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John Savage

John Klyczek

Eastern Illinois University

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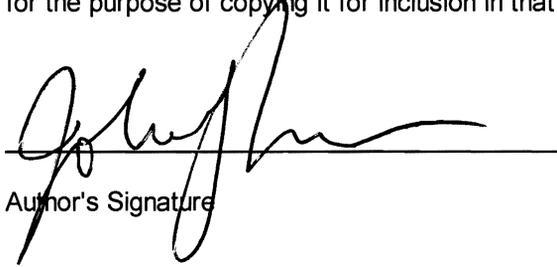
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John Savage

(TITLE)

BY

John Klyczek

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Masters of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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2011

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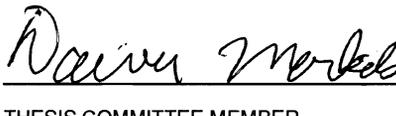
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To Melissa Anne Ruthenbeck, who taught me to Love. To my Mother, Susan Klyczek, who Loved more than anyone I've ever known; and to my Step-Father, Gary Smith, who Loved her and cared for her through her final hours. To my Father, John Alan Klyczek, whose Love is like Promethean Fire that consumes or forges; and to my Step-Mother, Angela Klyczek, whose Love is strong enough to kindle that fire. To Sol Ennis, the Love of my Life. To L'Trevenei'r "Ari" Arijont Phillips, my Brother in Love Forever. To The Denvits, especially Doris, who Love me like Family and gave me a Home when I had nowhere to go. To David Simon-Toledo and Kenny White, who taught me to fight for Love. And to God, who *is* Love Eternal and Infinite.

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God Bless you all.

Critical Preface

My Masters Thesis, *John Savage*, is a retelling of *Brave New World* from the perspective of John “the Savage”—a loose retelling, much in the same way as *Oh Brother Where Art Thou* is a loose retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey*—in which the historical and contemporary sociopolitical-economic derivations of the leitmotifs composing *John Savage* are foregrounded in contrast with Aldous Huxley’s sublimation of those very same historical, sociopolitical-economic policies and events from which he derived the leitmotifs composing *Brave New World*.

Responding to Huxley’s misanthropic characterization of John “the Savage,” my Masters Thesis, *John Savage*, is a denunciation of the implicit misanthropy in *Brave New World* and a revolt against it somewhat in the same way that *Brave New World* is a parody of “the horror of the Wellsian Utopia and a revolt against it” (qtd. in Baker 23). In particular, *John Savage* is a revolt against the eugenicist notion of genetic inferiority as insinuated through Huxley’s portrayal of John “the Savage” as a cerebrally-challenged, superstitious, sexually-repressed, sadomasochistic primitive; likewise, the novella is also a revolt against the eugenicist belief in biological determinism through genetic inheritance.

John Savage expresses its refutations of those eugenicist, biological determinist dogmas through the protagonist’s—John Savage’s—struggle to escape the sins of his father and break his family’s generational cycle of abuse. Raised in an abusive home in which he witnessed his father regularly beat his mother, the protagonist grows up violent and self-destructive, cultivating aggressive sexual fantasies until he falls in love with a girl and cannot bring himself to make her the object of those fantasies. He comes to

terms with his destructive impulses and sexual appetites, reconciling them to the tenderness and protectiveness he feels for his first love. In turn, the protagonist is able to reform himself from a life of drug addiction, vagrancy, and street fighting to a life of university honors and Christian charity, but not before first ruining his relationship with the girl for whom he changes himself. This transformation expresses the power of nurture over nature, the power of God and the human spirit over heredity, of love over predestination.

In terms of craft, these dialectics are signified through a style of organic form prose poetry which juggles unorthodox spacing, alignment, and fonts in structuring intertextual split narratives that interweave the first-person, present-tense narration with the protagonist's memories, dreams, and meta-academic meta-research documenting, through cited historical and current sociopolitical events, the incremental institutionalization of Malthusian eugenic globalization into the New World Order in a contemporary End Times scenario. (It is worth noting that Huxley himself implements a split narrative device throughout chapter three of *Brave New World*). Hence, John Savage's first-person, present-tense narration is continuously surrounded and colored by interjecting external events as well as metaphysical semiotics such that his struggle to break his family's generational cycle of abuse cannot be read as a purely internal, epigenetic, evolutionary process, but must be read in the context of environmental, sociological, cultural, political-economic, and even metaphysical factors that sometimes amplify and at other times quell his biological predispositions in ebbs and flows throughout the novella. Instances in which societal pressures, impending apocalypse, supernatural encounters, nightmares, failed romances, and interpersonal conflicts in

general exacerbate John Savage's epigenetic memories of domestic violence trigger in him obsessive-compulsive neuroses—impulsive nail biting, incessant counting, and Tourette's-like recitations of a gibberish non-language. Instances in which supernatural experience, premonitions, dreams, romantic unions, and interpersonal connections quell his epigenetic memories catalyze in him hope, faith, forgiveness, love, and spiritual transcendence of his past traumas and his fears of the foreboding end of the world.

In an effort to suppress his epigenetic memories from erupting into psycho-behavioral disorders, John Savage self-medicates with alcohol and a cacophony of psychotropics, narcotics, and stimulants, which echoes the sedation of World State citizens with government-issued pharmaceuticals known as *soma* in *Brave New World*.

The prevalence of memories, dream sequences, and supernatural phenomena in *John Savage* highlights the dialectic between subjectivism and objectivism in relation to that between nurture and nature within the larger dialectic of intrinsic value versus social utility as functions of human interrelationships and the broader human condition. By saturating elements of realism and historical fiction—cited current events and historical research—with so many subjective memories, dream sequences, and mystical experiences, *John Savage* rejects the hyper-rational, social-utilitarian justification of the Malthusian eugenic, scientifically-dictated World State.

John Savage's denunciation of social utility and stability as the ultimate purpose and function of human interrelationships and humanity at large culminates in the final scene where, despite the world crumbling around the protagonist, despite his father and surrogate family being evicted, he finds peace, in a moment, in the embrace of a sterilized woman who cannot bear him the child he so deeply desires to carry on the Savage lineage

and the fight to break the family's generational cycle of violence, to redeem the sins of the fathers. John Savage finds comfort and transcendence in the intrinsic value of love, the intrinsic value of humanity in a perfectly flawed individual who has no biological, procreative utility and therefore cannot avail him in what he feels is his social responsibility to produce a child(ren) who will make something beautiful and righteous blossom from generations of pain, abuse, pathology, and dysfunction.

In terms of craft, the thematic emphasis on intrinsic value over social utility is signified through an employment of unorthodox formatting and punctuation that is oftentimes implemented in a manner that is deliberately arbitrary such that even the structure of *John Savage* is an abstract departure from controlled, methodological, almost scientific objective rationality and utility, not much unlike Dadaism in the sense of art for art's sake—or humanity and love for the sake of humanity and love as the simultaneous means and ends of human interrelationships as microcosms of the broader human experience. Similarly, many of the dream sequences in *John Savage* are intentionally crafted in such a way that they are difficult to cohere with the rest of the novella such that the realistically subjective nature of dreams and dreaming is captured while at the same time obscuring the reader's ability to apply linear reason in interpreting meaning(s) and thematic interconnections throughout the novella.

Related to the thematic dialectic between subjectivism and objectivism in conjunction with the structural incorporation of split narratives is the protagonist's split consciousness which parallels that of John "the Savage" in *Brave New World*. In Huxley's dystopia, John "the Savage" grows up with the spiritual-religious mythologies of tribal Malpais—which are themselves amalgamations of Christianity and indigenous,

animistic spiritualisms—as well as the dramas of Shakespeare and his mother’s stories about the technological, scientific wonders of the World State: “[l]ying in bed, he [John ‘the Savage’] would think of Heaven and London and Our Lady of Acoma and the rows and rows of babies in clean bottles and Jesus flying up and Linda flying up and the great Director of World Hatcheries and Awonawilona” (Huxley 86). Thus, John “the Savage” lives with a sort of Du Boisian double-consciousness that renders him an outcast in both the “Savage” Reservations as well as the World State, instilling in him an alienated and alienating self-concept that causes him to not only despise, verbally abuse, and ultimately riot with the World State citizens he wishes to liberate, but also to psychotically engage in pathological rituals of corporal mortification. In *John Savage*, the protagonist’s double-consciousness is split between rationalist, objective academic, historical, and political-economic research; and liberal humanist sociopolitical activism on the one hand—or lobe—; and subjective, intuitive spirituality through Christian penance through religious conversion and missionary work; mysticist and occult divination rites; prophetic dreams and visions; and Jungian synchronicity intuited through extreme chance coincidences on the other hand—or lobe. This split-consciousness renders him—in a parallel to John “the Savage” in *Brave New World*—an outcast in both the Christian Church and the New Age community as well as in the professional-institutional realm of academia, which incites him to not only cultivate a certain disdain for his academic peers, his fellow Christians, and the general American public, but also to suffer psychotic, obsessive-compulsive episodes of self-mutilation.

In the story of *John Savage*, the protagonist’s violent tendencies—both his self-directed masochism as well as his anti-social self-projections—are at another level,

perhaps primarily, learned behaviors that are symptomatic of being raised in an abusive home (to be fair, these tendencies can also be read as manifestations of his epigenetic memories); and his career as a professional mixed martial artist is a channel through which he fights to transform those learned behaviors (and biological predispositions) into something positive, constructive, and productive, something artistic, beautiful, and honorable.

John Savage's violent propensities, like those of John "the Savage" in *Brave New World*, are also inextricably entwined with his sexuality. In *Brave New World*, John "the Savage" is afflicted with a sexual repression that kindles his fits of corporal mortification, especially when Lenina Crowne, the apple of his sexual desires, entices his sexual passions. Even when Lenina visits John "the Savage's" hermitage with tears in her eyes—evidence that she in fact loves him, or at least has strong feelings for him much deeper than a mere, superficial sexual attraction—John "the Savage" cannot physically consummate his love for Lenina, in essence unable to discern the sin of lust from the sacrament of true love; instead, he beats her "with a whip of knotted cords," and when he finally has sex with her in a *soma*-induced "orgy-porgy," he hangs himself in shame as penance (Huxley 168).

In *John Savage*, the protagonist is plagued with a similar sexual complex in which he struggles to differentiate primal, aggressive lust from affectionate, sensual love. As mentioned earlier, John Savage grows up with his father's violent treatment of his mother as the primary model of male-female/husband-wife love relations. As such, John Savage has learned to almost instinctively emulate such abuse in his own romantic relationships with women, until he falls in the love with a girl named Melissa and cannot impose those

degrading sexual appetites upon her. When he falls in love again, years later, this time with a girl from his non-denominational Christian church, she anticipates him, as a professional pugilist, to be a hyper-sexual, super-macho, dominating and forceful lover who will ravish her out of her years of Christian sexual repression; yet John Savage sees in her only the shy, innocent, sweet church girl who is still saving herself for marriage, and although he no longer equates amorous love with primitive, rough sex, he is still yet to equate sex with anything other than aggressive lust. The result is that he cannot physically consummate his tender, caring love for his new girlfriend because he cannot express his sexuality in a manner that does not simulate the violence that was characteristic of his father's treatment of his mother. Hence, sexually unsatisfied and emotionally smothered as such, John Savage's girlfriend leaves him brokenhearted once again, left to grapple with not only his sexual identity, but also his social and spiritual identities as well; his sexual complex, in turn, spirals him into a state of disillusionment that causes him to question not only his rejection of his learned (and perhaps epigenetic) sexual desires, but also the very existence of love itself. Consequently, he plunges himself into an attempted spree of sexual deviance, soliciting one-night stands from women on social networking internet sites and prostitutes on Craig's List (which invokes the theme of smash monogamy—or what H. G. Wells termed "Free Love"—in *Brave New World*). But when the prospect of a child, and therefore a family, becomes entangled with one of his potential liaisons, John Savage comes to realize that [e]ven if there is no such thing as Love, if it's nothing more than a haphazard chemical reaction amongst neurotransmitters, even if all of humanity is but complex bacteria spawned from pond scum, congealed in the primordial goo; [he] can't live as though

nothing matters. Even if Life is meaningless, [he] cannot deny [his] *need* to find Meaning, the necessity to at the very least *create the illusion* of Meaning.

And he therefore can no longer allow himself to pursue his debased, demeaning sexual yearnings—whether in a frenzy of meaningless Free Love or in a monogamous relationship of mutual sexual exploitation—, even if it means he must live out the rest of his days in loveless solitude.

Thus, in summary, *John Savage* is, most simply put, a love story. But it is not simply a romance—that is, not simply a story about *eros*—; rather, it is a story about Love with a capital “L,” Love in all of its expressions: *eros*, *agape*, *philos*, *storge*; family, community, sexuality, spirituality, marriage, friendship, progeny, and God.

CHAPTER 1: John Savage

John: “God Is Gracious.”

. . . and I’m a piece of shit.

I stole my mother’s oxycontin.

While she wheezed and gurgled on her deathbed.

john (**Oxford English Dictionary**):

d. (With lower-case initial.) A lavatory, water-closet. *slang* (chiefly *U.S.*).

John Innes (compost), one of a group of composts . . .

She would snuggle up against her stuffed animals as I would tuck her in. After that, I’d shut her bedroom door only halfway because she was claustrophobic. Throughout her childhood, her brother used to lock her in a closet for hours on end where he would do things to her at intervals until their mother returned from work—she never knew her father. Hence, she would hyperventilate, panic attack whenever she found herself in an enclosed area. If she woke up before me—which she almost always did—there would be nothing I could do to not startle her. Whether I quietly called out, “Mom,” whether I softly tapped the razorblade scars on her arm, whether I gently rapped on the threshold to the kitchen where she spent her mornings washing dishes or looking over her “to-do” list; she would scream, half-hushed with a gasp as if a predator had leapt out from a dark shadow. There was no peace in her life. There was no calm. No warmth or security. Only her Pooh Bear, her Tigger, and the rest of the cuddlies from the Hundred Acre Woods—I’ve always been a fuck up. Maybe that’s why she spent most of her life trying to make other people happy. To comfort them, make life easier. Maybe that’s why she was the only one who would respond to the letters her brother sent from prison as he awaited lethal injection for chopping up his wife and discarding her garbage-bagged remains in a swamp.

Once she was asleep, I would sneak off to her medicine cabinet. I would place the tiny, round

beige-orange pill on my tongue and suck on the 40mg dose of oxycontin, removing the cream-colored time-release coating. After spitting it into a Kleenex, wiping off the remnants of the time-release coating, I'd set the now-white narcotic in between two tablespoons. Carefully, I'd press them together, rubbing them side to side, crushing the tablet between the concave side of one spoon and the convex side of the other, slowly, so that it wouldn't shatter and scatter, ejected from the sides of the spoons onto the cigarette-burn-riddled carpet where it would be lost amongst the singed fibers. Then I'd empty the large granules onto a large shard from a broken mirror averting my eyes from my reflection, after which I'd remove my driver's license from my wallet and use its edge to dice the clumped-up grains into a fine powder. Sweeping the pile of ground painkiller into a thin line about half the width of a pencil, I'd open my wallet again, exchanging my license for a dollar bill, which I'd roll tightly into a straw. Still avoiding my mirror-image, I would nose dive toward the neatly filed prescription drug with the rolled-up dollar-straw inserted in my left nostril, my right nostril pressed shut with my right index finger.

The world becomes quiet, dark, innocuous, as if I am submerged in warm waters, flowing beneath reality.

I'd spark a Basic or a Maverick Special or some other generic-brand cigarette like incense in dedication to a medicinal sacrament, to Holy Communion, to Transcendence. Placing an ashtray on the dusty, tattered cushion next to me, I would sit back heavy, sinking into the old, grey sofa, the cherry from my square resting safely on the ashtray.

Lost Time Lapsed.

Something stirs my altered consciousness from a foggy slumber that snuck up on me in a blank moment, in a hazy quilt. My body would jerk as if startled yet my thoughts remained sedated, my heartbeat mute, almost static. I'd glance at my cigarette, now a long cylinder of ash half-connected to the yellow-orange butt balanced delicately between my index and middle fingers. I'd put the butt in the ashtray and proceed to languidly scratch the little tickly itches crawling all over my body: neck, chest, armpits, scalp, crotch, behind the knees, small of the back. I'd scratch. Therapeutically. Like so many massages. I'd scratch, pleasure; relief, release. I'd scratch, light another square, inhale the thick grey-black smoke, exhale, rest the hot end in the ashtray, drift away, dark, silent; a place between sleep and unconsciousness.

Lost Time Lapsed.

My clouded senses reemerge again; my cigarette consumed, extinguished. I'd scratch.

Repeat repeat.

Lost Time Lapsed.

Repeat repeat repeat.

(Oxford English Dictionary):

John-a-nods, one who is nodding, or not quite awake;

**“YOU WHO DWELL IN THE DUST,
WAKE UP”—ISAIAH 26:19**

~ ~ ~

GOD IS LOVE.

WHOEVER LIVES IN LOVE LIVES IN GOD, AND GOD IN HIM.

**IN THIS WAY, LOVE IS MADE COMPLETE AMONG US SO THAT WE WILL HAVE CONFIDENCE ON THE
DAY OF JUDGMENT, BECAUSE IN THIS WORLD WE ARE LIKE HIM.**

THERE IS NO FEAR IN LOVE.

BUT PERFECT LOVE DRIVES OUT FEAR, BECAUSE FEAR HAS TO DO WITH PUNISHMENT.

THE ONE WHO FEARS IS NOT MADE PERFECT IN LOVE.

WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US.

IF ANYONE SAYS, “I LOVE GOD,” YET HATES HIS BROTHER, HE IS A LIAR.

**FOR ANYONE WHO DOES NOT LOVE HIS BROTHER, WHOM HE HAS SEEN, CANNOT LOVE GOD,
WHOM HE HAS NOT SEEN.**

AND HE HAS GIVEN US THIS COMMANDMENT:

WHOEVER LOVES GOD MUST LOVE HIS BROTHER—1 JOHN 4:16-21

I was a missionary in Haiti.

I taught 6th grade English at a small non-denominational Christian school.

The building was more mortar than stone. The mortar was more sand than lime. The sand was more gravel than grains.

The Universe is There.

The Door is There.

Knock and It shall be opened.

To a select few.

There was a mural at the Entrance. Chalked stainglass stone: Little Africans in diaspora running home into the arms of two generic white missionaries: the freckle-faced kid on the old Farina box and maybe a

mousketeerette .

“Christ will Come Again,” they said one day, and again.

The Little Ones beam. Bright smiles. Jaundiced eyes yellow like clouds on the tropical sun.

There is Grace. There is Faith.

“Are you excited for summer vacation?” I asked.

“No,” they said. “We want to stay in school. We want to learn. We want to know. We want to be missionaries like you.”

A ceramic statuette of Toussaint L’Ouverture stood somewhere behind me.

* * *

(Oxford English Dictionary):

b. Also used as a representative proper name for a footman, butler, waiter, messenger, or the like, and in other ways

After class let out, I worked construction on an addition to the school.

I wheelbarrowed stones from a heap that was once a building, dumped them in a trench to be filled with cement; I ran with the wheelbarrow, shredded muscles pushing to labor as much as possible before dusk. The Haitians took their time. How much do they have?

They laughed at my sweating in the sweltering Caribbean sun, my huffing puffing the thick humidity.

“You big,” said Sydney grinning.

Was I embarrassed or ashamed? Or something in between?

Yeah, I eat four big ass fucking meals a day, I thought to myself.

“Whas your name?” asked Sydney.

“John”

“Johne Cina,” said Sydney smiling, flexing his lanky biceps beneath the same faded red t-shirt he wore everyday.

We mixed concrete together: me, Sydney, Etienne, and Robert (pronounced *Robare*).

We mixed it with a hose and shovels on the pavement that would be the floor of the addition; the Haitians mixed barefoot on the scalding concrete.

“Johne,” said Robert.

He pulled an amulet forth from under the frayed collar of his faded blue t-shirt: an expressionless skull enclosed by variously colored beads.

“Voo’Doo,” said Robert.

I feigned an animated terror.

Robert smiled.

“Is Good,” he said.

He held it out to me, still around his neck; I touched it, and a speckle of cement splashed in my eye.

I blinked and staggered and blinked.

“Wasch your ice, Johne,” said Robert bringing me the hose.

I tried to rinse my eyes myself, but I couldn’t get the right angle; I handed the hose to Robert, and he tilted my head back, washing my eyes.

When I could see again, I showed Robert Mars tattooed on my right wrist, the Sun tattooed on my left wrist; I held them up to the open blue sky and said, “Voo’Doo: The Stars,” pointing everywhere above the horizon.

* * *

All the missionaries ate dinner together at the head pastor’s house.

Jet black Haitian women in brightly colored headscarves prepared and served us feasts on the extended, gated patio; they cleaned up after us, cleared the plates covered in half-eaten foods.

The people in the street could smell, could taste the aromas. A UN jeep spat the dirt-rubble road into a gritty mist as it rolled through the street; the people in the street could smell, could taste the rock-smoke, the dirt.

Were their mouths watering across the street in the orphanage too?

I went there one day.

At the entrance was a stone-faced man slumped in a feeble wooden chair, hugging an old rifle.

Inside, the children trampled barefoot about a decrepit playground strewn with metal scrap, plastic, and glass shards; some teenagers kicked a deflated soccer ball in the corner.

A two-year-old tugged my shorts as if trying to scale me like a mountain or mount me like an elephant.

I scooped him up from under his armpits, my fingers lacing neatly between his protruding ribs as if they were factory-made handles; I seated him piggyback on my shoulders, his empty-bloated Buddha belly breathing shallow against my neck, growling.

We run, we Fly.

We make a landing, to refuel.

I took a drink from my plastic cantina.

And every child in the foster home mobbed me; collectively, individually.

“Water! Water!” they shouted climbing over one another clawing at my thermos.

I relinquished the bottle to the first hand to touch it; the Little One attempted to drink while the Others pushed and pulled and reached and grabbed causing him to spill the water on his chin and his torn and holey t-shirt that read “Jesus Loves Me” written in bumpy globs of glittered fabric paint.

One of the teenagers intervened, took the water bottle from the frenzy of dehydrated adolescents, gave it back to me, gesturing that I put it back in my bag before a prepubescent riot ensued.

* * *

I left the orphanage with teardrops blurring and burning my eyes.

I wanted to collect gallons of them like Living Water in whatever discarded jugs, cans, bottles, and jars I could scavenge from the litter-ridden beaches; I wanted to sob like a well that never runs dry, to turn wine into water that quenches once for all Forever.

* * *

On my way to the Church for evening group prayer, I came across an elderly woman with a severe case of rickets; she gestured a request for my thermos—I remember what Pastor Franck said the day I arrived at

Sonlight Academy:

“They’ll ask you for whatever they think they can get. Any chance they get. But don’t give them any handouts, even if it’s just some pocket change or something you were going to throw away. The Haitians think white people are all rich, and they expect that we all have money to just throw around. I’m sure you’ll all want to give away everything you don’t need, but we don’t want to feed the idea that we’re all here to just give handouts. I mean, we don’t want them to depend on us.”

So I gave it to her, even though I knew Pastor Franck would throw a fucking shit fit.

It’s a fucking plastic bottle and an ounce of fucking water, I thought.

* * *

I was the first to return to the Church.

On the flat concrete roof, I sat lotus between exposed rebar reading *Getting Haiti Right this Time: The U.S. and the Coup.*

French: Jean

Jean Bertrand Aristide

The others arrived and spread themselves out across the roof reading Bible verses in their private little corners.

Families slept under the grey-yellow moon on neighboring roofs to escape the trapped condensed oven-like heat inside their houses; they lay covered head to toe under white sheets to shield themselves from mosquitoes.

After group prayer, we all sang contemporary praise songs; I was silent, looking at the moon.

“This is our last night in Haiti,” said Elise, her pale white skin glowing with the moon. “And . . . I guess I wonder . . . I just . . . I mean what can we do to help them once we’re back home?”

Quiet.

There is something in my head.

Then one girl proclaimed, “We can Pray.” And the silence was broken.

Yes, I thought. *We can Pray. We can go home and Pray. And we can eat supersize McDonald's and drink aspartame-sweetened zero-calorie soda and watch Jersey Shore and play video games and pierce our eyebrows and talk shit on Facebook and buy new shoes and wave a star-spangled fucking banner.*

And yes, I thought, the Haitians too can Pray. And Pray and Pray. And pray.

~ ~ ~

Oxford English Dictionary:

a. A masculine Christian name, that of John the Baptist:

“YOU BROOD OF VIPERS! WHO WARNED YOU OF THE COMING WRATH? PRODUCE FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE. AND DO NOT THINK YOU CAN SAY TO YOURSELVES, ‘WE HAVE ABRAHAM AS OUR FATHER.’ I TELL YOU THAT OUT OF THESE STONES GOD CAN RAISE UP CHILDREN FOR ABRAHAM. THE AX IS ALREADY AT THE ROOT OF THE TREES, AND EVERY TREE THAT DOES NOT PRODUCE GOOD FRUIT WILL BE CUT DOWN AND THROWN INTO THE FIRE”

—MATTHEW 3:1-2; 5-10

Oxford English Dictionary:

5. **St. John's**, in composition. **St. John's berry**, the barberry. **St. John's bread**, the fruit of the carob-tree (see CAROB 1); also the tree itself. **St. John's grass** = *St. John's-wort*. **St. John's seal**, the plant Solomon's Seal. **St. John's-wort**, the common English name for plants of the genus HYPERICUM.

What's the Good News? How do I produce Good Fruit

Like photosynthesis? Am I the Light and the Truth?

Am I the Faith that moves mountains that the builders refuse?

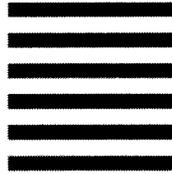
Am I the son of Chun Tzu like Confucian sifus?

They crucified me with a bourgie necktie like a noose;
but I resurrect my dead body from the depths of the tomb,
ideologically reborn like I re-entered the womb.

Where is the salt to bless my festering wounds?

Oxford English Dictionary:

e. In full. *John Chinaman*. A Chinaman; the Chinese collectively. *depreciatory*.

Heaven-Heaven: (Ch'ien)***The Creative***

Heaven repeats itself. Continuous action of higher powers as well as of the superior being. Follow the chosen path with calm unfaltering steps. Act thus in harmony with the powerful, creative primeval principle, and success is assured.

TV off. Stereo off. Computer off. The university apartment is 10x7 square feet, not including the bathroom and bedroom, the latter of which is barely large enough for a twin-sized bed.

Brown rice, lentils, chickpeas. Plain. I rinse them with warm water. Hushed rush of the faucet. It is quiet. I place the beans in my pressure cooker. Whispered whistle of seeping steam. Quiet.

Cheap Aristocrat gin.

Oxford English Dictionary:

John Collins, a Collins (see COLLINS2) made with a base of gin or whisky:

I fill a little Japanese teacup; about a double-shot, maybe triple. It is warm, cozy, from my stomach to my fingers, toes, face. I chase it with a swig of cheap Livingston Cellars rhine wine straight from the bottle; I swish it before I swallow. It is dry; bittersweet. This is my Tea Ceremony. I am quiet.

The phone rings: it's a telemarketer. I initiate a conversation about Ben Bernanke, Goldman Sachs, The Federal Reserve, the banker bailout, The World Bank, The IMF. She hangs up the phone. Quiet.

I turn the TV on: *Anderson 360 covers the Haiti earthquake relief effort*.

Via skype, Anderson Cooper interviews a Dr. Moreau-looking old white man who has just arrived safely back home in Florida after being rescued from the rubble of the Hotel Montana.

I thought they said all the airports were shut down.

I cut onions; tears. I dice ginger, taste a sliver: bleach-sweet. Turmeric, salt, coriander, black pepper, cumin, ground chili pepper, cardamom.

A charcoal-black shirtless Haitian man is waving a UN-issued nutrition bar, warning people not to eat them.

“It is a bad ting,” he shouts.

The camera angle switches suddenly.

A reporter from Anderson’s crew holds a foodbar from too far away for me to read the wrapper and explains that the man is confused between the packaged-on date and the expiration date.

I chop jalapenos and habaneras. I lick the juices from the knife; clean. Delayed searing, lingering; runny nose. Tears.

Hundreds of injured survivors lay incapacitated in the dust under a red medical tent like a war zone.

“We’ve just received word that UN troops apparently commandeered the only three doctors on site here. The Peace Keepers would not say where they were taking them or why.”

I turn the TV off, throw back another gulp of gin behind my tongue, chase it with chugs of pungent, fizzy wine. Quiet.

I soak my hands in a 2-gallon Ball canning jar of my homemade *dit dat jow*. I square myself with my *muk jong* and drop into a *yi chi kim jang ma*. I extend my *wu sao* touching the dummy’s right arm with a *jam sao*. I *lop sao, wan jern* into Yip Man’s 116-move set: *bong sao; tan sao, wan jern; gong sao; gong sao; tan sao, wan jern; gong sao; hun sao, jik jern*.

