashed against one another and the water in the creek swirled into small white caps that crashed onto the rocky shore.

“Check it out kiddies.” The pilot’s voice crackled in the headphones. “You can see the waterfalls just there.” The helicopter continued to climb upwards until it hovered above Navajo and Fifty Foot Falls. We held onto the cracked leather seats as we swiftly rose out of the canyon and then lurched forward as we flew just above the narrow walls. “Almost there guys.” We lingered just above the launch pad before ramming into the giant H that marked it. “Watch your heads.” Mr. Ezzo and Wes jumped out and ran towards the row of cars that were parked perilously close to the canyon’s edge. Mr. Ezzo scanned the line for his black pickup and threw his and Wes’s pack into the gray bed of the truck. The shrill sound of metal grating against metal made us wince in aural pain as the hatch opened. He reached into a faded blue cooler and tossed us each a warm Capri Sun. It dripped with the warm water of the cooler and fell onto the coral dirt that then turned crimson with the moisture. “Now we just get to wait,” said Mr. Ezzo.

The stink of body odor, damp socks, and stagnant river water that had embedded itself in our clothes hung thick in the car. We rolled down the windows and stuck our

heads out so we wouldn't have to smell one another. The cars turned into a dirt parking lot where a chrome diner coruscated in the distance. The thirty of us descended upon the restaurant that sat at the edge of the Mesa and filed in a single, filthy line inside. We took up half of the tables and looked at our trail of dust that we tracked inside.

The waitress brought me a Sprite in a plastic tumbler. The effervescence ascended along the ridges of the cup and gathered near the top around the fast melting ice cubes. She placed a plate of potatoes saturated in melted cheese and vinegary onions and tomatoes. My knife smoothly cut into the fried egg and ripe avocado that lay dormant beneath the seething cheese. The yolk spilled out into the bowl and I mopped it up with the potatoes. All of the food was the color and texture it was supposed to be. The cheese wasn't rubbery, the eggs not chalky, and the Sprite wasn't watered down. Never has a meal or drink been so delicious or the comfort of a plush, vinyl bench been so satisfying. "How's that food tasting," dad asked. A single tear rolled down my cheek. "I think this is the best meal I've ever had."

My mother and sister sat outside on the patio drinking their Lime Rickeys as we pulled into the driveway. They put their hands in the air and waved at us. Dad dropped out of the car. His feet struck the ground and a plume of dust leapt off his clothes. "Help with the bags." He shouted at me. We went to the trunk and pulled out our packs.

"Well look," my sister pulled down her oversized sunglasses and looked over them. "It's our dirty, gross backpackers." She remarked. "Hey smartass," dad said as he nudged her face. I bent down and hugged her. "I'm gonna try and be delicate." My sister turned her head away from me. "You need to take a shower." I moved closer to her and

raised my arms up as I stretched next to her face. “Ugh dick!” she shouted and pinched her nose. “Guy! Can you two stop pestering each other for a second?” My mother asked as she pulled me in for a hug. “Ooh honey,” she backed up “You do need to shower.” A shit-eating grin spread across my face and I marched triumphantly to the bathroom.

The red dirt gathered up around the porcelain of the tub and swirled down the drain. I crunched out the rest of the dried mud from my hair and rubbed the pieces between my hands before letting them linger under the pulse of the hot water. “Finish up. Dinner’s ready.” My mother shouted from the kitchen. I rolled my hair up in a towel and sat down at the table.

“Well aren’t you looking fabulous tonight,” my sister remarked grabbing the end of the towel.

“Fuck off.”

“Girls!” Dad shouted. “Cut it out.”

My sister and I dropped our heads down as we laughed.

“Can’t we have a dinner where you two aren’t using filthy language?” Mom asked as she placed the bowl of fusilli on the table.

My sister tucked her lips behind her teeth and muffled her laughter. “Well, when else are we gonna use it?”

“You both are ridiculous.”

“See you’ve upset her.” My sister said as she kicked her feet at me.

I shook my head as I lifted the spoon filled with melted cheese and warmed arugula that clung to the fusilli’s greasy spirals. My fork sunk into its tendrils and I swirled it around to pick up the flakes of grated lemon and the Parmesan that pooled at the bottom. I closed

my eyes and by the time I had opened them all the food on my plate was gone. My mother scooped another helping and deposited it onto my plate.

“So guys, how was Havasu this year?”

I mashed the food around in my mouth as I answered her. “It was good. Water was beautiful and it was hot as hell.”

“She got stung by a scorpion on our hike out this morning.” Dad said.

“Oh gosh honey are you okay?” my mother had stopped eating. “Where did it sting you?”

“On my hand. It’s fine.”

“It wasn’t that bad. It blew up like a balloon, but she bitched and complained the whole time.” He said pushing the pasta around on his plate.

“It was fine. I took the helicopter out with Mr. Esso.”

“Well we should keep on eye on it,” she said.

I helped my mother do the dishes while my sister stood in the kitchen and did nothing. She had an aversion to any sort of domestic work and always bestowed the dinner cleanup to anyone besides herself.

“Why has dad been acting like such a dick? My sister asked as she turned towards me. “Was he like that on your trip?”

“He kind of left me hanging the whole time, but he wasn’t being any meaner than usual.”

She investigated the dust that collected on an edge of the island in the kitchen.

“Gosh guys have you cleaned the house at all?”

I looked over at her and cocked my head. For someone who has never cleaned before she had high expectations.

I picked Blaise up in my mom's mini van and she slid the door open until it collided forcefully with the rubber stoppers. She threw a backpack in and a couple of plastic bags before she climbed into the front seat. She held a CD that caught the sunlight underneath, shiny and slick, and made the light bounce around the dash. She put it into the player and turned the knob until the song rattled the bass in the car. "That's the night that the lights went out in Georgia," Blaise pointed and sang to the open road.

We followed the signs that directed us West and we passed through Calexico and the arid desert of the Tecate Divide. The sky opened and the ocean stretched out before us and the lights from downtown San Diego reached upwards, cutting through the incoming fog. Blaise looked out of the window and put her hand against the glass as she remarked how beautiful it was. "It's so different here." She looked out toward the city. "It's beautiful, better."

We arrived in Venice Beach, at my aunt and uncle's house where they let us stay in their spare bedroom.

There was a child's twin bed and a blow up mattress on the floor. Blaise and I played "Rock, Paper, Scissors" to decide who slept where. I took the bed and she the floor. We woke up the next day, my feet dangled over the edge and my head hung off the other end. Blaise was on the ground in a jack knife position. The mattress had deflated during the night and her lower abdomen and hips had sunken to the floor. "Don't you

look comfy?” Blaise was facing away from me, but I knew how she felt after she held up her middle finger.

Blaise dug out a change of clothes from one of the plastic bags she brought with her. She kept all of her belongings in the bags and the backpack was meant to “just throw everyone off.” All of the alcohol she brought with her was in the backpack and it rattled as she swung it over her shoulder.

We walked out to the kitchen and saw two plates with a hunk of aluminum on each. My aunt was grinding roasted tomatillos in her molcajete while my uncle sat outside on the porch scraping away sand and surf wax from his board. I knew from the tightly wrapped foil that they were the Tacos Por Favor breakfast burritos that sat patiently waiting to be unwrapped. “Morning ladies.” She spooned the viscous, green salsa into a light blue ramekin and topped it with a few leaves of cilantro. “It might just need a squeeze of lime.” she said as she placed the food on the table. I peeled off the outer shell and let my teeth sink into the thin, flour tortilla and through to the eggs and savory, shredded machaca. I poured the salsa over where my teeth marks had carved out an opening and watched as it seeped between the protein and starch. Blaise looked at me disgusted and averted her gaze as she ate her breakfast.

My aunt and uncle helped pack us up again in the car and handed me a care package of peanut butter cookies and oranges from their citrus tree before we continued our journey along the PCH.

An endless string of red lights invaded the pothole filled roads. My hands fell heavy on the steering wheel and I sighed. “Goddamit.” Blaise looked over and scrunched

up her face. Her musings darted around her brain before seeping into her cheeks and forehead and twisting her mouth into a decisive smirk. “Fuck it.” I inched the car into the breakdown lane and barreled down along the idling vehicles. Blaise yelled and hammered her hands on the dash in feverishness. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” She threaded her fingers through the moveable handle above the door. White spread along her knuckles as she clutched at the plastic and leaned into the turn right turn. Our car curled around the sidewalk and hurtled through the red light.

Houses lined the street of the road leading up to the boardwalk. People clung to waffle cones where ice cream melted and oozed out onto their hands and bicyclists tucked surfboards underneath their arms as they pedaled towards the ocean swirling with spiraling waves.

The road wound along Morro Bay and every now and then I would glance over and see the water crash on the shore and the volcanic rock protruding up from the earth and cutting into the sea. Surfers, like little flecks of drift wood, straddled their boards and bobbed in the ocean waiting for the perfect wave to carry them back to the chalky sand.

We stopped at Ruddell’s in Cayucos to get some smoked Albacore and shrimp tacos and waited in the line that curved around the corner. The food was heavy in our hands and we unwrapped the aluminum foil and caught the runaway pieces of diced apple in our palms. We squeezed hot sauce out from plastic bottles and bit into the tortilla and felt the liquid ooze out onto our hands and down our forearms. Blaise could only finish one and pocketed her shrimp taco for later. “I’ll eat it once we hit Hearst Castle.”

She looked out the window at the saloon style storefronts where bikers parked their Harleys and families dragged along their beach carts out across the sand. We drove along the water and the edge of the grassy trails of Harmony Headlands. The road climbed upward as the car made its way towards the Enchanted Hill. The mansion crested above the trees and its ivory towers with cerulean tiles lacerated the heavy fog that surrounded it.

Blaise and I bought tickets for the Grand Rooms tour and wound through ornate suites decorated with tapestries and gold vaulted ceilings. The azure mosaics wavered under the water of the indoor pool while the ceiling reflected off its glassy surface. We walked outside and looked down at the Neptune Pool surrounded by Mediterranean Cypresses where they swayed like giant, disapproving fingers and tourists with black cameras dangling around their necks pointed their lenses out toward the valley and ocean below.

The car engine turned over as Blaise buckled herself into the seat.

“What an incredible house,” she said as we drove away.

“And property. Everything, was so well preserved.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to be that rich? To have all this useless property and just hire people and say shit like, ‘oh yes Jimmy Stewart barfed on the terrace, take care of it will you. Or we need our eighth pool to be drained because one of the bison got into it.’”

I shook my head as I looked out through the windshield “Dumbass.” I turned toward her. “But you’re one of my best friends and I love you anyway.”

Blaise pressed her brow against the window and gazed out at the bay, calm and glassy. The sun began to set and cast a light blushing with coral and orange hues onto the tranquil water. I weaved through traffic and twisted around mountains covered in dehydrated and dead grass. The rocky hills disintegrated and the skyline fizzed with brightness. Blaise absorbed the glowing buildings and the vibrant houses ascending steep streets. The Golden Gate strong and faultless quivered in the distance.

