

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2021

No Answering Riot

Jacob Z. Bienvenue

University of Montana, Missoula

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Bienvenue, Jacob Z., "No Answering Riot" (2021). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 11731.

<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11731>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

NO ANSWERING RIOT

A Novel By

JACOB ZACHARY BIENVENUE

BA English and Communication Arts, George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon, 2019

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing, Fiction

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2021

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Boris Fishman, Chair
Creative Writing

Hiltrudis Arens, First Reader
World Languages and Cultures

Marton Marko, Second Reader
World Languages and Cultures

I have shouted to God and the Virgin, but they have not shouted back and I'm not interested in the still small voice. Surely a god can meet passion with passion?

Jeanette Winterson

Finally, in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour, the process of dissolution going on within the ruling class... assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class...

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

When the smoke clears and you can see the sky again, there will be the chopped off heads of leviathan.

MF DOOM

Prologue

The Way North

Jackson

I left this morning for Portland, Oregon—could be for good. Told my dear mother I was taking a day trip then hopped in her dinged up black Audi and felt the thing hum alive beneath me. Her speakers were still good, so I threw on a playlist with Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie and all of the ragged traintrack prophets and went roaring out of those gilded hills for hopefully ever. There was no traffic getting to Sacramento; it took me just twenty minutes to hit the I-5 North juncture and after that I went peeling up the central flatlands with 500 miles to fly in, each one of them cool and green. I'm realizing now this is the only way to travel: don't expect to come back.

I've changed a lot in the last few weeks and history's changed with me. After last night Portland's the place to be. They're saying there'll be riots downtown, people pissed off about Trump winning the election. Maybe I'll get arrested. Anything's better than being at home. But most of that stuff doesn't bear going much into; I was just tired of being there, being who I was there.

At the foot of the craggy Siskiyou mountains I pop my last Adderall and my brain takes off. I'm everywhere, man. The nation's hurtling toward dissolution, old forms are passing, the ground is shaking, blood will be spilt, but all I can see is a cherry light in the distance, the firmament of the promised land. I could die for it. I really could go off and die.

Fear and Trembling

Brooke

We took Rachel's car into Portland. I sat shotgun, Cheddar sat in the back. It was dark and cold. It looked like it was going to rain. I kept checking my phone. Footage from *The Oregonian* showed a small and peaceful crowd. People said, Maybe it won't turn violent after all. I hoped it wouldn't, but then why were we even going?

The city was empty, so it wasn't hard to find parking. We took a spot a couple blocks away from Pioneer Square. In the distance we could hear the wail of sirens. Helicopters passed over the tops of buildings. The streets were flushed orange and the low Oregon clouds hung thick and red. The three of us were silent as we followed the sirens. Rachel led the way. I was right behind, wearing the backpack full of medical supplies. It became difficult to control my breathing. I felt like I couldn't inhale all the way. It wasn't nervousness. It was like when you know someone is going to tell you something really important, but they're holding back. I don't know, I can't explain it.

The streets were foreboding in their vacancy. Wisps of trash rose and fell on the sidewalks like birds. An aura of disaster came over us. Cheddar kept shooting glances over his shoulder, which I noticed only because I was looking over my shoulder also. Rachel forged sternly ahead.

The first thing we heard was the pulse of a drum in our bellies. Then, crossing a street, we heard a low, dull roar; it didn't come from one location, but seemed to originate from everywhere at once, howling off the concrete. This roar had a specific shape and pattern—chants, I assumed—but I couldn't pick out the words. It got louder as we approached. Then louder.