Exhale_____

The dark-cherry-stained wood cl-cluenk cl-clunks like a bamboo windchime. Musical. Like Earth and Wind; a small fire crackling. Cl-cluenk cl-clunk rhythmical like an indigenous percussion section in Time with my Breathe, in harmony with my Mind. Universal. Free.

Inhale-----

Lost Time Lapsed.

My palms are hotpink, my calcium-bulbous knuckles aching, my forearms bruised, one of my wrist bones chipped hot. I dunk my hands in the *dit dat jow* again.

Gin. Wine. Exhale_____

The pressure cooker simmers down. I dump in the spices and vegetables, stir it altogether. Quiet.

Oxford English Dictionary:

John-a-dreams, a dreamy fellow; one occupied in idle meditation:

* * *

It is Late. It is Silent, Empty. The initial bubbly-warm high from the alcohol has diminuendoed into a stagnant, cloudy depression that slumps my shoulders leaden like a glaucoma.

It is Dark. Only the spectral glow of computer porn like a full moon.

Oxford English Dictionary:

f. A ponce: the client of a prostitute. *slang* (orig. *U.S.*).

The gallery categories are always twisted: BDSM, Bukkake, Pissing, Puking. I click on the Brunettes category, but even the few simple guy-girl clips I can find are extreme, abusive, violent: hair pulling, choking, slapping, spanking, pounding; one guy steps on the girl's face while he fucks her doggystyle.

I click on the Lesbians category and watch a blonde and an Asian make out in their panties; I jerk off into a paper towel and throw my seed in the garbage.

Oxford English Dictionary:

g. Abbrev. of *John Thomas (b)*: . . . (e.g. . . . *john* 'penis' ..).

. . . **John-hold-my-staff**

My body sinks heavy into itself; my spirit folds into itself like origami inside a *matryoshka* nesting doll.

There is an eight-year-old sandwich bag filled with crumbling Hershey's kisses sitting on my scratched, wooden coffee table next to a glass-framed "Footprints" poem printed on the backdrop of a red sand beach. The bag is tied shut with a blue ribbon laced through a card that reads "Class of 2002." I turn the card over:

To: John

. . . "A ROSE ONLY BECOMES BEAUTIFUL AND BLESSES OTHERS WHEN IT OPENS UP & BLOOMS. ITS GREATEST TRAGEDY IS TO STAY IN A TIGHT CLOSED BUD NEVER FULFILLING ITS FULL POTENTIAL!"

I'LL MISS YOU

Melissa

Our first kiss: my first kiss.

Oxford English Dictionary:

2. A plant: old name for a variety of pink: usually SWEET JOHN, q.v. *Obs.*

There is a New Balance shoebox on the bottom shelf of my coffee table. Inside is an old ice-blue cardboard folder containing my Life: The Book of Life. The last letter she wrote me is there, still inside the scratch-&-sniff, lavender-scented aromatherapy envelope in which she handed it to me, Brown Eyes welled up with tear drops sparkling star-bright like the setting sun against The Water:

"Some people come into our lives & quickly go. Some stay for a while and leave footprints on our hearts & we are never, ever the same."

John, I know a lot has happened, and not all of it has been good. I just want you to know some things. I want you to know how much I have learned about life from you, and how I have learned to appreciate it more because of you. I have the deepest, deepest, respect for you and your beliefs. I also have a lot of faith in you, and know you can succeed in anything. Please realize this.

Thank you for everything you've done, and know I appreciate it all.

I'm sorry for everything I've done to hurt you, that was never my intention.

Please don't change for anyone, ever. You're a great person just the way you are.

Last but certainly not least, I'm so proud of you for quitting all the drugs & other harmful things. I never told you what I thought of it because I wanted you to change for yourself, and not me.

Well, sadly, it's time to say goodbye, but I will always remember & miss you.

Love always,

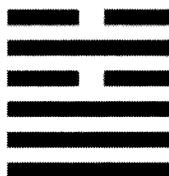
Good luck!

Melissa

I scratch the envelope.

Inhale-----

Heaven-Water: (Hsu)



Waiting

The rising force of heaven is facing danger in the form of rain clouds.

Gather strength calmly and wait for fate to be fulfilled. Do not worry and take everything as it comes. If one does not deceive oneself, the path is clearly visible. Strengthen body and spirit.

Perseverance brings success.

Exhale_____

Oxford English Dictionary:

John Thomson's man, . . . a proverbial appellation for a man who is guided by his wife

* * *

I arrive at the mini-commune that is the History Graduate Assistant office wearing tattered blue jeans and my grandfather's 70s-style, nicotine-stained, lime-green suit jacket over an army-green Che Guevara T-shirt.

Oxford English Dictionary:

POOR JOHN

One of my colleagues is sitting at one of the cubicle-like desks absorbed in his laptop: some random comedic skit on YouTube or a clip from some reality show he's obsessed with.

Oxford English Dictionary:

John Q. Public *U.S. colloq.*, the general public, or a member of this

John Citizen, the ordinary man (esp. considered as a member of the community)

I take a swig from the gallon jug of drinking water I'm carrying.

"Working out today?" asks Q. Public.

"No, I'm resting up this week."

"What's up with the giant water jug then? There's a fountain right out in the hall." He's glancing back and forth at his computer making sure he doesn't miss anything.

"I ain't drinking that shit."

"Why not? It tastes fine to me."

I shuffle through my bookbag, hesitate; "Because that shit is fluoridated."

"So. Fluoride's good for you. It helps strengthen your teeth."

"You don't drink suntan lotion to prevent a sunburn."

"What?" his eyes over his shoulder, stuck sideways to the screen.

I zip up my bookbag; "Just what I said. You don't drink suntan lotion to prevent a sunburn." He peels his glasses from the laptop and just looks at me. "Fluoride is for *topical* use only. That's why children's toothpaste is fluoride free. Because little kids have a tendency to swallow that shit, cuz it's got that menthol taste. It says right on the tube, 'if you ingest more than you brush your teeth with, contact a poison control center.'" I throw my backpack on my right shoulder.

He grins, shaking his head. "Well I drink faucet water every day and I haven't had to contact poison control yet. You're wasting your money on all that bottled water."

I'm on my way out the door, but I drop my bookbag on the floor and grab a 1000-page hard-cover textbook from off the sliding metal shelf on top of my desk: *Ecoscience: Population, Resources, Environment*. "Ever heard of this guy?"

"Paul Ehrl-itch?" announces Public. "No."

“It’s pronounced Ehrl-ick. But no no I’m talking about this motherfucker right here: John P. Holdren.”

“Uh, no. I don’t know who that is.”

“Oh, well he’s the current White House Science Czar under Obama. Here, here, let me read you some of his shit:

‘The third approach to population limitation is that of involuntary fertility control. Several coercive proposals deserve discussion . . . Adding a sterilant to drinking water or staple foods is a suggestion that seems to horrify people more than most proposals for involuntary fertility control. Indeed, this would pose some very difficult political, legal, and social questions, to say nothing of the technical problems.’ (Holdren et al 786-788)

“—notice he don’t say shit about the moral problems—And then he goes on . . .”

John Q. Public interjects: “Dude, that’s tinfoil-hat crazy.”

“You think that’s tinfoil-hat crazy? How about this?

‘Indeed, it has been concluded that compulsory population-control laws, even including laws requiring compulsory abortion, could be sustained under the existing Constitution if the population crisis became sufficiently severe to endanger society.’” (Holdren et al 837)

He swivels away from the book, faces his laptop. “Hold on,” I’m flipping through the pages, “how ‘bout this?

‘Perhaps those agencies, combined with UNEP and the United Nations population agencies, might eventually be developed into a Planetary Regime—sort of an international superagency for population, resources, and environment. Such a comprehensive Planetary Regime could control the development, administration, conservation, and distribution of all natural resources, renewable or nonrenewable . . .’” (943).

He interrupts me, eyes glued to his computer screen, mocking me with a raspy hillbilly impression: “And then the Reptilians are gonna implant microchips in everybody and we’re all gonna be enslaved to a conspiracy I call *The Beast*.”

I clap the book shut, place it back on the metal shelf next to piles of books and documents: Homeland Security Reports, IMF and World Bank documents, history books, UN reports, environmental science books, medical journals, G20 summit reports, State Department memoranda, House and Senate bills.

Oxford English Dictionary:

e. A policeman; (less commonly) a detective. In full, **johndarm**

John Birch Society (see **BIRCHER**); hence **John Bircher** = **BIRCHER**

“Ever heard of eugenics?” I ask.

“Uh, yeah,” he replies, pupils still plastered to the internet, “they did some pretty good indie stuff back in the 80s. It was a little too poppy for me though.”

Oxford English Dictionary:

John-out-of-office

Slovak: Ivan

Ivan Illich

“Many students, especially those who are poor, intuitively know what the schools do for them. They school them to confuse process and substance. Once these become blurred, a new logic is assumed: the more treatment there is, the better are the results; or, escalation leads to success. The pupil is thereby ‘schooled’ to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is ‘schooled’ to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work. Health, learning, dignity, independence, and creative endeavor are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools, and other agencies in question.”—Deschooling Society

Oxford English Dictionary:

John Trot, a man of slow or uncultured intellect. a bumpkin, a clown.

* * *

I’m playing keyboard in my kitchenette: left-handed chords, thick, filled-out, root accented: F# major, E major, C# minor; right-handed 16th-note runs syncopate melodies against the harmonies. Somber. Like the smiling stuffed animals lining my kitchen counters. My only audience. My only critics.

I switch keys: B major: C# minor, B major, G# minor. Still melancholy like photographs in my wallet. In fact, the progression sounds almost identical.

There is a fly circling over my head like a vulture.

Oxford English Dictionary:

John Scott, an artificial fly

I shorten the G# minor by a half measure, throw in an F# major at the end of the progression before my 4/4 time signature starts over.

Oxford English Dictionary:

John Hancock *U.S. colloq.*, a signature

The rhythm picks up somewhat, but the tone remains mournful, like when the hero dies despite saving the girl. I'm trapped like solitary confinement in this crawlspace of an apartment. Locked in Keys.

I never had this problem before I learned anything about theory. Before then, when I was completely self-taught—unconstrained by conventions of major, minor; augmented, diminished; dorian, lidian—all was intuition: Guts; Heart, Soul. All that mattered was how the music sounded, how it *felt*. Now I look down at these black and white keys before me, and I see rigid patterns, limited combinations. Predetermined
Narrow Paths paved and preset in stone.

The fly lands on my arm; I flick it away.

I substitute the C# minor with an inverted A major, the G# minor with an inverted E major; I keep my melody on B major though: a little dissonance from A to A#, D to D#, but it still sounds the same; still feels the same. Everything feels the same.

The fly buzzes onto my neck, tickles it; I swat at it, miss. “Don’t fuck with me, goddamnit.”

I run left-handed octaves through the bass keys, E major, keeping harmony in time with right-handed chords climbing octaves through A major. My left hand is clumsy with the melody: slow, choppy,
stumbling.

The fly careens into my cauliflower ear: zzzz megaphoned down my ear, sending goosebumps down my back.

I fuck with a diminished scale; everything sounds like some Phantom of the Opera shit.

The fly perches on my wrist, rubbing its front two legs together as if clapping applause. My only fan. My
only friend.

I take my wallet out of the front pocket of my 8-year-old, ripped-up Jncos and unfold it like a storybook. The first chapter in the picture book is Melissa’s photo. She’s looking at me with a sadness

I've never seen before in her almond eyes. There is no apology there, not the slightest regret; not like the day she gave me that letter. Now there is only a painful mixture of pity and disappointment.

I melt bittersweet into her photograph, into her golden-tan complexion, her softly-pointed chin and pixie ears, her hooked Italian nose, her braided bangs wrapped around her long, black curls like laurels crowning a goddess; I melt, improvising a requiem like John Cage:

Do you remember:

When I was a kid, my Ninja Turtles always died in the end.

"That's crazy," he said.

I flicked the flint on my Bic lighter, sliding my thumb into the button, opening the valve to the butane, releasing it, igniting it.

I think that's why The Book of Judges has always been one of my favorites.

My eyes watered as I let the smoke billow lazily from my mouth.

Slowly, I brought the tiny, contained yelloworange flame towards the bottom of my left forearm with a fascinated, compulsive anxiousness, hand trembling as it carried the fire to my flesh.

In boxing, most beginners have a tendency to backpeddle on their heels linear with their arms outstretched like a flinching mummy whenever they get punched in the face;

"You think that's crazy?" I echoed.

The heat became sharp, stabbing inches before the actual tongues touched my skin, reddening it. that's a natural human reaction:

"How 'bout this?"

Puss-yellowish blisters eventually bubbled up with a clear fluid. to retreat from harm's way, to push it away, shield the vitals.

I stomped the accelerator to the floor and rocketed blindly into a red light, engine revving with no regard for the busy traffic crossing the intersection.

I popped the blisters, squeezing the juice from them.

The problem with this "tactic" is that you're off-balance, your chin is unprotected, and you can never backpeddle fast enough to get back outside your opponent's reach once he's closed the distance and set up his angles;

“I’m in Love with you,” I told you.

Deflated blisters filled back up with wateriness.

it’s like trying to outrun a freight train on the railroad tracks:

You were speechless.

My skin shriveled, slightly curling after the blisters dried, darkened to a maroonish, almost like a half-cooked steak.

if you don’t step off the rails, you *will* get hit.

The bell rang for class, and we went our separate ways.

In the weeks that followed, the wilted, charred flesh formed an olive-green-yellow scab, curdled like Freddy Kruger’s face.

Ideally then, you want to side-step and re-set or at least slip or bob-and-weave once your opponent’s closed the gap.

You avoided me for weeks, wouldn’t return my calls.

But sometimes though—like when you get your bell rung—the best you can do is cover and wait for an opening to fire back.

I still Love you.

CHAPTER 2: Mind/Body Split

Cyrus White is fifty years old. He lives by himself. Never been married. Never had kids. 6-foot, 230-pounds of brawn and beer belly. He has five Rottweilers that go rabid whenever anyone walks past their crates, muscling their cages inch by inch after every passer-by, growling, snarling. His balding head is as white as his name. There is a *koi* pond in his backyard. American flags and gun cabinets line the walls of his house: shotguns, pistols, assault rifles. Miscellaneous blades from all over the world everywhere in every room: *katanas* decorating the walls, *khukuris* on kitchen counters, *karambits* buried in couch cushions, KA-BARs filling dresser drawers, *ba zhan daos* on window sills. Hundreds and hundreds of books on every martial art across the planet span wall-to-wall bookshelves: *wing chun*, *kali*, *silat*, *tae kwon do*, *Okinawan karate*, *kyokushin karate*, *savate*, *muay thai*, *pancrase*, *aiki do*, *hap ki do*, *judo*, Brazilian *jiu jitsu*, Western boxing, Greco-Roman wrestling, *sambo*, *Jeet Kune Do*. He's recently retired from his post as a first-sergeant in the United States Army after twenty years of service. The first day I pulled into Cyrus's driveway, he was in the middle of demonstrating a *kali* progression on a Cuban Jew in his garage, narrating each technique in the sequence as he sliced Simon like a fillet: "Then you disarm him; you clear this line; trap his elbow; and then you bury his fucking knife in his chest. And then the cops come and you're like, 'oh, thank God you're here; he was just trying to kill me and . . . ' **BOOM, BOOM, BOOM**—the cops shoot the fuck outta you and blow your fucking brains all over the fucking asphalt."

"You ever had to use any of that before?" I asked.

"All the time," he grinned.

"You're a pretty big dude," I said. "I wouldn't think too many people would try to start any shit with you."

"Oh, no. I'm usually the one that starts it."

There was a time when Cyrus didn't so much as even touch alcohol, didn't even cuss; just like there was a time when I didn't either, when I was a missionary in Juarez. But these days, almost everything Cyrus says is somehow prefaced with a sailor-mouthed diatribe against Obama-care.

“It’s fucking eugenics,” I’ll say. He’ll call me a Lyndon LaRouche-loving liberal whack-job. Then he’ll curse a harangue about “environmentalist whack-jobs.”

“It’s fucking Malthusian population control,” I’ll say; and he’ll call me a fucking lunatic conspiracy theorist.

But not today. It’s late when he calls my free university landline, and I still haven’t gotten any work done on my Master’s thesis.

Ring.

I turn on the speaker phone and fish the spiral notebook containing my rough draft out of the puddles of papers, folders, books, and notebooks thrown all over my dusty-white tile floor; I open it, place it on my black particle-board desk next to my computer and keyboard like sheet music.

“Hello.”

“Dude, what up?”

“Shit. Just typing up some shit on my thesis here. What’s up?”

“Ah, nothing much. I was just up at the *dojo* today, and I was mentioning your fight coming up, and how you been training with me and Simon up at the garage and everything.”

“Uh-huh,” transcribing my hand-scribbled draft into an electronic word file:

“the best of either sex should be united with the best as often, and the inferior with the inferior, as seldom as possible; and . . . they should rear the offspring of the one sort of union, but not of the other, if the flock is to be maintained in first-rate condition”—
Socrates

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. B. Jowett. New York: Modern Library, 1941.

“And them motherfuckers are all like,” he starts with that gruff, sarcastic tone he uses when he’s mocking someone, “oh, well, we don’t get into MMA ‘cause it’s not realistic. MMA’s got rules. They wrap their hands and wear gloves and mouthpieces, and they got cups on, and there’s a referee, and you can’t strike to the groin or the throat or the eyes. MMA is a sport; we train for self-defense on the street.”

“Since the legislator should begin by considering how the frames of the children whom he is rearing may be as good as possible, his first care will be about marriage—at what age should his citizens marry, and who are fit to marry?”—
Aristotle

Aristotle. “Politics.” *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.

“Yet these are the same fucking people who refuse to fucking spar, or even grapple.”

"It does not, however, seem impossible that by an attention to breed, a certain degree of improvement, similar to that among animals, might take place among men. Whether intellect could be communicated may be a matter of doubt: but size, strength, beauty, complexion, and perhaps even longevity are in a degree transmissible. . . . [T]he human race could not be improved in this way, without condemning all the bad specimens to celibacy"—Thomas Malthus

Malthus, Thomas Robert. "An Essay on the Principle of Population, as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society: With Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and Other Writers (1798)." *On Populations: Thomas Robert Malthus*. Ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb. New York: Modern Library, 1960. 5-143.

"In the fucking *aiki do* class, the closest they come to any kind of resistive training is *randori*; they almost never do any fucking *ni waza* in the *judo* class; and they don't even fucking point spar in the *kenpo* class."

"[T]he prime duty, the inescapable duty of the good citizens of the right type is to leave his or her blood behind him in the world; and . . . we have no business to permit the perpetuation of citizens of the wrong type. The great problem of civilization is to secure a relative increase of the valuable as compared with the less valuable or noxious elements in the population . . . The problem cannot be met unless we give full consideration to the immense influence of heredity . . ." —Theodore Roosevelt

Roosevelt, Theodore. Letter to Charles B. Davenport. 3 Jan. 1913. TS. Charles B. Davenport Papers: Series 1 (Correspondence) 1878-1944. American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.
<http://cdm.amphilsoc.org/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/eugenics&CISOPTR=133&DMSCALE=100&DMWIDTH=600&DMHEIGHT=600&DMMODE=viewer&DMTEXT=&REC=5&DMTHUMB=1&DMROTATE=0>

He switches back to his scruff, satirical inflection: "No. All you need is *kata*. You must study the forms until you uncover the *hiden*. Then you will be one with the *do*."

"Well Bruce talked about that. The Classical Mess."

"Right. He called it 'Dry Land Swimming.' But I'm not against forms. That's not what I'm saying. You can learn some shit from *kata*, like balance and footwork and body mechanics and all that shit. But don't *tell me* that *kata* is a more realistic way to simulate a fight than MMA."

"The only fundamental and possible Socialism is the socialization of the selective breeding of Man: in other terms, of human evolution. We must eliminate the Yahoo, or his vote will wreck the commonwealth"—George Bernard Shaw

Shaw, George, Bernard. *Prefaces*. London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1934.

"Dude, if *any* of them fucking *kata* queens stepped in the cage, it'd be fucking *ugly*. What, one of these motherfuckers is gonna get out there in a fucking horse stance and just drop a motherfucker with a mighty blow? A single fucking reverse punch? Get the fuck outta here."

"[I]f people grow less superstitious, governments will acquire the right to sterilize those who are not considered desirable as parents. This power will be used, at first, to diminish imbecility, a most desirable object. But probably, in time, opposition to the government will be taken to prove imbecility, so that rebels of all kinds will be

sterilized. . . . [I]n the end, there will be a tendency to include all who fail to pass the usual school examinations—Bertrand Russell

Russell, Bertrand. *Icarus or the Future of Science*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1924.

“Dude, I was in a fight once where I hit this motherfucker so hard his fucking feet left the ground.” He punctuates with a pause. “He got back up. Fight wasn’t over; fight just *started*. And guess what?” He pauses again. “I lost the fight.”

"The unnatural and increasingly rapid growth of the Feeble-Minded and Insane classes, coupled as it is with a steady restriction among all the thrifty, energetic and superior stocks, constitutes a national and race danger which it is impossible to exaggerate"—Winston Churchill

Gilbert, Martin. “Churchill and Eugenics.” *The Churchill Centre Online*. Web. 31 May 2009. 7 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/support/the-churchill-centre/publications/finest-hour-online/594-churchill-and-eugenics>>.

“I asked ‘em all one time; I said, ‘how many of you actually even been in a fucking fight?’ I raised my hand, a few of ‘em raised theirs. Then I asked ‘em how many had the wind knocked out of ‘em. Most everybody’s hands stayed up. Then I said, ‘how many of you had your teeth knocked out?’ Everybody’s hand went down except mine. And then I said, ‘how many people had their nose broke in a fight?’ Kept my hand up.”

“The demand that defective people be prevented from propagating equally defective offspring is a demand of the clearest reason and if systematically executed represents the most humane act of mankind. It will spare millions of unfortunates undeserved sufferings, and consequently will lead to a rising improvement of health as a whole”—
Adolf Hitler

Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.

“If nothing else, *kata* can’t teach that; it can’t teach you how to react when you’re hurt or when your tired. The only way to learn that is to experience it.”

“I wonder whether, some 60 years after Hitler's death, we might at least venture to ask what the moral difference is between breeding for musical ability and forcing a child to take music lessons. Or why it is acceptable to train fast runners and high jumpers but not to breed them. I can think of some answers, and they are good ones, which would probably end up persuading me. But hasn't the time come when we should stop being frightened even to put the question?”—Richard Dawkins; Professor for Public Understanding of Science, University of Oxford

Dawkins, Richard. “Eugenics May Not Be Bad.” *Sunday Herald*. Sunday Herald, 19 Nov. 2006. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.

“Oh, they can philosophize all fucking day about why they chamber the fist on a punch,” he switches to his sardonic impersonation again, “or how you must *kiap* and empty your *hara* in coordination with every strike. But they’d never be able to apply that shit in fucking reality.”

“But they got black belts.”

“*Goddamn*, dude, them motherfuckers about make me wanna throw my black belt in the fucking garbage.” I laugh. “Sometimes I wonder why I even bother to still teach there.”

“Because you love the art.”

“Yeah.”

“But hey listen man, let me let you go. I gotta get some fucking work done so I can get to bed at a decent fucking hour tonight.”

“Alright, man. You and Simon coming up here this weekend?”

“Yeah, we’ll be there.”

“Alright, man; ‘preciate it.”

“Yep.”

“Out.”

“Peace.”

When I lie down on the stiff-sprung, university-issue mattress, I toss, turn, toss every time my battle-worn back, neck, shoulders, or knees hurt. Toss, turn, toss with every thought rambling through my head: my fight; dad’s late mortgage; Haiti; Melissa; my thesis; hyper inflation. I Pray: sleep.

* * *

There’s a guest lecturer on campus today: a prestigious professor of historical linguistics at some Ivy League college. He is giving an outdoor lecture on a mysterious arrangement of rune-like flagstones ornamenting the courtyard in front of the biology department. I happen by the event on my stroll to the GA office, detour briefly. It seems I’ve caught the introduction:

“In order to translate The Bilderberg Stones,” pronounces the spectacled, grey-bearded, caricature-like PhD in his grey, tweed sport coat patched with brown suede at the elbows, “one need not be proficient

in the hieroglyphic alphabet in which they are engraved. All that is needed is a thorough comprehension of the etymologies of the English language. In fact, a simple, direct English transliteration would fail to preserve and accurately convey the originally intended promulgation of The Stones; for many of the subtle connotations implicit in the autochthonous text would be obscured. Thus, the only way to precisely decipher their indigenous purport is through a glottogonical archaeology of the lexigramical and morphological transformations evolving from Proto-Human monogenesis into modern Standard American English. Every logogram, phonogram, ideogram, and pictogram, every syllabary, every word of every language is but one postulate, one expression, one crystallized, fragmented relationship among the innumerable relationships that constitute the collective self/world/society continuum . . .”

How any of this terse jargon has anything to do with the meaning of the “rune” stones, I’ve yet to comprehend. This whole spiel seems nothing more than an exercise in semantic gymnastics. I take a knee in front of the cluster of flagstones to get a closer look at the archaic inscriptions; the prof’s academic legalese fades mute as I fade empty into the prehistoric-looking etchings like cave-painting inkblots. Suddenly an angular black-steel fighter jet is tumbling, spiraling out of the blue-grey sky like a poorly-thrown football; it disappears out of sight somewhere behind the 4-story, 19th-century stone science building, crashes to the dirt somewhere probably not even a mile away; hunks of smoldering, twisted metal sail through plumes of black smog billowing over the roof’s horizon. The philosophical doctor doesn’t even skip a beat, not so much as a flinch, while his audience flees every which direction in pandemonium; I am still kneeling, paralyzed with awe.

“Remain calm,” professes the scholar. “We knew this would happen. We are prepared.”

Without thinking, I dash across the courtyard to the GA office to salvage my research. My hands are shaking, keys jingling, rattling as I repeatedly miss the lock to the door, frantically stabbing the knob over and over again like a homicidal maniac.

When I finally manage the door open, the lights are already on; three FEMA officers in black riot gear are rifling through the paperwork piled on my desk; one of them is saying something about contraband. Now I’m staring into the dead of their ballistic face shields; I know that they know the contraband is mine; I’m torn in two directions: risk almost certain death in an attempt to rescue the documents, or make a break for it and probably get killed anyway.

What sounds like an explosion reverberating, ringing concussions off of the cinderblock walls back into my ears and throughout my body makes the decision for me; I can taste a cold lump of lead in my throat seasoned and warmed with my running blood, consolidating, coagulating; I collapse to the cold speckled-black tile, writhing, squirming.

Blackness.

Now I can here someone screaming something about “pressure on it.” I struggle my eyes open, and I wake up with tears in my eyes. I use the washroom, then gulp a shot of gin straight from the bottle. And for some reason, it’s not the nightmare I just dreamt that keeps running through my head residually; it’s that recurring dream I used to have when I was a kid:

~ ~ ~

I can see, from a remote distance—as if watching it on a television screen—the dual entrance to a vast, unadorned, grey-blue solid concrete building: a toy store. There is a foldout wooden sign posted in front of each doorway: one labeled “Heaven,” one labeled “Hell.” A wind, somehow sentient, almost anthropomorphic, whisps past the signs and switches them.

Shortly thereafter, Dad takes me on a visit to the toy store. He holds my tiny, fleshy hand in his swollen, calloused hand, bronzed dry from decades of pounding nails in the naked sun. He smiles in anticipation of my smiles, unknowingly leads me through the mislabeled gateway to “Heaven.”

The inside resembles a massive warehouse more than a toy store. The blue-grey cement walls and ceiling swallow most of the Light in an indigo eclipse. The entire expanse is uniformly divided by filmy steel shelves that stretch for what seems miles upon miles.

Dad points at an aisle of stuffed animals with warm enthusiasm. We walk hand-in-hand to a section of teddy bears; Dad pulls a grey-and-white highlighted koala-looking bear from off of the top shelf; he wiggles the fluffy teddy in my face, and I giggle with my whole body. I squeeze the bear, pressing its round, innocent black eyes against my chest.

A regiment of wind-up toy soldiers is marching rank-and-file toward us with pitter-patter goose-steps that echo hollow throughout the cold, blue-black warehouse; Dad points with wonder. In unison, the miniature redcoats halt and aim their rifles.

Pop! *Like cap guns.*

Pop! *And my Dad's jean overalls spray crimson blood through myriad little rips and tears like Swiss cheese. He scoops me up into his cradled arms and retreats. The koala's once-childlike eyes are now glowing a menacing red like cigar cherries; I drop it in terror, and its fiber-optic fluorescent eyes plunk out of their sockets, bounce around the concrete floor with a sound like marbles on glass; they bleep like deep-sea sonar. Our escape route is cut off by a series of screaming circular saws slicing through the cement floor, spinning, chewing, grinding toward us, closer and closer, spitting neon sparks everywhere like fireworks. We are trapped. The electric-red eyes beep louder, faster like an LRAD sound cannon until they explode into orange-white fireballs.*

* * *

I rise with the morning star, tie my running shoes, stretch out my legs, and go for my six-mile run.