Per her instructions, we were to empty the whiskey and tequila into smaller flasks and then hide them. We hollowed out a few sourdough baguettes and slid the small water bottles into the crusty shells of the bread. Blaise fastened the halves together by tucking one half slightly into the other and wrapped it up in a brown bag. “Before we go to the festival we gotta make a quick stop.” She directed me around the streets of North Beach until we stopped in St. Mary’s Square. “I’m just meeting my weed guy.” She had weed guys everywhere. “Where my stoners at?” She shouted as she scanned passageways strewn with black trash liners dripping with decaying food. “Stop!” I struck the brake and clenched the steering wheel. Blaise lurched forward. “There’s my dude.” She pointed to a guy swimming in a suit too big for him. She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door.

“Whaddya want?” She let her hand rest on the top of the door.

“Sativa.” I flourished my finger in front of her. “No edibles.” Blaise smiled.

“Remember what happened last time?” I looked at her above my sunglasses.

“Gotcha.” She winked and closed the door.

“Really, I don’t want to fuck with them!” I yelled at her as she disappeared down an alley lined with pastel pink buildings.

She returned a few minutes later. The drug dealer emerged behind her towing behind him his garbage bag full of weed. The door opened with a groan. She produced a Ziploc and pinched at the contents in it. The buds, furry and green flaked off and gathered in the corners. "Check it out." Blaise pulled out a clear, plastic tube from her pocket. "Dude hooked us up with some prerolls." The lid separated from the cylinder with a pop. The brown, coiled ends poked out of the top. She clicked the lid back into place and put it into the bag with the rest. She held it up and swung it back and forth. "I did good." She smiled and stuffed the stash down her bra. "Don't worry. I'll smooth it out before we get to the festival." She patted down on the uneven lumps that protruded from her chest.

We parked on one of the sloping streets a few blocks from the park. Blaise ducked behind a hydrangea bush and used the flowery heads to conceal the illicit actions. She crunched down the green nuggets and shook them around the small plastic bag she clutched between her fingers. She shifted it in her bra until it was flat. "There we go." She stood up. "All you gotta do is roll it up and put it right where the underwire is." She modeled the smooth surface. "Looks totally normal."

She reached into her pocket. "Your turn." She pulled out the plastic tube with the prerolls. "I need you to take these."

I looked down and let it wheel around the palm of my hand. "I can't put this in my bra."

Blaise searched her clothing for any other substances. "Find somewhere else."

I crumpled my forehead and mouth and huffed.

"Just shelve it."

I glanced up. "You disgust me."

Blaise laughed and shook her shoulders from side to side. “Tuck it up,” she paused, “in your hair.”

I exhaled, relieved. “Alright.”

I wound my hair into a messy knot and used an oversize scrunchie to hold it in place. Blaise helped tuck the joints into my dense, sooty curls. “Boom!” Blaise stood back to look at her craft. “Let’s hit and quit it.” She clapped her hands and drifted down the street, dancing to the music that seeped out from the woods and into the city.

We stood in the line and waited to get our tickets checked. Blaise eyed the security guards ahead as one of them shouted, “I’m checking cootchies ladies.” She nervously adjusted her bra with her fist and shoved me forward to go first. A woman with long acrylic nails clasped a flashlight and told me to hold out my arms. Her hands glided up and down my legs and she sunk them into my back pockets. She patted down my chest and back and snapped the bra straps on my shoulders. She waved me through to have my backpack checked. A man opened it up and dug through its contents. The bread crackled underneath his hands as he lifted it out. He unwrapped the opening. His nose dipped down and he let it sit against the heel. He closed his eyes as he inhaled deeply and took in the sweet, yeasty notes. I looked at him and did not try to hide my repulsion. Thank God we weren’t planning on eating that. Once he got a substantial whiff, he set it down on the table. It thudded. I trembled with unease and implored the powers above that he wouldn’t notice. His search continued. He grasped the lining between his gloved fingers and felt for lumps. “You’re all set. Have a good time.” I slung the bag over my shoulders and watched as Blaise scrunched up her face during her pat down. I could hear her shouting

internally, “Please don’t check my cootchie.” The woman moved the tips of her fingers beneath her bra and clutched the edges with her fake nails. She gave it a good shake. Blaise’s hand seized up into a fist and a look of violation flashed across her face. The woman stood in front of her, looked her up and down, and waved her through. Blaise wide eyed, exhaled as she walked towards me.

“I feel debased.”

“Why did she have a flashlight?” We looked at each other. “What was she gonna do with that?”

We wove our arms together and laughed as we made our way to the fields.

“Just follow the music,” I said.

“Who has a music festival in the fucking woods?”

Blaise clung to my shoulders as we hiked through a forest of towering Redwoods, Cypress with canopied tops, and aromatic Eucalyptus. Their bark was damp beneath our fingers and bits of it fused itself to our hands. She splayed her palms on her shredded skinny jeans and wiped away the fine hairs that splintered off from the tree’s rind.

The cypress and eucalyptus, once dense above us, thinned out. A muddy field sat below. It bristled with concertgoers who drifted from vendor to stage to vendor again. I pulled out the glossy pamphlet from my pocket and unfurled it. The multicolored schedule had all the artists and bands neatly organized into blocks detailing their locations and set times. Blaise glanced over, but quickly lost interest with all of the organization. “Right now,” I clicked my tongue and dragged my finger along the boxes. “It looks like The Decemberists are playing on the Sutro stage.” I flipped over the paper

and looked at the map. “I think we’re in this pass right here,” I looked out past the woods and onto a muddy path veiled in vapor. “I think we go this way.” Blaise and I descended onto the trail. The fog diffused under our feet and the mist clung to our clothes and formed in small beads on our windbreakers. We nodded and smiled as we walked by other attendees who helped direct us to the Lindley Meadow where the stage was.

The sun cut through the haze as we neared the Sutro. Colin Meloy’s twelve-string guitar fractured the marine layer and big drums reverberated in our ears. The band, fervently playing their instruments, called out to the crowd to shriek and descend into chaos for the next half of the song. Blaise and I, looking down on that once vibrant pasture, draped our arms over each other’s shoulders and smiled.

The crowd had packed in at the Twin Peaks stage and Blaise was gently resting her head on the shoulder of a small Frenchman in front of her. “It’s just so cozy,” she mouthed. I stood on my tippy toes to watch the sea of people all swaying in unison. “Viene con too chapeta, raggae music, cumbia y folcor.” The lead singer grasped the microphone between her hands and swung out her floor length, yellow fur coat. Something brushed up against my legs and a biting wind crept along my bare neck. The vibrations of hands clapping together clamped my ears and rattled my brain. I turned around to see a small space of grass inhabited by men and women dancing the cumbia where the women twisted their long, lacy dresses into hypnotizing shapes and men drove their feet into the grass as they spun themselves around. The fog had finally begun to burn off and the lead singer danced in the slits of sunlight as she took off her coat and put on her oversized, white sunglasses.

I trailed behind Blaise as she drove her head between people in the crowd and used her shoulders to push through stagnant festival goers to high to move. We barreled down the narrow passes and across the polo field to the Lands End stage. We slid along the fence dividing the opulent VIPs from the commoners of GA and infiltrated the audience from the side. Blaise ruffled my hair triumphantly when we stopped a few rows back from the stage. “At least we’ll feel the music.” She said attempting to peer through the hordes of hipsters.

The air above us had begun to thicken with the carbon dioxide and the smoke people exhaled from their lip synching mouths. “Yr city’s a sucker my city’s a creep,” the crowd shouted in unison. My arms were pinned to my sides while someone crunched into my backpack from behind. The lights from the stage arched out over the crowd and cut into the fog and fractured shadows sliced into people and carved out dancing figures that moved to the repetitive rhythm of the timpani and synthesizers. The crowd kicked up grass and dirt, and swirled it around in the pit. I took out my tie-dye bandana and put it over my nose and mouth. My hair twisted in with the knot on the back of my head and every time I moved with the music I felt my skull being tugged in other directions. The dirt clung to the sweat on their faces and they emerged from the pit with streaks of black that gathered on their foreheads and chests.

Blaise turned to me and shook my shoulders while she sang, “So we can shut the door, oh shut the door on terrible times.” The lights cut out and a blue light ricocheted off the monstrous mirror ball that hovered above the stage. Blaise and I stretched out our arms and danced underneath the flitting gleam. The music wove its way through the audience. It thundered in our ears and we, along with all of the strangers that surrounded

us, swiveled to the rhythm. A guy dancing a few feet away from Blaise and I mimed reeling us in. He approached. His knees buckled as he undulated his hips. He pointed to me and leaned in close. “Hey there,” he shouted. “I like your sandals, you wanna buy some meth?” I shook my head and grabbed Blaise by the arm to lead her away. He clenched at the necklace from his neck and took up the silver, oblong shape that dangled from it. He unfastened the top and pulled out a mini, gold claw that held a brown powder. He snorted it as Blaise and I Cabbage Patched away.

Floral cannabis dissipated in the air as the fog dragged in the smell of eucalyptus and dew. Mud bubbled up from the grass beaten down by Doc Martens and Vans. Blaise’s feet sunk into the dense sludge and it slowly flooded her shoes. We walked through the cypress and pine along with the rest of the crowd who all hummed “Someone Great” and clung to the last particle of contentment before reentering the morose sphere of everyday life. Hands smashed together and the vibration rolled through the group. The humming ceased and a staccato “quack” emanated from the front. A crowd wearing green jerseys with hockey stick wielding ducks raised their hands above their heads and conducted their human waterfowl congregation. “Quack, quack, quack.” The noise rattled and spread through our limbs as Blaise and I struck our hands in unison with everyone else. All of the bodies flared simultaneously in delicious chaos and noise. We broke through the tree line and flowed out into the street stopping Muni and the anesthetized late night riders that lay sprawled on its benches.

Outside of the windows were the backyards of middle class families and kids who ran around spraying each other with hoses and whipping dirt clots at one another. The train sped through the dense trees before it shot out from the woods and into the white rolling dunes layered with sea grass that fluttered and twisted violently in the train's wake. It spat us out at the very end of the tracks and we rolled our bags along sand dusted sidewalks until we saw our friends standing next to their car, waving us over.

My mom first met Mary when they both worked as bank tellers at 18, before either of them were married. My dad and Dave didn't appear until ten years later, but all four of them became close. Growing up, my family went to visit them every summer. As the years went on it became less our entire family and more my mom, sister, and I until after my sister went to college, it just became my mom and I.

"Hello lovelies." Dave hugged us both and grabbed our bags to throw them in the truck. "Hi hun!" Mary wound her arms around my mom and they both cried as they held each other. Their bodies separated and they laughed as they saw the other wipe away their tears. "Hi honey." Mary tugged me into her arms. "Oh we're so happy you're here." She kissed my cheek. "Let's go we've got cocktails waiting."