Part One

Freaking out the Neighborhood

El Dorado Hills, California

Three Weeks Earlier

Jackson

The fall of 2016 was a bad time for me also. I'd been living in my stepdad's place along with my mom, working at a place called Pizza Heaven while taking junior college classes on the side. Four years my life had been like that; I was 22. The housing arrangement was something that embarrassed all three of us. My future was stuck to the bottom of every conversation, like, Are you planning on joining us for dinner tomorrow, Jackson? even though of course I would, where else would I go. Things in worklife weren't great either. Lately my boss had been hinting I could make a career out of it, the pizza thing. He said I could make fourteen an hour. Fifteen, play my cards right. My life was shaping up to be a real disappointment to me and everyone else. I tried not think about it.

Toward that end I drove over to Hondo's place every night after work. He leased a garage from a rich family at the edge of town. It was dumpy but it had a porch in the back with a dusty table and four wicker chairs, and the building was far enough from the main property that we didn't have to worry about making noise. There were four of us who'd go over. It was a sad little group; we'd met in community college a few years back and really the only thing we had in common was a mutual sense of failure, a feeling that we'd fucked up some very basic tenet of what it is to be a man in this world. In some ways this was a profound thing to share. We lounged around the wicker table every night that summer smoking weed so desperately it wasn't fun. If you can't change your world, change your brain, we thought. So we'd cough and look off the porch over a field that had a tremendous oak tree twisting up into the night sky, and through

its branches you could see the stars if the wind blew strong enough. Hondo's porch was the very end of the suburbs. I'd get high and imagine all civilization lining up behind me, and that here I am at the frontier looking on naked wild, but really it was just a field, and on the hill above it you could see the lights of town twinkling on the ridge. That field, we knew, would be developed soon anyway. Already there was orange tape draped on the trees. I imagined the families who would live there once the land was plumbed and plundered. The kids, especially. All of them just like me, wandering this world with no idea what they'd lost, what they'd do about it.

For the most part I don't remember individual nights. That summer was a blur of stars and bubbles. Three nights were memorable enough to talk about. There was the time a group of girls from Hondo's art class came over. A failure: us acting dumb and too stoned to do anything anyway. Then the time we swore lightning struck a barbed wire fence out of a clear sky. And then of course the end, the last time.

It was early fall, but the night still felt like summer. My mom had let me drive her Audi to work—my stepdad was out of town—so I'd taken it to Hondo's afterward. We were out on the porch. The night was warm. Hondo and I were sitting on one side of the table and Ricky and Lester were across from us. It'd been like that since the presidential campaign heated up: libs on one side, Trumpers on the other. Not that I knew anything about politics then. I just had a sense that the core of things was bad and we were living through a real shit bit of history that was getting gradually and intentionally worse. Did that make me a Democrat? Hell no. My parents were Democrats, but the dumb kind. As for Hondo, he was a Dutch exchange student and didn't give a fuck about American politics. He just happened to know me better than Ricky and Lester. The difference I think was how each of us related to our sense of failure. Ricky and Lester still thought they could pyramid scheme and dream their path to millionairehood, that sure, there's

been a shit dealer but there's a new man on deck and with him a run of jacks, free gin and waitresses with low tops and pretty eyes. How that relates to Trump exactly I don't know. I think it's a personality thing with most people. And because we never really talked about the election, our dividing ourselves up like that was one-hundred percent unintentional. Those were our spots. What else are you gonna do?

Early that summer we'd all pitched in to buy a thick glass bong with money we didn't have. So thick we called it LeBong James. We put a sticker of the king on the front to cover up the swampy water we never changed, not just because it was gross but because that water had been gross so long it had become a *thing*. The water was part of the ritual, part of the night, like where we sat and how we smoked and what we said, and over us the oak tree waving in all that hot summer dark.

LeBong had made a full rotation that night. There was a lull before we passed it around again, during which we crooned over the girls we knew in high school or evaluated the merits of the video games we played or swore this season would be different for our favorite teams. We wore smooth the usual topics. Then Lester asked if we'd heard about Shane's brother.

He's dead, Lester said. Was back home on leave. Two days before he was set to ship out again, he got on the bike when he shouldn't have. Hit a fence going 85.