Vintage yellow-orange tile and once-white nicotine-stained walls and ceiling reflecting a yellow-brown dinge off of one another, shrouding even the old grease-caked, dirt-brown kitchen cabinets in a puke-tinted glow.

The images running through my brain torment me worse than running and running in the sweltering hot; and I fucking hate running.

Sheltered in a dim shadow under the rickety kitchen table, my sister's arms around me like a hen's wings;

I hate running; so I punish myself with it. With the monotonous smackslap smackslap of sidewalk shockwaving through my fiery feet into my knees. Tedious.

I am clutching her brown stuffed puppy, its eyes dangling out of its sockets, hanging by threads.

I punish myself with the dry, blanketed heat sautéing me in salt sweat.

In the far corner, my Mom, turtled in a fetal position.

The sizzling cement streets and sidewalks below, the searing stone dormitories, Greek frat houses, and lecture halls leaning over me; together like a giant grill. Like God's kiln.

My father thumping sledgehammer fists down on her back.

I count my strides neurotically in time, measuring one bar for every inhalation, one for every exhalation, my strides smackslapping quarter beats.

Suddenly I'm running to her aid pelting my father with my own little rubber mallet fists. Like father like son.

A university shuttle belches a soot-black plume into my labored breaths and my ankle gives out momentarily, rolling slightly on a patch of uneven grass as I cut around a pasty-faced, blonde sorority girl stumbling home from a kegger, hung over in her Greek letters. Lactic acid bathes and burns my trudging quadriceps. My mouth is sand: tongue and palate stuck together with chalky white foam-saliva. And all I can think about, other than the day Mom left Dad, is how much I fucking hate running, how much I want to quit, to turn around and walk home. It used to take me sixteen minutes to "run" a mile for high school P. E.; of course, back then, I used to smoke quite a bit, but even now I fucking hate it. Torture. The most painful part of my professional fight career. Not the contusions and concussions, the fractures and lacerations; but the *conditioning*: the cardio—the running, sprinting, hills, stairs, intervals; plyometrics—the dieting, cutting weight. That's the torture. And *that's what makes* a fighter. It's easy to fight, to push when you don't have a choice, when shit's falling on you, knocking you down; it's easy to suffer, to be tough when it's already there, when it's all there is. But it's hard to make yourself suffer, to suffer yourself. It's hard to be tougher than yourself, to toughen yourself. It's hard to fight your self, to push your self. So it's easier to take a punch than it is to run six miles a day, five days a week.

I'm remembering my first fight now, running, and still running:

The gravity of reality sinking in, saturating consciousness, blood and bones with adrenals. Fight-flight symphonic tension beating a war drum like concussions; shock and awe. Doubt like a mantra permeating nerves like pride.

I run. Keep running. Instead of six miles, I run eight. I run until a stitch pierces my side like a spear and I run more, the spearhead digging deeper as I truck smackslap smackslap pumping acid through my legs.

Something propelling you into the hexagon cage, something in spite of every thought you can gather. Heart? Ego? Stupidity?

I run. I push.

Find yourself on the tropical-orange mat, the glistening plastic magnified electric-fluorescent from the beaming stage lights reflecting sharp radiance glossing featureless faces occupying the seats encompassing the arena; their ferocious vocals dark and faded as if far away in a funnel. Surreal.

Until the cooking sun cozies around me like a tropical blanket, electrified, energized.

Everything collapsed into a chaotic collage of gestalts, noises, and sensations like a postmodern cubist feely. Everything surreal.

A cool breeze comes from the past, kisses me on the forehead, sort of the way certain smells evoke vivid memories.

The referee saying something that de-materializes into the black hole of screaming spectators, spotlights, and psychic pandemonium.

Ding.

I think it makes me think of rain. Basements. A water-filled rock quarry defaced with graffiti and booze bottles.

Two steps forward and you're in the opponent's face, in the center of the ring. Suddenly your lead right leg snapping into a high roundhouse; your instep cracking against his stereotypically bald head with a sound like a thick branch breaking into splinters.

The weekend. Gasoline. Or maybe it's the barrel of a revolver in a little league dugout at 3 a.m.

He's weeble-wobbling, tottering, toppling all in hyper-slow motion, and when you watch the film a few months later, you won't believe that only a fraction of a millisecond passed from the moment the kick crashed into his skull to the moment his ass hit the mat—the adrenaline surge of your first gladiatorial bout is like a time machine warped on LSD.

October leaves—maroon, orange-brown, goldenrod—; or Mexico, maybe Juarez or Cancun. Cancun: the last place I held her.

Following him to the canvass; securing a side-mount. Elbowing his cranium until he's hugging you tight with an impotent head-and-arm lock, clamping on desperately.

Sweat pours over her name tattooed in black medieval calligraphy arched across my abs: Melissa.

Posting up to get an angle for hammerfists. He's using the space to shrimp to his knees and shoot for a single leg.

I think maybe there is a song in my head too. I'm not sure; but something in the atmosphere gives me cold goosebumps that fuel a second wind.

Sprawling; snatching his throat in a guillotine. It's in tight. He's struggling, wheezing, gurgling, hissing raspy.

Ding.

And I'm running. Harder; Faster.

You're spent. The adrenaline pump dumped everything you had in the tank. Burping from your guts, on the verge of puking.

Until the smackslap of concrete smooths into a cushioned thudthump kick-drumming out quarter beats to the ambient music in my mind's ear.

Simon's cornering you, squirting some water in your mouth; almost gag as soon as it touches your tongue; drooling it onto the light-bright canvass before he can get you the spit bucket.

I run, I push. Until the more I push, the more endurance, the more speed, more explosiveness I exude.

One of your training partners sneaking up to the edge of the cage from his ringside seat as you're barely keeping your weary body upright by clasping the fence links half-slumped.

Immortal.

"I'm gassed," you're murmuring, "I got nothing left."

Invincible.

Six-foot-six, mohawked Native-American admonishing you: "Yes you do! Yes you do!"

High on endorphins.

"No . . . no . . . I'm gassed . . . I'm gassed."

Empty Cup Running Over.

"No you're not! No you're not! Get out there and earn your check!"

Ding.

Ladders, Stairways, Dimensions forever. Infinite, new.

You didn't hear a single word of your cornerman's revised stratagem. Touching gloves. Backpeddling, countering with mostly jabs.

Thudthump thudthump. Past the empty basketball courts.

He's hooking the back of your head, snagging a thai clinch; straight knees to your abdomen.

Thudthump thudthump and a convoy of cyclists zips ahead.

Shooting recklessly for a gross double-leg; shitty technique, rookie mistake. Eating a knee to the eye socket, spending the rest of the round on your back, brain bouncing off of the canvass every time a frenzy of indiscriminate ground-and-pound connects clubbing away swinging and swinging with stubborn viciousness.

Ding.

Thudthump past lawns strewn with beer cans and plastic cups. Out onto the main road circling campus.

Your cerebrum throbbing, probably more from over-exhaustion than any blunt-force trauma. Ambient abstraction of malicious cheers, malignant scowling faces misconnected like a Picasso painting seeming to swell and pulsate with your aching, thumping brain. Full-body nausea worse than Sartre.

The rumble of the highway blurred with an echo-smear horn zooming off into the distance.

"I think I'm gonna throw up."

For a stretch, I lose myself in the steady rhythm of my steps in perfect time with the signature of my breaths harmonized with the song-specter in my head;

Simon dribbles a sip of water in your mouth; he has the spit bucket ready this time, but you manage to retain it anyhow: swish; spit. Whatever he's saying evaporates mute into your misassembled awareness.

Discombobulated reality.

I keep my eyes pasted to my thudthumping shoes, hypnotize myself with their pendulum trot.

You're saying something. It must be something defeatist, because Oyate is gripping the fence, shaking it, spewing rebukes: "You're starting to piss me off with that shit! What the fuck did you train for?! Get out there and earn your fucking check!"

Ding.

Thudthump like a primordial heartbeat.

Hands held barely up to your chest; wore the fuck out. Touching gloves and the motherfucker sucker punches you.

Until the acid in my legs catalyzes into lubricating anesthetics as I run alongside traffic.

Banging like a street fight now, squared up, flatfooted, no head movement, no bob and weave, no slip or parry; absorbing whatever he gives you, and feed it right back to him. The exchange looking more like a barroom brawl than refined martial arts or even combat sport.

Until all I can hear is the powerful quiet between the thudthump thudthump of my shoes pounding the pavement;

Lose yourself in the hollow, jarring sensation of each headshot. He's on the ground; you knocked him down, or maybe he slipped and fell; it doesn't matter, you're on top again, in side control.

songbird melodies somewhere in nearby distance, piercing the still quiet in a crisp key that rises above the world with the sun covering the earth in a quilt of golden warmth;

Cyrus shouting from his ringside seat, his tactical insights flaring up over the crowd's barbarous clamor:

"Full-mount! Full-mount!"

each chirp, each warble making distinct its own unique contribution to the rich spectrum of avian tones blending in chords;

Passing to full-mount, go for the kill. But you're too arm-weary to smash through his pathetically outstretched limbs. Trying to hook around his feebly extended defenses or angle between his uprights like a field goal. No use. Your fists like Jell-O flopping limp by the ends of wet noodles.

the very same songs that seem to slide secretly between the breeze during every busy, run-around, rigmarole workday, muffled by so many worries;

From out of nowhere his legs snaking around your face from behind your back and you're upended suddenly, your balance yanked from under you as if the mat was tugged away like a carpet.

the steady hum of tires;

He's waylaying, unleashing continuous combinations of tactless straights and hooks, re-energized by the turned tables.

distorted, blaring bass bumping murky from a subwoofer in a beater barreling down the highway;

Welting his forehead and orbital bones with elbows from the bottom.

*Your Dad's quavering voice finding your cauliflowered ear from out of the postmodern Coliseum's howling
bedlam: "There you go!"*

laughter somewhere off;

*Then your snap elbows answered with down elbows dashing against your cheekbones, ricocheting your
skull off of the mat like shaken baby syndrome. Your heart crumbling at hearing the distress in your
Father's cries; more painful than being bludgeoned, turning your stomach worse than hyperthermia.*

some song somewhere in the back of my head on backup accompaniment.

You're done. That's it. You're Dad's quivering voice echoing in your wilting consciousness, haunting.

The nuclear-white sun becomes occulted by a shapeless sheet of thin, solid grey overcast.

No. You're not done. Finish the round at least; don't let it end like this. Get wrist control; trap his arms.

He pulls one free, plants his knuckles in your temple. Figure-four his other arm, twist it into a kimura.

Rain begins to drizzle.

*He's fighting to keep it straight. But slowly it's bending behind his back, slowly, inch by inch, until his
hand is behind his neck, his shoulder wrenching, tearing. He won't tap though.*

It breaks my cushy thudthump pulse-rhythm into a thumpsmack slaphud, my flat feet battering the
pavement without any shock absorption, arms and legs growing heavier with each impact, the former
swinging flaccid like boiled spaghetti.

*Lactic acid fermenting in your deltoids, your triceps, forearms, hands, fingers. His arm beginning to
straighten. The kimura loosens. You lose it. The beating ensues.*

Ding.

My endorphins run their course before I run mine, and I come down, acid-burning ass ragged for the last
mile, which seems to drag on for eternity, seems to recede further and further away with each gallop, like a
counterclockwise-turning minute-hand.

Stagger back to your corner. You lost. You know it. You don't need to hear the official decision.

So I push continue to push.

*Simon applies an end-swell to your peppered face. Now the ref is standing between you and your
opponent, holding your hands as you struggle to maintain equilibrium, swaying queasy with a visceral
dizziness that churns from your intestines and cerebellum to every extremity.*

Like fucking Sisyphus.

“And your winner. By unanimous decision. Jooohn Saaavaaage.”

*Your eyes flash open wide like the parting of the Red Sea. You won? You won. Every muscle from neck to
claves flexes with vehement pride and celebration draining whatever milli-fraction of energy you may have
had left. Knees buckle, body crumples; nearly faint.*

And so I push.

*Somewhere, you can't tell; everything is spinning now: double-quadruple vibrating vision. An EMT
checking your vitals. He garbles something about the ER and your heart rate.*

I run smackthump push thudslap, until I wonder why I'm doing this.

*Dad crouches in front of your haggard face. “You don't have to do this for me. Not if this is what it's
gonna be like. I'll find a way to pay for the house. Or I'll just burn that motherfucker to the ground.” He
half-smiles.*

Until my soul demoralizes, and I give up just short of my eight-mile goal, decelerating to a cool-down
march, hands on my hips, sucking air in what is now a torrential downpour, lightning thunderclapping
crashing crackling, a perfect storm.

* * *

Did I mention that I obsess? I wouldn't exactly call it a *disorder*. Although it has taken on a few
pathological incarnations here and there, it's never severely impaired my ability to feign the superficial
routines necessary to get along: the bullshit social graces, the insincere “how are you?,” the meaningless
commentaries on the weather. But in those mundane repetitions, those estranged rituals, an amorphous
anxiety nags. It pokes and prods. It itches. It aches. It drags heavy and lingers. And I find myself
reaching for a meaning. Something structured, coherent. Something defined, contained. A pattern, a
sequence, a rhythm. Something.

So I count whenever I drink water. When I wash myself and brush my teeth. When I eat. When I
chew my fingernails. And sometimes for no reason at all.

There's no set number that I count to, but I always have to end on a multiple of ten. And I count

quickly, chaotically so that the sequence is inaudible in my mind's ear like a recording on fast-forward. Sometimes I get stuck in a sort of infinite loop like a scratched CD where there's not a decennial comfortable enough to settle upon and I am impelled endlessly until something distracts my count.

Sometimes the sequence isn't numerical but musical—or a-musical to be more exact—and it's usually a particular note or measure that is the ordained destination. And just like when I'm counting, I almost never know what that destination is until I'm there. That place is always too perfect for a label or even a title; you only know it by the touch. Intimate.

Yet it always departs before there's a chance to get acquainted. So it remains lofty and free. Strange, elusive, and continually original.

I also used to have a compulsory tendency to explode with childish outbursts of gibberish. I would contort my jaw so that the nonsense sounded like it came from a demon-possessed, Slavic cyborg with synthesizers for vocal chords. A friend of mine used to compare it to symptoms of autism, Asperger's, and Tourette's. I'm more fond of analogies with the shaman's ceremonial chants, the raw, improvisational scat lyrics of jazz, and the intuitive expressions of the infant; the very core of language. Then again, I do have a demented knack for extracting meaning from the loosest associations. And some of the more complex consonant clusters do tend to leave my jaw a bit sore.

Even nowadays, when I'm sparring sometimes, I catch my subconscious mind reciting the incoherent poetry as a footnote to every jab, cross, hook; every kick and knee; slip, parry, cover; every shoot, sprawl, scramble. All-together. Spontaneous. Wandering, short-range, long-range. Weaving in and out of the pocket; my footwork stealing my opponent's like an inverted mirror image, a lock and key. Every stroke and counter intuitively syncopated like a call and response bebop jam. Hot. Rapid. The clacking of shins like percussion: the high hat or a metronome. Clinching with the tension of strings. Grappling like sightless, burrowing animals: the bass that is felt more than it is heard. Everything Happening. Like an out-of-body experience that orbits my body.

- - -

By the time I get home from my run, I've been speaking in tongues to myself for longer than I care to remember. *Shbinsht shtyulbonsht inshtubuensht shtyulbuensht*. I play the infowars stream on my iTunes, boil some rice, peas, and green beans, each in a separate pot. *Fbrbonshtyul infbrboensht*. Alex

Jones in harping about HAARP; I open a can of tuna, drain the water out of it, chop some red onions, garlic, yellow and orange bell peppers. *Duencht induncht inshtufpuensht infplunshst.* Little bit of salt, little black pepper, mix everything together in a ceramic bowl. *Shplrshploonshtyul inblrbluensht.* Alex is interviewing Gerald Celente now:

“China’s holding what, 1.5 trillion worth? All over the world, they’re holding U. S. currencies. They want to get out of them in a way where they’re not going to lose on their investments.”

I eat at my coffee table with deliberateness, attempting a Zen-like mindfulness of each forkful: the firm texture of green beans; the bland-sweet mush of peas and rice; the vinegar-sweet flavor of purple onions; the mild zest of bell peppers; tuna; pungent garlic.

“We’re going into the Greatest Depression.”

I eat quietly with purpose, attempting to explore the subtle distinctions between each ingredient in the recipe;

“There will be no job growth.”

but Celente’s forecast and the non-language in my head preoccupies my thoughts, fragmenting my mindfulness so that all I can taste is the acrid bite of too much garlic and onion.

“Unemployment will continue to escalate.”

The meal becomes a chore, myself unable to savor it, unable to give Grace.

“Along with it, so too will crime,

I rinse my dishes in the sink,

poverty,

then chomp methodically

kidnappings,

on my fingernails,

boss-nappings,

sitting lotus

and the more things spin out of control, the harder the hammer’s going to come down by the federal government to keep everyone in control.”

on my rigid university-issue loveseat.

“The whole world is ready to bail out of bucks.”

I gnaw on my nails selectively, systematically.

“They just want to do it in a way where they’re not gonna lose on their investments.”

I clamp down tight on the tips of my longer nails, then twist them out so that it makes a surprisingly loud clicking noise; my dad couldn’t stand it whenever I’d do this growing up, and we went at it more than once as a result.

“That’s all that’s going on.”

For the nails that are too short to click, I grind them by scraping them perpendicular along my front teeth.

“There’s going to be a new reserve currency.”

I have a particular taste for nails that are jagged and can produce a double or even a triple click with every bite;

“There’s going to be a world currency.”

I also crave peeling rice paper-thin strips of fingernail just off the very top layer of each, paring them as far back toward the cuticles as possible.

“They’re going to push it through the IMF.”

That’s how I chew on my nails like a mantra.

“That’s going to be the banksters that are going to be in charge of it.”

It pushes the gibberish out of my head, but the incessant click-click-click of tooth and nail is like the drip, drip, drip of Chinese water torture.

“It’s going to happen, and it’s going to happen sooner rather than later.”

Yet I cannot pull my fingers from my mouth, as much as I want to;

“I want to read you a quote, from Abraham Lincoln:”

I keep chewing, switching fingers in search of the perfect click or compilation of clicks to sign out on, never finding it—or finding it and then wanting just one and more, and just one more.

“The money power preys upon the nation in times of peace, and conspires against it in times of adversity.

It is more despotic than monarchy, more insolent than autocracy, more selfish than bureaucracy. It denounces, as public enemies, all who question its methods or throw light upon its crimes. I have two great enemies, the Southern Army in front of me, and the financial institutions in the rear. Of the two, the one in

my rear is my greatest foe. I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my Country. Corporations have been enthroned, an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the Country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the People, until the wealth is aggregated in a few hands, and the Republic is destroyed,'"

Eventually I manage to restrain myself from champing on my nails like a bit.

And that, Alex, is why I believe they shot Lincoln.

I stop the infowars stream on my computer, deciding that some quiet reading will quiet my mind, calm my nerves, rest my muscles. I pull *1984* off the bookshelf built into the wall of my apartment, open it to the page I've bookmarked: "'The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism' by Emmanuel Goldstein." It takes me almost three hours to get through the meta-chapter "Ignorance is Strength" because the non-words in my brain have started up again, jabbering over the words on the pages so that I have to reread every sentence at least once. It's almost as if I'm reading a foreign translation of the novel. I close the book and set it on my coffee table, then shower for 11, 470 seconds, brush my teeth 140 times, and try to get some early shuteye; but the jargon in my mind keeps me awake with its ceaseless recitations as if praying spells to a foreign god in a foreign tongue. I kick at my covers, flip my pillow over and over in search of a cooler spot until the entire pillowcase is hot and my sheets feel like a straightjacket. I want to take a shot of gin, but it's too close to my fight to be polluting my body with that poison. I Pray; sleep.

* * *

Three days until my fight at the Iron Heart Crown. The work is done: the intense cardio, the heavy lifting, full-contact sparring, and grappling. Time to let the chips fall where they may.

I go to the gym one last time for some light calisthenics and bag work, bringing with me a duffle bag filled with my research. After stretching, then warming up with some shadowboxing, I begin my final workout, light; compiling citations into a spiral notebook between rounds:

"Galton's eccentric, skeptical, observing, flashing, cavalry-leader type of mind led him eventually to become the founder of the most important, significant and, I would add, genuine branch of sociology which exists, namely eugenics"—John

Maynard Keynes

Keynes, John Maynard. "Galton Lecture, 1946: Presentation of the Society's Gold Medal." *Eugenics Review* 38.1 (1946): 39-42.

A familiar face is approaching when I start punching, kicking, kneeling, elbowing the blue, synthetic leather *thai* bag. "Fight coming up?" he asks. I acknowledge him tipping my chin upwards, replying with half-sentences in between strikes. "Well, good luck."

"I don't believe in luck," axe kick, spinning hook kick, "I believe in God."

"Irrational superstition. All the world's problems stem from religion. It's just a way to control stupid people with fear."

"Really," jab, jab, jab, "and how many," bob and weave, hook, "of his own people," down elbow, snap elbow, knee, "did Stalin murder?" shoulder stop, slip; "How many," superman punch, low roundkick, "did Mao kill?," jab, sidekick; "How many," jump back-kick, "tens of millions?" jab, cross, high roundkick, "Cuz that was a secular regime;" cross, body cross, shovel-hook, "not only that," an egg timer buzzes, "them motherfuckers," sprawl, "wouldn't *let* you even *talk* about religion," post to my feet; shadowbox, "or they'd shoot your fucking ass."

"More people have died because of religion than anything else in history," says Calvin as if he were reciting from a manual, a textbook, or some religious doctrine or wisdom book.

"Actually," still shadowboxing, "government is the leading cause of death throughout history." I stop shadowboxing, shake my head, lean against the heavybag stand. "And it's the scientifically dictated State that's committed the most abhorrent human rights violations and acts of genocide humanity has ever known; just look at the twentieth century. Eugenics alone can attest to that."

"Eugenics?"

"Yeah, eugenics, which later became known as social biology in 1969, otherwise known as transhumanism today." Calvin's face is blank. "It's one of those pseudo-sciences that stemmed from John Knox's and eventually Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, like phrenology which was used to justify slavery based on the idea that the skull structure of Africans demonstrated that they weren't as developed along the evolutionary chain as white Europeans." I sit down to put on my sox and shoes while Calvin starts playing with a speedbag hanging next to the heavybag stand. "Eventually, Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, came up with the bright idea that you could sort of harness and speed up the evolutionary process through selective breeding," tying my shoes. "So Galton and Darwin—whose *The Origins of Species* by

Means of Natural Selection was originally subtitled *Or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*—married off all their children to one another thinking they would end up with a progeny of super-geniuses.” Calvin smiles condescendingly. “Of course, it was a horrible failure, and they ended up with a bunch of blue-blood mongoloid-like babies.” Calvin wears his smile comfortably to the broken rhythm of his botched attempts to keep time with the speedbag. “But from this whole idea spawned eugenics programs, which originated in England through the Eugenics Education Society—otherwise known as the Eugenics Society or the British Eugenics Society (currently known as the Galton Institute).” I pull my crew sox tight, then scrunch them down ankle-level. “Julian Huxley—the brother of Aldous Huxley (author of *Brave New World*) and the grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley (nicknamed ‘Darwin’s Bulldog’ because he was a staunch advocate of Darwinian evolutionary theory)—was an eminent member of the Eugenics Society, honored as a Life Fellow in 1925 then holding the Presidency from 1959 to 1962.” Calvin steadies the speedbag, not looking at me. “He co-authored *The Science of Life* in 1931 with G. P. Wells and his father H. G. Wells—the renowned science fiction author who was himself a student of Thomas Henry Huxley during his enrollment at the Normal School of Science in London.” Calvin centers the speedbag again, stopping its erratic figure-eight-like rebounding from shitty punches. “In *The Science of Life*, Huxley and Wells praise the eugenic forced-sterilization programs that were instituted throughout the United States, where the field of eugenics really gained momentum and international acclaim through Charles Davenport’s work at Cold Spring Harbor and the Eugenic Record Office.” He punches the speedbag as hard as he can, whumping a machinegun-like staccato of ricocheting leather; apparently frustrated with his inability to keep cadence on the bag. “Davenport’s research was funded by the Carnegie Institution and the Rockefeller Foundation, both of which invested in German eugenics research where the so-called science of racial hygiene reached its pinnacle as the justification for exterminating Jews and conducting all those wonderful experiments on them in the concentrations camps; you know, like ‘is concrete an effective form of birth control?’ and, ‘if you place a man in water and lower the temperature by one degree every 20 minutes or something like that, at what point will he die?’ Ah! the redemptive and benevolent power of reason and science.” He looks at me as if wanting to roll his eyes. “But that’s all in the past, right? Thank God we’ve got the United Nations to police the globe and prevent anything like that from ever happening again. Thank God Julian Huxley was appointed Director General of UNESCO—The

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization—so that we can have a World Government unified under an eco-fascist, Malthusian eugenic religion. Oops, I mean environmental policy.”

“I don’t know about all that,” says Calvin.

“I don’t give a fuck if you know about it. It’s a fucking fact. Look it up.” Two girls in matching sports bras and spandex booty shorts make their way past the bags. “And that shit was *science*. That’s what ‘rationality’ gets you: ‘don’t you see, it’s better if we kill all the Jews, and all them savage niggers too.’” The girls exchange shocked glances at each other but won’t look in the direction of me and Calvin. Calvin notices their appalled expression. He turns his back to me and heads for the staircase leading down toward the exit to the Student Fitness Center. “Oh, I’m making you uncomfortable now.” I smile to myself, removing a stack of books from my duffle bag; I jump up to follow Calvin down the aisle between nautical machines to my right and treadmills to my left. “You don’t believe me, huh? Well, here, let me read you some shit. Here’s Julian Huxley—*UNESCO: Its Purpose and Its Philosophy*:

“Thus, even though it is quite true that any radical eugenic policy will be for many years politically and psychologically impossible, it will be important for Unesco to see that the eugenic problem is examined with the greatest care” (23).

He says nothing; just walks.

“It is, however, essential that eugenics should be brought entirely within the borders of science, for, as already indicated, in the not very remote future the problem of improving the average quality of human beings is likely to become urgent; and this can only be accomplished by applying the findings of a truly scientific eugenics” (42).

I’m switching books like shuffling cards in a deck. “Here’s his little buddy, H. G. Wells—*Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress Upon Human Life and Thought*:

‘[T]he ethical system which will dominate the world state, will be shaped primarily to favor the procreation of what is fine and efficient and beautiful in humanity . . . and to check the procreation of . . . all that is mean and ugly and bestial in the souls, bodies, or habits of men. . . . And the method that nature has followed hitherto in the shaping of the world, whereby weakness was prevented from propagating weakness, . . . is death. In the new vision death is no inexplicable horror, no pointless terminal terror to the miseries of life, it is the end of all the pain of life, the end of the bitterness of failure, the merciful obliteration of weak and silly and pointless things” (322-323).

Calvin peeks over his shoulder behind him, still walking; doesn’t say anything. I shuffle books. “Here’s his brother, Aldous Huxley—*Brave New World Revisited*:

‘In this second half of the twentieth century we do nothing systematic about our breeding; but in our random and unregulated way we are not only over-populating our planet, we are also, it would seem making sure that these greater numbers shall be of biologically poorer quality. . . . [E]very advance in medicine will tend to be offset by a corresponding advance in the survival rate of individuals cursed by some genetic insufficiency. . . . And along with a decline of average healthiness there may well go a decline in average intelligence’ (19).

He turns toward the bathrooms at the end of the row of exercise bikes. “How about Saint Darwin—*The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*:

“If the various checks specified in the two last paragraphs, and perhaps others as yet unknown, do not prevent the reckless, the vicious and otherwise inferior members of society from increasing at a quicker rate than the better class of men, the nation will retrograde, as has too often occurred in the history of the world” (507).

Calvin enters the washroom and I follow him spouting documentations; he goes into the stall, probably trying to get me to leave him alone. “Here’s a photocopy of a Eugenics Research Association document that was reprinted by Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press in 2008:

**‘January, 1918
Transfer of E. R. O.**

On December 14th, the trustees of the Carnegie Institution of Washington accepted from Mrs. E. H. Harriman the gift of the Eugenics Record Office’”

The guy taking a piss in the only urinal in the restroom doesn’t say anything or even look at me when he washes his hands in the sink. Calvin flushes the toilet, exits the stall, washes his hands, doesn’t say shit. He leaves the men’s room. “Here’s a 1934 Rockefeller Foundation Annual Report that documents the funding of American eugenics at Cold Spring Harbor and German eugenics at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute:

**‘Long Island Biological Association, Cold Spring Harbor, New York
Work of the Biological Laboratory (RF 34004, 34149)
Appropriations—\$46,000.00; Payments—\$20,000.00 . . .
Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Genetics, Berlin-
Dahlem, Germany
Research on twins and the effect of poisons on germ plasm (RF 32077,33054)
Appropriations—\$3,406.48; Payments—\$3,406.48’**”

When we reach the staircase, Calvin pauses next to the row of exercise bikes. He’s going to say something. But he just descends the steps. The two girls in the matching spandex and sports bras are coming up the stairs. They keep their eyes on the steps, whispering something. I keep my eyes on the gorgeous women sweating, trotting along treadmills as I walk back to my duffle bag and put my books away. The work is done. Let the chips fall where they may.