The air, warm and salty, rolled over the hood of the car and onto the cargo bed where I decided to sit with the luggage. When we stopped at a light I'd hear my Mom and Mary reminiscing about the times they spent flirting with fireman who lived across the street from their apartment and when they'd go out in their fur coats the day before thanksgiving and shop and have a three martini lunch afterwards. Dave's smile spread across his face and his white teeth seeped out from under his moustache as he chuckled. He turned the corner and shouted to me in the back. "Get ready!" He sped up the car and

the metal cracked as it hit the speed bump at full force. My body popped up into the air. Legs and arms twisted into obscure shapes and for a moment I didn't recognize my limbs and they felt as if they were not my own. They squirmed against the ashen blue sky and grasped at the vibrant, green leaves that dripped off of the trees. I crashed back down onto the inflexible steel. Tears burst forth from my eyes and I wrapped my arms around my stomach as I laughed. I wiped away the briny streaks and tried to suffocate the laughter that seemed unquenchable. The sun palpitated as we drove beneath the sassafrass and sycamores and I wished my sister was there.

We waved at my mother and Mary who sat on their chairs and giggled as they sipped on the Palomas they smuggled onto the beach. Their chairs slowly sunk into the viscous sand with each microscopic movement and the echo of their booming laughs crept along the shore as theirs legs were swallowed up Dave and I turned back towards where the waves were breaking and dove under the curl of the swell as we swam further out. I exhaled the rest of the oxygen from my lungs and sunk downwards. My feet hit the sea floor and the sand rose up mummifying me in a beige, sand, column. I closed my eyes and waited for the water to clear. I ran along the bottom with my arms wrapped around my shoulders and leaned forward towards the darkening blue abyss. From the floor, I watched as Dave swam above me. His fingers curled into paddles as he sculled just below the surface and his feet kicked calmly, creating small bubbles that swirled upwards. The sun cut through the water and fractured rays of light clutched onto smooth stones before the waves above disrupted it and sent the light darting elsewhere. I pushed off the bottom and reached upwards, breathing up as my head crested the choppy water. The waves

crashed on the shore and Dave watched as the water swashed up toward the billowy sand dunes before it receded back into the frothing water.

“Nice swell.” The water surged and the sun caught the crepey surface of the waves and the white caps moved infinitely in every direction. Dave’s head twisted on his neck to look over his shoulder for the next wave. He paddled forward and as I was lifted on the crest I saw him angling his body and his left arm stretched at eleven o’clock. He disappeared under the white before he popped back up howling and raising his arms in excitement. “You’ve got a good one coming up! Get ready for it!” he shouted. I crawled forward in the water and I extended one arm in front of me and let my head rest against my arms. The swell lifted and pushed me. I felt pressure on my head and neck and my legs flopped wildly. Biting sand obscured my vision and the salt water rushed in through my nostrils and cleared my sinuses. My body curved in the barrel and I felt my legs following the same movement. The wave ground me down on the sea floor and everything in the water pooled in every crevasse in my suit. Sunlight pierced my eyelids and I dug out bits of seashell from under my back I stood up and Dave was staring at me. I shook out the water from my ear. “That was awesome! Let’s go again.” Dave smiled and we swam back out into the surf.

Dave was in the kitchen cooking dinner and my mom and Mary sat out on the front lawn and sipped their gin and tonics. I had showered off outside after we got back and was still peeling off bits of seaweed and sand that embedded itself in my skin.

Dave was breading fish that he had caught earlier that morning and the flour he threw it into leapt up in a plume and stuck to his hands and shirt. “Wanna help?” He pointed to a bag of potatoes. “Start cutting those. And then cover them in olive oil and

salt and pepper?” I nodded and grabbed the bag. I washed them first and scrubbed away the coarse dirt on its skin. The elongated strips sunk into the viscous liquid in the bowl. The ground pepper gently settled on top and the pink salt swam in the yellow and starchy mixture. My hands disappeared as my fingers drove into the contents. I laid them on a cookie sheet spreading them out evenly making sure their greasy edges didn’t touch the other potatoes. A pot of oil bubbled and surged on the stove and Dave stood back as he dropped one of the pieces of fish in. It crackled and hissed as the flour that coated it changed from white to golden brown. He took it out and let the liquid drain from its blistering skin. The timer on the oven dinged and I slid out the tray. “Those got nice and crispy.” Dave said wiping his hands on the dishtowel hanging over his shoulder.

We sat at the table and passed the basket of fries around, dumping them out onto our plates and piling them on top of the fish. My teeth sunk into the crispy flesh and it broke apart in my mouth. I wiped away the oil that dripped down my chin and reached for the bottle of vinegar in front of me. I shook out the dark liquid and watched as it bounced around from fish to fries landing gently on the skin that absorbed it. The soggy pieces clung to my fingers and soon all of the ingredients merged together. When I finished, I pushed the plate away from me and rested up against my chair, slouching down and letting my feet move over the plush carpet beneath the table.

The car curved along I-95 and hurtled next to the river and colorful, colonial houses. We pulled up to the terminal and saw my dad standing curbside clutching his bag and continuously scratching his hand. I climbed into the backseat and he threw his body into the car and tossed me his suitcase. He nervously looked back at the terminal as we

drove away. “How was your flight?” my mother asked. “It was fine.” A calm had returned to my dad and I saw it coursing through his face as all the muscles around his mouth relaxed and his forehead lost the aggravated creases.

“But the strangest thing happened at the house today.” He paused. “I think someone broke in while I was getting ready for work. I got out of the shower and there was someone standing outside the bedroom, at the end of the hallway.”

I leaned in, concerned. “Who was it? What’d you do?”

The anxiety returned and he started to pull back layers of skin on his hand. “I don’t know who it was, but I got in the car and drove around while I called the cops.”

“What did the cops say?” my mother asked.

“They said there was no one in there now and if it happens again to call them. I don’t think this is the first time though. I’ve felt uneasy for awhile.”

I looked at my mother. “I’m not comfortable with you guys going back there.”

[“How strange,”] she said. “I’m sure it was nothing, but when we get back we can follow up with the police.”

We pulled into the hotel parking lot. “Let’s hustle.” My dad took the keycard from the cup holder and sprinted with his bag into the building. “Is he okay?” I asked. My mother shook her head. “Maybe he’s overtired. He’s been traveling a lot for work and maybe it finally caught up to him.” My mother and I followed him inside.

He opened his suitcase and flung his white t-shirts and a bag of nail clippers across the room. They fell onto the ground and dust sprung up from the musty carpet. He tucked himself into bed still fully clothed and slipped off his shoes and pushed them out

from underneath the covers. He tunneled his way through all the cheap feathered pillows and then pulled the duvet over the ivory mound that grew out from his head.

My mom and I looked at each other confused while we got ready for bed. We hovered over him while we brushed our teeth and watched as he snored and twisted uncomfortably under the covers. She slept on top of the covers and put pillows up divide herself from him. I slept on the floor at the foot of the bed and swatted away the bugs that crept up from the carpet.

We arrived at the dorms before my new roommate had gotten there. My mom wiped down all of the furniture in the room and collected the dust into a tiny garbage she had found in one of the common rooms. There was a knock on the door and my roommate and her family were all holding boxes. Sweat leaked out from their pores and dripped onto the wrinkly cardboard. We introduced ourselves and split up into groups according to our genders. The dads worked on putting together pieces of furniture, the mothers helped dust and clean, and my roommate Rosie and I unpacked our suitcases while making small talk. I stood on my bed and hung up the My Bloody Valentine poster above where my head would be. Rosie looked at me as she unfurled her Portishead poster. “Thank God. I thought I was going to be stuck with someone who liked Country or some shit.” Rosie said smiling.

My parents and I walked into the parking lot covering our faces to shield us from the leaves kicked up by the wind. I avoided making eye contact with them so they wouldn't see me crying. My mother hugged me and I could hear her voice shaking as she said, “You're going to do great honey.” My dad's nylon jacket crinkled beneath my

cheek. He quickly walked back over to the driver's side and rubbed his teary eyes before opening the door. I hugged my mom one last time. "Alright kiddo," we'll let you know as soon as we make it home." She got into the car and I watched as they drove further away toward the darkening skies of the storm.

The rain was falling sideways. Water pooled in corners of the parking lot and rushed down the hill that led up to Donovan, dragging branches and chunks of earth that got caught in its current. An email had been sent out earlier assuring us that all of the storm windows had been installed and if the weather became "hazardous" we were to congregate in the basement of the building.

Our power had gone and the shrieking of the wind flowed through the few trees that remained and crashed up against the windows and brick walls of the residence hall. My new roommate and I and others from the floor sat in a circle in one of the common rooms and rolled a ball around to one another. When we picked it up the person who rolled it was allowed to ask the receiver any question. It was a game one of the girls from further down the hallway suggested and it was terrible.

"Where are you from?"

"How many siblings do you have?"

"What's your major?"

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Do you have any pets?"

"If you were an animal, what animal would you be?"

"What season best fits your personality?"

I left after the first handful of questions and let my hands glide along the walls to guide me back to my room.

“Hey dad.” He was breathing heavily on the other side of the phone and it sounded like he was running.

“They’re after me. I called the cops, but they’re useless. They’re gonna kill me.”

I sat silently on the other end and closed my eyes.

“Who’s gonna kill you?”

“The people that keep breaking into the house.”

“What people?”

“The people from New Mexico. They’ve been following me and your mother and we aren’t safe.”

“Okay, you need to get away from the house. Is mom there?”

“No, she’s already at work.”

“I don’t give a shit about the party.” I said laying back on my bed.

“Let’s just get fucked up and if were not feelin it we leave.” Rosie said standing in front of the mirror.

“Fine.”

I stuffed my shirt with two, giant wadded up paper towels and applied lipstick to the outside of my mouth. “Am I doing this right?” I asked as I showed off my cleavage and grinned with a lipstick stained teeth.

“This is what people do on Halloween right? Slut it up?”

Rosie rolled her eyes. “Who the fuck are you supposed to be?”

“I’m Beth Chapman. Dog the Bounty Hunter’s wife.”

“Dumbass.”

Rosie concocted up a recipe of Keystone, Triple Sec, and blue Gatorade that she poured into a small garbage can she had cleaned out and washed earlier. “Ice is over in the mini fridge.” She dipped the plastic cup into the liquid that surged out and over onto her crumbling desk. She wiped away the mixture from her business textbooks and closed her eyes as she slowly sipped away at the blue poison. She crinkled her nose as she swallowed. “Fuck.” She winced “That’ll do it.” She shuddered and shook the chill from her body. “Come and get some.” I looked down at the oily film that coated the top of the drink and steadily filled my cup.

It tasted like rotten Oreos and wet socks. “I think some of the garbage has mixed in with drink,” I said coughing. “We finish the bucket. We leave.” She said staring forlornly over the gallons of blue she made.