What nobody tells you about life is how people start to die. I thought this problem would come along much later, in my 40's or 50's, maybe. Shane's brother wasn't the first. A guy I knew from high school had died cliff jumping that spring. We'd all jumped that rock a hundred times. Another had shot himself in the head. They found him in his own trunk. My legs and arms started shaking.

Fuck, Ricky said in a low voice. That's— fuck. He looked away.

We smoked some more, a toast to the dead. I ground up some weed then pulled out my pack of Spirits and twisted a few squiggles of tobacco on top of the bowl. I brought the lighter close and sucked, bending the flame, and held it while the ring of scorch spread. I kept chugging until the beaker was milky white then I pinched the downstem and pulled. I leaned back and let that oak tree spin. We had a way of measuring how high we were. There were only ever a few stars in the sky, but they were the same every night and so we got to know them. Not by name of course, but we were familiar with their positions, and we'd point to the biggest one, a red little guy low over the eastern horizon. We'd point to it and say, If there aren't two of Big Red, then I'm not high enough. That night I looked up and there they were, two red stars like a snakebite on the void.

I'm sitting there riding the buzz and fighting death off the ramparts of my mind when Lester goes, Jackson, lemme get the Spirits.

You might think that mortality would make you more generous.

I'm out, I told him.

Come on, he says. I see one in the pack right in front of you.

I patted down my pockets like I kept them there and said, Nope, sorry.

Dude, he said solemnly. Then he looked at me like what I'd done was unthinkable.

Let me chill for a second, Les, I said, because my jaw was vibrating and my lungs felt like dusty vacuum bags.

I'll venmo you, he said, then snatched the pack off the table and shoved a cigarette behind his ear.

I woozied out of my seat and tried grabbing the cigarette from the back of his head. He scooted back and said, Yo, it's fine, and he said it with a kind of half-laugh.

All at once I realized how ridiculous I looked, standing there trying to steal back the Spirit. God, those monkey dramas. If only the sacred knowledge of death had moved in us more profoundly! But there we were, there I was, the same as ever. I was pissed at myself and pissed at Lester, and I felt stuck in the anger, stuck in my life. All I wanted to do was drive home and pour myself a bowl of cereal and beat off to something nasty.

I'ma peace out, I said.

Can you leave the cigarettes? Ricky asked. His eyes were little red slits and I knew he comprehended nothing but insect hunger.

I tossed the cigarettes on the table.

Stay and sober first, Hondo said to me, and his Dutch accent was so strong and filled with well-wishes I almost got teary-eyed.

Thanks Hondo, I told him, and left.

I walked down the dark driveway. There are no streetlights in that area because it's far away from town. The moon that night was low and yellow and just over the ridge the globe of it was caught in a thin layer of clouds. It had that end-of-summer spookiness almost like Halloween. God, I was high.

My mom's Audi was waiting for me on the street. I ran my hands along its sleek black body, flushed with gratitude. I normally took Charles' Prius but he was out of town. Letting me take the Audi was a serious thing for my mom to do considering it'd been a gift from Charles and it was the nicest thing she owned. We didn't have money growing up; she'd worked as a phone operator at Six Flags. This is still funny to me. I mean, who was she calling? They're roller coasters. I jumped around and slapped myself sober then hopped in the car and whipped out of there.

It was a hilly road back to town and honestly, I felt just fine. I'd been driving high every night that summer. I ran through the usual thoughts. To get to my house you had to drive past a huge dam. The road which runs alongside it is straight and empty, and I toed the gas and took off smoothly. Even in the dark I could see the white pillar of water gushing from the concrete wall. It pulled me out of my body for a second, all that water just rocketing out in the night, no one to see. I zoomed past it and came down into residential part of town, filled with neighborhoods called things like Vista del Lago and Rickshire Heights. The landscaping there is exquisite. All the meridians are filled with grass and lined with identical poplars, and close to the ground the air is orange from the streetlights. Stoned it was like hurtling through a real forest, a second earth named by man and made by him too. Was it really so much worse than a wild field? I was feeling comfortable in my life, alone like that. Sprinklers showered water over the grass and the mist caught fire in my headlights. I thought I saw a racoon. Nature! I thought.