CHAPTER 3: Of Love and *Budo*: How to Break a Promise

Fight night. Question one last time how you got yourself into this and start to warm up with some shadowboxing. The announcer's Bruce Buffer-like inflection reverberates from the stadium loudspeakers into your locker room. David looks you over applying a moderate layer of Vaseline to your orbital bones.

"Show time," he says.

Make your way to the cage with a singular, no-minded mindfulness. Your entrance music, the stage lights and camera flashes, the crowd's bloodthirsty roars, all meld together into some ambient presence hovering about the periphery of your awareness. All that exists is your opponent.

Enter the cage and wait for the bell.

Ding.

Advance to the center of the cage and cautiously touch gloves, prepared to counter a sucker punch.

He's tall. He easily has a good six inches on you and an equal reach to match.

Test the validity of his *muay thai* shorts by driving your knotted shin into his thigh like a baseball bat.

He probes the distance with a pawing jab. Swat it away with an open palm and dig into his quad with another roundhouse. Like rapid fire, instantly follow it up with one more. He attempts to shield by taking it on his own shin but he's too slow. The network of tendons between your instep and shin mash into his kneecap spinning him around on one foot.

Your foot goes temporarily numb. Ignore it. There's no time to think about that.

He plants a straight kick into your abdomen that sends you sailing into the fence. He immediately follows it up with a knee to your stomach and a flurry of punches rains down on your skull like a hailstorm.

Cover.

Shoot for the double-leg and take him to the ground.

You both scramble for control.

He gives up his back. Slide your wrist under his tucked chin and grind it against his Adams-apple to soften him up for the choke.

He somersaults and shakes you off.

He stands back up. He wants nothing to do with your ground game.

Don't box with him though. His head movement is clean and your hands are amateur at best, not to mention the reach disparity. Continue chopping him down with leg kicks instead.

Your shin chews into the multi-colored welt on his thigh and your head suddenly snaps back.

Was it the jab or the cross?

Warm blood streams from your nose into your mouth. It was the cross.

After a few more exchanges the blood begins to clot in your septum and trickle down your throat constricting your airways. Fatigue sets in.

Ding.

Saved by the bell.

Lean against the fence exhausted. David enters the cage with a water bottle, a spit bucket, and a small blue stool. He shouts with urgency.

“Are you that fucking tired?! He's gonna beat cuz you're giving up! You got heart?! Get out there, take him down, and win this fucking fight!”

It's like divine inspiration.

Catch your second wind and stand up.

Ding.

Touch gloves and wait to time his jab with a double-leg.

It's like poetry.

His shoulders hit the mat and you proceed to maul him with a chain of primitive blows. He desperately attempts to control your arms as your broken nose drenches his wincing face with thick beads of blood.

Grow careless, anxiously smelling victory.

He sneaks a reversal.

From your back, throw your legs over his head trapping his right arm against his neck. Pull down on the back of his head compressing his throat and bicep together. His eyes cloud up. Blood drains toward your lungs. Your wheezy, gurgled gasps grow thinner, more intense. Lactic acid concentrates in your

burning hamstrings and your vice-like triangle choke starts to lax. The life crawls back into his pupils.

Like music, transition to an armbar. His elbow locks out and a succession of pops sound off like a thick towel being torn slowly in half. He rolls onto his back alleviating the pressure at the last second.

You're on top again.

Take side control and soften his ribcage with a series of knees until the bell rings and trudge back to your corner.

When the judges score the bout a draw, be happy it was only a two round fight.

Rinse the dried, black blood from your teeth, neck, shoulders, and chest. Clean your mouthpiece, remove your jock strap, and change into some loose-fitting shorts and a wife-beater that will serve as a convenient rag for the remainder of the night.

Navigate through the Coliseum-like atmosphere and locate the small group of friends that came to support you. Apologize for failing and notice an unfamiliar face. Meet her still pumped full of adrenaline with a swollen nose that makes you look like a horse. Fumble for the proper method of informal greeting between a man and a woman and clumsily settle upon a limp handshake involving only the fingertips. Murmur an insecure "hey" and creep away as quickly and inconspicuously as possible before you say or do something stupider.

* * *

Think nothing of her attendance at your fight alongside your friends and spend the next week swimming in an almost euphoric tranquility that exists only in the wake of a war between two starving artists with nothing to lose but everything to prove. It is peace, more than releasing aggression. It is a fearlessness manifest in the realization of the deepest powers of will, secrets of the soul rising from the ashes of all existential doubt like a phoenix burning through your cooling veins.

You will still be riding this high when you meet her again and it will equip you with a James Dean-like passivity that seems to increase her attraction to you.

Wander the most reclusive areas of a Christian retreat camp, sneaking swigs of gin from a smuggled flask, with a Taoist-like indifference to the opinions of even God himself and spy her spying you

with a suggestive intrigue that even you couldn't miss. Carry her bags up to her fourth-floor dormitory. She will walk back down with you where you will say, "Let's kick it some time." She will agree, blush, and gracefully shy her grey-blue eyes slightly away from yours as you notice hers for the first time.

~ ~ ~

Round 1: Your first date will be a visit to the local pet shop, because she's a zoology major. She says she loves animals because she doesn't like people—animals don't judge you like people do. Her favorite creatures are the tarantulas. "They're cute and furry," she says.

Retire to your apartment for a late-night movie. Hold her tenderly, carefully. Gently run your fingers through her thin blonde hair. Pay no attention to the tragedy of *Tristan and Isolde*. Focus meditatively on the soft lullaby rhythm of her breath.

"You're not watching," she says.

Don't frighten her with the fact that your attention is circling the most subtle details of her body, of this experience, and the almost certain fear that this too will fade to a eulogy engraved across your stomach. Instead lie or say nothing at all.

~ ~ ~

Round 2: It's the middle of October. This affords you the opportunity to buy her a stuffed spider. Surprise her with it and feel stupid about your creative attempt to be romantic. Occasionally pick her flowers. Suppress your growing attachment. Cook spaghetti using your grandmother's recipe for homemade, authentic Italian sauce. Call her as infrequently as possible. Dig through public litter to collect beer and soda tabs to raise money for her nephew's operation. Keep your feelings to yourself.

To express your feelings would express your emptiness, your buried neediness. Neediness is weakness. A martial artist needs nothing; you roll with the punches. A warrior is never weak. No retreat, no surrender, death before dishonor.

~ ~ ~

Round 3: Drive three-and-a-half hours to bake Christmas cookies with her family. It's a welcome alternative to the Yuletide fistfights that almost annually occur between you and your father. Everyone gets along. There are no foul-mouthed tirades. No drunken episodes. And you somehow know, have always known, that this is what has always been missing.

"People don't stick around very long," she blurts. The moment is shattered.

"What do you mean?"

"Guys always do stuff I don't want them to do." She goes into a scattered and convoluted history of failed romances. Wonder how anyone could take such a sweet, such a beautiful girl for granted. Assure yourself that you're different, a superman amongst selfish, shallow dicks. Assure yourself that you have the insight and endurance to make this work. Assure her that no matter what happens you'll always be there for her. Like a cliché. "I'll always be here for you."

Drive three and a half hours back and go three losing rounds with that ever-lingering fear. Go three more losing rounds with sleep and watch the sun rise while running your fingers across the graveyard of symbols inked throughout your body.

~ ~ ~

Round 4: Cook her lemon-pepper chicken. Feel her arms creep around your waist from behind you while you clean the carcass. Feel her cheek buried softly, deeply into the crook of your neck and shoulder. For the first time, this hollow, dilapidated efficiency feels like home. She feels like home.

Lift her up, pin her to the wall with your hips and kiss her deeply. Lose yourself in the mysterious fog of her smoke-blue eyes. Tell her how beautiful she is, how much she means to you.

She never believes you.

She's sitting on your lap in the swivel chair after dinner. That VH1 documentary about The Temptations is playing on the TV when you accidentally brush your fingers against her plump ass.

"Did you just grab my ass?"

“Well, . . . no, I just touched it a little . . . on accident.”

She giggles. “Do you want to?”

“Well, . . . y . . . I thought you said you wanted to take things slow?”

“I did.”

Hold each other.

Tell her you will always be there for her. No retreat, no surrender, death before dishonor. Just hold each other.

~ ~ ~

Round 5: She will call less and less. You will do the same. Give her space. Let her be. Roll with the punches.

Eventually you must ask, “So what’s up, you don’t dig me anymore?”

She replies with confusion. “I’m losing interest but I don’t know why and I don’t want to because you didn’t do anything but . . .”

Fear becomes reality. Again. As Always. You are strong though. Your heart is conditioned like your shins and knuckles. Tell her you will always be there for her no matter what.

“No matter what, I’ll always be here for you.” She manages a smile and holds you tightly like a toddler’s security blanket. It lingers and you savor it like a death-row inmate’s last meal.

Walk her home, kiss her goodnight, and feel her lips leave yours for the last time like your last breath leaving your lungs. Walk yourself home following the roadmap of abandonment etched permanently in your skin. Try to find your way home.

She feels like home. She felt like home.

~ ~ ~

Round 6: She leaves you without reason. She says simply, “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Do not ask her why. Do not argue, bargain, or beg. This is what she wants. Give her what she

wants. Be there for her. Roll with the punches.

Bounce from errand to errand with an absurd manic enthusiasm that exists only in the void that remains where meaning and hope once stood united in harmony. Call her on your way home and tell her that if she ever needs anything you will always be there for her.

Drop your bookbag heavily on the floor of your bland inefficiency and feel the weight of the world lessen by a most insignificant amount. Strands of her thin golden hair cover your apartment like relics of a fabled utopia mocking like acid. Your heart decays. Pound your *muk jong* through your tears until your palms and shins are black and blue as her eyes and your life.

~ ~ ~

Round 7: Wonder what more you could have done; what less. Wonder what's wrong with you. Wonder.

Call her infrequently to make sure she's alright, to make sure she's happy. Be there for her.

Months pass and be there for her.

Call her on her birthday. Suggest pizza because it's her favorite. Unexpectedly she says, "I need to be mad at you to get over this."

"You need to be mad at *me*?"

"It's just how I get over it."

Tell her you will always be there for her and hang up. Wonder what more you could have done; what less. Wonder what's wrong with her. Wonder.

~ ~ ~

Round 8: She will call you out of the blue, out of your blues months later. Tell her you've still been collecting beer and soda tabs—mostly beer tabs—from around campus for her nephew; the prodigal children of America will save the world. She thanks you with an inflection that stirs a painful nostalgia that seems more like a dream.

She continues to call sporadically, only when she needs something: to get away from her

roommate; to use my apartment for a private study hall when I'm at the gym; to borrow the DVD of your fight to watch with her other guy friends.

Comply. Always comply. It feels like salt and piss on a gangrenous wound, but comply. Always comply. Be there for her. This is *budo*. No retreat, no surrender, death before dishonor.

~ ~ ~

Round 9: Ask her to color belated Easter eggs with you. She cheerfully agrees. Plan on the coming weekend. Call then and leave a message. Wait for her to call back.

After two days, color them by yourself, then break them like your heart. Pick up the pieces and throw them in the trash with your dreams, with your life.

~ ~ ~

Round 10: Two weeks pass. She does not call. Don't call her either.

See her in the food court. She will stop to talk to you but keep walking. Don't even look at her. Retreat, surrender, death, dishonor.

Go three rounds with your conscience. How can you be there for someone who is never there for you? How can you be there for someone who isn't there? Who doesn't care?

It's a unanimous decision. Fuck you, John. Fuck you.

Eat the punches and spend the rest of the evening futilely struggling to decipher the matrix of artistic scars that paint a picture that is somehow vaguely familiar, somehow entirely foreign.

CHAPTER 4: Ashok and Eye

If only I could forgive myself. But that's cheap; a fucking copout. I don't want to feel better. I want to *be* better, a better person. I don't want absolution; I want redemption. But that's impossible. I'm a piece of shit. If only I could forget myself.

I try to lose myself in my studies, throwing myself into my thesis, gorging on a dozen assorted Crispy Crème doughnuts and a 40 oz. of King Cobra. I dig through the books flung everywhere around my apartment—on top of the radiator, underneath the coffee table, on top of my keyboard, under my bed:

“the number of weddings is a matter which must be left to the rulers, whose aim will be to preserve the average of population [...] There are many other things which they will have to consider . . . to prevent the State from becoming either too large or too small”—Socrates

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. B. Jowett. New York: Modern Library, 1941.

There is a sandalwood picture frame on my coffee table displaying a photograph of Mom and me. Mom's cheeks are bloated with water from corticosteroids, her puffy eyes crestfallen like her sad half-smile. That was the day she went into hospice.

“[t]here is a clear hope that, later, directed breeding will come within his [humanity's] scope, but that goes beyond his present range of practical achievement, and we need not discuss it further here. Suffice it for us here that the world community of our desires, the organized world community conducting and ensuring its own progress, requires a deliberate collective control of population as a primary condition”—H. G. Wells

Wells, H. G. *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1928.

My hateful black eyes are burning at the photographer with tiny, flaring-red orbs blazing like embers glowing out of my coal-black pupils; my chipped teeth gritting, jaw muscles clamped, bulging. Mom was being so emotional; clutching, clinging to me, sobbing in my T-shirt, dragging out the farewell. And all I gave a shit about was getting alone with the Oxycontin I'd just stolen from her; scowling with impatience, piercing.

“The recognition of an optimum population-size (of course relative to technological and social conditions) is an indispensable first step towards that planned control of populations which is necessary if man's blind reproductive urges

are not to wreck his ideals and his plans for material and spiritual betterment. . . . [A]reas must be set aside where, in the interests of mankind as a whole, the spread of man must take second place to the conservation of other species”—Julian Huxley;

Huxley, Julian. *UNESCO: Its Purpose and Its Philosophy*. Washington D. C.: Public Affairs Press, 1948.

The silence is contaminated, bloated with regret, remorse, inadequacy, guilt, shame. Nothing but bad memories.

“Restraints on reproductive freedom may similarly become more common in cases where governments through incapacity or unawareness have allowed demographic pressures to build to extremes. I am not speaking here of government measures aimed at creating greater social responsibility in the reproductive decisions made by families, but of coercive government intrusions into the decisions themselves—forced sterilization for example”—Robert S. McNamara

McNamara, Robert S. “The Population Problem.” *United Nations Environment Programme: Earth and Us: Population – Resources – Environment – Development*. Eds. Mostafa Kamal Tolba and Asit K. Biswas. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1991. 48-65.

The gibberish in my brain is starting to babble on top of it. So I play some music on my iTunes—Immortal Technique—, hoping to drown my thoughts, the white static noise that is my mind.

“But if world government is neither feasible nor desirable, how then can we establish a successful cooperative global effort to save the environment? . . . [F]ive strategic goals must direct and inform our effort to save the global environment. . . . The first strategic goal should be *the stabilizing of world population*”—Al Gore

Gore, Al. *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

I’m gnawing on my fingernails now. *Bizonshti inblrbllinsht*. The enamel on my front teeth is starting to erode, tips chalky like talc; nerves exposed. Every bite sends needles through my incisors like a stungun; stabbing, shocking. *In’nfpuetuefi inbwuibyuenst*. But I can’t stop teething. Kicking against the goads. *Shbuebuenschit inshtduenschit*.

“Since population growth is a major determinant of increases in food demand, allocation of scarce PL 480 resources should take account of what steps a country is taking in population control as well as food production. In these sensitive relationships, however, it is important in style as well as substance to avoid the appearance of coercion. . . . Sterilization of men and women has received wide-spread acceptance in several areas”—Henry Kissinger

United States. National Security Council. “National Security Study Memorandum 200: Implications of Worldwide Population Growth for U. S. Security and Overseas Interests (The Kissinger Report).” <<http://biodireitomedicina.files.wordpress.com/2009/01/relatorio-kissinger-nssm200.pdf>>. US National Security Council, 10 Dec. 1974. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.

Knocking at my door.

“Hi, John. How are you?” It’s Ashok. I wave him inside.

“I’m alright. How are you?”

“Good; good. Did you take your dinner?”

“Uh, sort of.” I point to the beer and fried dough on my coffee table.

“Dowg-nuts? This is good for health?”

I smile. “They’re called do-nuts. And no, they’re not very good for health, at all. Actually, they’re very bad for health.”

“Oh that is not so good. Better to eat veg-etables and curry and things like this.”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ve been eating pretty healthy for the last few months getting ready for my fight though. This is my guilty treat. Or one of ‘em anyways.”

“That is okay. Once in a while is okay, but better to eat rice and *dahl* and these kind of things.” I chug on my 40. “Alcohol is not so good for health either.”

“Yeah, you’re right. You’re right.”

“I do not know why people drink alcohol. Juice and water and milk tastes much better.”

I chuckle. “People don’t really drink it cuz it tastes good.”

“Why they drink then?”

“Because they want to get drunk.”

“Drunk?”

“Intoxicated.”

“It gives you energy?”

“Well, kind of,” I start, my words muffled through a mouthful of *éclair*. “It makes you less stressed out. For a little while anyway. But really it just makes you depressed in the long run,” lips smacking. “Some people get violent when they drink it. Some people get real silly. And some people get drunk so they can’t even fucking walk or talk and then pass out, unconscious.”

“It makes you feel happier?”

“You mean me, specifically?”

“Yes.”

“Mmm . . . not really.”

“Then why you drink?”

“Cuz I’m a fuck-up, alright.”

He smiles, shakes his head, “*No*. . . . John? Do you need to go to the Walmart today?” Ashok doesn’t have a car, and I’m his only ride to get groceries and whatnot.

“No, not really. Why? You need to get some shit from there?”

“Yes, I would like to go.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I can take you up there. You ready to go now?”

“Yes.”

I slam the rest of my King Cobra, and we walk to the parking lot together in the rain; Ashok follows alongside me, so close that he keeps bumping into me every time I change my trajectory even the slightest. It’s irritating, but I’m assuming this crowded proximity is a cultural custom, so I don’t say anything. He shadows me all the way to the driver’s-side door of my grey, 2003 Chevy Malibu, then realizes he has to walk around to the passenger’s side.

We coast past mobs of bar-crawlers staggering, screaming hoorahs from club to frat party to bar to house party: muscle-headed jocks with their gelled faux-hawks and popped collars; painted floosies in their wedged heels and miniskirts, ass cheeks peeking out with every exaggerated swing of the hips, breast cleavage busting out into the chill autumn gales and frigid raindrops.

“Why they dress like that?” asks Ashok.

“In the cold, or you mean all the time?”

“All the time; but yes, especially in the cold.”

I’m twisting my head over my shoulder, practically gawking backwards out of my backseat window to get a better look at a particularly voluptuous redhead. “I really don’t know, dude; you’re asking the wrong fucking guy if you wanna know why girls do the things they do.” We roll to a stop, splishing through puddles in front of a crosswalk and wait for a small gaggle of partygoers to stammer across the street, quiet in the quiet patter of showers against the windshield, hood, and roof of my Chevy. “I guess they’re trying to attract guys; I guess.”

“For sex?”

“Well, eventually. I mean, sooner or later, anyway. And in this country, probably sooner than later.”

“What if they do not want gents to touch?”

“Well, they just tell him, ‘no.’ I mean, just because they’re dressed like that doesn’t mean they’re fucking prostitutes.”

“Yes, I understand this. That is not what I mean.” The starless sky flashes grey-white; gentle thunder purrs. “John? Do many ladies get raped in this country?”

“Umm, I don’t exactly know the statistics or anything; but I’m sure it’s probably a lot.” “Do you know Diane was raped?”

“Diane from the History Department?”

“Yes.”

“*What?* Who told you that?”

“She did.”

“*What?* Wait, wait, wait, how did *that* come up?”

“I aksed her.”

“You just out of the blue asked her, ‘hey, Diane, ever been raped before?’”

“No, no. I saw it in her palm.”

I look straight at him as we pull into Walmart parking lot. “You read palms?”

“Yes; yes.”

“How long you been able to do that for?”

“Many years. That is my profession before I come to America. I learned from the greatest palmist in Nepal.”

I throw the car in park. “Will you read mine when we get back to your apartment?”

“Yes, I will be happy to do that for you.”

I unlock the doors while Ashok’s trying to open his, prying and prying on the handle, nearly wrenching it off. “Hold on,” I say, “wait . . . wait.” I press unlock again, but he’s still pulling on the handle. “Hold on . . . wait . . . you gotta let go for me to unlock it.” *Click.* Okay, now you can open it.” We step out into the rainstorm.

“John? Can I ask you personal question?”

“Uh . . . yeah; alright.”

“Do you have sex?”

“Me? Umm, no, actually. I’m a virgin.”

His eyes are wide surprised. “I also am virgin. It is different kind of culture in Nepal; we must wait until we are married. But here, everyone I talk to has had sex. You are only the one. Why you do not have sex?”

“Mmm, I wanna make sure I’m in love first. And I wanna know that she’s in love too, and doesn’t just wanna have sex cuz it feels good or whatever.”

“You are different kind of guy then.”

“Heh, yeah, no one’s gonna argue with that. I just don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing.”

“It is good.”

“I like to think so anyway.”

By the time we enter the automatic sliding glass doors, we’re sopping soaked in raindrops. Inside, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, is on telescreens everywhere looping the “See Something, Say Something” campaign, encouraging customers to spy on one another:

Homeland Security begins with hometown security. If you see something suspicious in the parking lot or in the store, say something immediately. Report suspicious activity to your local police or sheriff.

“What all you gotta get from here?” I ask.

“Just some veg-etables and some other seet.”

“What’d you just say?”

“Some veg-etables, and some other seet.”

“Did you just say ‘shit’?”

“Yes, some other seet.”

“Do you know what that word means?”

He’s inspecting some cucumbers. “Yes; it means the stuffs, the things.”

I smile and shake my head while he scrutinizes some tomatoes. “Well, yeah, when I use it, that’s what it means. But literally it means feces. Do you know what feces is?”

“No, I do not know. It is vulgar word?” A roly-poly-shaped, old white-haired white lady keeps looking at us with shifty eyes, probably suspecting Ashok to be one of those scary Muslims because of his accent and brown complexion.

“Yeah. It’s what you do in the toilet when you sit down.”

“It is the toilet?”

“No, it’s what you *do* in the toilet. When you sit down on it.”

He halts his examination of a head of broccoli. “Oh, that is very bad.”

“Yeah; I know. That’s why I’m telling you now. I mean, I don’t care if you say it around me. But don’t go saying that shit around any of your professors.” I laugh, shaking my head again. “Dude, I told you not to be picking up my vernacular. You’re gonna go back to Nepal and be teaching everybody how speak fucking gutter English.”

He puts a bag of onions in his cart, then moves to the frozen foods section where he selects a box of microwavable beef burritos.

“Have you ever had those before?” I ask.

“Yes; berritoss. It is good for health?”

I don’t have the heart to tell him that “beef” means cow meat. “Well generally any pre-cooked foods aren’t very good for you. But there’s worse things you can eat. Like Ramen noodles and hotdogs, with all that fucking MSG and preservatives and shit in ‘em. Which a lot of people buy; cuz they’re cheap; you know, Ramen’s are only ten cents a pack.”

“Yes, but you are doing more than ten cents of damage to your body. You are not saving money.”

“Yeah. . . . yeah. You got a point. But you know most of them vegetables you got there are GMO.”

“GMO? I do not understand.”

“Genetically Modified Organisms.” We’re unloading his shopping cart onto the checkout conveyer belt. “That’s where they splice animal DNA with insect DNA, or plant DNA with a virus or bacteria. How good for health do you think that shit is?” The cashier scanning; the register bleeping. “It’s fucking eugenics. They’re trying to alter our biochemistry by poisoning the food supply. It’s fucking soft-

kill eugenics. It's . . ." but I censor myself because Ashok's already heard me rant about eugenics about a million times before.

He swipes his J. P. Morgan-Chase credit card and we drive to his apartment.

After helping him carry his groceries inside, I sit down on one of his kitchen table chairs, wait for him to fill his fridge and freezer, hold out my open right hand. He gazes at my palm, opens his eyes wide, trying to focus better, or maybe he sees something alarming. I'm nervous, scared, because the last time I dabbled in mysticism my mom died, Ashley left me, and I ended up homeless. He tilts the lines toward the light.

"You have had much suffering. But that is in the past. You don't have to worry about that."

"I'm not gonna kill anyone?"

He half-smiles. "*No*. It shows you are generally good person." He spreads my fingers out like a fan, pulling my pinky away from my ring finger, then my ring finger from my middle finger; stops.

"You will live to 40, maybe 50; but you might go longer. The lines can change."

"50? Or longer? That's a lot more than I figured. 40 sounds about right though."

"You don't want to live longer?"

"Well, I'm not really holding onto anything. Really I'm just ready to get this over with. And get it right. But I've always just had this feeling that I won't be sticking around here very long."

He curls my hand into a fist, reading the creases on the side of my balled-up hand underneath my pinky knuckle. "Love shows one in the past. You loved her very, very much. And then it shows one in future. She will be your wife."

I grin wide reflexively, but every thought I can gather is telling me it can't be true. "You think so, huh?" still grinning.

"On the basis of what is here, that is what it says. It is not always hundred percent; but based on my calculations, you will have a wife. You do not want to be married?"

"*Yeah* I wanna get married. It's all I've ever really wanted. I just don't see it happening. What's it say about kids? Will I have any children?"

He folds my hand into a fist again, interpreting the arrangement of creases under my pinky knuckle once more. "Maybe one. It is not clear."

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“You do not want children?”

“I want kids, yeah.”

“That is good. But I have found many people in this country do not want to have children. It is different kind of culture.”

“Yeah, well, you know I ain’t most people in this country.” I check the time on my minuteless cell-phone, which I’ve kept for the last few years for the sole purpose of using it as a watch, an alarm clock, and a digital Rolodex. It’s just past midnight. “Shit, it’s getting kinda late, man. I need to get home and get some sleep. I gotta get up early tomorrow.”

It’s slightly after 1 a.m. when I get home and crash on my unyielding mattress as soon as I step in the door.

~ ~ ~

A Golden sandstone mountain. A crumbling trail winding into wispy white clouds. There is a plump snow-white owl splayed out dead in the middle of the twisting road. I approach it, hesitantly, weary of the diseases it might be carrying.

It rouses gently from its slumber when I near it, fluttering about my head; it hovers on its back mid-air, directly in front of me. It wants me to hug it. So I cuddle its velvety feathers to my chest and cheeks. It Loves me. When I release it, the owl rubs its satiny feathers against my face, then floats away, fades away into the cloud-mist crowning the crag’s invisible summit.

Suddenly I feel dirty, worried I may have caught a contagion from its living-dead body.

Ascending the spiraling path, circling, reeling, twirling, the higher I climb, the denser and darker the steam-white clouds become, thickening into a grey smog, then a solid night-black like outer-space, all the while the gritty sandstone becoming progressively smoother, more reflective, from a dingy metallic copper gradually into crystalline glass mirroring boundless navy-blue-black into itself, away from itself.

I’m in a cavern of quartz-like mirrors now. A maze where everything looks the same: halls and Dead Ends identical; my self-image silhouetted everywhere. At every turn, I run into people I haven’t seen

in Forever. People that brought me here. People left behind. At every turn its someone else, disappearing and shape-shifting into one another.

“This way,” each says, “follow me. There’s someone we want you to meet. She can tell your future.”

They guide me out of the cave-maze to a large room that looks something like a hotel lobby where a mauve carpet leads to a decrepit blind woman dressed in brown soiled rags, seated on a wheelchair behind a mauve ottoman. An eight-foot-tall, rotund juggernaut in a dusty burnt-sierra suit sentinels beside her; he has no face on his bald head.

I kneel in front of the ottoman.

“Your hand,” she says. I give her my hand; she opens my palm. “Say your name.”

“Jo-oooOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMM!” The vibration in my vocal chords ripples to my chest out through my extremities, out into the room, my voice and my name blending, melding with my body and my surroundings; I leave my body, entering and becoming kaleidoscopic colors I’ve never seen before, spirographing gyroscopically in continuously original combinations; OM becomes deeper, lower, denser, until somehow it reaches a screeching high pitch like a fax machine squealing through a telephone.