By cup three I had ceased tasting the garbage and felt the alcohol trickle slowly down my body and grasp onto my toes. The feeling in my feet was the first to go followed shortly by my legs and hips. I clutched the cup and wiped away the viscous lip-gloss that gathered on the rim. Rosie slammed her cup down triumphantly. “Done. Let’s get the fuck outta here.” I trailed behind her, lifting my feet awkwardly and having them fall heavily onto the stained carpet of the hallway. “I don’t think I’m gonna be able to make it down the stairs.” My hands glided over the cement walls to help my balance. I pulled my coat around my fake tits and felt the paper crinkle against my skin. We pushed through the glass doors at the front of the building and out into the ferocious October

wind. The blue drink embedded itself in the corners of my mouth and I licked away the sweet of the Gatorade and the stickiness of the lip-gloss. My tongue over my teeth and the gluey substance clung to my gums and seeped into the spaces that divided my incisors and canines.

There was a bouncer at the door of the house party. He sat in front on a steel stool and crossed his arms as he looked down over his sunglasses at all the people making their way inside. "If one of these fuckers steps out of line I'll set em straight with this." He pulled out a small Taser that snugly fit between his elongated fingers. "Yup got this at a gun expo. Just walked right up, threw down my money, now it's mine." We walked in front of him and made eye contact as we did the universal nod of hello. He put out his hand attached to his pale and delicate arm. "How much have you two had to drink?" He wasn't much older or taller than us, but spoke in a fabricated deep, authoritative voice. "We haven't even started yet." Rosie said. He cleared his throat and tensed his jaw. The bones bulged out of his face. "Alright then." He waved us through and we walked through the doors that opened up to a smoke filled room and lights that darted in and out of other coeds in costume. "Yo tits! Keg stand?" Some dude was pointing at me and I looked back at him disgusted before I glanced down and caught site of my large fake breasts. I nodded and felt the smirk of realization smear across my face. "Fuck it. Sure." Hands gripped me on my ankles and my legs were lifted up above my head. I grabbed the stainless steel handles and felt the blood rush from my lower body and into the tips of my fingers and head. Someone lifted the nozzle up to my mouth and I inhaled before I put it between my lips and bit down. The foamy liquid surged in my mouth and I drank mostly air on the first sip. I closed my eyes and continued, shutting out the pain of drinking

upside down and the gravitational pull on my stuffed bra. My swallowing began to dislodge the paper towels in my shirt and I used one hand to try and desperately shove it back in to its rightful place. I gave up after both of my apples rolled out of the bag and I pulled away from the nozzle coughing as I tried to not throw up. They set my legs down and I restuffed my shirt as they patted my on the back. “That was one of the shortest keg stands, but for multitasking you did okay.”

I found Rosie standing in the kitchen scavenging for food in the refrigerator. She found a jar of salsa and some cookies in one of their cabinets. “Look! It’s just a sweeter version of chips and salsa.” I watched as she dipped the cookies and pulled out a clump of tomatoes and bits of cilantro before she put the entire thing into her mouth. “Girl we gotta get you home.” I said taking her snack away from her. She pocketed more cookies and with a mouthful agreed to leave.

As we left, we saw the lights from the local cops pulling up to the house and drunk students stumbling away. It had begun to snow and Rosie and I held each other up to keep ourselves from slipping on the slush that piled up on the ground. The snow was heavy as it landed on our shoulders and back and it left big, rounded marks as it faded away into our clothes. I felt it crunch and disperse under my boots and I looked toward the path leading up to our dorm. The paper towels stuffed in my shirt had begun to take on water and my chest was sagging.

We threw off our jackets that were drowning in water and let them rest on the floor. My tits which had started out high and happy were now gathered and clumped at my waist in a soggy mess. I pulled out the paper towel and wrung it out as Rosie fell backwards onto her bed laughing. “Paper towels for boobs were a terrible idea.” I said as

I threw them into the garbage. “Yeah and they were lumpy and had weird edges.” Rosie put her hand up to her head. “Also, fuck that party with their stupid trap music and shit. I felt like I was swimming in a sea of douche bags and who the fuck has a completely empty refrigerator?” She was ranting. “Those stupid Lax bros. What a bunch of dicks.” Intermittent snoring slowly replaced her tirade and soon she was curled in a ball against the wall clutching at her pillow.

My mom whispered when she picked up the phone. Dad was sleeping on the couch.

“Hi honey. Sorry it’s just me. Dad had a long day and he’s finally able to sleep.”

“No worries. I miss you. I wish I could be home this weekend.”

“Me too, but you’ll have more fun in Montauk anyway.”

“Why is dad so tired?”

“Work has been hectic for him and he’s been running around the house all day just getting things together.”

“Why is he getting things together?”

“He said he’s just getting rid of clutter and organizing.”

“Alright. How are you?”

“Doin fine. Just missing you and your sister. I can’t wait until your both home.”

“At least you’re getting to spend some time with dad. You know, reconnecting.”

“Of course. I’ve been lucky to have this time with him as well.”

She got quieter when she talked about him and I didn’t realize that she was attempting to convince herself she was enjoying her time with him.

“You know he’s hardly ever home with work and everything.”

“You’re getting some good you time then.”

“Alright honey, well have a safe trip. What time is your train?”

“I’ve gotta leave in about 20.”

“Okay. Alright, well I love you honey. Let us know when you’ve made it. Miss you so much. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I got off in New London and waited for the ferry there to take me to Montauk. I boarded along with other coeds from the coast guard academy who were escaping the oppression of an empty college campus during fall break. It was clear on the water and once we pulled out of port we could see Montauk vaguely flickering in the distance. I stood outside up against the railing and let the cold air coil itself around my body.

Dave and Mary bought tickets for a gig later that night at The Hut. We made roadies with our vodka tonics and poured the remaining liquid into emptied out soda cans. It sloshed out of the can and onto the road as we shuffled our feet down the sandy road towards the venue. We drained the soda cans and threw them away in a garbage before we went inside.

Once past the door, it opened up to a room filled with fisherman who had just come off the water and were sitting down for a drink and a cigarette. They exhaled plumes of cigarette smoke from their wind chapped lips and the stench of fish and nicotine clung together and billowed up towards the ceiling.

The plane trembled and as it plunged down, I slowly picked my head up from the tray table and brushed off the pretzels that had collected on my forehead while I was sleeping. As I swept the salt away from my eyes, I noticed the man sitting next to me was staring. “Looks like somebody got some good sleeps,” he whispered. I focused on the black, faux leather seat in front of me and refused to acknowledge his creepy remark.

The plane sunk towards the earth and the click of seatbelts moved like a wave through the cabin. It screeched along the worn runway and came to a halt in front of the dilapidated Phoenix airport.

I clenched the phone in my bag and pressed my fingers against the smooth, silvery keys. The phone illuminated and messages that read, “Let us know when you land” and “Have a safe flight” flickered across the screen.

I rubbed my eyes and drove the palms deeper into my sockets. I sighed. The thought of being home caused me to feel physically ill. What was I going home to? A whacked out father, who three days before, called me from his closet and said that the helicopters outside were coming to kill him and that I was going to be next? Or my mother who hadn't slept in weeks, because my dad would burst into their room at 3 o'clock in the morning and start shouting at her and asking her if she bugged the house.

The doors opened and as I walked through the deserted terminals, the smell of nail polish remover and accumulating trash saturated the air. I dragged my frayed bag behind me. The glass doors opened and my family stood expressionless by a drooping palm tree. My dad rapidly picked his face around the corners of his mouth and my sister smacked away his hand. My mother smiled wearily and blinked slowly as she said, “So happy your home” and hugged me. I went to give my dad a hug, but as soon as I reached

out towards him he twitched and stumbled back steadying himself on the scuffed metal of the baggage carousel.

We walked out towards the car and my dad scuttled around the parking lot, gesturing for us to move faster. Inside the car, my sister shoved a brown bag towards me. “We got you some Machaca.” The paper peeled off and queso fresco spilled out of the warm tortilla. As soon as my teeth sunk in, my dad barked, “Don’t you spill that! We just had the car cleaned.” His words and gestures were brisk. He stared at me in the rearview mirror and I slowly placed the food back in the bag.

We drove along the freeway and watched as the streetlights extended infinitely towards the mountains. We passed trailer parks, the light reflecting off the lustrous tops and drive in movie theatres where microscopic children waved broomsticks above their heads and kicked up dirt as they darted in and out of the cars.

We pulled up towards the house. Rotted, hollowed out oranges littered the driveway. My dad leapt out of the driver’s seat and darted in through the door. I languidly walked into the garage and twisted the corroded doorknob. The fluorescent kitchen lights blinded me as I walked inside. My dad stood near the windows looking out to the backyard and he nervously looked out into the still night. He went outside and picked through the rose bushes and climbed up into the lemon tree. “What is happening?” I questioned. “Just leave him.” My mother said. “He thinks we have a bee infestation.” He drifted along the lawn, his silhouette outlined by the moonlight.

[and as] He flailed at imaginary bees and rolled on the grass, his ribs jutted out from his skeletal abdomen. He walked back into the house and gently shut the door.

His sunken cheeks made his mouth open slightly, revealing black, chipped teeth. Scabs surrounded the corners of his mouth and his lips bled every time he talked or frowned. “There are just so many night bees. I’m surprised I haven’t been stung more.” As he spoke, his lips cracked and blood spilled into his mouth. He laughed and the viscous crimson laced itself between his teeth.

I squirmed, “Well, I’m gonna go to bed. Good luck with those night bees.” I collapsed onto my worn mattress and burrowed into the corner, pulling my duvet and the pillows onto my head.

My sister roused me out of bed the next morning with the promise of food. “Come on. Let’s get some huevos rancheros.”

The plate of tortillas drowned in roasted tomatillos and the aroma of guajillo chile tore through my nose. I cut into the runny eggs and soused the vibrant, green avocado in the salsa. Neither one of us bothered to look up while we ate and we rested in the comfortable silence of enjoying our meal. Once we finished, we both rested the stained, plastic forks on Styrofoam plates and slouched satisfied in our chairs. I cleared my throat and asked, “What’s the deal with dad?” My sister took a deep breath and put her hand up to her mouth as she exhaled.

“We think it’s drugs.” She dabbed at the food trickling down her chin. “Mom overheard a doctor tell him to stop using drugs last time they were at the ER.”

The tears slowly flooded my eyes. I scrunched my face and turned away from her.

“What is mom gonna do?”

“Maybe an intervention.” She leaned back in her chair. “I think it’d be important for all of us to be there.” She emphasized all.

“Okay,” my eyes closed and head nodded attempting to take in information.

“I mean,” She lifted her hands up, “I dunno. She might de something else or nothing at all.” She stared at me.

“What? Like just never address it?”

“I dunno.” She shrugged.

“What are you talking about?” I leaned over the table and tried to meet my gaze with hers. She continued to stare, impassive and calm. “Does she want a divorce?” My sister nodded her head. “Mom has all the paperwork ready and was going to serve him after Christmas.”

I pursed my lips and sucked out the remaining food in my teeth. “When were you planning on telling me this?”

She looked up. Her voice calm and eyes unyielding. “We were going to tell you after your interview today.” She winced. “Sorry.”