Coming my way was another car. It had that shady sort of look that a cop car has, and I gripped the steering wheel and focused straight ahead. What would happen if I got a DUI? Could my life get any worse? What was I thinking, I thought. Of course it could. Luckily the car was not a cop car, and when we passed each other I looked out the window and saw it zoom past at what seemed a million miles an hour. A deep anxiety started twisting my guts up; what would it be to get in a head-on wreck? I would explode. I thought of Shane's brother—gore hung on a fence, pulsing red and blue and dripping.

Finally I came out of the lowlands. I climbed up a hill towards the gated neighborhood in which Charles kept my dear mother locked away from some genuine version of herself. Things were different when my dad was around, before the crabbing accident. Though my memories are hazy, I remember my dad as a tall, dark-haired man with warrior blood, that maybe somewhere

down the line we'd come from kings. In the books I read as a kid, my dad would actually be the god of the sea, and sometime around my 18th birthday he would emerge, needing the help only I, the chosen one, could provide. But my manhood had come, and it had gone.

Now here I was pulling up to the fucking Embassy Villas in my stepdad's Audi, my future all twisted up in a reality I could not stand. I punched in the code: the iron doors swung inward, and the asphalt changed to a smooth black. The houses there are huge. Some of them mimic Italian villas while others are square and modern, mostly window. Stunted palm trees shone in garden light. I felt safer in the neighborhood because there weren't any cops around. Through an empty lot I could see the whole grid of the suburbs below, cut out of the black of the valley floor. Hills rolled on the other side and the lights from the houses there formed what looked like some ancient civilization, or just any civilization really, and I was stupefied by its strangeness in a way I had not been before, I felt utterly alone, and I looked out and revelations flickered through my head and vanished before I knew what they were, and I was left only with the sense of profundity and then loss. Then I crashed.

I killed the car and hopped out, dead sober and visionless. It was the speed trailer I'd hit, very slowly it seemed, the one the HOA paid to have put in. The big machine had toppled sideways onto someone's lawn; it looked up into the night sky and in orange letters said, Your Speed: 0. A pair of driveway lights flicked on from the house on whose lawn it had fallen. I panicked; drive away or go it on foot? The thunder of a garage door. I hopped in the car and ducked under the steering wheel. After a while I peeked out. A man had come out and was standing over the trailer, which was lying where I felled it, looking more confused than damaged. He remained there for a couple beats, then started to walk toward me. I ducked down and listened to my breathing spin out of control. I kept waiting for his tap on the window. When

finally I looked up, the man loomed over the window, just staring at me. He was right by the door. I couldn't see his face. My heart was rattling in my chest. I waited for him to do something, but after a second, he looped around the front of the car and wrote down my license plate number, then walked away.

I punched the steering wheel and yelled, Fuck! I got out of the car. The Audi was fucked up. The left headlight was shattered and there was a big dent and white scratches everywhere. And I knew I was gonna be stuck there forever. A brief moment of freedom, then the realization that I would never leave that place. I was gonna be one of those 40-year olds who live with their parents and eat macaroni for breakfast. For a second I considered taking that Audi and just driving off. Fuck Charles, fuck Lester and Ricky, fuck Pizza Heaven, fuck Sacramento, fuck America, fuck me, man. But instead I pulled up into my driveway.

The figure of the house was almost perfectly, nauseatingly square, except the small attic on the right side which formed a steep point. The busted headlight threw a twisted light on the garage door. I felt it meant something.

My mom was still up when I came in. She was watching TV in a big leather couch that Charles had bought. It made her look tiny.