~ ~ ~

I jolt awake, flinging my bedspread violently onto the floor as I shock upright. There is something in the lightless room with me. I need to urinate, but I’m frozen afraid of the presence. “Who’s the there?” No answer. “I’m gonna take a piss now,” as if giving fair warning will earn me a free pass. Tip toe to the toilet, hairs on ends, reciting the Lord’s Prayer over and over again all the way there and back, safely back to my sheetless mattress. I can’t sleep now. Shift around for almost two hours with no success. Mind alert on Fire. Goddamn I could use some fucking liquor right now. But my apartment’s dry, and everything’s closed at this hour—except for Walmart, of course, which stops selling alcohol after midnight. Fuck it.

I roll out of bed, peek out my window to check if it’s still raining: Clear Black Sky. After throwing on a black hoodie and black sweatpants, I stuff a dictionary-sized stack of papers, a box of sidewalk chalk,

and two rolls of scotch tape into my black bookbag, sling it over my shoulder, head out into the early-morning night. In and out of streetlights. From Darkness to Light, Darkness to Light.

I reach my first destination—the psychology department—, peek as inconspicuously as possible over my shoulder, scouting for witnesses; remove a roll of tape and a piece of paper from my backpack, stick it to the main entrance:

THE HUMAN RACE WILL SOON BE CULLED BY 90% OF THE POPULATION

Underneath the caption is a picture of the Georgia Guidestones—a close-up of their engravings:

MAINTAIN HUMANITY UNDER 500,000,000 IN PERPETUAL BALANCE WITH NATURE.
GUIDE REPRODUCTION WISELY - IMPROVING FITNESS AND DIVERSITY.
UNITE HUMANITY WITH A LIVING NEW LANGUAGE.
RULE PASSION - FAITH - TRADITION - AND ALL THINGS WITH TEMPERED REASON.
PROTECT PEOPLE AND NATIONS WITH FAIR LAWS AND JUST COURTS.
LET ALL NATIONS RULE INTERNALLY RESOLVING EXTERNAL DISPUTES IN A WORLD COURT.
AVOID PETTY LAWS AND USELESS OFFICIALS.
BALANCE PERSONAL RIGHTS WITH SOCIAL DUTIES.
PRIZE TRUTH - BEAUTY - LOVE - SEEKING HARMONY WITH THE INFINITE.
BE NOT A CANCER ON THE EARTH - LEAVE ROOM FOR NATURE - LEAVE ROOM FOR NATURE.

I search around from the corners of my eyes double-checking for onlookers before moving on. When I get to the physics department, a couple holding hands is walking my way in the opposite direction, maybe going for a romantic moonlight stroll, but most probably journeying home from an evening of wild oat sewing; so I skip this post, keep walking, to the geology department—I'll have to come back later. I stealth around like this for a little over an hour, chalking “Abolish the Federal Reserve” and “FEMA Concentration Camps Are Real (National Emergency Centers Act—H. R. 645)” all over the sidewalks as I go, when I spot a middle-aged guy in a grey skull cap, blue jeans, and a navy-blue quilted vest over a speckled-grey sweater for the third time in three separate places. *This motherfucker's following me, ain't he.* I pretend I didn't notice him, continue along my route, detour down a paved alleyway between the Russell Library and the Shaw Performance Art Theatre. As soon as I'm around the corner, I sprint silently into the art center; zig-zag randomly through the randomly intertwined architecture of the postmodern edifice, randomly trying to lose my stalker at a powerwalk pace, not too fast so as to draw suspicion, randomly. I exit the second-story, scan the parking lot for that fucking snoop: coast clear—if I see him again, he's following me, no doubt. I meander back to the few buildings I had to pass over because of passers-by. I should call it quits and go home, but I want to cover every department before sun-up. And there he is again; scoping me from about thirty yards behind somehow. *Motherfucker's following me*

alright; for sure. I carry on, feigning unaware. I tape a flyer to the rear entrance of the biology building, walk casually around to the front doors, wait for him to pop around the corner; make sure he sees I see him seeing me this time. Shookened up, found out, he jumps clumsily behind a tall, olive-green bush, as if I don't see him stumbling into his "hiding spot." *Gotcha*. I hang a flyer to the glass double-doors, turn around back the way I came, nonchalantly. I wave, truck back to my apartment, splooshing through pools of rainwater streaming through curb gutters under sparse streetlights: Light, Dark; Light, Dark. I circumvent my apartment wandering convoluted loopy loops around the complex, hoping to shake him before he trails me home.

The horizon is paling to a dim watercolor jade with the awakening dawn. Class starts in less than three hours. I lie down on my used mattress and wonder if it's even worth going back to sleep, nodding in and out of consciousness, obsessing paranoid about that fucking snitch and whether or not he tailed me home on reconnaissance; eye-lids heavy; drooping; half-nodding off; shaking my head, rousing back to Waking Life. Fuck I need some liquor. I check my alarmclock-phone: less than an hour before class. Fuck it.

I curl out of bed, pack my books, and my door is kicked in a SWAT team raiding guns drawn; I put my hands up surrender, my body bolts stiff like a wet towel untwisting with a violent snap. Now I'm on the dusty tile floor in a pile of silverware, broken ceramic dishes, glasses, stagnant dishwater; titanium-toed jackboots crunch my ribs, bruise kidneys, I snail into a fetal ball, grooved hard-rubber treads chip forearms, crack tailbone; my mouth goes wet-numb, I'm drooling teeth out the corner of my cheek palsiated; bolt stabs through me again amplified in this soap-scummy dishwater, I'm bleeding in. Darkness to Light, Darkness to Light.

* * *

Everything is Fuzzy. Thoughts. Memory. Everything is everything. Darkness. Eyes buried alive; lashes like anchors. Darkness. Eventually. I struggle my eyes; open; struggle for open. Only my left opens, halfway. I can feel a soft puff over my closed eye. I think Purple. Lying on a cot or something somewhere in some kind of storage room that looks somewhat like a concession stand. A gouging piercing

sensation like my abdominal wall rupturing when I attempt to sit upright, I cripple, cringe. There's foggy lights dancing in a window next to me; gated with rollout steel shutters. I strain, peeking through metal rectangular links; I see stories below me: an oval-shaped arena-like space of Astroturf, end-to-end housed with hives of disheveled families herding around filthy; towering stacks of casket-sized black-plastic storage bins. There's a constellation of pink prick marks on my right arm, stomach splitting pain; I'm sweating cold dizzy vision splitting octuple like a woozy spider or fly. Floating around through phantom slideshows floating in and out of one another. Somebody's saying something about inoculations; someone else is saying something about a "Blue List." A sound like iron sharpening iron. I'm flat. A montage of scalpels dancing through circular hazes like synchronized swimming. Something about "sterilization." Glinting sterilized cold steel surgical blades merry-go-rounding: clockwise, figure-eight, counterclockwise. Something cold between my inner thighs; something warm, running, trickling, wet.

Something is beeping and beeping and beeping.

Wake up in a frenzy. I whip my phone-alarm out of its charger by the cord. "Fuck off, goddamnit!"

CHAPTER 5: Of Trash and Treasure

Once a week, the Catholic disciples at St. Liborious get together to share a few beers and discuss social issues from a religious perspective. An event called “Saints and Suds.” Today’s topic: “Planned Parenthood and the 7th Sacrament: Be Fruitful and Multiply.” I’m not Catholic. I’m not exactly fond of all the ritual and ceremony; the clergy’s gaudy vestments; the golden censers and jewel-encrusted chalices; the rigid pews; the sculptures and stained glass monuments; the monotonous rote recital of the Lord’s Prayer and Apostle’s Creed. But the lounge is small and cozy. Four round tables spread about a green carpet under a cathedral ceiling. An electric fireplace and an old television cart. A makeshift bar constructed out of unstained plywood in the corner. The bartender welcomes me with a St. Pauly Girl and our small talk is halted with the onset of group discussion. The dialogue is not what I had expected. Tich Naht Hahn, the Dali Lama, and the Prophet Mohammad are all quoted. Socialist politics are considered and no one is excommunicated. Christ was a *radical*. An outlaw and an outcast. Some say nothing, concentrating on salsa, tortilla chips, and honey roasted peanuts, oblivious to any notion of etiquette.

“Well, look, I mean, I really do believe that a woman should have the right to choose what she does with her body. But when you choose to have sex, and you get pregnant, shouldn’t you be responsible for what happens?”

“Like when you choose to get raped.”

Ice tinkling in beer mugs, chips and nuts crunching in the silence; someone clears their throat.

“ . . . Well, . . . I can totally understand how you would want to . . . get rid of . . . something that violated you. I mean, I would never say anyone was wrong for that. But, . . . at the same time, it’s like, I can’t say it would be right to judge that baby for what the father did. I don’t know. Shouldn’t that baby have a chance to be something better? To make something good come from the father?”

That’s my queue: “And that’s basically the real issue right there,” I start. “That’s where the whole birth control movement came from—the whole question: ‘is it in the greater interest of the human species to prevent the genetically inferior from reproducing?’ Pre-crime, basically. Eugenics,” unzipping my

duffle bag. “You know, Planned Parenthood used to be called The Birth Control League. It was founded by Margaret Sanger, who was a staunch eugenicist and a supporter of Hitler. She called black people ‘human weeds’ and came up with the Negro project, which set up abortion clinics all around poor black neighborhoods. Today, 52% of all black babies are never born.” Father Burns steadily chomps; crumbs collect in his thin, wiry, black mustache. “And then there’s the population control agenda. Margaret Sanger organized the first World Population Conference in Geneva, which helped pave the way for John D. Rockefeller—another eugenicist—to set up The Population Council. Because Malthusianism has always been tied to eugenics: not just a perfected gene pool, but an optimum population size—the perfect number of perfect people. So the first step toward that is necessarily to control human reproduction: both the quantity and the quality.” He washes it all down with a swig from his third diet Pepsi and wipes his mouth on his sleeve. “That’s why the birth control movement used to be called Neo-Malthusianism, in reference to Thomas Malthus and his *Essay on the Principle of Population*. And that’s why they changed The Birth Control League to Planned Parenthood. Because it had this negative connotation of repressing the birth cycle, controlling it. And the question was always ‘who’s controlling whose birth?’ So they changed the name to Planned Parenthood, to spin it so it has a positive connotation of planning to have children rather than restricting the birth cycle. So it’s like, ‘It’s not eugenics, it’s feminism; it’s not Malthusian population control, it’s family planning. T . . .”

“That sounds kinda like conspiracy stuff,” interjects Father Burns.

I begin removing books and documents from my duffle bag, placing them on my table. Every page I need is bookmarked; I ramble off a maelstrom of quotations like an auctioneer:

“Entirely apart from its Malthusian aspect or that of the population question, Birth Control must be recognized, as the Neo-Malthusians pointed out long ago, . . . as the very pivot of civilization. Birth Control . . . is really the greatest and most truly eugenic method . . . Birth Control has been accepted by the most clear thinking and far seeing of the Eugenists themselves as the most constructive and necessary of the means to racial health’—Margaret Sanger

Sanger, Margaret. *The Pivot of Civilization*. Elmsford: Maxwell Reprint Co., 1922.

‘All those who have had experience of birth-control work in the slums seem to be convinced that there is a residuum . . . which is too stupid or shiftless or both to profit by existing birth-control methods. These unteachables constitute pockets of evil germ-plasm responsible for a large amount of vice, disease, defect, and pauperism. But the problem of their elimination is a very subtle one, and there must be no suspicion of harshness or brutality in its solution. Many of these low types

might be bribed or otherwise persuaded to accept voluntary sterilization'—H. G. Wells,
Julian Huxley, G. P. Wells

Wells, H. G., Julian S. Huxley, and G. P. Wells. *The Science of Life*. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1929.

'American foundations also contributed significantly to the spread of family planning in less developed countries. The most important was the Population Council of New York set up as a result of an initiative by John D. Rockefeller III. . . . Frederick Osborn, the eugenicist, was nominated Vice-President'—*The United Nations and the Population Question 1945-1970 (A Population Council Book)*.

Symonds, Richard, and Michael Carder. *The United Nations and the Population Question 1945-1970 (A Population Council Book)*. New York: Population Council-McGraw-Hill, 1973.

“But really, this whole policy of eugenic population control through birth control is nothing new. That’s how oligarchies have always operated throughout history. They grow like plants. Like a tropism,” digging through my duffle bag. “The function of an oligarchy is to consolidate power in the hands of the ruling class. So once you have a ruling class, they’re going to instinctively institute policies that perpetuate their powerstructure and make sure they continue to rule, more and more effectively. And so population regulation—both the quantity and the quality—is key to any oligarchy. And one of the easiest and most obvious ways to achieve that is to persuade or force, quote-unquote, ‘undesirables’ to abort their babies. We can find examples as far back as Ancient Greece, and probably even further. Here’s Socrates from Plato’s *Republic*:

‘we [the rulers] allow them [the subjects] to range at will, . . . accompanying the permission with strict orders to prevent any embryo which may come into being from seeing the light; and if any force a way to the birth, the parents must understand that the offspring of such an union cannot be maintained, and arranged accordingly’—
Socrates

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. B. Jowett. New York: Modern Library, 1941.

“And here’s Aristotle—*Politics*:

‘As to the exposure and rearing of children, let there be a law that no deformed child shall live, but that on the ground of an excess in the number of children, if the established customs of the state forbid this (for in our state population has a limit), no child is to be exposed, but when couples have children in excess, let abortion be procured before sense and life have begun’—Aristotle

Aristotle. “Politics.” *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941. Print.

“And here’s . . .”

“You wannanother beer?” asks the bartender who’s standing next to my table now. I think he’s had too much to drink; I hesitate considering tomorrow’s priorities. “Uhh . . .”

“Yeah you wannanother beer,” he insists and slams one down in front of me before I can make a responsible decision. I forgot where I was in my spiel and I realize how uncomfortable everyone is now. I’m relieved to need to relieve myself. Still frazzled mute when I return. I stuff my books in my duffle bag, downing my bottle of Red Stripe. I tie one on, stagger home, drink myself to sleep.

* * *

Stuff *Wretched of the Earth* in my bookbag, half-sleepwalk to my Post-colonial Finance and International Relations course. If only I could forget myself:

She was dying. In the late stages of pulmonary fibrosis. Hooked up to an oxygen tank and could barely move around long enough to cook her own meals.

We’re watching this documentary called *Life and Debt*.

She passed four days before Christmas. December 21st 2003. The Winter Solstice. The date the Mayans predict the World will End.

But I’m mostly thinking about Mom. I remember:

how much she wanted to celebrate just one more Christmas, how much she wanted to take me shopping for college supplies.

Thinking regret; resignation.

But as the scar tissue in her lungs thickened and thickened like rubber cement, they eventually became incapable of supplying enough oxygen to keep her awake for more than 10 or 20 minutes every several hours.

So many of my peers are text-messaging like a fucking Tetris tournament; no attention on the film.

One day she woke up in the wee hours of the morning to find me and my step-dad still in the hospital with her. And she knew she would not see Christmas. She shattered into tears, but, almost instantly, she composed herself, lifted her chin, took an uncannily deep breath for her condition, and nodded her head positively.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m ready.”

Thumb-typing Newspeak without punctuations Some are sleeping sitting upright; some blatant with heads tucked in arms folded on desks. I’m in fucking high school again.

Until the week she died—the week I lived at St. James hospice—my dad refused to believe she was terminally ill.

“Please,” he’d say; “Stop. You’re mother’s fucking delusional; she’s a fucking nutcase. She just wants attention.”

The lethargy is contagious like a yawn; I’m dozing off now myself, here and there, in and out of conscious awareness, eyes rolling flickering to the back of my head.

A year after she passed away, me, Dad, and my sister spent Christmas together. We scrolled through old photo-albums cataloguing pictures from when we all still lived happily together, with Mom.

My fingernails chewed to bleeding raw nubs, I’m gnawing, picking, gouging, nibbling, digging at the deformed meat-slicer scar that is the tip of my right index finger instead; I’m peeling, tearing away obsessively at the rubbery-calloused mass of scar-tissue obsessively like morbid fruit. Obsessively, trying to keep my eyes open focused on the projector screen.

“Wow,” my sister remarked, pointing at a picture of Mom sitting on the orange-and-black-striped vintage 60s couch we called “the zit couch” because something about the burlap-like fabric would make your face break out if you fell asleep on it. “Look how skinny Mom was. I forgot she was so skinny after seeing her all puffed up from the prednisone for so long.”

I think I’m starting to develop carpal tunnel syndrome from incessantly pinching my thumb nail into my scar-mangled forefinger; a sharp aching in my wrist like knots tied tighter and tighter in my tendons. A loud rumble of shuffling clambering books stuffing into backpacks seven minutes before class ends.

“Oh, yeah,” said Dad; “I remember that day. She was real sick”

“What was wrong with her?” I asked.

It’s a race to exit the classroom, but I yield the right of way, still spaced the fuck out from lack of REM.

Suddenly his eye welled up, his voice quivered.

“I don’t remember,” he said. My sister and I each put an arm around him.

“It’s okay Dad,” my sister consoled.

"I didn't know she was so sick!" he cried, shuddering, crumbling.

When I return to my apartment, the red light on my answering machine is blinking, bleeping. I'm maneuvering over piles of paperwork, books, and dirty laundry, tiptoeing, hopping, sidestepping toward my archaic landline. That card Mom gave me two weeks before she died is on the floor for somehow; I don't notice it until I step on it. I pick it up, open it for the first time in almost a decade:

12 . 7 - 03

Just the card that says so much how I feel for you, my feelings. You know how sometimes you know what you want to say but it doesn't come out right? You are a caring compassionate young man and have grown up. I just also wanted to say thank you for all you've been doing for me. It helps put my mind at ease that you and I have found "our bond." I'd like before you leave for college that we can spend a day "veggin." Watchin movies, eatin & munchin and just relaxing all day, like we did in the "Nickelodeon days." Remember? I miss you being stuck here in these hospitals but I'm sure it won't be much longer once I get to the U of I — maybe a week or two — My goal is to be home before you leave so we can shop etc. Pray. If not you'll have to "shop till you drop" without me.

I'm so proud of you being accepted to college. It takes time for dreams to come true, prayer and hard work also and you have done it well. I wish you knew how very excited & happy I am for you. Make sure you let me know what you need.

*And outside, the trees rustled . . .
like a thousand hands applauding.*

The card is signed over and over again in the margins:

I love you so much!

Mom

I thank you for all you do for me ☺

*I'll keep missing and loving you,
Mom always*

I'm getting so excited for you as I'm sure you are!

*I love you so much John
Love your Mom*

We never did get to "veg" or go shopping. She never even made it to the U of I Chicago.

I play the message on my machine: "Hello, Mr. Savage." A stuffy voice like a head in a bucket. "This is university PD. There's been a fire in the History Department and we'd like to ask you some questions." Half-laughter like a depressed muppet honks through the speaker. "Naw, dude, it's—fucking Rob, man. I don't know, man; I'm just seeing when's the next you're coming through." He's hammer-

sloshed, annunciation slurred. “Fucking, my dad’s—he’s home from hospice now. He keeps—trying to take his oxygen mask off. He made the nurse take his feeding tube out last night. I don’t know, man. Fucking—hit me up when you get this.”

~ ~ ~

I’m speeding down the interstate, so fucking sleepy right now I may as well be driving drunk, but I have to pay my respects to Rob’s Dad before he passes away; I’m remembering the times when I used to drive Rob’s Mom to the university where she worked concessions for football and basketball games. She used to tell me stories on the way, about the 1960 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and marimbas on Lake Michigan Beach. That was when I lived out of my car. Doris was always insisting I sleep in her basement though. So most nights I crashed on a single mattress propped up uneven on old paint cans; it sagged in the center like a sinkhole funneling into a blackhole. An astral vortex perforating Time. A junkyard Dreamcatcher. I found myself in an empty Christian cathedral. The walls and ceiling were unfinished and the exposed studs permeated the air with the sharp aroma of cedar. The lighting was dim and the floor was dirt. I was searching between pews for Yoshi, my sidekick, my nemesis, my Shadow, when an Asian monk adorned in a purple robe embroidered with black leaves appeared out of the distant darkness.

“What do you seek my son?” he asked.

“Uh . . . um . . . I thought I saw my friend walk in here.” I turned to exit the monastery but he snagged my left arm.

“You’re just a child,” he said peering square into my eyes. They welled up with tears and my throat constricted.

“I . . . gotta go,” I insisted attempting to leave again.

“No, no,” he persisted, clenching my wrist, “let me help you.” Planted instantaneously on my stomach; some undetectable maneuver; drove his knee into my spine, and placed a small crystal shaped like a crescent moon on the dirt in front of my face. It gradually began to glow, gleam, shine, sparkle, illuminate with growing intensity until it radiated a nauseating, blue-white light that smothered the entire

church. I squeezed my eyes forcefully together and tried to meditate on images of hexagrams but blue emptiness poured through my eyelids, melting. Then I'm in This House. This House that's dark. No electricity. This House that's empty. There's no furniture. This House isn't our House anymore. What am I doing here? Mom is Dead. What is she doing here? The doctors were wrong. She's really alive? Or she's Resurrected? She lies in her bed with her oxygen mask on her face. She barely moves.

"Let me get you a glass of water," I say. I bring it to her in a coffee mug; a little is enough. The current residents of This House enter and I have to explain my presence. I'd wake up with this melody in my head:

C# G# E F# B E D# C#

I'd wake up, and take a cold shower because all the hot water was always gone by the time it was my turn.

I exit off the interstate, curving down the cloverleaf ramp into the Heights; the centrifugal force of the turn sends CDs and scattered stacks of papers sliding down the dashboard onto the passenger's-side floor. I hear something metal ping against an empty soda can in the pile of garbage carpeting the floor like a landfill: it's that palm-sized pewter angel Mom gave me after I totaled her Pontiac Firebird; the one holding an unfurled banner with the inscription, "Please Drive Safely Son."

I was terrified the first time I took the wheel; I made a hyper-conscious effort to never exceed five miles under the speed limit. Over the course of about a month or so though, I gradually became comfortable being on the road. Secure in the mundaneness, the everydayness of the same routes, the same twists, turns, bends, the same street lights and signs. I began to test, to push the limits: five miles over, seven miles over, ten miles, until I was experimenting with just how fast I could get Mom's Firebird to go on any given street.

And that's how I wrecked it. In hindsight, she should have been a lot more upset, a lot angrier than she was; I probably would have been if the tables were turned. I know she was more happy that I wasn't injured than she was upset that the sports car she had saved up for so many years to buy was trashed; yet for the modest lecture she did have for me, I still argued back with the case that she was overreacting. And she still bought me a beige, 91' Buick Electra in addition to a used, white Grand Marquis for herself. She hung the soft-metal seraph by the clip welded on its back to the driver's-side visor of my Buick.

She died a year later. So did the Buick. And I could have sworn the angel was Lost with it. She stayed perched on the visor, wings spread and clipped, sitting in my driveway for some months while I worked to save up enough money to buy a new transmission. In the meantime, one of my neighbors felt it necessary to call the police, complaining that it was an eyesore, as if *its* presence was the reason they couldn't sell their shanty and move out of our suburban ghetto where not a single business stayed open past 10:00 p. m.

So officer Haskins, who I'd had plenty of run-ins with in the past, came by my house one day and warned me that if I didn't junk the old beater, he'd have to write me a ticket, and keep issuing them every month until I got rid of it. So I towed it that same day, knowing that at the rate I was saving money, I'd end up hundreds and hundreds of dollars in debt to the city of Chicago Heights before I even came close to purchasing a new tranny.

I was so pissed off about the whole situation—thinking only about vandalizing my shit-head neighbors' unwanted property—that I forgot to remove the angel from the visor. Or at least I'm pretty sure I did, because this is the first time I've seen it since.

I begin following the speed limit precisely. When I was living out of my Electra, the radio used to talk to me. When I wanted to kill myself. Classic rock and hip-hop transubstantiated unto Holy Water Hymns rinsing my Soul; Choirs of Seraphim renditioning Psalms through my speakers; The Voice of God Prophesying Revelations through postmodern, technological Footprints poems: synchronicity in the lyrics of whatever artist was coming through my stereo. For the longest time, I'd repressed the feeling that certain songs, certain lyrics, words, phrases at certain moments in my life were messages meant specifically for me, then, and there, directly. I repressed those feelings. For fear that I was going insane, becoming some clichéd schizophrenic who thinks television and radio broadcasts are persecutors transmitted from the MK Ultra department of the CIA.

I'm steering nonchalantly down the same potholed streets I'd traveled for years now, still following the speed limit exactly; past the same abandoned stores with their plywood-covered windows spraypainted with graffiti; past the same shifty-eyed pushers posted up in the dark, narrow alleys alongside numerous liquor stores; past the usual, toothless, skull-sunken prostitutes trotting spastically from corner to corner in crack-induced jives as if they were stepping to some a-rhythmic beat inside their lost minds.

Nothing unusual. Just the usual. Except one hooker whose facial features, though heavy, sad, worn, are not rough enough to suggest that she's been working the streets for very long.

Just a few blocks ahead, she's crossing the road I'm driving on. Judging the pace of her strides, it seems that she's likely to step directly in front of my Chevy. But then she pauses for a second at the dotted white line. *She's waiting for me to pass*, I think.

Then something suddenly makes me yank the wheel hard to the left and I just barely miss bouncing her off of my hood, into me windshield. I steer the car back into the lane, my heart pulsating with adrenaline, my skin electrified, hairs standing on end. I look in my rearview mirror, not fully believing what just occurred.

She is standing perfectly still in the left lane with her eyes closed, a hauntingly eerie smile on her colorless, hopeless face. I can feel the blood drain from my own cheeks when I recognize her. It's Maggie O'Connell. My first crush. She was sort of plain to look at. She never really bothered much with makeup, left her chubby cheeks pale, rarely styled her straight, shoulder-length blonde hair. But there was something beautiful about her ordinariness, something dignified in her quiet self-confidence. I was one of those kids who pulled a girl's hair if he had a crush on her; I'd pinch her, smack her ass as hard as I could, not to mention the name calling and vulgar innuendoes. I thought it was cute. Maggie didn't. And she didn't put up with it either. She was gracefully self-possessed, and she slapped the shit out of me or soccer kicked me square in the nutsack anytime I disrespected her even in the slightest. I remember when she pushed me into that glowing-blazed space heater at Josh's birthday party.

I'm a piece of shit. And that white rose I gave her wasn't going to make up for it.

"If you just weren't such an *asshole*, John," she said.

"So you're not attracted to me then. It's my acne, right?"

She rolled her eyes, sighed with frustration; she had that familiar look on her face like she was on the brink of putting her foot in my testicles. I would have let her too, almost gratefully, because at least she'd be touching me, at least she'd be paying attention to me. But she didn't. She took me to the middle school dance instead; probably out of pity, but maybe she thought she saw something under all my sociopathic tendencies.

Whatever the reason, nothing came of that first and only date. It was the first time I'd ever been that close to a girl without performing some flirtatious form of torture or harassment. I didn't know what to do, didn't know how to act. So I went the evening without dancing with her. I eventually contrived to cautiously sneak my arm around her near the end of the night, but I was too insecure to keep it there, even though she sidled up closer to me; I pulled it skittishly away expecting a backhand or a heel to the scrotum, reflexively, because that gentle embrace expressed the same tenderness as every mischievous "love tap" I'd ever teased her with. That was the closest I ever got to her. I couldn't hold onto her.

I remember when I heard how she lost her virginity in an alley behind a Discount Thrift Outlet dumpster. How she dropped out of high school and ended up a teenage mother, addicted to cocaine, in love with a Latin Count who liked to give her black eyes and fat lips. And here she is in my rearview mirror: Living Dead; still shackled to the stones I cast when we were only children; who couldn't know.

The garbled sentences in my head are starting to jabberwocky like dissociative fugue sirens playing Marco Polo; I have to pull over, unfrazzle my mind. I stop at a Stop & Go and buy a thirty-pack of Miller Light tallboy cans.

* * *

Tom is dead before I can get to his bedside; Doris is already asleep, and the rest of the family—all thirteen sons and daughters, all their in-laws, and all the grandchildren—have dispersed to their own homes, everyone except four of the daughters: Barbara, Amanda, Lisa, and Melanie. The four sisters are still awake, making arrangements for the wake and funeral when I knock on the door; I know I'm too late as soon as I see Melanie's baggy eyes cracked with raw red fissures. I apologize and apologize trying not to choke up, then drive to Rob's.

Almost every inch of Rob's apartment is littered with odd trinkets he's scavenged from foreclosed homes he manages for a company that subcontracts for Safeguard: a Peter Max poster book; a Masonic sword; an autographed photo of Ryan Sandberg; a rubber sumo wrestler costume; some crumpled, tattered Marvel and DC comic books; miscellaneous foreign currency; an alabaster Buddha. He's never sold any of it, though some of the trash is veritable treasure.

His refrigerator is decorated with pictures of a little blonde girl and drawings of crayon scribbles signed “Aubrey” in catawampus calligraphy. The artist is not his biological daughter, but how many years later now and still he keeps her bedroom the same as it was the day she and her mother left while Rob was at work.