I threw my hands in the air. “Well fuck.”

We drove with the windows down and as I closed my eyes, the smell of orange blossoms percolated into the car. We pulled into a dirt parking lot and the dust twisted into a funnel as my sister whipped in and out of rust eaten pickup trucks.

I walked towards the glass doors and my sister shouted good luck as I pushed through into the lobby. Flip flops skidded along the concrete floor and Layla poked her head out from the hallway. “Let’s do the actual interview and then CPR and the swim

test.” Her office gushed with pool shit and I navigated my way through bleached lifeguard tubes, suits with torn straps, cracked and damaged Annie dolls, and empty bottles of sunscreen.

“How’s college?” she asked. “I’m sure you’re so happy to be home.”

“It’s fine.”

“And is it nice being home?”

“Sure.”

“Okay great.”

The chair rolled behind her as she stood up. “Wonderful job. Meet you on the deck in ten?” My neck supported my bobbing head as my brainstem ignited back to life.

My phone vibrated in the chlorine scented speedo bag. I checked it and saw the message, “Your sister told me you talked this morning. Sorry you had to hear about everything that way. Affairs have been going on since before we were married. Hopefully we can help with the drugs.”

My sister had neglected to tell me about any affairs. I held my hands out to my sides and searched an empty room for someone to validate my shock and sadness. I collapsed onto the floor and sat, unresponsive. “Fuck.” I hoisted myself off the slick tiles and walked out onto the deck. The grease left behind by aging sunbathers caked in tanning oil and the drops of Jell-O from synchronize swimmers coated the bottoms of my feet. I walked to the edge and crouched down to feel the calming water.

Gradually, I submerged in the pool. As I inched in, the cold crept up my torso and the air gently retreated from my lungs. “You’re just swimming a five hundred. Two hundred free and two hundred breaststroke. The last one hundred, approach stroke.”

I pulled the goggles over my eyes and pushed off the wall. I looked down at the cobalt, porcelain tiles cemented at the bottom of the pool. The sun bounced off of them and as I turned my head away from the reflection, I reminded myself to breathe. My neck rotated and I took a deep breath. The bubbles obscured my vision and I flipped and pushed off the wall, pumping my legs as I drifted through the water.

My lungs began to sting with each intake of breath and as I finished the first lap I rested on the numbing, metal gutter. Layla looked down from her vinyl chair and said, “It’s fine. You can stop now.” I took off the goggles and my eyes, swollen from the tears I refused to shed, pooled in the corners and around my eyelashes. “I think that chlorine got into your eyes.” She said. “Yeah, it’s the shit goggles.” She walked away towing the chair behind her.

“What up?” somebody shouted from across the pool deck. My eyes scanned the cool cement and Kay’s feet skid towards me in her plastic flip-flops. “When did you get back?” I pinched my nose with my fingers. “Um, not too long ago.” That stupid grin was plastered on her face. “We need to hang hard. I saw your dad the other day. He’s hilarious. He was outside Costco yelling at all these families with young kids, something about how they’ve cut the brakes on his car. Anyway, hilarious.” She sat down and let her feet dangle by the gutter. “So when can we hang?” She coiled her hand around my arm. I plunged back into the water and covered my screaming face, as I slowly sank to the bottom.

The unadorned Christmas tree rested in the corner, its branches decaying and withering. He stormed out of the kitchen. “Goddamnit! You ruined it again! Every fucking year!” My mother stood in the kitchen and stared blankly. I poured myself a glass of wine, guzzled it, and poured myself a second glass. “I think we should just drug him,” my sister suggested to my mother and I. We looked on as he stood in his room, furiously, meticulously folding all of his socks.

She grabbed his Vitamin Water and cracking the lid off the prescription bottle, shook out one orange pill. She grabbed a knife, crushed it, and gathered up the powder. “He’s coming back, hurry,” I whispered. She disposed of the Xanax in his drink, shook it, and wiped up the residue before placing it back on the counter. He lumbered back into the kitchen, opened the bottle with the ferocity of a lion devouring its prey, and aggressively took a sip.

As we anxiously stared at him chugging his drugged drink my grandmother and great aunt pulled up in their battered Pinto and emerged with three cases of wine. With her glittery, viscous lip gloss my grandmother leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. “Merry Christmas” she muttered as she pulled away. “Help me carry these?” She heaved out a cardboard box that clanked with chunky glass. “Just a few bottles.” She smiled and nudged me forward.

Twelve bottles of Pinot Noir from my grandmother’s cases littered the counter and four empty bottles rested in the recycle bin. I opened up a fifth bottle and emptied half of the contents into a frayed, green plastic cup.

I sat on the couch and sank deeper into the worn leather. My sister sat perched on the leg of an armchair.

“What happens when you mix alcohol with Xanax?” She asked squinting her eyes.

“I guess we’ll find out.”

He was two glasses of champagne in when he passed out on the couch.

“I killed him.” My mother whispered. “I can’t believe you girls talked me into drugging him.”

“Technically, I killed him,” my sister responded.

She rushed over to check on him and a wave of relief washed over her when she felt his breath on her hand.

Family members attempted to make small talk and in order to cope I had another bottle of wine. “Go check the potatoes,” my sister shouted. Water spilled out and branded the stove. I stumbled around the kitchen and turned off the heat. “You can’t do one thing right. This whole dinner is fucked.” My dad said with droopy, stoned eyes.

The smell of stale coffee and lighter fluid from the night before hung heavy in the air. I wiped away the sleep from my eyes and inched out of the sleeping bag. The dirt smattered tarp crinkled beneath my feet and I stumbled over jagged rocks toward the moldy and decaying picnic table. Backpackers cooked bacon and the smell flowed further down the river, until it rested gently upon the shore where I had begun to eat my chalky, dehydrated eggs. I washed them down with watery orange juice and wiped away the pulp that pooled at the corners of my mouth.

“We ready?” a voice questioned from behind the bushes. Looking down at my blistered and bloated feet, I tightened my neoprene sandals. Blue zinc coagulated on my face and old, crusty sweat coated the Camelbak and crumbled away as I slung it over my shoulders. I slumped forward and as I stood up, pain shot through my feet and traveled through my legs. I whimpered and continued forward through plants bristling with stinging needles

Rocks sent ripples through the translucent water as it passed over their rough surface and fish slowly emerged from under smooth pebbles and struggled to swim upstream. As the sun rose, it illuminated the quaking aspens and the agave plants that blanketed the crimson earth. Hands extended forward and pushed away branches and my fingers brushed across leaves that wrapped themselves around my fingertips. A thunderous roar grew louder with each step and the echo steadily rumbled down the canyon. The incline escalated and the current grew stronger. Ahead there was a clearing. I pushed through one last branch.

I soared above the trees and stared down at a cosmic waterfall that spat down white water into a turquoise pool. The calcified travertine rested beneath the swirling surface. A figure suspended in that blue bath gazed up at me. It had dark curly hair and its eyes, black, were deep set in its face. It smiled and the skin on its face began to fracture and instead of blood, a blazing light poured out from the wounds. The figure clawed at its flesh and the luminosity tore through the desert space. For a moment, the waterfall stopped flowing and the surface vibrated with violent brilliance. The light seized me and wound its way around my neck. It plunged down my throat and burst forth from my eyes and hands.

The frost bitten trees oscillated in the numbing winter wind and I heard the door slam shut as the song that played on my iPod upsurged with dysmorphic piano and violin before transforming into a beautiful deadening silence. My feet slipped across the splintered hardwood and my dad, who had been sleeping on the couch, as if by some supernatural force slipped quietly out into the night.

I could see the funnel of my mom and sister's flashlights and heard them faintly calling out to my dad. I looked behind bushes with branches that pierced my fingers when I touched them and across loose, damp gravel that splintered beneath my feet. I dropped down into a grassy ravine and landed on something fleecy. His t-shirt lay crumpled in a pile, along with a pair of dewy socks and sweatpants. Scrambling up to the top, I shouted to my mom that I had found his clothes. A look of horror filled my mother's face. I turned around and rapidly covered my eyes. He said he just needed to get out and take a walk. Why he had to go without any of his clothes, was a question neither one of us could answer.

They were going to have the intervention after I left for Sedona. My sister handed me a pen and paper and told me to write stuff down that I wanted to tell dad. I sat at the table and rested my head on the blank sheet. My phone rang and the derelict Tercel pulled up the driveway. I grabbed my bag and shouted to my sister that I would text her what I wanted to say.

I ran out to the car and the eroded door stuck and then crumbled as it opened with a screech. Blaise brushed away the crumbs that collected on her seat and as I sat down

something popped underneath my foot. I dug through empty cups and fly traps that had lost their gluey surface and from underneath my shoe, I pulled out a mousetrap. I looked over in disgust, clenching the rodent death trap between my fingers.

“Oh, a mouse ran across my dash the other day,” Blaise said.

“That’s disgusting.”

“Don’t get your shit in a twist we’re not even driving this car up.”

“Thank God,” I whispered under my breath.

We drove beside the reservations and through the barren farmland, diminutive houses stood vacant in the beige fields and underfed horses roamed the ridged terrain. The windows were rolled down and the bouquet of pine trees and the sweet, dusty earth rushed in. The car twisted around the red canyons and scorched trees with fractured branches bordered the unfinished freeway. The car slowly descended along a gravel road and we pulled up to a battered hotel. Blaise’s mom came back with our [own] room key and we dragged our bags up the damaged cement steps. Blaise and I threw our bags across the room and rummaged through the bed and sheets checking for bed bugs.

We drove into the town and walked along the street with vendors selling embossed plates with scorpions on them and wooden rain sticks that felt waxy as we picked them up. We sifted through multicolored ponchos and books describing encounters with aliens in the desert. “Dude,” I said pointing to one of the books, “we should go to a vortex. There are supposed to be a ton up here.” Blaise looked suspiciously at me. “I mean what else are we going to do? Huggy is always talking about the time he

went to one.” I put the book down. “ I mean Bright Eyes has an album dedicated to this stuff.” She shrugged her shoulders, “What the hell?”

We trekked along frost bitten boulders and the crunch from the cacti punctured the soles of our shoes. Behind me, Blaise complained,

“I hate hiking! And nature!”

I leaned up against a rock and told her we were almost there.

“You don’t know where you’re going,” she shouted. “You need to stop obsessing over this Bright Eyes, vortex shit. Who gives a fuck?”

“I don’t think you understand, vortexes were life changing for Conor Oberst and they’re going to be life changing for us too.”

She puffed out a growl and reached for help up the slick rock.

I walked further and she followed closely behind. We disappeared into a canyon where the walls towered above us and we walked through a narrow passage with our arms close to our chest. I shouldered through a chasm in the rock and stumbled into an open space. A thread of light weaved in and out of the ravine and melting ice dripped onto the damp earth. “This is it,” I said. “This is definitely a vortex.” Blaise shook her head. “Can we leave now? I just squeezed myself through that opening that was like a frigging hamster tunnel and if someone was to murder us, this is definitely where they would do it.” She sounded out of breath. My hands drifted along the cool stone and with arms outstretched I turned to Blaise and asked,

“Can you feel it? The earth’s energy is supposed to be concentrated right in this small space.”