He called me that day, when he came home to an empty apartment and found that letter revealing the affair Aubrey’s mother was having. He hacked a chili-pepper-shaped scar into his right bicep with a carpenter’s knife. He hadn’t meant to cut himself so deep, and so I had to butterfly bandage his arm back together, even though it really needed stitches, the yellow fatty corpuscles just above the muscle laid bare. The gash was all dried up by the time I got to it, and in order to pull the gouge closed with the butterfly strips I had to break the puss-ed-up scab causing it to ooze fresh blood. I rolled up my sleeve uncovering about 15 or 20 infected-pink razor tallies that looked like cat scratches and said, “Wonder Twin powers activate!”

“Dude,” I say, “I’m sorry, man; I should’ve got here sooner.” I bear hug him. “How you holding up?”

“Eh, I’m alright—I guess. It’s just weird thinking he’s not gonna be around no more—he’s gone—you know. Man, I mean, couldn’t nothing stop my dad. I didn’t think he could ever die.” Rob’s twin Will is sitting cross-legged on the ash-blue sofa, his face buried in his cell phone, texting or Facebooking or something while the television strobes commercials and music videos.

“Yeah,” I add, “he was a bad motherfucker.” Will leans forward, extends a hand and pulls me in to a one-armed hug; returns to his computer phone.

“I’m saying,” Rob continues, “he fought in the Korean War. That was before he was a motherfucking mobster. A fucking hitman on the FBI’s Most Wanted List. And they caught his ass and threw him in federal prison. But he still made us though. You know what I’m saying?” We sit down at his kitchen table cluttered with beer cans, cigarette butts, and pot seeds and stems; between us is a chipped marble chessboard configured with an assortment of wooden and plastic pieces he recovered from a property he cleaned.

“I only know him as the man who gave me food shelter for almost a whole year of my life.”

He opens the game: Knight G1 to H3. I could fool's mate him at will, even though I'd shown him on numerous occasions how to set it up and defend against it. I'm not sure whether he couldn't grasp the five-move progression or just didn't care enough to take inventory. Either way, the game was nothing more than that. We invested nothing of ourselves in any match, any move, pushing pawns, bishops, and knights merely to punctuate conversation.

"Yeah, he lost a million dollars at the track. And—yeah—we slept some months in The Van, and . . . well you remember how he used to chase us around with his revolver when he was still getting drunk all the time. But, I'm saying, we're still here." We clink our beer cans together like a toast. "You know it says in the Bible that God will punish a man's sins for four generations?"

"Yeah: Exodus 20:5."

Rob puts a lighter to an old ratchet head jerry-rigged into a one-hitter, packed with MK Ultra hydroponics. "Well then you know why I am the way I am, and why you are the way you are," his voice raspy, straining to hold the smoke in his lungs while he passes me the hitter; I decline.

"Yeah," nodding my head. "But Ezekiel 18:20 says 'The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.'"

"Right," he lights a cigarette. "That's how my dad left something better with us."

"Now you just gotta carry it on. To the next generation," Rob's passing the hitter to Will but he's mesmerized by hyperlinks and cable TV.

"Hey phone-face," barks Rob, "you're fucking up the rotation." Will comes out of his trance long enough to take a hit and pass the makeshift pipe to Rob. "Fucking shit disgusts me," adds Rob. "We're fucking in the damn hospice; Dad's fucking dieing, can't barely fucking talk or anything, and everybody in there's got their fucking face glued to their phone." I fork his king and rook with my knight. "It's sickening. It's fucking—," futilely figuring how he might save his rook, "inhuman. Fucking—'*Talk to your fucking father,*' I'm thinking to myself." A ribbon of smoke swirls from Rob's Newport into my nostrils; I waft the mentholated smoke away from my scrunching face. He moves his cigarette underneath the table, moves his king out of check. "I don't know, man. I don't get it." I take his rook, then leisurely mow through his ranks, taking no prisoners, sparing none.

"Checkmate."

“You know what I wanna do?—I don’t know . . . I just wanna get up and just start walking and just . . . Go.”

“Where?” I’ve heard this somewhere before.

“Wherever. Nowhere. It doesn’t matter. I just wanna move. Just . . . keep moving.” He looks out the sliding glass balcony door, somewhere out past the pink tricycle parked against the black, steel railing. “I remember when you told me that shit. I thought you were crazy. I was like, ‘*this motherfucker wants to be a fucking hobo*’? . . . But I get it now.” He grabs another beer from the fridge. “Fucking—man—I’m ‘bout to be on a whole ‘nother level. Motherfuckers can’t understand what I been through. Fucking—in my soul—can’t no one tell me nothing. I’m fucking moving shit with my mind and teleporting. I can fucking see things man. Miles and miles away.”

He’s starting to sound like his brother Michael when he used to get soused on mouthwash. “Motherfucker, before you go trying to telekinesis on everything, why don’t you try saving some money to help your Mom pay for the wake and the funeral and everything? Or at least stock up on some storable foods for when the fucking dollar collapses.”

“Naw, man, it don’t work like that. Denvits survive like cockroaches. You know a roach can live for nine days without its head? We don’t need no gold or silver or canned foods or solar generators or water filters or fucking—replantable—fucking non-GMO fucking heirloom seeds or whatever the fuck. And ain’t no one gonna lock me in a motherfucking FEMA camp or fucking eugenicize me into a cyborg or—fucking—nothing. I told you, man. It’s like—we’re like them people in that book.”

“What book?”

“That fucking book you gave me.”

“*Brave New World*?”

“No, the other one. Where they change history and fuck up the language.”

“1984.”

“Yeah, we’re like them people—fucking—the proles—the fucking Salt of the Earth and shit. You know what I’m saying—fucking—we been doing this shit like this for fucking—thousands of years. And they’re gonna just come in here and—fucking—change it all overnight? No—I don’t think so. It don’t work that way.”

“Well, one way or the other. It’s gonna be what it’s gonna be.”

“It’s gonna be beautiful, man.”

* * *

My dad is on the phone when I come to visit, carrying my guitar downstairs through the side door.

“Hello . . . Yeah, this is he . . . Uh-huh . . . For the same reason it is everytime you call . . . Cuz I don’t have any fucking money; what about that don’t you understand? . . . Because I’m self-employed; okay? I don’t get unemployment. I . . . Look, wait, wait, Citicard? Citicard? Didn’t you motherfuckers get a bunch of that fucking bailout money? . . . Yeah, you already got paid, motherfuckers; you don’t get paid twice!” *Click.*

I chuckle, even though the constant tele-harassment sends anxiety throughout my entire body, makes my heart suffocate, twitch erratically, tingle morbidly.

The phone rings again.

“Yeah! . . . This is he . . . Uh-huh . . . Why do you think!? . . . Because carpentry went the way of the rotary phone . . . Look, haven’t I paid the fucking mortgage for the last 30 fucking years? When I get the money, you’ll get it; until then, don’t fucking call again; this is harassment Goddamnit! P . . . Look, I bought this house for 50,000 dollars in 1986. I’ve paid over 300,000 dollars into it. And I still owe over 120,000!/? The way I look at it, it’s mine! You made your money. Th . . . Oh, you want a pile of ashes? Come and repossess it then.” *Click.*

In the basement, I play around with an A-minor-E-major progression on my cheap, white, Oscar Schmidt guitar, improvising syncopations between strums and finger pickings; my agitated nerves melt Zen into the spontaneous harmonies and melodies. Dad descends the stairs with salt tears lingering in his eyes. I stop plucking away.

“It’ll be alright, Dad.”

He sneers at me with his hard-ass nonchalance. “Ah! I don’t give a fuck about that. I’ll shoot it out with them motherfuckers like Grandpa’s old friend Ronny Barbizi. Where’d you learn to play like that?”

“Eh, this ain’t shit. This is just some simple shit I picked up here and there from some people at college.” He hugs me, then scruffs my hair with his labor-worn hand.

“I’m proud of you son.” He walks back up the creaky wooden staircase, pauses midway.

“Remember that dream you used to have where I was leading you down the wrong path?”

“*What?* What dream? What are you talking about?”

“You know; the one where the Devil switches signs?”

“Oh. *Oh.* Yeah, I remember. I didn’t know you saw it like that. *Yeah,* I guess . . . I guess that probably could be what that was about.”

“Maybe I wasn’t leading you down the wrong path after all.”

“You did good Dad. I’m proud of you too.”

He climbs the rest of the stairs. “Dinner’ll be ready in about fifteen minutes.”

“Alright then. I love you.”

“I love you too, son.”

* * *

Mr. Denvit is buried next to his son Michael, who was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered when he was thirty-three. I remember we went looking for his body in the condemned barns off those country roads. The dried, rotting wood like a cornhusk, cracked and peeling, twisting, tilting toward collapse into the flat fields of amber-gold cornstalks surrounding everywhere as if Wild. It was a year after Rebecca, the oldest sister, was found raped and killed somewhere in a Las Vegas desert. I was thirteen; the year Rob compound fractured my right forearm, the ulna gouging through muscle, puncturing skin, bloody. I was chucking stones at him in reprisal to a foul on the basketball court, and when he got in my face to retaliate, I hocked a loogie in his face, threw my blue First Down coat over his head, and then jumped on him while he was blinded by mucus, tangled in my jacket. Dr. Pain (my osteopathic physician’s actual name) had to screw the bones back together with two stainless steel plates.

Two military officers ceremoniously fold an American flag with angular, mechanical, ritualized movements. I’m weeping. Not so much because the casket is ready to be lowered into the earth, but

because it breaks my heart to watch Rob's half-blind, squinty mole eyes watering over as he stares expressionless in disbelief at the coffin; Will's teary-eyes glazed over; Gregg, the youngest, sobbing red-eyed; Tim, the toughest, balling swollen-eyed. But Mrs. Denvit is almost Stoic. Somber yet graceful as the soldiers present her Tom's Stars and Stripes; thirteen children and fifteen grandchildren huddled around her like The Tree of Life. Like Eve or Sarah. There is Peace in her sadness. There is Love all around her. There is Life in Mr. Denvit's Death: Generations and Tribes numerous like solar systems. There is Power in poverty. Wealth in sweat and toil. Mustard seeds. Redemption in Time.

Before we leave, Rob picks a white rose from the bouquet Mrs. Denvit has placed on the footstone marking Michael's grave. After a luncheon at the VFW, the extended family regroups into its smaller, component nuclear family units, and I drive Rob and Will back to their apartment. I stay for some drinks.

"Remember when you punched Jerry Broadway in the sternum with your gym padlock?" Rob asks me.

"Yeah. And then when he tried to do something I told him to his ass to sit down. Motherfucker was like a foot taller than me, and he just sat his bitch ass down."

"What about the time you wrapped your wallet chain around your fingers like brass knuckles and broke Jason Smith's eardrum with that fucking sucker punch when he was walking away from you?"

"Member when I stabbed Justin with a pencil cuz he told me I wouldn't?"

"You were a crazy motherfucker, man."

Rob goes to the bathroom right after Will for the third time in an hour; I'm pretty sure they're doing lines in there. I'm remembering us snorting fat rails. A bump here, a line there. Rub a little on the gums for a numby. Sprinkle some on a blunt; inhaling primo through anesthetized teeth. Line numby bump primo mix it up repeat; repeat, repeat—half the high of being geeked is wanting more; and most of the other half is doing more, the anti-ceremony of the whole thing. I remember when I used to hide bumps in fire-sealed cellophanes all around a house party in random, obscure places so I could forage for them at dawn, when all the blow was snorted up, not even dusty residue clinging to an empty sandwich baggy, licked clean. But you always have to come down eventually, inevitably. Everything restored to its rightful disorder. And the denouement is always right around the corner, just behind you, looming, gaining closer

and closer, chasing while you chase escape; strung the fuck out. Rob and Will know that's why I don't tweak anymore, so they try to be discreet about it.

Rob is sniffing when he comes back from the restroom. "Dude, did I tell you about that fucking dream I had? Where Bob Marley hugged me? And me and you were riding on a caravan with Jesus?" he asks me.

"No."

"Yeah, and, fucking, there was this big hole in the Earth, like a fucking volcano or something. And all this stuff started coming out of it."

"Like lava?"

"I don't remember," snuffles. "But all these guys in suits kept trying to plug it up, and I was like 'no,' but no one would listen to me. And then I was jumping on this trampoline higher and higher, and when I got real high I started screaming until I turned into an Eagle and I was screeching like an eagle. . . . And you were there. You were a wolf."

Will flushes the toilet again and goes back to his room; Rob fills the vacancy. He's jacking his jaw, grinding his teeth when he returns, sniffing.

"Good deeds are done in the Light, and wicked deeds are done under the cover of Darkness," I say.

"Dude, I'm saying, man. All the shit that's happened—all the shit that's been happening—," snuffles, "and you don't think something's gonna happen?"

"Oh, no, I know something's gonna happen. Ain't no doubt about that. But people need to Wake Up. Fucking, this is the New World Order. It's already here. Fuc . . ."

"But it don't matter. Fucking—dude—hold on," he walks to his bedroom while Will is coming out of his own.

"Dude, check out this shit I wrote, dude. Check this shit out," hypes Will.

*"These are the End Times. You better Open your Eyes
and hold them close to the Sky. Like UFOs glowing Lights
in hyperspace. Black Holes broken open in Time.
Back to the Future like Marty McFly, smoking opium pipes."*

*All the History they told me was lies.
Now Everything hurts like birth pangs.
So you cursed your birth place and erased your surname
while they hacked the Earth's veins hemorrhaging volcanic earthquakes
that crack the tectonic plates. It's got me under the weather
that you discuss to forget her. But Love is Forever. Like diamonds.
African blood. Corporate miners.
Colonial empires. Genocide with Bibles.
Templar Knights. The World Bank and Eyeballs
that spy all from dollar bills sniffing up eight-balls.
This ain't living. This is fucking survival.
Like a tribal, cannibal, animal psycho
eating his own child like a Lion in the Wild.
So I'm suicidal, so high I'm bleeding out my eyeballs.
Like Jeshua in the Garden of Gethsemane crying
'till I'm outta the frying pan into Chariots of Fire
flying over the horizon like Enoch and Elijah;
but the climates changing shifting magnetic pole positions
while foreclosed broken homes is filling overloaded prisons.
The Death Toll is ticking like the Dow Jones dipping,
but Depression don't affect me; I'm bipolar and manic.
So panic in your padded room while the dollar collapses.
Plastic Hearts, Rubber Souls, two questions for every answer.
Can't stand to see the man in the mirror that's staring back at me.
Blasphemy like pervert pedophiliac Catholics.
But I'll manage it, dancing with the Devil's Advocate.
St . . . ”*

“Dude, I want you to check these out,” Rob interrupts, carrying an orange plastic milk-crate filled with crinkled, torn comics and some filmy, faded old viewfinder slides from the 60s. “Dude, check out this *Beatle Baily* issue number one.” He’s handing it to me, but Will snatches it and I can hear it rip. “Dude, what the fuck, man? Don’t be fucking up my shit. That shit is fucking—very valuable, man. Gimme that back.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” snaps Will. “It was already ripped. It ain’t fucking worth shit.”

“Yes it is worth a lot—motherfucker. And you don’t know how to take care of it. Now give it back to me.” Will throws it in the crate, fraying the corners even more. “Fucking, people don’t appreciate shit anymore.” He’s handing me a stack of viewfinder slides: Scooby Doo, Space Ghost, The Green Lantern, Johnny Quest. “Dude, check these out.”

I hold them up to the kitchen light so I can see the colors better. “You got a viewfinder?”

“Naw, man; but—fucking—you’ll never see nothing like that ever again. Fucking—I don’t know. Fu . . .”

“It’s fucking garbage, man,” interjects Will. “It’s a fucking worthless piece of garbage. No one’s gonna buy that from you. John, you think anyone’s gonna buy this crap from him?”

What could I say, here in this junkyard museum of faded dreams, so many discarded possessions, abandoned mementos insulating Rob’s broken home, his broken heart? What could I say, here behind these walls padded with antique collectible postcards, an Al Capone bobblehead, autographed Beatles albums, maybe an anniversary gift or a graduation present: eviction debris, the sentimental relics that weighed too much to salvage.

“Naw, man; you don’t understand,” says Rob. “This is fucking—a moment in Time. Fucking—there’ll never be nothing like this ever again. Naw, man; fucking—people don’t know how to appreciate shit anymore.”

CHAPTER 6: Never–Never Land: I Still Love You

I've been driving for almost two hours when I realize that Rob left the flower he picked from Michael's grave on the console of my car. I'm more than halfway home, but I turn around.

Rob insists I accept a joint as payment when I deliver the rose. He knows I haven't chiefted in years, but he refuses my refusals until I yield for no other reason than to placate him and get back on the road before my neuroses start acting up and impair my ability to drive.

Just past rush hour. Jammed traffic underneath the Chicago skyline. Stop Go Stop. Underneath modern industrial castles, fortresses, and palaces. Every vehicle seems to tailgate me, nearly rear-end me. They barrel down on me in my rearview until they blot out the mirror, then brake without anything of a screech somehow. If there were an open lane nearby, I'd whip into it out of panic; since there isn't, I brace for fatal crashes that never come, adrenaline regurgitating my heart up into my throat with each vehicle eclipsing my rearview mirror, swallowing my reflection like a Great Fish. It never comes, of course; by the inches we're creeping per Go Stop Go, not one of these automobiles can be rolling fast enough to bend a fender. But my anxieties are gnawing my fingernails, the OCD jargon in my mind starting to blather: non-words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, volumes; multiplying like bacterial reproduction. Clustered, cluttered. Crammed, climbing over one another like a rioting mob without a common purpose. Neuro-pandemonium.

I turn on the radio to maybe drown out the gobbledygook in my head, to stifle my haywire nervous system. But for some reason I can't get any reception on even one station. Just static hissing and gnashing; RF snowstorms. So I switch the source on my stereo to "CD." Scratched CD. Herking jerking shrapnelled melodies; murky harmonies disjointed spurting like so many muddled firecrackers; mutilated tempo; drums cl-crink cr-clack like washing dishes. Repetitions out of order. Stop go stop Stop Go stop. Jammed like the wordless phonics in my brain.

I come to merge onto Lake Shore Drive. The accelerated velocity makes my heart panic, lungs shrink. I turn off the skipping CD to concentrate on navigating the Freeway. The hum of tires, the rush of whistling wind wooshing through rolled-down windows is all ominous, all too tranquil. Over the aquamarine fields of Lake Michigan, crystals speckle, glint; the buoyed diamonds begin to sink as the turquoise meadow deepens to indigo under the blossoming dusk. I make a hyper-conscious effort to stay five miles under the speed limit. Even semis zip past me like stampeding dinosaurs. My heart races to the thrum of wheels, the low falsetto winds in my windows for expressways and expressways until I exit into The Heights. Driving is a surreal experience like that, when you think about it: so often desensitized to the threat of speeding metal and concrete whizzing past soft flesh and fragile bones, surrounding at every angle.

My pulse is mach speed; my nerves are shellshocked. The claptrap balderdash in my head snowballing, spurred into overdrive. Forgetting the CD I have in is scratched, I turn the stereo back on hoping to drown out my psychic blabber. The instruments jostle into one another ricocheting sporadically like the talkless phonetics swarming my mind. I skip forward through the tracks looking for a song that isn't scratched.

Suddenly a car horn blasts; my attention jolted to the road and I slam on the brakes just before colliding head on with a tan minivan in the middle of an intersection. I freeze, parked under the traffic signal, clutching the steering wheel like a mountain climber's safety rope, heart thumping out cold sweat from every pore, extremities shaking, itching, breaths shortening, accelerating, Panic attacking; while honks scream at me, insult me, threaten me, until I crawl through the intersection. Once safely across, I turn the stereo volume all the way down, then pull over and assault my dashboard and steering column with gorilla punches, grunting cuss words and mad spit that is as intelligible as the garbage ranting in my mind.

After I catch my hysterical breaths and a little composure, I recognize where I am, slowly. Vaguely at first. Like Déjà vu. And then I'm Awake. On the edge of Never-Never Land. The woodland sanctuary of my youth. I put the car in park and step out.

Plodding through soggy dirt, I cross the brilliant tie-dye trellis-like threshold of autumn forest canopy. I take the hiking trail just a few paces, then abandon it, tip-toeing over brambles that snag my clothes, ducking under branches, bending them aside as I sneak through the criss-crossed foliage into the

secret meadow that we called Never-Never Land. As many acres as it spans, with such sparse floral cover growing between it and the beaten path, it's curious that so few people have ever known about the majestic retreat. Close to a half-mile in diameter, almost a Perfect Circle of nothing but waist-high grass except for one crabapple tree maybe 50 acres or so northwest off-center. A herd of deer grazes peacefully near its trunk. A statuesque stag puffs his chest out between me and his doe and fawns. We gaze at each other in stillness until I light the joint Rob gave me, and he dips his nose back down into the thick, tall grass. Inhaling sharply so as to purposefully induce a coughing fit, I arrest the smoke deep in my lungs, suppressing each hack to a nasal squeak. My eyes water as I let the smoke billow lazily from my mouth. Vague paranoia creeps up my spine spinning a myriad of hypotheticals through my brain that hush the non-talk which had ceaselessly menaced my sanity since I left Rob's. I let go; lose myself in God's masterpiece.

I pluck a fluorescent orange-magenta-yellow silver maple leaf before strolling out into the open freedom of the plain through a cornucopia of fluttering buzzing insects dancing pirouetting throughout the atmosphere: yellowjackets, bumblebees, dragonflies, fireflies, mosquitoes, ladybugs, grasshoppers, box-elders. Holding the dieing leaf by its stem with one hand, I caress the brittle, dry-plastic-like surface between its veins with the other. I bring it to the tip of my nose, smell it, savoring the damp, earthy aroma of decaying cellulose and sticks fermented in old rain. Then, pinching the stem with my thumb and forefinger, I present it like a paintbrush to the dissolving canvass sky: dissipating yellow-orange, pink, fuchsia, lavender pastels gradating upward from the tree line. A short gust momentarily picks up, steals the beautifully withering leaf from my fingertips, flights it into the cosmic-watercolored horizon, mixing, melding.

I hit the joint again, meticulously rotating it to prevent it from running; but it's been years since I last toked, so it runs anyway, despite my efforts. I drool a small glob of saliva onto the tip of my index finger, dab it on the spot where it was running. The first time I ever smoked pot was here, in Never-Never Land. I was 11 years old.

Lost Time Lapsed.

The joint has fizzled out. I light it up again and take my wallet out of the front pocket of my black, pinstriped slacks. I remove Melissa's photograph from its plastic sheath, turn it over. There is writing on the back:

An ounce of care is worth a pound of cure.

She copied it from a fortune cookie we shared at a Chinese restaurant on Chicago Road. She's looking at me like a ghost. Only an emptiness I've never seen before in her innocent, brown eyes where pity and disappointment were once apology and regret. Was there ever Love there? I wonder if she can hear me.

This is where we were alone together. Where I stuttered out shitty, cornball poetry I wrote for you. You were so gracious; your eyes so brown: small galaxies looking into my lonely universe. But I think I should've just told you I Love you right then and there.

I knew I Love you when I had that bad acid trip. Mesmerized by visuals. Bubbly landscapes peeking out of some fairytale world, some child's imagination, shaped and textured by a hypersensitivity to the usually translucent, low-frequency UVs painting spectral halos along the perimeters of Everything, halos that rainbowed pale through varying colors as they radiated outward from even the most non-reflective surfaces; the infinite intimate intricacies of even the simplest patterns—a plaid shirt, the way the multi-colored, intersecting stripes would weave in and out of one another, some raising up, some falling back, down, some traveling randomly, yet somehow systematically like Chaos Theory, veering at abrupt angles: left up right down, east south west north—; leaves of grass ruffling against the breeze like ocean swells, the way the ripples and rolls would summon deep, vibrant kaleidoscopic mosaics that swam through collages of blades with the spontaneous passing of each zephyr. The significance of Everything. Every thing significant, beautiful, meaningful. So meaning-full that I would detonate into violent cackles through hot tears and taught, aching, exerting abdominals. Connections upon inter-connection connecting so simplistically, so artistically, in such crisp contrast to the bleak dissonance the everyday world refracted in my sober mind's eye, they opened my soul to a divine perspective. New; an extra-intro-perspective that was so pristine, so pure, so rich it was absurd, so absurd it was Holy, Real, Fulfilling.

But soon my psyche had expanded beyond my cerebrum and nervous systems, the synapses between mind and body glitching like a computer virus. My hands crippled to my chest like brachial palsy; I could only bend my wrists, just slightly. My thoughts raced lightspeed; too fast for my mouth to shape

them into words, slurring as if my lips were paralyzed with gallons of Novocain.

“D—ude—I—thi—nkI’m—to—o—f—uckedu—p—Ith—inkI—’—mhavin—gab—adtr—ip.”

“Qcwrdrvathjgnlkoupyqtwrczasgxebhjvytimkuloghihp,” said Android.

“Du—deId—idn’—tu—n—derst—a—ndaw—ordyo—us—ai—d.”

He smiled, nodding his head.

“Dud—et—h—a—t’sn—otg—oo—d.”

Somehow I hobbled my way through Never-Never Land back to my dad’s, twitching ticking through layered, intersecting two-dimensional planes that cross-sectioned corporeality and distorted my body like funhouse mirrors as I channeled myself through each. Psychic nausea swarmed my cerebellum, dizzying like vertigo as the abstract geometrics that were once tree branches intertwined with my head like brambles in my spine, twisting disorienting. Everything was Black and White. Flashing fragments skipping. I kept thinking Pat Conran was following me through the woods, and I kept wanting to turn around and knock him the fuck out in revenge for the time he paid Block to throw me through that window.

When I got to my dad’s, I tried to pass out on the cold, damp, mildewy concrete floor of the basement. But my heartbeat was booming like a base drum, and all I could think about was Dad finding my lifeless 18-year-old body rigor mortised at the bottom of the stairwell. So I climbed back upstairs and knocked on Dad’s bedroom door:

“D—ad?”

“Huh?”

“Ith—i—nkI—ove—rdo—se—d—onaci—d.”

He tried to counteract the LSD by feeding me bottles and bottles of Budweiser. I kept looking at the phone and asking, “Didyoucalltheambulance?”

“No,” he’d say.

“But—myheart’sbeatingreallyfast.”

“That’s what happens when you take five hits of LSD.”

“So—I’mgonnadie?”

“No.”

“Soyoucalledtheambulance?”

“No.”

“But—my heart’s beating really fast.”

“That’s what happens when you take five hits of acid.”

“So—I’m gonnie?”

“No.”

He laid me down on the couch, cocooning me in blankets and I thought I was on a stretcher being wheeled to the emergency room. My body became misconnected, appendages attaching anatomically incorrect: my elbow bending my thigh, my ankle rotating my neck, fingers sitting up from my hips, torso contorting around my ears and toes. Metamorphing arms and legs into tree trunks spreading roots into deep-purple Magic Eye murals. I thought I was dead. In Hell. Then I thought was a vegetable. And all I could think about was how I would never see you again.

That was the day Topher Thomas balled up his sweaty Deigo-T and stuffed it in your purse, and I almost broke the graduated cylinder we were using for chemistry lab over his head. But you were the only person kind enough to be lab partners with the temperamental, burnt-out leper in the back of the class; so I didn’t want to upset you or embarrass you with a knockdown drag-out tumbling across your lab table.

I remember one time when I came to walk you to class from your locker. You didn’t know I was behind you, submerged in a river of gossiping teenagers like a bubble in frothing cascading waters.

“Ugh, you like him?” asked April. “He’s a weirdo.”

“Yeah,” injected Crystal, “he’s crazy. I heard he stabbed Brian Wellman with a pen.”

You hesitated; I stayed back, drowned in the waves of freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors flooding from class to locker to class between bells; I didn’t want you to feel like you had to stick up for me.

“Well . . . he’s really sweet to me,” you said. April and Crystal just looked at each other, then rolled their eyes.

I tapped you on your shoulder and you turned around with that magical smile that makes your eyes twinkle like luminescent turtle-shell gems.

“Come on,” said April walking away.

“Yeah, we’re gonna be late for class,” added Crystal. The Light in your eyes waned to a dim glow

like a child's nightlight.

I didn't expect you to walk with me. You were Perfect. Perfect cheerleader body; Perfect grades: salutatorian. But you must've felt sorry for me and didn't want to hurt my feelings, because you walked with me. And you waited for me everyday. Even after your friends started distancing themselves from you, and I told you to save your reputation.

I remember you used to always say how smart I was. But I always told you that if it seems like I got a lot of answers, it's just because I got a lot of questions. You were always telling me to fill out applications for college. I was comfortable working with my hands and smoking weed and eating mushrooms for the rest of my life. But I would've went for you. I would've went with you. But I couldn't tell you that. Not without saying "I Love you."

You slapped me across my face when you saw the puss-festered burn-scab on my arm, your eyes glossed over with trembling tears. That was the same morning you saw me plow suicidally through that red light and almost t-bone that SUV on the way to school.