“No, I don’t feel it. Can we leave now?”

“Just a few more minutes. I think you’re supposed to have ‘an overwhelming feeling of tranquility.’” I looked at the parts of the rock worn away from hands of other serenity seekers. “At least that’s what one of the books said we were supposed to feel.”

“I’m having 127 Hours flashbacks.”

“Fine, we can leave,” She skidded along loose, red rock. “And stop being so confrontational.”

We sat outside and ate our pizza while we soaked our feet in the Jacuzzi. The light from the whirlpool bounced off the icicles from the roof and danced around the cracked sidewalk. I took out a pouch of loose tobacco and unwrinkled one rolling paper. The tobacco clumped along the thin, ivory surface and I licked the edge before rolling it into a cigarette. My hand shook as I lit a match and raised the flame to ignite the twisted end.

I took a deep breath and dense smoke flooded my lungs. As I exhaled and the vapor poured from my mouth, I blurted out, “My parents are getting a divorce.” Blaise looked over while she bit off the end of a cigar. The disintegrating, brown paper dangled out of the corner of her mouth and with her jaw slightly dropped she asked why. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on.” I shook my head and inhaled. Blaise continued to fiddle with the cigar. “They don’t tell me anything and then send me away with you,” I stopped and looked at her. “I mean, I love you and of course I want to spend time with you, but they treat me like a fucking baby, which, I know I’m the youngest, but I’m sick of not knowing anything and them thinking I can’t handle it. Then my sister starts laying into

me about how immature I am and that mom likes me more because she doesn't let me do or pay for anything, but my mom is just keeping me in this box where I can't grow and I'm fucking sick of it." My voice quaked as I sharply took a breath. "I guess I just don't like my family that much right now."

Blaise, without moving, held the flickering lighter in front of her half opened mouth. "Damn." she lifted the lighter to the cigar. I closed my eyes, and shook my head. "I'm sorry. I haven't told anyone and I just couldn't keep it in any longer." She flicked the end of the cigar with her thumb and the ash floated down to the grass. "Don't be sorry. I'm sorry you felt like you couldn't tell me sooner."

We finished lunch and got back into the car. I asked Blaise's mom if she could take me to my grandmother's house. She said it wouldn't be a problem and as we drove south, nearing the city, we passed through dilapidated neighborhoods with decaying Laundromats and packs of stray dogs darting out from behind dumpsters. We pulled up to the line of cinder block apartments covered in frost bitten vines and I thanked them for the weekend away and slowly got out of the car.

The metal door swung open and my sister pulled me inside. My dad's sister had flown in the day before and was sitting on the couch wiping away the tears that had stained her cheeks with mascara. I sat down and my mom came over and held my hand.

Barely squeaking her words out, she told me that he's addicted to meth and when they tried to have the intervention he became violent and locked himself in his room.

My sister tried to talk to him and he started screaming through the door for everyone to shut up. When my mom tried to talk to him, he came out and started throwing chairs at her and threatening to hurt her.

They called 911, but he drove away in his car before the cops could get there. My mom said that the police officers suggested that we stay somewhere else and that it wouldn't be safe to sleep in the house.

I hunched over and put my head in my clammy, quivering hands. My aunt rested her hand on my neck and my mom whispered, "I'm so sorry, honey." My palms pulped my eyes and the feeling of trying to be the "strong" one for my family and holding in my tears to keep everyone together, faded. I buried my face in my hands saturated with my salty tears and struggled to take a breath.

I looked down at my feet as they kicked up the algae beneath the gelatinous, green surface. My uncle reclined on the hammock, puffing a cigar and ashing it into his empty beer can.

I walked into the kitchen and leaned up against the marble island. Someone had come to change the locks earlier and I heard the sound of wood disintegrating. A breeze drifted through the door and as I closed my eyes, a car squealed and fishtailed as it drove on the deteriorated front lawn.

My aunt ran through the house in her underwear and shouted, "He's here! He's here!" The guy changing the locks looked up from his drill in confusion. I grabbed a bat that rested conveniently in the corner and swung it from side to side screaming, "I'll kill him. I swear to God, I'm going to kill him."

My sister had woken up from a nap and scrambled to the front door. My dad pushed by the man who was holding the handle and knocked him onto the floor. He flickered by and disappeared into his room. My aunt took the bat from my hands and told me to go talk to him.

Calmly, I knocked on his door. He didn't answer and I tried to push the handle. He had locked it and from inside his room loud thuds from cabinets slamming closed shook the door I leaned against.

"Dad?" I said, my voice teetering. "I just want to talk to you. We just want to figure out what is going on with you, so we can get you the help that you need."

"Leave me the fuck alone." He shouted.

"Just tell me what's going on. I know about the meth and the affairs and I want you to know that I don't care." The tears flooded to my eyes. "We don't care." My voice cracked. "I just want you to get better."

"You, and your sister, and your mother, you all turned me into this," he paused "and your mother, she's been mistreating me our whole marriage. All of this is her fault! She made me into this monster." There was a thud against the door.

"Bitch!"

My mom leaned against the wall and held her hand over eyes. Her head dropped and dangled above her chest that crumbled as she cried and gasped for air. My sadness collided with my rage, "Don't you dare say anything about mom! She stayed with you in this marriage for 24 years, even though she knew you were cheating and doing God knows what."

Tears gushed from my eyes and my knees buckled. I sank to the floor and pounded on his door. The wood splintered beneath my fist as I screamed at him.

“If you’re going to keep doing drugs, you will never see me again.”

“I don’t want to see you anyway, you, your sister and your mother. All of you have fucked up my life.”

“Fucked up your life? You don’t even realize how fucked I am going to be because of this.”

“That’s right, you’re going to be so fucked up because of me. Everything is my fault. What about me? You’re all yelling at me and I don’t even know what it is I’ve done.”

I began to pound my fist harder. “You’re a fucking selfish prick and you can OD for all I care. Make it easier on all of us and shoot up with all your goddamn drugs and die. Just fucking die.” I turned and rested my back up against the door. My body collapsed and I slumped down on the waxed, wood floors and held my swollen fist as I wept.

My uncle hammered on my door. “Get up. I have a 9 o’clock tee time.” I stumbled out of my bed and swung the door open. He stood there in khaki pants that still had the adhesive tag on the leg. “Let’s go. You’re taking me golfing.” I rubbed my eyes and yawned.

“Did my dad come back?”

“No, fuck nuts did not come back.”

“Does my mom know I’m taking you golfing?”

He shrugged his shoulders, “She’s cool with it.”

I threw on a worn sweater and slipped on a pair of crumbling Birkenstocks. He sat in the car with his golf clubs on his lap and motioned for me to hurry. I drove next to dehydrated ponds where blackened golf balls and tattered baseball hats rested on the muddy bottom. I pulled into the dirt parking lot and my uncle flung his clubs out of the car. He waved over a caddy who strapped his bag to a cart.

“Do you need a caddy this morning sir?” he asked.

“No, I’ve got my niece. I’m dragging her around as my servant today.”

A look of bafflement and anger flashed across my face. “I thought I was just dropping you off?” I questioned.

“Nope, go park the car and meet me back here.”

I pulled into a vacant space and walked towards my uncle. My uncle propped his leg up on the golf cart. He looked like a suburban Captain Morgan as he stared off into the distance and rested his slouched body on his knee. I sat down on the plastic leather and the electric car whirred when we took off down the course to the first hole. As he drove he put on his gloves and I reached over and grabbed the steering wheel to keep it from careening off the path and into low-lying cactus. He punched down on the brakes and I jolted forward. He stared at the tees and the rocks that marked them. He adjusted the glove on his right hand.

“Get my driver,” he demanded. I rushed to the back.

“Wait, I don’t know what that is?”

“It’s the big one.”

“Um, okay.”

He walked along the cushiony grass and it sunk beneath the cleats on his shoes. He rotated his hips while he stared down at the ball on the tee. He swung back. The ball sailed into the air and dropped into a sand trap. "Goddamnit!" He threw his club on the ground and stomped back to the cart. He sat and impatiently tapped on the steering wheel. I ran over and picked up the club. I slid it back into the bag and we drove on the green toward the sand.

The rest of the morning continued in a similar manner. He would set up a shot and hold a lit cigar between his teeth. When the ball crashed back down to the earth, he would erupt into violence and dig into his pockets to find money to buy beer. He waved over the drink cart and consumed a beer at each hole. By the eighteenth hole, he was unable to drive and most of his shots resulted in him losing the ball in a water trap.

He waved me on and ordered me to go get the car. I loaded his bag into the trunk. "Better luck next time," he slurred. "Tomorrow," he hiccupped "you'll bring me back in the morning and have a much better game." I put the keys in the ignition and drove back to the house.

I walked in through the front door and found my mom was crying. She looked up. "Oh honey, thank God you're alright. [I was worried when] I came home and you weren't here." She wrapped her arms around me. "I'm sorry. I thought Paul told you I took him golfing?" she shook her head and held me tighter. I felt awful and responsible for the miscommunication.

"I'm so sorry. I know you were worried."

"And you weren't answering your phone."

"I wasn't thinking and I left it here."

While I apologized to my mom, Paul meandered around the house before he collapsed onto the abraded leather couch. He passed out and the stench of stale beer seeped out of his snoring mouth. A few hours later he woke up. He barreled toward the refrigerator and shoved his hand into a jar of pickles. They crunched between his teeth and juice dripped down his striped polo.

He walked throughout the house pointing to things on the walls or in cabinets. “Hey, I call this when you get divorced.” He said as he held up a metallic red cocktail shaker. He put it underneath his arm and walked to the backyard. My aunt swayed gently on a hammock nestled behind the feathery acacias and between two palm trees. She swung her legs over the side and I sat next to her. I sighed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, it’s just dipshit over there is being a fucking,” I paused and gritted my teeth, “douche burger.”

My aunt confused, tilted her head and smiled. “Douche burger?”

We both looked over at him and he broke down a wicker chair and tossed it into the fireplace. He looked back at us and motioned. “Get that branch hanging off the tree.” As if I had no control over my movements, I got up and pulled the branch. It splintered at the end and I dragged it to my uncle. He broke it in half and stomped on it. Blazing embers darted out from behind the grate as he flung it into the flames. We turned and covered our faces while he laughed. “Go and get me another beer.” Involuntarily I went back to the shed and pulled out a dented, silver can. I tossed it to him and his dirt stained fingers pulled up on the tab. He threw his head back and swallowed. He wiped the

corners of his mouth and exhaled a sound of satisfaction. "I'm supposed to be on the wagon right now." He whispered as he stared longingly at the empty can in his hand.

My aunt leaned over to me. "He's supposed to be on the fucking wagon?" She pushed me to the side. "Having him is here is like the blind leading the fucking blind. How is he going to help your dad get sober if he can't even get his shit together?" I closed my eyes and shook my head.

My uncle pulled me inside the house.

"Your dad wants to talk with you, but you can't get mad and the worse thing you can do is yell at him."

"What do you mean I can't get mad?"

"Just try to stay calm."

"Whatever." I turned and walked away.

My dad called my sister and me into the kitchen and crossing his arms he started saying things like, "I'm just not in love with your mom anymore" and "It's her fault that this marriage is falling apart." I shook my head and expressed to him that I didn't think it was her fault. He scrunched up his nose and with his scabbed finger pointed at my sister and me, "I don't love you. Either[. Both] of you. Not after what you've done to me."

I turned my back. He followed us outside and continued to say things about my mom and sister. "They've all betrayed me. You all are disgusting, selfish, inconsiderate people. You're not my real family. If you really loved me you wouldn't be doing this."

I rubbed my eyes and told him as I turned around to stop talking about them like that.

He began to yell “Shut the fuck up you little bitch!”

I started to laugh. “You shut the fuck up.” I fired back. “You know what? While you’ve been shooting up all fucking day and never taking responsibility for anything in your entire life, mom has been keeping your shit as well as hers together so we wouldn’t be exposed to whatever the fuck it is that you do.”

“I am your father and you do not talk to me that way and I’m not on drugs. I don’t know how those got into my system.” He said as he aggressively picked his lip. “It’s not my fault that your mother is a fucking bitch, who lies to you girls and makes me look bad.”

“No, you made yourself look like a piece of shit all by yourself. And what do you mean you don’t know how those drugs got into your system? They didn’t just magically show up.”

He clenched his fists and stomped over to a stack of chairs. His shoulder blades protruded through his worn, white shirt as he picked up the grimy plastic. He lifted them above his head and walked towards me. “Are you gonna throw those at me?” He continued marching and threw the chairs in my direction.

They fell short. I recoiled in disbelief. “You want to hurt me? Come on and hit me you fat fuck.” I shouted. “Come and kick my ass motherfucker.” I said holding my hands out to my sides. As he darted towards me, my mom and uncle tried to pull him away.

I ran towards the concrete wall. My hands grasped the shaky cinderblock and I leapt into the neighbor’s yard. My dad’s head poked over the concrete as he tried to scale the wall, before my uncle ripped him back and threw him to the ground. I brushed away the grass that clung to my stained kneecaps and looked up to find our neighbor staring at

me through his kitchen window. I politely waved and informed him I would let myself out the back gate.

As he continued talking I walked out into the kitchen. The refrigerator door opened and the light flickered revealing an untouched container of eggs. He proceeded to follow and express his absolute repugnance he held for me. I opened the front door and strolled towards his car. “You’ve abandoned me. You’ve betrayed me.” He continued.

As he prattled on, I took out one egg and held the ivory globe in my palm. I raised it up to the sun and the yolk cast a shadow through its shell down on the atrophying grass. In one motion, the egg disappeared from my hand and drifted into the air. It landed on the windshield of his car.

[A feeling of] insurgence overwhelmed me and I began to throw the remaining eggs. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing you little bitch!” he shouted. I stared at him and continued flinging the eggs. Under a shower of splattering egg whites, he sprinted over to his car and fumbled for the keys. Golden yolks exploded on his previously unblemished, sable Mustang and violently rained down on his tattered Tommy Bahama t-shirt. He sped off, brandishing his middle finger.

“They all have to continue on with their own lives,” my mom said as she grabbed my shoulders.

“I know, but if they’re not here where are we gonna go? None of us are comfortable staying at the house. Where are we gonna live?”

“The Esso’s have very kindly said we could stay with them.”

“They’re not even home.”

My mom looked down at the ground. “We’ll sleep in the car. [It’s not the best thing right now, but] we’ll make it work.”

“You’re right. We can make it work.”

We drove to the airport and dropped off my aunt. Her tired eyes looked into mine and she told me I would make it through this. She hugged me and as soon as she turned around, she sprinted off with her bag towards security. I clicked my seatbelt in. “Where are we off to next?” my sister asked. “Where do we want to go?” My mom, sister and I sat in silence.

A car honked at us and my mom sped off toward the red, rolling hills of the reservation. “We could go to Papago,” I suggested. My mom and sister looked at each other and nodded their heads. “Sure.”

We drove along the murky lake where crew boats rowed in unison. The blades reflected off the surface before they gently dipped in and cut the mirrored images of the skyscrapers that lined the river. We ascended up a hill and wound around hiking trails and past happy, ignorant couples walking their dogs. She parked near the edge of the mountain. I got out of the car and walked around to the driver’s side. “I’m gonna go for a walk.” I said to my mom.

My hands grasped for holds in the rock and my feet followed as I pushed myself up onto a boulder. I looked out towards the university and watched as inebriated college kids attempted to scale “A” Mountain. Their feet slid out from under them and they fell back on the ground where they remained for several minutes. Roars from the football

game echoed from the stadium and floated out across the mesa on the cool desert air. My head dropped between my knees and I rubbed the back of my neck with my hands.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I checked it and a drawn out message from my dad flashed across the screen. He said I had abandoned him and that because all of his loved ones disowned him there was only thing he could do. He said he was going to kill himself. He said there was no need for a funeral, because he didn't believe in God anymore and that by tomorrow morning, I would get what I wanted and he would be entirely out of my life. My eyes grew thick with tears and I shoved the phone back into my pocket. I walked to the rim of the boulder, leaned forward and screamed out into the chasm.

I descended down the rock and walked back to the car. I saw my mom and sister crying from behind the windshield. I climbed into the backseat and my sister turned around.

“You get dad's message?” she asked through her tears.

“Yeah, I got it.”

My mom was on the phone and my sister turned and told me it was the police. She reported the attempted suicide and they said they would go and check on him. They asked for an address, but we didn't know where he was. I stretched out across the seat and fell asleep to the sound of my sister crying.

We had been sleeping in the car for five days. Our annoyances with one another latched onto the sadness and grew into one giant negative tumor. My emotions fluctuated wildly and I behaved like him. It frightened me.

I was on my computer in the backseat and my sister, ready for bed told me to turn it off. I declined and told her the soft glow was not that irritating. My sister swiftly reclined the passenger seat and my computer collapsed onto my hands. "What the hell?" I shouted. She looked back, reached her arms towards me and pushed down on the screen. I abruptly removed my hands and slapped hers away.

"I'm tired and that stupid fucking light is keeping me up." She said reclining her seat back further.

"Seriously, you need to fuck off. I haven't slept in a week because you keep pushing your seat back more and more. You're puncturing my kidneys!" I paused.

"and you know what," I paused, "it's not all about you."

Like a mountain lion attacking its prey, my sister lunged over the seat and sunk her hands into my sides. We rolled around the back of the car. I punched her in the side and grabbed her face. My mom banged her head against the steering wheel. "Mom! Mom!" I shouted. My sister pinned my arms, reared her head back and spat into my open mouth.

I turned over and retched. My sister fell backwards and laughed.

"What did you just do to your sister?" My mom questioned.

"She spat in my mouth." I cried.

"That's disgusting. You spat in your sister's mouth?"

My sister laughed uncontrollably. I sat up and punched her in the shoulder. She heaved forward. "Did you hear that? That was her punching me!"

"You spat into her mouth. It's your own fault if she beats the crap out of you." mom said.

Our mother separated us. She sat in the front seat, while I was banished to the back.

As soon as the doors opened, cold New England air filled the airplane. I walked down the jet bridge and felt the flimsy metal buckle beneath my feet and surge outwards towards the metal walls that enclosed it. The advertisements displayed rattled as people walked by the bold type that marketed tropical vacations that asked “WANT TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL?” and “START YOUR NEW YEARS RESOLUTIONS OFF RIGHT.”

I chucked my bags down narrow escalators in South Station and splayed them out on the T on my way back to campus.

My dad’s number appeared on the phone and my thumb involuntarily hit the green answer button. I hesitated before putting it to my ear, but spoke softly as I raised it towards my mouth.

“Hello?”

“Glad someone finally fucking answered.”

“What do you want?”

“Someone’s bugged my computer. There’s a virus.”

“I can’t talk right now.”

“Of course you can’t. You’ve always been a shitty person, so I’m not surprised that nothing has changed.”

“All I’m gonna say is, get help, get sober, and don’t [try to] contact me until you’ve done that.”

I hung up and clasped the phone between my fingers. It vibrated and a message from him lit up the screen.

“Apparently the virus wasn’t enough to get your attention. Maybe I should kill myself.”

“I don’t have time for this bullshit. Either kill yourself or stop threatening to.”

“I’m going to this time.”

“Alright, then do it and stop bothering me and everybody else.”

“Cunt.”

“Remember to put your wrists in water after you’ve slit them it draws the blood out faster.” I turned the phone off and threw it onto my bag. “Dick.”

I wasn’t going home to a house with my own room or my back yard with the citrus tree that dangled over the pool and dropped ripened lemons into the chlorinated water. We were going to live with my grandmother for the summer or until we could come up with a plan of getting out of Phoenix.

My mother and sister stood next to the same drooping ficus where I had met my family five months before when I was last home for Christmas break. This time, my father was absent and fatigue and sadness embedded themselves in my mom and sister’s faces.

“How’s it been living with grandma?” I asked.

My sister extended her hand toward the grooved radio dial and turned it down.

“Well, it beats living out of the car.”

The spring had slowly begun to lose its grasp on the desert while the summer crept up steadily along the scorched buttes and mesas.

My mom sat in the decaying fold out chair. She pulled her floral printed skirt over her knee while she nervously bounced her leg up and down. Molly's mom sat next to us and fiddled with her smudged car keys. My mom bit her nails as she furtively glanced down the hallway to see if he was there.

“If you were a flavor of ice cream, what flavor would you be?” I asked her.

“Oh honey, you're so sweet for trying to distract me, but...”

“Mom, this is an important question and I need you to answer it.”

She shook her head and sighed, “I guess I'd be strawberry.”

“That's a horrible answer, but it's your choice. And if you want to be a gross flavor, I guess that's fine.”

She knew I was trying to be funny and laughed halfheartedly.

The lawyer bounded down the hallway, her glasses dangled from her straggly hair and food stained papers poked out from the briefcase. She motioned for my mom to follow and we walked behind her as she pushed through the wooden door that creaked when it closed behind us.

I sat down on the creaky bench and the stillness of the room washed over me as a reverent wave. The lawyer's clogs thudded as she opened up the gate and she flung her bag over the railing. The stenographer looked straight ahead and her elongated fingers glided over the shorthand keys.

Molly's mom and I stared at the back of my mom and heard her as she started to cry when the judge asked, "Do you think this marriage is over?" She answered yes through her tears, but quickly restrained herself and replied with a stronger, "Yes, your honor." I rumbled the edges of my denim skirt, closed my eyes and cleared the lump in my throat.