I found a poem printed in black medieval calligraphy on a folded sheet of salmon stationary paper. Something about a Royal Purple Rose growing in a garbage dump under medical waste and discarded X-rays, and how it refused to bloom in the SunLight. An anti-tropism. I never realized you were the one who wrote it, for me.

Yoshi saw the way you beamed when you ran into us at K-Mart that one day. "The fuck you got that I ain't got?" he said.

"Oh, she's just being nice. Cuz she's sweet like that. It don't mean nothing."

"Naw, she likes you Johnny; she likes you."

I've had a crush on you since the seventh grade. You sat in the front of social studies class. And I sat in the far-back corner where I threw stolen rolls of toilet paper at Mr. Lale while he chalked on the blackboard; whenever I wasn't daydreaming about you or scraping cryptic poems into desks and cabinets with my keys:

***For every answer, there are 2 questions. Life is the answer.
Any questions?***

Six years later, Mr. Body had me carted out of Bloom Trail High School on a stretcher; suspended indefinitely. Security claimed I appeared to be overdosing on something, which could have been true on

almost any other day I was in attendance, but that day I was straight as an arrow. I offered to walk calmly, peacefully to the ambulance, but all the authorities argued it was a necessity that I be secured in the stretcher. I started doing handstand push-ups, and they strapped me down like a mental patient, at which point I started pretending I was talking to voices in my head. I faked violent convulsions, growling, slobbering, thrashing, kicking the metal cart clink-clank, rocking it rattling it while the paramedics wheeled me past the library. I didn't know you saw me, while you were checking out some books, as I seized down the halls theatrically.

They suspended me for a week, even though there was no real proof that I'd been under the influence. A punitive vacation.

Dad was irate: "C'mon karate man!" he instigated. And before I knew what happened, he kicked me in the testicles, split my lip with a punch to the mouth, and put me in a full-nelson.

Peeling out, squealing to St. Joseph Church.

I squirmed and flailed to break free, futile;

The pit of my stomach finally knotting, churning from the kick to my nuts.

I backpeddled him into the stove;

Hammer fistng my legs erratically, clubbing the steering wheel through hysterical sobs until the horn

jammed: BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

a pot of boiling spaghetti crashed to the puss-yellow kitchen tile splattering sauce and noodles everywhere;

Yanking the horn out of the steering column, throwing it in the back seat, then proceeding to pummel the

wheel some more, snot-nosed, eyes swollen red.

still tied up,

Pulling into the Church parking lot.

I charged him backwards into the Ice Mountain water cooler toppling the 4-gallon jug off of the dispenser, flooding the floor with drinking water;

Wiping the crusted black blood off my lips and teeth, drying my eyes on my baby-blue terrycloth sweater,

covering my disheveled, greasy brown hair with a white, crocheted skullcap that looked like a kufi.

I escaped his clutches somewhere during the impact;

The starless sky, empty black.

instantaneously he swung on me with a loopy hook;

Exhaling forcefully, shaking out my head and limbs, composing myself, approaching the broad oak double-doors to the cathedral decorated lavishly with elegant Victorian dental moldings and elegantly crowned trim.

I ducked reflexively, bobbed and weaved, countered with my own hook;

A homeless man in a tan carhart loitering just outside the entrance; his hair long and oily; moving, speaking as if drunk or drugged up on downers or some sort of opiate or combination thereof: "Is there a service tonight? I never been to a Catholic Church before," asking through a sparse few butter-brown teeth.

he staggered;

Didn't want him to follow me, afraid he'd be noisy and belligerent with inebriation; didn't want to get thrown out for guilt by association.

I stepped in to close the distance, follow up with a one-two;

Didn't want to deny him either.

I slipped in the thin puddle of bottled water, cracked the back of my head on the tile;

Capitulated; invited him in, walking quickly ahead so no one thought we came together.

he grabbed an aluminum folding chair from under the table, raised it over his head like a maul, then

slammed it down on me like a pile driver;

Slumping myself into a stiff wooden pew next to an elderly white-haired woman sitting austere with veiny, liver-spotted, rheumatism-ballooned hands folded rigidly on her lap; began weeping again, tightening my throat, flexing my abs, trying to suppress my tears so as not to cause a scene; efforts hopeless; body spasms, spit cutting through clenched teeth

I reverse somersaulted out of the way at the last second.

The elderly woman leaning toward me, whispering, "You need to take your hat off in Church."

He restrained his onslaught, staring at me wild-eyed, heaving, huffing, puffing.

Removing my hat, still convulsing, attempting to smother my tears.

"Get the fuck out of here!" he shouted.

The homeless man sitting in the empty space next to me, extending his hand.

I scrambled to my feet, spat black blood in his face. “Fuck you! You fucking piece of shit!”

“I can take your pain. Cuz I’m strong like that,” his voice somehow articulate now.

I stampeded out the door, trampled to my Buick.

Clasped my hand in his; squeezing it, and chills radiating from my heart out through goosebumps on my back and shoulders; my cries softening, tranquilized, though still hyperventilating.

I stomp-kicked the wheel-well of his new silver pick-up truck as I passed it, caving it in.

“You ever seen a wheel?” he asked, “Like on an old-time wagon?”

He must have seen me from the kitchen window, because he rushed outside wielding my red, hand-me-down twelve-string guitar as I turned the keys in the ignition.

Trying to look in his eyes, but something repelling me, something there in the silver-glass gloss, somehow solid black.

He brandished it by the neck like an axe, waved it in the air a bit so I could see it, then bashed it to smithereens against the old silver maple in the middle of the yard.

“God is like a wheel,” he said. “It doesn’t matter if your Abraham or Isaac or Jacob; you’re just a spoke in the wheel. You don’t have to be a martyr. Just pray for the strength to endure.”

DO NOT FORGET TO ENTERTAIN STRANGERS, FOR BY SO DOING SOME PEOPLE HAVE ENTERTAINED ANGELS WITHOUT KNOWING IT.

—HEBREWS 13:2

His name was Michael: “The baddest guitar player the Heights ever seen.”

I drove my car to Never-Never Land, killed the engine, and prayed until I fell asleep under the somehow transubstantiated full moon, glimmering sun-golden, inflated twice its diameter.

I stayed most of that week I was suspended at Mysti’s, a twenty-one-year-old exotic dancer: toned milk-white curves; hair dyed a metallic auburn that shimmered a rainbow of reds and purples; her emerald eyes hidden behind contacts that simulated those of a cat, gazing mystically from underneath her sharply arched eyebrows which were offset by a hoop pierced through her left brow.

She and Yoshi had been living together at her Glenwood apartment since they started fooling around that summer. I never could figure out what she saw in him. We called him Yoshi not because he ate a lot, but because he was fairly overweight. Not obese but nearly rotund: two hundred and ten pounds of mush and barely taller than me. Tinted, corrective glasses rested on his lightly-freckled face. Pale. Flat.

Angular. He wasn't particularly artistic and he certainly wasn't athletic. If he was intellectual or insightful, his actions never reflected it. His idols were Tony Montana and Tyler Derden and he did everything possible to emulate them in even the most tedious activities, his demeanor forcibly mysterious as if he thought he was in some B movie, each scene woven together with clichés, gimmicky plot twists, and cheesy, melodramatic acting. But I must say, aside from the facts that an ounce of cocaine was the heaviest weight he'd ever pushed at a single time and his constituents were adolescent burnouts and wannabe gangsters like the Almighty Brothers and the Green Street Boys, he played the part quite well. Well, he definitely had the reckless self-endangerment part down anyway. Maybe that was what attracted Mysti. I could see straight through his whole façade, his plastic mystique; but for some reason, girls always gushed over it, so much so that I even adopted some of his charades in my own flirtations, especially whenever I was too nervous to be myself around a particularly gorgeous young lady.

I never had to do that with you though. Maybe because I had long ago resigned that you were 40,000 leagues above my own; I pushed any sexual tension between us out of my mind, believing that you could never have Feelings for me the way I have Feelings for you. But maybe I was relaxed with you moreso because I knew you would never shun me, never even judge me. Not like April and Crystal did.

Yoshi used to make overtly debauchorous sexual advances at them, just to make them feel degraded. It was his roundabout way of getting revenge for me, defending whatever honor there was between two drugged-out thieves.

We gorged ourselves on ecstasy that week I was suspended. Grinding up pills, snorting them, shivering and cringing while gagging on the X as it drained from my sinus down my throat. The MDMA circulating quickly through my bloodstream. My fingers fidgeting. My teeth clenching, chattering as my body temperature would rise massaging me with a soothing sweat like sacred hot springs. My muscles loosening into Jell-O as my thinning irises would roll up into the back of my eyelids. I popped five-and-a-half grey fish that Wednesday and listlessly watched streetlights throw seizures through the speeding midnight blue-black Dan Ryan. A neon-electric tie-dye pulsating through the world to the reverberation of my epileptic eyeballs. And then . . .

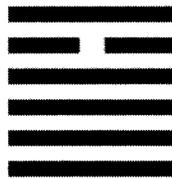
Quiet. Grey. A thin open sky, cloudless and grey; Quiet. A pavement. Grey, solid, still. Walking, still. A numb whispering breeze, grey-white bland blend. And you are there. Still. With me. Still. Walking still. I

*can't see your face, only grey-white, pale. Blur and your hair black. But you are there though.
Somewhere close out there; in the grey. Soft, quiet, still. I can feel your supple curves; laced around me
like silken scarves, grey in the grey winds. Grey.*

Then I was splashed with digital baselines, TR 808 kicks and snares, showered with cold steel-mechanical percussion, effervescent synthesized timbres; hovering warp speed in the passenger seat of Yoshi's shit-box Corsica through vibrating, stretching prisms of traffic lights, reflectors, head lights, and street signs, toward a rave downtown. "Going to The 'Nother Place" was what we called it.

Mysti read my Tarot cards that night. People like apparitions in the corner of my eyes disappeared around corners behind doors. Yoshi and I cast yarrow stalks:

Heaven-Fire: (Ta Yu)



*Possession of Great Things
What Heaven gives to mankind becomes visible in the light of Fire.
Encourage goodness and prevent evil. Such effort, undertaken with moderation and clarity, accords with
the laws of Heaven and leads to great success*

We communicated telepathically. As we had learned to. Maybe it was because nothing Yoshi ever did or said was genuine; there was always an ulterior motive with him, always an underlying scheme or scam, and I'd learned to read his feints, a step ahead of him all the time. Of course, in time he came to anticipate my clairvoyance, a step ahead of my step ahead, and we were deadlocked in extra-sensory combat. Psychic chess.

I remember one day, his pasty face seemed to blanch clammier and clammier as I probed it for a response. Soon his cheeks and forehead glossed over as if dimly glowing. The glow illuminated and I felt a pressure around my head. Intuitively, I pushed the force back. For a moment it relented. Then it returned and I responded in kind. This relay continued for some time. It was like a call and response jazz piece or a kickboxing match. Communication without words. Meaning condensed into rich vibratory

symbols part of an infinite semiotic. Suddenly it dawned on me for the first time like an astral wave crashing sublimely against the shallowest shores of my consciousness.

“We’re . . . communicating . . . telepathically,” I said with half-belief. His incandescent face returned to its naturally waxy state with the speed of a light switch as he lowered his eyes with what seemed like a subtle humility I’d never before seen him display.

“I like to call it ciphering,” he said. “Me and Mysti been able to do it for a minute now.” Then he cocked his head with his cocky smile and peeked at me sideways as if to say “*watch this*.” He stood up, walked casually over to the sliding glass door, opened it, and cofined off the balcony ass-first. I rushed to the railing and found him sitting carelessly in a pseudo-lotus position on the sidewalk below.

That was about six months to date before I was suspended for “public intoxication” at school. Six months before Everything changed.

“You’re not going to kill anyone, are you?” he asked me. “Promise me you won’t kill anyone.”

It jabbed my insides suddenly, without warning, without context, like a knife plunging clandestinely into my guts in the middle of a fistfight, the punctures indistinguishable from the punches, not knowing I’d been cut until the fight’s over and I’d already bled out critically.

A burning hatred I’d never before known jolted reflexively out of my eyes, spearing his with threats that shocked me within, yet coursed through my veins, boiling them, rooting into my bones. I flipped over Mysti’s coffee table, scattering Tarot cards, knocking ashtrays and day-old beer cans onto her carpet as I stormed toward her apartment door. Before exiting, I put my knuckles through the drywall next to the threshold.

I really don’t know what came over me, but it scared me. Scared me that I might actually do it. Might kill someone. Might kill you. I felt it in my muscles, welling up, spilling over. Wanting to strangle you, feeling my fingernails digging into my palms, hands gripping themselves, tightening as if your neck was already in their clutches.

I kicked open the main entrance to the apartment complex and exited into the evening sun as it finished its colorful descent toward the dark forest line bordering Mysti’s apartment. How could he could tell me I’m not who I am, that we’re not who we are? He was supposed to know me better than that.

I lit a Marlboro Red and dragged hard on it until my throat burned and I almost coughed as I

roamed along the bike trail that traced the perimeter of the forest. Yoshi and Mysti were soon chasing after me. I ignored them, marching, hot-boxing my square.

“Dude, come back to the fucking apartment, man.” I said nothing. “Dude . . .”

“Motherfucker,” I lashed out, “you’re supposed to be my best friend, you’re supposed to know me better than anyone, and you’re accusing me of being a fucking murderer? How the fuck am I supposed to respond to that shit? Dude, I don’t even wanna fucking look at you. Get the fuck away fr . . .”

“Shh!” said Yoshi. We all halted in our steps.

“What?” asked Mysti.

“Shh!” he repeated. He tiptoed cautiously off the trail, squatted low to the earth, and started clawing up the dirt with his fingernails like a cat. Tiny golden orbs escaped the hole hovering just above the ground. When he went to hold the glowing spheres they were repelled like mercury. After several failed attempts he dug another hole. Then another one and another. Suddenly he shot up to his feet reaching for the foggy crescent moon. A strange language left his lips chanting.

“Yoshi?” asked Mysti. The cryptic hymn was cut off mid-verse as Yoshi speared his solid black pupils into Mysti before galloping off into the woods on all fours like a beast.

“Yoshi!” she cried again chasing after him. I tried to follow but before I could take one step off the trail, something threw a small stone at my feet. I paused and scoped the area. Finding nothing, I tried to advance once more. Another rock came skipping across the concrete at my toes. I stopped again and a presence enveloped the wilderness. Every hair on my body stiffened like a dead body. My hands grew cold and clammy. My heart accelerated. But something told me that the entity could sense fear like a predatory animal. So I reacted by ghost-reciting some poem I’d never heard before or again. The lyrics muffled my terror, erecting a screen between the being and my mind, my spirit.

When my cognizance returned, I was somehow back in Mysti’s apartment with little recollection of my retreat. “#9” was playing on a cheap boom box. I balled up on the love seat trying to retrace my steps, to make sense of my encounter. Soon my eyes fluttered and rolled up into the back of my eyelids until I fell asleep.

My eyes startled opened as I sprang upright in the love seat at the very moment that Yoshi exploded through the apartment door ass-naked. He ran straight to Mysti’s bedroom and slammed the

door. Eerie, guttural noises stirred inside the room but I clamped my eyes shut, ignoring it as best I could.

I put my index finger in a meat slicer the following morning, cutting lemons working as a busboy at Balmoral Race Track. The same EMT that stretchered me out of Bloom Trail a few days prior drove me to get stitches, shaking her head but smiling.

I was still half-asleep when I heard Mom's voice the morning after, so I don't remember what she said. But it was something about being bombed or under attack or something. I rolled out of bed and swam through the eerie tension which seemed to have a body and a weight that tangled everything like humidity. Mom had just left for work. She forgot to turn the TV off and as I stepped onto the vintage, snot-green living room carpet expecting to begin a carefree day with a bowl of generic brand cereal, I was confronted with the image of a commercial airliner smashing into the World Trade Center.

Maybe it was the fifteen-frames-per-second broadcast. Or maybe it was seventeen years of unfiltered exposure to Schwarzenegger films and *Mortal Kombat*. Or maybe I'd *never* known reality. Whatever it was, my brain would not accept the testimony coming from my eyes. I stood frozen in an empirical fog, my five senses in a stalemated grappling match as I looked out over the tree line across the street from my flagstone patio waiting to see a stealth bomber or satellite-guided ballistic missiles screaming across the cloudless, ice-blue horizon; envisioning a sheet of white-hot light sweeping over the south suburbs of Chicago, pulling every color from the spectrum in a nuclear winter where everything smears together in shades of grey like black and white television. And the only thing I could think of was you and why I wasn't with you on this eve of Armageddon.

I came back to school dressed in the hospital gown I had to wear during the psychiatric evaluation I was given the day they stretchered me out of the principal's office; a blue hunting hat like the ones mailmen wear in the winter crowned my head with its ear muffs flapping out to the sides like wings; my right index finger wrapped in an ace bandage that made it look like the barrel of a pistol. I aimed it at every security guard: *P'CHKOW*. The school board had a meeting discussing the implications of my deadpan prop comedy, and a new school handbook that banned any such "terroristic threats" was published. So I started playing my harmonica in the hallways between periods, which they also banned before the semester had passed. Do you remember how I used to harp for you on the coastline in Cancun?

You told me I couldn't be in Love with you: something about a difference between Love and

being in Love. Is it childish if I say I still Love you? We never even kissed. I didn't so much as hold your hand when we went to see *Shrek* at Western Heights Cinema, making it a point to be extra-gentlemanly, to prove I wasn't just trying to get in your pants. I think it just confused you though; made you feel awkward.

I used to parade around Trail singing "Johnny Was a Good Man." And April would chime in on backup accompaniment with "but he was terrible in bed."

When we went to Cancun together, on our senior trip, you were already engaged to Paul, that guy from Marion Catholic High School; the one you grew up with, who used to go to Blink 182 concerts with you and took you to the senior prom while I was comparing a mugshot of me on four hits of ecstasy with a mugshot of me on five hits of acid, sitting in jail for brawling in the street: me, Yoshi, Justin, and Josh versus Beaner and the screwdriver he always carried in his pocket, Lurch with that malignant-looking sty growing over his eye, Tat the fucking lackey, the Monsvilles, and the rest of the Almighty Brothers.

You'll be safe with Paul. I knew that when he got that scholarship to Loyola and bought you that diamond ring. You wore it everywhere the whole time we were in Mexico, but everyone there thought I was your fiancé. The way you held my hand anywhere we went, all the time, from club to club, always sharing a Sex on the Beach. The way you always rode the shuttle bus back to the hotel with your chin resting on my shoulder, allowing every turn of the steering wheel to gravitate your body into mine, your beauty crushing my heart heavy like the weight of your epithalamium, crushing like coal compressed into a diamond.

"Life," I'd say; "Life is the situation. But the Stars are beautiful." Then I'd clean up the liquor you'd routinely spill all over the portside deck of the nightly Booze Cruise along the Gulf Coast. We'd fall asleep on the beach together watching God tie-dye the clouds with the sun rising over the ocean horizon. The federalies would wake us up and tell us to go back to our hotel. And I'd walk you back to your room through the salty humidity. You wanted me to stay with you. I laid with you until you fell asleep, then bought a dime bag of weed off a guy selling Dominoes pizza out of a portable oven on the back of a moped.

Sometimes Senior Frog's would still be open, and I would dry-hump obscenely all over whatever drunken hotties were desperate and horny enough to dance with me in the minutes before last call.

Thinking of you.

“When you gonna pull the trigger, Johnny?” That’s what Yoshi used to say.

“It ain’t like that. I ain’t trying to just fuck the shit out of her, alright? I ain’t like you like that.”

“She’s probably sitting there at the movies all wet like, ‘why don’t he just finger me already,’”
cackling.

“Don’t you ever want something more than just fucking and getting fucked up and fucking shit up like you’re fucking up you’re life?”

“Like what?”

“Like Love. Like Truth. Like God.”

“It ain’t nothing but a bunch of cowboys robbing each other.”

“So just go against everything that’s Good.”

“Balance is everywhere and Everything. It happens whether you like it or not.”

“That’s why we live in a perfect fucking utopia.”

“You can’t save the world. Motherfucker, you can’t save yourself.”

“No. There’s something more we were meant for. Something . . .”

“Once you hold on to something, it’s not yours anymore. You have to let it go. Sometimes you have to let go and just live life.”

Yoshi lent me his sunglasses before I went to Cancun. I couldn’t never see shit the whole trip, because his shades were always fogged with hot moisture in the air. Until that last night, I’d thought my surroundings were blurry, as if refracted through a coke bottle, only because I was drunk as shit. Until the glasses fell off my nose when I punched out the giant Senior Frog standing outside the club. I wiped the condensation off and put the shades back on. Everything Clear. But the muggy air would steam up the lenses in less than a minute.

You started smoking cigarettes in Mexico. The day we went snorkeling along the coral reef and I almost got us inked by a school of squid. You started off with just a puff here and there off Crystal’s Newports, but soon you were bumming whole squares from her.

We were on the golden adobe balcony of your hotel room listening to the caged peacocks below in their kennels; outside in the sticky summer air under palm trees, those little lizards scuttling everywhere, trying to crawl in your room. I wouldn’t give you one of my Lucky Strike non-filters.

“You don’t need to be smoking this shit,” I said; you just looked at me with a hand on your tilted hip, the other laced around my neck. “Yeah, I know what you wanna say.”

“No you don’t. What? Say it then.”

I just looked at you from the corner of my eye, lit my square.

“Okay, Daddy,” we both said it at the same time. You giggled and looked down at the peacocks below.

“But I don’t know you, right?” I said. You hugged me. I can’t Love you, right? A silly, puppy-love high school crush doesn’t last for more than ten years. Does it? Maybe I’m delusional, obsessing like a creep. Maybe I don’t know what Love is. Maybe it doesn’t even exist. A failed attempt at aviation, the illusion of flight during the initial moments of freefall before a doomed contraption smashes into the earth, plummeting stardust impacting with the dirt. Or maybe it’s all the same. We are all stardust and we are all dust. We are all stars and we are all dirt. We are all decaying. Always. From conception unto convalescence. Maybe I should just Let Go.

CHAPTER 7: Let Go

I'm driving a 45-mile-an-hour bend now. Somehow. A country road. I don't know how I got here, don't remember driving for some time now, but I'm hugging the curve smooth like a cloud. My CD is working now—Tupac Shakur:

*Staring at the world through my rearview.
Scream to God; He can't hear you.
Heart beating fast; time to die,
getting high watching time fly.*

I'm bobbing my body to the rhythm. Pitch Black. Except my brights enlightening upon galaxies of multicolored gravels and pebbles beneath billions of blue stars. I'm noticing that it's more like the road is turning under my car while I'm trying to keep my tires from slipping off. Too High. The road is shifting off and onto and back off its radius, the double-yellow lines skipping in space and time like my headlights are strobe lights. The harder I try to keep my wheels in alignment with the painted lines between lanes, the harder it is to stay out of the cornfields, let alone in the lines. But as long as I keep my body bobbing on beat with the music, my eyes centered where the street disappears into its vanishing point in the distance, my car seems to glide effortlessly, seamlessly between the lines. I Lose Time when I do that though, so I can't let go into the music like a ceremonial drum, afraid I might let go into a ditch; my left brain wakes up and tries to trace the street with my tires causing the asphalt to swerve under my car, swirling like a trail of smoke. Let Go back into the lane. Hold onto the steering wheel into a guardrail. Let Go. Hold on let go.

~ ~ ~

I'm searching for an escort on Craig's List. For the first hour or so, I'm just windowshopping, browsing the pages, clicking and scrolling through a cornucopia of flesh for sale; every complexion, petite and plump. Fantasies lingering like excitement. Broadband foreplay. Eventually I decide upon one of several bestlatinaintowns, her bubble ass and tits accentuated by her arched back, navel peeking out of her half-shirt.

I don't know what's the proper etiquette for this type of relationship—not that I really understand the correct protocol for any sort of human relationship—; do I just go ahead and ask for sex right off the bat? Or are there still certain preliminary formalities we have to attend to, like a job interview? I mean, this is just a business transaction, right? Just an exchange of bodily fluids, no?

I figure it's best to be as polite and gentlemanly as possible; I don't want her to creep out and think I'm some kind of pervert predator. I send her an email:

From: savage84@bnw.com

To: bestlatinaintown58@hotmail.com

Subject: Company

Best Latina,

Will you be available to provide this lonely gentleman some company tonight?

Sincerely,

JS

I keep refreshing my email every ten minutes for the next three hours, until she replies with her standard hourly rate. I'm not so desperate that I'll pay two hundred dollars for an hour of sex when I can spend a few bucks at the bar and prey on girls too wasted to remember my name or notice how socially inept I am.

Lady's Night at the Tender Trap Tavern. I'm roosting myself on a barstool, nursing the same plastic cup of draft beer into the wee hours of the morning. Sultry drunk girls looking for someone to take them home. Blaring music, too much bass. I'm leering everywhere; girls creped out. But a few goggle

back with suggestive eyes; hair flipped back with a toss of the head. I think to initiate a conversation, but I've never been able to distinguish the subtle innuendoes that signal a woman's desire from everyday femininity. Or maybe I'm just insecure; afraid of rejection. Either way, I can't rouse the confidence to approach even the pig-nosed, double-chinned white girl with the platinum highlights who's been staring conspicuously at me for the past fifteen minutes. I'm glancing at her over my draft, across the bar counter, at intervals, and then she disappears behind a small clique walking by; she's gone when my line of vision is cleared. I down the remainder of my flat, warm beer, ready to go home when she appears all of a sudden at my side.

"Were you looking at me?" she asks, twirling a lock of her hair, batting her eyelashes.

"Yeah," I reply, lowering my eyes, blushing. Uncomfortable silence while I stammer, bumbling for the most inoffensive way to brazenly propose a one-night stand of wild, meaningless sex. "Umm . . . well, . . . uh . . ."

"This place is getting kinda lame. I wanna get out of here," she slurs, a harsh odor of whiskey in her hot breath punches me in the face, and I realize now how inebriated she is.

"Uh . . . I don't really know of any other bars or clubs we can go to around here. . . . I don't really have much of a social life." Awkward silence as she tries to balance her chin on her palm, leaning on her bent elbow propped unsteady on the counter. I'm fidgeting, chewing my fingernails, counting the wood grains meandering through the laminated bar counter. She hops off her stool, almost falling, then stumbles away without a word. It occurs to me now, she was hinting that I take her back to my place or hers for a sport fuck. She was throwing herself at me. But I'm fucking clueless.

- - -

I drive home, inadequate and humiliated despite my hyper-self-conscious efforts to avoid the embarrassment of rejection.

Returning to the solipsistic anonymity of the internet, like a dog returning to its vomit, I create myself a profile on MyFuckSpaceBook, one of those social networking sites where people hook up for no-strings-attached sex.

I'm surfing through the "Women Seeking Men" directory, instant messaging any even remotely attractive female between the ages of 18 and 45.

My IMs are timid at first:

Hi .

How are you?

Hello?

No replies.

Eagerness irks me to poke and prod more and more:

Lonely?

Plans for tonight?

Need some company?

Still no response.

My eagerness becomes impatience, escalates to agitation; my messages become aggressive, vulgar:

Looking for sex?

Want to fuck?

Need some dick?

Finally a reply from a long-faced Plain Jane with straight, long sandy-brown hair:

upload a photo to yr profile or email me 1 or something so i can
c what u look like

I message her back explaining I don't have a digital camera; she writes back:

well i need to know what u look like if u wanna hook up ;)

I IM back telling her I'm going to drive to the Walmart down the street and buy a cheap digital camera, and that I'll send her a picture as soon as I get back.

She replies with another winking smiley face emoticon:

;)

It takes me almost an hour to figure out how to operate the gizmo. morganaschild9 has signed off by the time I get the photograph uploaded to my profile; so I put a .jpg in her in-box, hoping she'll see she has new mail and then log back on.

I stay logged in, waiting for her to contact me while I work on my thesis:

“[W]e will gradually replace ourselves with our robotic technology, achieving near immortality by downloading our consciousnesses . . . But if we are downloaded into our technology, what are the chances that we will thereafter be ourselves or even human? . . . Genetic engineering promises to . . . replace reproduction, or supplement it, with cloning”—Bill Joy, co-founder of Sun Microsystems

Joy, Bill. “Why the Future Doesn't Need Us.” *Wired*. Wired, 1 Apr. 2000. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.

Hours pass without word from her.

I'm getting ready to log out when she finally IMs me:

mmm! send me another pic with yr shirt off flexing yr muscles

I comply; she replies:

hot! why don't u send me a pic of yr dick now

That doctor from the free clinic is the only woman who's ever seen my penis, so I'm apprehensive about exposing myself to morganaschild9; but if she thinks my junk is comically small, I won't have to experience the shame of actually listening to her laugh derisively at me, actually see the ridicule in her eyes.

I send her a .jpg of my limp dick; she messages back:

i wanna see what it looks like hard

I message back:

Okay, but I want to see what you look like naked first.

She complies—emails me a photo of her spindly body, almost shapeless: pointy little breasts; bony angular hips; curveless. But I'm not picky.

I stroke my penis erect, snap a photograph, mail it to her; she replies:
tell me yr kinkiest fantasy n don't hold back

Reply:

Well, when I was younger, I always fantasized about choking a girl unconscious while I fucked her.

Reply:

oh...send me your phone number

Reply:

(141)555-1932

I munch my fingernails waiting for her to call:

Ring.

“Hello.”

“Hmm. . . . So tell me about this choking fetish you have.”

“To be totally honest, I'm really not into that type of stuff anymore. It's . . . I'm just, different . . .”

“Oh, . . .”

“ . . .”

“well that's too bad. Cuz I *love* rough sex. I love being slapped around and choked and having my hair pulled. And if you pin my wrists down to the mattress, like you're raping me—oh, my God—I'll just, totally lose control. It's the only way I can cum. Can you do that for me?” She sounds so pitiful now.

“Uh . . . umm . . . yeah. Yeah I can do that for you.”

“Talk dirty to me.”

“Umm . . . O . . . K . . . like . . . like how?”

“It doesn’t work if I have to tell you. Use your fucking imagination. Don’t you have any brains to go with those muscles?”

“Oh . . . uh . . . okay . . . you . . . fucking . . . whore.”

“Mmm!”

“Y . . . yeah. . . yeah, why don’t you . . . suck my fucking dick, . . . you . . . dirty . . . bitch.”

She’s quietly moaning now, hushedly, breathing. “Are you . . . are you fingering yourself?”

“Mmhmm,” she puts the phone next to her vagina and I can hear a wet glucking sound; I slide my free hand down my underwear and start playing with myself. “My pussy’s so wet for you. I want you to fuck me like a whore.”

“Yeah? . . . ,” she’s panting, moaning. “Like a . . . fucking . . . filthy fucking slut?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh-huh. I want you, to . . . cum inside me and get me pregnant.”

What the fuck? I’m almost ready to climax so I just go along with it: “Y . . . yeah?”

She’s breathing heavier, moaning deeper. “I wanna feel you shoot your load all over my cervix and get me pregnant.”

I ejaculate into a tissue; she’s still masturbating, carrying on about me impregnating her. I do my best to entertain her with dirty talk until she screams that she’s cumming. Awkward silence.

“So . . . ”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . so when we gonna hook up?” I ask.

“Hmm. . . I don’t think you’ll do it.”

“Whattayou mean?”

“I’ll only fuck you without a condom.”

The thought of STDs hesitates me, just briefly. “Whatever.”

“You’ll pull out.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I ain’t trying to get you pregnant.”

“I told you you wouldn’t.”

“Wait, what? Hold on. You’re being serious about that?”

“Yes. I told you. I want you to get me pregnant.”

“I thought you were just going through some kind of roleplaying thing.”

“No. I want you to get me pregnant.”

“So, basically, you just wanna use me for a sperm donor then.”

“Pretty much. You just wanna use me to get your rocks off. It’s win-win.”

I’m remembering Wally, that little Haitian boy who clung to me like a koala, refusing to let go when I left the orphanage, crying “papa, papa” as the armed guard pried him from my shirt, tears in my eyes. morganaschild9 is probably my last chance to father a child, to spread my seed and carry on the Savage name.

“Well, . . . can I ask you . . . well let me . . . I wanna ask . . . will you let me be a part of the child’s life?”

“Sperm donor isn’t baby daddy.”

“Then, no. I can’t help you out. I’ve done a lot of fucked up shit in my life, but I ain’t gonna bring a fatherless child into this world.”

“But it won’t be. It’ll be okay. It’ll be taken care.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’ll be taken care of. . . . It’ll have a family.”

“You mean you got a boyfriend. Or a husband.”

“Not exactly.”

“Not exactly? I don’t get it. . . .”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . Oh—you’re a lesbian.”

“Bisexual.”

“But you prefer women.”

“No. I just happened to fall in love with a woman. And now we want to have a baby.”

“They got sperm banks for that.”

“Yeah, but do you know how expensive that is? Besides, I don’t want something they scraped off the bottom of the gene pool. At least with you I’ll know I have an excellent physical specimen.”

“Oh, thanks. So I’m good enough to make a baby but I’m not good enough to raise one. And how is that fair to the child? Don’t you think you’re baby has the right to know who the father is? What’re you gonna say when the question comes up?”

“I don’t know. I’ll just say it was artificially inseminated. . . . But it doesn’t matter. It won’t know the difference.”

“So you’re gonna lie.”

“It won’t know any difference.”

Did I hear that? “No. I won’t be a part of that.”

“I told you you wouldn’t do it.”

“Yeah, well, I thought we were just hooking up just for casual sex.”

“Well, . . . we still can.”

“*Protected* casual sex.”

“If you still want.”

“. . . What’s you’re girlfriend gonna think about that?”

“She’s okay with it. She knows I still have that part of me. But you need to know though that it can never be anything more than that. Strictly fuck buddies.”

I ponder her proposal and find that the hollow reckless abandon to which my sexual appetite had been yoked and spurred is now fizzled into a disturbed confusion in my stomach. “I . . . I’ll have to think about it. . . . I . . . I’ll get a hold of you.”

Click.

I’m disgusted with myself. Even if there is no such thing as Love, if it’s nothing more than a haphazard chemical reaction amongst neurotransmitters, even if all of humanity is but complex bacteria spawned from pond scum, congealed in the primordial goo; I can’t live as though nothing matters. Even if Life is meaningless, I cannot deny my *need* to find Meaning, the necessity to at the very least *create the illusion* of Meaning.

CHAPTER 8: Mending Is Better Than Ending

There are holes like shotgun blasts riddled all through the gypsum partition walls in my apartment. The sliding bifold doors to my “bedroom” are splintered, dented, and smashed, twisted off the track; jammed. Only the veneer of the bathroom door remains, dangling from one hinge, cracked split frayed. I’m Losing my Mind. Worse than intermittent explosive disorder. I can see the world ending. I see. No Future. No Humanity. Only. Biological androids. I’m all alone. Exhorting End Times prophecies everywhere across campus like a madman vagrant. Everyone laughs, jeers, points fingers, mocks. A corporate-communist Borg in which everyone belongs to everyone else. And I’m a weirdo. My greasy hair growing wild like a mane. My brown-blond whiskers like a soft wire brush; patchy like face pubes. I’m Letting Go into No Future. But my Past is Everywhere. Like *maya*. Retrospective Tea Leaves in short-circuiting street lights. Tattoos. Flocks of sparrows circling dead snow in dead winter. Stop signs. Rosaries. Fish and Frogs breathing bubbles that Speak. A Mitsubishi spare tire cover. Tupac Shakur. Thin clouds that arch from horizon to horizon in perfectly straight lines. Doors. Proverbs 16:9—

**IN HIS HEART A MAN PLANS HIS COURSE,
BUT THE LORD CHOOSES HIS STEPS**

I’ve been perpetually stoned for the last week. I drove all the way back to the Heights to scoop an ounce of dro. Self-medication. It quiets the gibberish in my head, pacifies my tooth-chattering nail-biting, but I find myself sighing deep breaths every five minutes as if staving off a panic attack, my heart pumping weakly as if unable to circulate my life blood sufficiently. Vague anxiety harassing, stalking, like gnats, mosquitoes, bedbugs. Chest constricting, hands clammy and itchy, perspiring, even though I’m feeling my body heat leaving me. Shaking, quivering my way under the bedspread trying to struggle against, to push away the muscular spasms throughout my body. Soon my stomach knotting queasy, the queasiness sloshing my head. I’ll bundle myself tighter and tighter, coiling myself into a dense fetal position, attempting to stabilize my shiverings; but the tighter I curl up, the tighter my lungs, my breaths become, the tighter my head spins until I sleep from hyperventilation. When I awake, I’ll wish I hadn’t, so I’ll lie perfectly still, eyes closed, like a corpse, as if Death might actually find me and make a mistake. I’ll stay

there for hours with no such luck. The part of me that wants to get up, to live is held down by the invisible weight pressing down on my airways every time I think of rising, going through the motions. A part of me, yet apart from me. Parasitic. Like something you'd catch from a dirty mat. Living inside me. Taking over discreetly. I'll awake metamorphosed. I will not bloom brilliantly colored wings that lift me high above my disintegrating sense of self though. I'll devolve. A larvae writhing in its own slime. And I would wallow here Forever if thin sunbeams didn't keep invading my room like God's spotlight.

I've been having trouble breathing too, not only because of my psychotic anxieties hyperventilating heart palpitations, but because my lungs are constantly scorched with hot smoke. So the weed is sedating me enough to keep from having a total fucking nervous breakdown, but my lung capacity is torched. Which is a problem, because I've got a huge fight coming up in the next Shooto Grand Prix—1000\$ just to show up, then another 2000\$ for each win and another 45,000\$ if I win the whole 16-man tournament.

I'm walking through the courtyard of my apartment complex on my way to the gym for some cardio. When you come running out of your apartment after me in your socks. You're wearing a pink tank-top and black stretchpants, your little Afro-puff frizzing out of a black headband like palm leaves.

Tell me how you saw me at the gym. How amazing my body is. Ask me if I can help you trim your waistline. You think you have a "belly," just because your stomach's not flat like an 8-pack washboard.

You're leaning slightly over at a provocative angle while we're talking and I can see straight down your cleavage; caramel skin glistening with beads of sweat on this specially warm autumn day. I wonder if your revealing pose is intentional while you keep finding ways to touch me. You're probably just being friendly though, in a girly-girl way; so I invite you along to work out with me.

When we get to the fitness center, I try to run you through a calisthenics routine; but you tell me you can't do push-ups because your wrists hurt and that you can't do pull-ups because you have shoulder problems. So I try to coach you through a core workout, but you quit after ten crunches. You seem more interested in chitchatting than exercising.

So I ask if you'd like to grab a bite to eat, somewhere we can talk more comfortably. Suggest my place. Where you'll grill me with a cacophony of invasively personal questions. I'm an open book though;

you'll know my Life story in a matter of hours, despite offending and unsettling me with your interrogations. You'll know all about the drugs and alcohol, street fights and other violent episodes, the self-mutilation, my dead mother, living out the backseat of my car; but it's the fact that I'm still a virgin at 26 years old that you're so enthralled with. Your inquisition is non-stop, and I really don't get a chance to know much of anything about you before you finally leave my apartment.

~ ~ ~

Round 1: Bernanke has announced QE2. The Recession has officially been over since June of last year. Dad hasn't worked for almost a month now. I'm still having a hard time running four miles. I try to avoid you as much as possible for the next week, while you call me or email me every day; I'm feeling bad about it. Maybe you're just trying to be a friend.

I invite you over to my apartment again. Where you comment on the pigpen of papers, books, folders, and notebooks; dirty laundry and crusty, moldy dishes; busted doors and punched-out drywall everywhere like a disaster area. Offer to clean up for me.

"Hey," I start, "fucking Einstein was a fucking slob too, alright."

"Well, you should at least clear off this loveseat. I mean, what if you ever have a girl over and she wants you to sit with her?"

Tell me you're hot and I'll tell you to open a window.

"John, why are you being so mean to me?" you'll ask.

"I ain't being mean to you. This is how I am. You're coming into *my* apartment, complaining about the mess and asking all kinda personal shit about my dead mother and my sex life and I don't even fucking know you. I was nice enough to let you in, wasn't I?"

Her puppy eyes lowered to the floor, "John? . . . you should really consider doing some re-shaping with me."

"Re-shaping? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, we'll identify a problem area in your life, analyze it, and then look at how you think it could be better."

“Well, Sol, I really don’t need a fucking therapist.”

“I’m not signing up for a therapy session either. I just noticed something and thought . . . Okay, tell you what, let me . . . I mean that . . . I’m sorry. I’m all over the place.”

~ ~ ~

Round 2: The local Metra train station and the Greyhound bus station down the street are being secured with TSA checkpoints. Radioactive naked body scanners. Genital fondling. Dad’s working a small side job, remodeling: siding, soffit, fascia. There are riots in France. I’ve been feeling feverish on and off for about a week now and I haven’t trained once since. You were sexually abused. You don’t exactly remember when or where, who did it or how; but you remember. Something. Sometime when you were a child. Someone in your family. Vague flashbacks recollected like so many details from a bad dream that fades murky as you open your eyes. Posttraumatic-stress disorder. Whatever that means. I’m a piece of shit, so I finally concede to your continual petitions to let you straighten up my apartment.

Buy the cleaning supplies and ask for nothing in return. It’s a cozy evening of intimate conversation. Tell me about your work counseling pedophiles and I can’t understand. How? Why? Part of me is moved by your Christ-like compassion for those most abominable of sexual deviants, the very aberrations that all but ruined your life; yet more than anything, I’m perturbed by your near-absolution of sins I don’t think I could ever Forgive.

Ask me what’s in the two Tupperware-like plastic totes under my “kitchen” table.

“200 pounds of rice and 200 pounds of beans.” Look at me like I’m from Planet X. “It freezes the cost.”

“ . . . ”

“ . . . Before the dollar collapses and hyper-inflation makes food unaffordable.” I rant about the police state, FEMA Camps, population reduction, eugenics, World Government.

It’s still a relaxing evening altogether though; I think. Still I’m enjoying your company like an asylum more than all the grass I’ve been smoking and all the booze I’ve been guzzling.

But start trying to reorganize my kitchen cabinets and rearrange my furniture and I start yelling at you about *my* apartment, *my* stuff, *my* way.

I walk you home, because you're afraid of the dark.

~ ~ ~

Round 3: Federal income tax increases. State income tax increases. UN carbon taxes to The World Bank. Early winter blisters like an arctic grave entombing the World Seed Bank. Rolling blackouts. Dad is two months behind on his mortgage. I cracked my ribs and chipped my shin sparring, and I'm two chapters behind on my thesis:

“[D]irect modification of DNA at fertilization is widely researched with a goal of removing defective genes; however, discussions of future capabilities open the possibility for designing humans with unique physical, emotional, or cognitive abilities”

National Intelligence Council. European Union Institute for Security Studies. International Monetary Fund. ASEAN. G20. “Global Governance 2025: At a Critical Juncture.”
<http://www.foia.cia.gov/2025/2025_Global_Governance.pdf>, Sep. 2010. Web. 21 Feb. 2011.

We've been seeing each other every day for a couple weeks now; I'm starting to think maybe you really do like me more than a friend. My apartment already looks again like a tornado came through whirlwinding TNT everywhere across the studio. But I've made sure to keep the loveseat spotless so we can sit next to each other.

Tell me I need to get rid of my baggy, ratty jeans; my windbreaker with the stuffing falling out of the pockets; my worn and beaten sneakers that look like Freddy Kruger's glove, laces shorn short, soles flopping loose like open mouths talking. I'll feel as valuable as the rags you want me to throw in the garbage. I'll get pissed off and snap at you, condemn you for being materialistic: “Why you so hung the fuck up about how I fucking look?!”

“Because you look like a homeless person, John.”

“So the fuck what!”

“John, those shoes don't even keep your socks dry when it rains.”

“So! Look, I can't afford new shoes, alright.”

“But you can afford weed and alcohol and five million pounds of rice and beans.”

I clench my jaw, grind my teeth, livid. “Look, if you're embarrassed to be seen with me in public,

than find someone else to walk you to work in the dark every fucking day.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, John.”

~ ~ ~

Round 4: Tabloid shootings. Dramatization. Fox News. Drug Wars. Drones and robots in Afghani poppy fields. Border Wars and Amnesty. MSNBC. NAFTA; the North American Union. Bomb plots and double agents. Bill Gates on universal healthcare:

“The access that used to be available to the middle class, or whatever, is just rapidly going away. That’s a tradeoff society is making because of very, very high medical costs, and a lack of willingness to say, you know, ‘is spending a million dollars on that last three months of life for that patient, would it be better not to layoff those ten teachers and to make that tradeoff in medical costs?’ But that’s called ‘The Death Panel,’ uh, and you’re not supposed to have that discussion. We’re making that tradeoff, because of huge medical costs that are not examined to see which ones actually have no benefit whatsoever. And because of pension generosity, we will be laying off over a hundred-thousand teachers, which, you know, I’m very much against that.”

Autistic vaccines. Bank robberies. Shootings. A state sheriff is knocking on my father’s front door. The officer is sorry to have to serve the court summons: a civil suit from Citigroup. I can’t breathe. Because my ribs are fractured. Because I’m hacking and hacking on marijuana smoke. Because all of civilization is a giant fucking hamster maze. I can’t train; injuries. You’re nine years older than me. I would’ve never known. Your favorite TV show is SpongeBob and your coffee-and-cream skin is almost flawless. We watch Shrek III on the loveseat in your apartment, my arm hugged around your thick hips like the waist of your black stretchpants.

You hate shaving because your sensitive skin breaks out into razor bumps. It’s kind of a turn off, but every day I notice something more of your beauty for the first time. Something overlooked; underappreciated. The subtle, almost East-Asian slant of your innocent chestnut eyes. Salt-and-pepper strands of grey and white hairs just above your temples. Freckles and high cheekbones like a porcelain cherub.

There’s a tattoo on your left shoulder: ~~Can’t~~ scrawled in fancy, curly cursive blue-green ink—your ex-girlfriend’s name. Tell me you’re still in Love with her and I’ll wonder why you’re letting me hold you. But tell me you Love me and I don’t know what you mean; you can’t Love me.

~ ~ ~

Round 5: Solid overcast for three months straight. No stratus, cirrus, or nimbus. Just solid Grey. Dad's raving about the government blocking out the sun, but he's caught up on his mortgage.

"Yeah, but Dad, every time we have crazy weather doesn't mean it's a government weapon." I'm soaking my bones in my homemade *si shou fong*, near boiling. David Icke's *Beyond the Cutting Edge* on YouTube. I'm catching up on my thesis:

"Biogerontechnology . . . include[s] improvements in biosensors for real-time monitoring of human health, robust information technology, ubiquitous DNA sequencing and DNA-specific medicine, and fully-targeted drug-delivery mechanisms. . . . Human cognitive augmentation technologies include drugs, implants, virtual learning environments, and wearable devices to enhance human cognitive abilities. Training software exploits neuroplasticity to improve a person's natural abilities, and wearable and implantable devices promise to improve vision, hearing, and even memory. Bio and information technologies promise enhanced human mental performance at every life stage.

National Intelligence Council. Office of the Director of National Intelligence. "Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World." <http://www.dni.gov/nic/PDF_2025/2025_Global_Trends_Final_Report.pdf>, Nov. 2008.
Web. 21 Dec. 2011.

Buy me a new jacket and I'll bitch at you for wasting so much money on me; I'll scold you about how you need to save your money so you can pay off your 100,000\$ in school loans. You look so fragile. Like you're going to break, and I think I hear tears bottled in a knot in your throat. So I take the gift and apologize, but you're distant and quiet now; I leave you alone.

I tell Dad I feel shitty, and he asks me why I would get mad at you for buying me a new coat.

"Because I already told her *I don't need* a new coat. And I don't have the money to pay her back."

"Well, at least be nice to her," he says. "Don't be mean to her."

I cook you dinner: Indian curry. It's the least I can do. The best I can do.

Kiss me once, so soft; slow, lingering Forever; I'll pull our hips together. Slow, gentle; like a dance. We hold each other; forevermore. Our noses nuzzled in our necks; just hold each other.

~ ~ ~

Round 6: Uprisings in the Middle East. Ted Turner's one-child policy:

"We'll be eight-degrees hotter in ten—not ten, but in thirty or forty years—and basically none of the crops will grow; most of the people will've died; and the rest of us will be cannibals; civilization will have broken down; what the few people are left will be living in a failed state like Somalia or Sudan; and living conditions will be intolerable; the draughts will be so bad there'll be no more corn growing. . . . We've got to stabilize the population. There're too many people. That's why we have global warming. We have global warming 'cause too many people are using too much stuff. If there were less people, they'd be using less stuff. . . . Everybody in the world's got to pledge that one or two children is it."

Gold is up; the dollar is down; silver is up; earthquakes, tsunamis, and nuclear reactors falling down. Dad's gone fishing; he hasn't worked in over a month. I have a temperature again; I haven't sparred or grappled in almost a month. I force myself to go a couple rounds, cold-sweating, barely wheezing; an accidental headbutt, teeth clack, a sickening crack, short bolt of pain through one of my molars. I spit crumbled rotten tooth, inspect the crater with my tongue: three razor-like splinters of root barely sticking out past my abscessed gums. You're already talking about marriage. But there's No Future for us; I'm going to assume you're thinking out loud. No Future for anyone; you just don't know it yet.

Tell me I'm always Doom and Gloom. I walk you to work every night. You always want to follow the sidewalks and crosswalks. Inside the lines like a coloring book. I drag you across private property, holding your hand, cutting through people's front lawns and j-walking into the streets without regard for passing traffic.

"They'll stop," I say; honking horns and cuss words.

"So this is what it's like to be a white male."

"Hey, fuck you!" I holler at a pickup truck that almost runs us over.

"You know, you don't really use your whiteness to your advantage."

"The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. That's *wing chun*." I lead you across the daycare playground behind the Newman Catholic Church where you ask me if I want to have kids.

"No. . . . I don't want to bring a child into this world . . . anymore. Ain't no future. I don't know. It don't seem right. . . . To bring a child into this nightmare," rubbing my eyes and forehead with my palms. "It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't . . . It don't seem right. . . . But, . . . when I really think about it, and I think about everything my parents did for me, everything my ancestors suffered for me, from the Slavs who fled Communist Russian occupation all the way back to the fucking cavemen who killed woolly mammoths and huddled around campfires on glaciers; when I think about it all, I feel like I have to. I feel . . . like I'm

indebted. I mean, it'd be like spitting in the face of everything that came before me, so I could be here. If I don't . . . If I don't carry on the fight . . . You know?"

Tell me you had your uterus removed when you were still living with Caiht and I don't know what to say, don't know how to feel.

~ ~ ~

Round 7: Gas prices are rising like British oil spills spurting geysers from the ocean floor. The stock market is up; the dollar is down; unemployment is up; Spirits are down. Like Hope. Pocket Change. Dad's three months behind on his mortgage. An oral surgeon cuts through my pustuled gums sawing the tooth fragments out of my jawbone. Three weeks until the Shooto Grand Prix. Ashok reads your and my palms together as one, at the coffee shop:

"There is thirty percent chance you will be together," he predicts.

You're devastated: "Only thirty percent? That's it?"

"That is good. Almost every couple I see in this country: only three percent."

I'm ambivalent either way. I told you you wouldn't like what you heard.

"What's that supposed to mean, John," you chide.

"I'm just saying. That sometimes oracles can make you think things and say things and do things you otherwise wouldn't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Why not just create your own Destiny?"

~ ~ ~

Round 8: Food prices are rising. Wind sprints. Foreclosures. Plyometrics. Rob calls me and tells me he just got evicted. Rolling; sparring—time warp sensations when I set up pinpoint counterpunches off clean slips. The moment just before reprisal. The look on the motherfucker's face. Bewildered. As his center of gravity overextends through his fist swung out past its target into the air. The look on his face. Like

something just pulled the mat from under his feet, Reality from under his mind. It's like seeing him from the advantaged point of another dimension. I can see him but he can't see me. I see him in a microscope. I see him in a crystal ball, in oil and water. As the moment stretches, slows, condenses, slower and slower motion. I see his attempted recovery take shape in his mind, on his face. Too late. Everything is in position, like an astrological chart: the aspect culminates; my knuckles sail prophecies like asteroids across Houses and constellations. You can't keep your hands to yourself. Just like me. You constantly have your hands up my shirt, rubbing my back, rubbing my abs and my chest; I always have a hand under your shirt, rubbing your chubby belly; you tell me you're too fat. We hold hands everywhere we go. We hang on each other like conjoined twins. Always Touching; interlaced fingertips, hands, arms intertwined, interlocked at the hips. Strolling Everywhere like a race against Nothing. Snuggling on the loveseat like stuffed-animal. Like spiders hugging. Kisses caress for hours; I can't tell when you're lips leave mine. Warmth builds while we're squeezing each other tighter and tighter like two planets colliding. Crush. Big Bang.

I'm kissing down your neck to your shoulder, kissing past your collarbone; you're slipping the spaghetti-string strap off your shoulder. I kiss my way to your naked breast. Your hips are starting to wiggle. Almost unnoticeable. Rising like temperature; heartbeats. My hips are dancing with yours like a Tango now. My fingers sliding, inching, millimeter by millimeter toward your panties, slipping under the elastic waistline of your stretchpants.

Push me away. Tell me to stop. You've had twenty-five partners but you won't have sex with me. Not until we're married, you say.

"So you can fuck a hundred other people that don't give a fuck about you enough to stick around, but here I am and I ain't good enough." I can see the hurt in your eyes, your jaw dropped open in disbelief; but I keep berating you. "And you can't even give me a baby, so what the fuck is the big deal anyway?"

You look so small. "I can still get pregnant. . . . I still have eggs and fallopian tubes," your voice so meek and pitiful. "We'll just need a surrogate mother to carry the baby."

"I ain't having no fucking sci-fi, Frankenstein, eugenic baby. It ain't fucking natural. God didn't intend for that shit to happen. You gotta live with the decisions you've made. Okay? It's not always all about what Sol wants."

“I’m sorry you feel that way, John.”

I storm out of your apartment slamming the door.

~ ~ ~

Round 9: Still no sun. Dad calls NOA:

“Hey! What the fuck’s the deal with the fucking weather? Do I get to see the fucking sun this year?!” The operator laughs. “What is it you guys spray up in the atmosphere? Barium salt and aluminum dioxide?”

“I have no knowledge of any cloud seeding in your area.”

The UN is touting the IMF’s proposal for a global currency again:

48. . . . Called, for example, *bancor* in honor of Keynes, such a currency could be used as a medium of exchange—an “outside money” in contrast to the SDR which remains an “inside” money”—International Monetary Fund, “Reserve Accumulation and International Monetary Stability” April 13, 2010 (26-27)

My director schedules my thesis defense for the week after the first round of the Shooto tournament:

“The development of neutron weapons which destroy living organisms but not buildings ‘might make a weapon of choice for extreme ethnic cleansing in an increasingly populated world’. . . . By 2035, an implantable ‘information chip’ could be wired directly to the brain”—London Gaurdian

Norton-Taylor, Richard. “Revolution, Flashmobs, and Brain Chips: A Grim Vision of the Future.” *London Guardian*. London Guardian, 9 Apr. 2007. Web. 5 Dec. 2011.

Weigh-ins next week. I’m still bitter about Sol when I drive Ashok to O’Hare airport; he’s flying back to Nepal. He has to listen to me rant and rave about her all the way there.

“Yes; yes,” he says, “I knew your relationship would not last very long.”

“Why’s that?”

“On the basis of what I saw in your hands, I knew that. But she loves you very much. That is there. Just do not be mean to her. Even if you do not love, you do not have to be angry; because she loves you. People have the right to love. You must let her love.” He’s smiling.

“Yeah, I know. You’re right. I mean, I don’t mean to be mean to her. But you know me, man. I can’t keep my fucking mouth shut. I got a fucking temper.”

He laughs a little. “Yes; yes. That is your simple habit. But try to be nice to her. Do not make her feel sad.” I hug Ashok before he boards his flight, never to return. “Goodbye, John. Thank you very much for your time. You have taught me a lot. I will always be remembering and loving you. I have learned a lot from you.”

“No, no. I have learned a lot from you. Thank you very much.”

“Yes; yes. You must come to Nepal someday. You will be very healthy there and I will arrange you a Nepali girl to be your wife.”

“I’d go with you right now if I didn’t have to worry about my dad. I should get the fuck outta this country before the dollar turns to shit and I get thrown in a fucking FEMA Camp. . . . But, I think I’m gonna go down with the ship. That seems right. That’d serve me right.”

~ ~ ~

Round 10: Fight Night. Oil is up to 150\$ a barrel. Dad hasn’t called for a while now and I can’t call long distance from my landline. Food riots. I haven’t seen you in weeks, haven’t spoken or written. I want to apologize. For being such a piece of shit; but you’ll think I want to get back together—and I do—, but I don’t deserve you. And I know you heart loves like an asylum. And you’ll take me back. Because you’ll try to understand. And Love me if you can’t.

So I leave you alone. Invisible. Sleepwalking in a cloud of pot smoke, editing my thesis:

“And advanced forms of biological warfare that can “target” specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool.”

Project for the New American Century. “Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century.” <<http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>>, Sep. 2000. Web. 21 Feb 2011.

Come to my apartment bearing a new pair of shoes you ordered online for me the day before I tantrummed out of your apartment; my phone is ringing. I don’t know how to respond. Tears wash my eyes; stinging. Cradle my chin in your yellow-brown hands and kiss me on my forehead. The answering machine is taking the call now. The Emergency Broadcast Signal is screeching through my television. Look in my eyes, then kiss me on the lips. Dad is screaming, screeching, steaming about the police outside

his house. Hold me. And I'll hold you. Tear drops running over, overflowing.

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