We walked out of the courtroom and my mom crumpled up against the wall. Molly's mom rushed her into a side office, grabbing a box of tissues before sitting her down in a swivel chair. Mascara streaked across her cheeks and I put my arms around her. I felt her tears soak into my shirt as she pressed her face into my shoulder.

I turned around and left to go get the car. I walked down the hallway and the fluorescent lights flickered and hummed. I stepped onto the marble where the seal of the state was engrained in the floor. I reached into my pocket to check my phone and when I looked up, I saw him.

His body was more skeletal than it was four months ago and his teeth and gums had begun to rot. I whirled around and walked towards the office. I stared at my mom. I inhaled, "Dad is here." She looked up and her eyes grew wide. "Fuckfuckfuck." She said under her breath. The secretary called the front and requested a security escort.

Two men walked us out from the office into the lobby. Dad looked up and saw us. His spindly fingers reached out. "Talk to me. Please, just talk to me." I took my mom's arm and looked down as I walked towards the elevator. He walked closer and the guards held him back. The elevator doors shut and as we walked back to the car, I continued to look over my shoulder to see if he was there.

I turned into the alley behind my grandma's house and pulled into the shaded parking space. "Thank you for coming with me. That must've been hard for you," she said. I took the keys out of the ignition and looked over to my mom. I touched her arm and she started to cry. "He's an asshole and now we never have to see him again." She used her sleeve to brush away the tears and without a word got out of the car and walked towards the beige concrete apartment complex.

I pushed the door open and wiped off the dust that stuck to the palm of my hand. My grandmother stood in the kitchen and turned towards us as we walked in.

"Did he show up?" she asked.

"He made an appearance, yes, but he didn't come into the courtroom," I answered.

"That seems odd."

My mom sunk down onto the couch and covered her face as she cried. My grandmother came over with a martini and cigarette in her hand. She put her arm around her and spilled her drink as she leaned in and said everything would be ok. My mom continued to cry. "Honey?" my grandmother asked, "Would you like some of my marijuana?" She waved to me and told me to get her dime bag that sat on top of the refrigerator. "No, mom! I don't want any of your weed." I stood there with the box covered in red paint that begun to peel and chip off the top. "Alright, alright." She said as she took the box from me. "Then I think I might have some." She opened up a chocolate edible and after slurping down her martini, popped it into her mouth.

“No more Elliott Smith or Nick Drake. No more of your sad music shit. We’re going to a gig tonight,” Huggy paused “A fun one.”

I exhaled a long, annoyed sigh. “Fine. Who are we seeing?”

“Youth of Today.”

I tilted my head back and squinted my eyes. “Dude, fuck straight edge shows. Last time I got a bloody nose because some guy kicked me in the face when he was crowd surfing.”

“Don’t sound so bitter about it.”

I sighed again. “Just because they don’t do drugs and eat,” I gesticulated with my hands “rabbit food, does not mean that they don’t do stupid shit at these things.”

“This’ll be different. Pick ya up at 9:30.”

I hung up the phone and drifted around the apartment. There was a sharp knock on the door and a fist sporadically banged on the steel exterior. I looked through the keyhole and narrowed my eyes. Kai rolled up his green pants and tightened the laces on his worn Doc Martens. The door handle wriggled beneath my grasp. Kai examined me and crumpled his forehead.

“Why are you wearing overalls?”

“Because I don’t want anyone to mess with my shit.”

He shrugged. “Whatever..”

A security guard with muscular shoulders and a large vein that protruded through his tanned forehead patted down my arms and sides.

“Do you have any weapons or drugs on you of any kind?”

“Just the switchblade I’m hiding in my bra.”

He grimaced and clutched my arm. “You may think it’s funny, but if you fuck with me I’m not letting you in.”

I twisted out of his death grip and smiled, “I’m just kidding, I’m not even wearing a bra.”

He motioned toward the venue. “Just go the fuck inside.”

Huggy waited for me underneath the marquee.

“What was that all about?”

“Oh Chuckles over there, he’s just a goofball.”

Our feet hammered on the floors engulfed in beer and unidentifiable sludge as we passed through two wooden doors pasted with posters. An incense stick burned on top of the bar and black floorboards groaned beneath our feet. Plumes of smoke swayed and undulated above the crowd. People with mohawks and neck tattoos flicked their Zippos and took long drags of joints and ashed [them] onto the beer soaked floors.

Someone grabbed the leg of my overalls and pulled me down. In a gesture of good manners they offered me some of their weed. I politely declined and told them I was trying to watch my figure. The lights went out and cheers and grunts from the onlookers drifted out onto the empty stage.

The bass sprung out from the speakers and reverberated off the walls and leapt into the crowd that swirled in a chaotic circle. They twisted themselves around violently and lifted their elbows to make contact with the faces and bodies of the others in the pit. Ray held the microphone in one hand, stood at the edge of the stage with his foot up on one of the speakers, and spun the audience into a black jean and leather jacket web of

cotton candy. The mosh pit spread until the entire venue pulsed along with anarchic lyrics and the gestures of the band. A dude with no shirt and gages wide enough for me to fit my fist in swung his head wildly until he collided into me. We both fell to the ground and before I could even recognize that I had fallen, a swarm of hands lifted me up off the ground and gently placed me back on my feet. We were peeled off of each other and the sweat from his torso seeped into my overalls and shirt. They all patted my back and made sure I was all right before they continued on with their ferocious dancing.

Huggy grabbed my hand and pulled me closer to the front. “Let’s see if this dude will lift us.” He shouted into my ear. The man was bald and the lights from the stage darted off his shiny head. He bent down and clasped his fingers together and motioned for me to put my foot in his hands. The stickiness of beer clung to the bottoms of my shoes and then transferred to his short and strong fingers. He launched me head first into the crowd and I stretched out my arms as they passed over everyone desperately trying to hold me up. They flung me from one side to the other and my body twisted while hands clutched onto my suspenders and rotated me like a pig on a spit. My hair dipped into cups of beer and the liquid wound itself around my face and neck. There was a thrust upwards and I found myself staring up at the ceiling and felt the grip of people pulling me closer to the stage. Arms hooked under my arms and grabbed at my thighs. My head swept across a rough surface and the disorientation fled from me and I felt the microphone chord from the lead singer being pulled from under my back. The guitarist slammed into me as I stood up and after a few seconds of thrashing my beer-drenched hair I leapt from the stage back into the crowd. I jumped so confidently only to be held for a minute and then promptly dropped on my side.

I stumbled backwards as someone pulled on my overalls and fell into Huggy. “Dude that was sick.” Huggy grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me. “I don’t think I’ve ever crowd surfed for so long.” He reached into the pocket of his jean jacket and brought his balled up fist down to his side. He twisted a pre roll in the palm of his hand before he let it fall to the tips of his fingers. His chrome zippo lighter lit up his face and the brown paper flashed a little brighter as he inhaled. “It’s Sweet Island Skunk.” Huggy’s chest fell as he exhaled. I felt the thin paper crinkle between my thumb and pointer finger as I raised it to my mouth. A citrus aroma hit my throat and nose and my lungs expanded with the earthy smoke. The crowd in front of me had cleared a path as a security guard pushed through holding a flashlight above everyone’s head. I hid the joint behind my back, making sure it didn’t catch on my clothes, and continued to hold my breath with the weed still sitting stagnantly in my chest. We made eye contact the entire time, my eyes bulging from my sockets and my mouth inflated like I had crammed it full of marshmallows. Huggy moved closer to me. The guard holstered his flashlight as he got closer and a smile spread across his face that reached all the way up to his ears. His forehead got smaller as he widened his eyes and his eyebrows traveled up toward his hairline. “Mmm, smells good,” he said as he nudged past me. I coughed and the smoke drained from my body. I used the back of my hand to wipe away the tears that gathered in my eyes.

“I thought for sure we were gonna get kicked out.” Huggy said.

“I was trying not to be obvious, but I don’t think I was doing a good job.”

“Yeah, your discretion is shitty.”

He produced a safety pin that was fastened to his jeans and gently stamped out the paper and the little bits of weed that seeped out of it.

I raced down the stairs and hurtled out the front door. “Don’t forget to wear sunscreen,” grandma said from the kitchen. “Yup,” I shouted as I slammed the gate shut behind me. I ran out to Blaise’s Tercel and the rusted door clung to the car.

“Oof I needed to get out of that house.”

“I was about to murder my entire family, so I need this just as much as you do.”

We drove further down into the wash and under trees that canopied over the road. She pulled up to a dirt path and gripped the steering wheel as she ran over protruding rocks and exposed roots from the Coolibah trees. She parked next to a white van with tinted windows and passengers drank the beer that rested in their American flag patterned koozies.

We went to the trunk and pulled out three rubber inner tubes and a crumbling teal cooler. Blaise walked down to the surging river and tethered all the tubes together. I heard the water breath as it lapped up against the gravel and receded back. My foot dipped into the sludgy green water and slipped on the mossy rocks below the surface. We climbed into the inner tubes and pushed off from the stony shore.

Our feet dragged along the bottom and plumes of dirt rose up to meet our sculling hands. The current picked up and we drifted through the trembling summer air that smelled like rain. Blaise reached behind and pulled up the cooler that trailed behind us. Melted ice and beer bottles sloshed and bobbed over the white caps. She pulled out a bottle and tossed it into my lap.

We floated through the rapids and along droughty desert that lined the bank. We continued to drink and hid the contraband from passing parties. Blaise finished her fourth beer when the current quickened. She clung to the glass and shrieked before we were both propelled from our tubes and into the rocks that projected out from the white water. I smashed into a jagged boulder and was submerged into a green cavern. My lungs withered as the air disappeared and I swam to the surface. Blaise frantically searched for the top of her swimsuit and waved and apologized to the family that stood in shock on the riverbank. I began to laugh and as she grabbed her top and tied the strings around her neck, she lifted up her hand with an obscene gesture. “At least I didn’t nail the rocks. You didn’t just hit those, you bounced off.” She said to me as she dug her hands into a Dorito bag. “Well at least I didn’t flash a family and ruin their day at the river.”

We stumbled out of the water and dragged our tubes and empty cooler behind us. A spray painted bus pulled up and we loaded our things onto the top. I stared out toward the mountains and dust floated in through the windows before we were dropped off in the unpaved parking lot. I deflated the tubes as Blaise drained the melted ice from the cooler.

After loading up the trunk, we sat on the hood of the car and watched as the sun set. Cactus Wrens flew over the elongated shadows of saguaros and burrowed in their hollowed out nests between the thorns.

“Thanks for today. It was good to get out of the house.”

“Besides me losing my top for that brief moment, I had a pretty good time.”

Blaise slung back her beer. It gurgled as it drained into her throat. “Ready?” she crumpled the can and let the aluminum fracture in her fingers.

“I think I’ll drive us back.” I grabbed the keys.

“Good thinking. Want to deliver you back to your mom and sister not dead.”

“Yeah, they’d be pissed at you.”

“They love you is all.”

“I know. I guess I love ‘em too.” I said smiling.