What are you doing up? I said when I came around the corner.

She squinted at me. Are you high, Jacks?

I've got to show you something, I told her.

We stood side-by-side as the garage opened. Light from inside cast our twin shadows on the mangled bumper of the Audi.

Charles won't be angry with you, will he?

My mom, shivering there in her PJ's, could only stare. I can't sleep when the house is empty, she said after a second. That's why I was up.

~

This is My Blood

Newberg, Oregon

Brooke

Voting for Hillary was a big deal for me then. There were no democrats where I grew up. Cyprus, Washington is a plains town so small they hang pictures of every graduating senior on Main Street. At most 15 or 20. Even in Cyprus my family was zealous. We belonged to First Odessa Evangelical, founded in 1968 when Billy Graham, moved by the Spirit, drove 30 miles off Interstate 90 and preached in the parking lot of a run-down gas station on second street. My dad was the son of one of the initial converts. His name was John Dryden III, named for the poet who loved the king. You might as well be named Cotton Mather. And besides his daddy's sermon notes from the initial deluge, his most prized possession was a Ronald Reagan ranch calendar, which, hanging over the kitchen sink, depicted the president in different aspects of the farmer. You've got to admit, the man was good looking for a devil.

Like every college aspirant from our church, I was sent to John Calvin University, a liberal arts school at the north end of Oregon's Willamette Valley. My first two years at Calvin I was a good little Christian girl, cheeky with hopes of marriage and other small heavens. I was a nursing major with plans to return to Cyprus to work in a rural hospital and perpetuate a way of living and believing that I'd grown up hearing was under attack.

The turning-point was Rachel. We'd met on a house listing on Facebook and then roomed together the final two years of college. Rachel was an English major, so when I told her about my family, she was quick to point out that John Dryden was merely a propagandist, and not even a very good one. Our friendship blossomed with my politics, but towards the end of our time in that little house on Burbank avenue, she began, tragically, misguidedly, dating Cheddar.

Cheddar was from Cyprus also, two years behind me. Same church and everything. In spite of the small student body, over the previous two years I'd managed to avoid being friends with him. I'd wanted nothing to do with Cyprus. Then he approached Rachel and I at a coffee shop and asked to sit down. This is the fatal first step in countless Christian unions: coffee shops are the amplifier of the religious libido. He sat down beside me and I turned back to my work. Another fatal step—this led the two of them to a conversation. They talked a long time; eventually I left. Rachel returned home three hours later. Within a week they were dating.

Why? I'd asked. Why date *him*?

Because, Rachel said. You have the idea of Cheddar as this annoying kid from your hometown. I never had that. He's more complex than you think. And besides, why not?

Because he's Trumpy! I said—this in reference to the fact that Cheddar's college metamorphosis involved bringing the Cyprian Christo-conservative ethos into the 21st century by converting it into a fashion statement. He wore America-themed clothing and even one time dragged onto the quad a Reagan Bush '84-themed cornhole set. The lobe of the *g* in Reagan formed the hole, into which one could lob American flag bean bags. But Rachel didn't take it seriously.

Calvin, I should say, was not a political monolith. The battle lines were drawn much the same as they would be at a larger school. Business and engineering and other male-dominated STEM fields tended to be more conservative. Liberal arts the opposite. But the Christian dynamic sharpened the spears. Particularly with a candidate like Trump. For the conservatives, Trump was a religious icon, a leader sent by God in the tradition of the Old Testament judges. For the liberals, Trump was, if not the antichrist, then antichrist-esque, on earth to continue the government's long-standing spiritual meanness.

So, by early November the relationship between Rachel and Cheddar, formed across educational and spiritual lines, had predictably soured; Rachel was close to calling it quits. Even so, she invited Cheddar and Parker, her friend-who-was-a-boy, over to watch the election.

For a diversity of opinion, Rachel assured me that day. Don't worry about the two of them in the same room. I told Cheddar it'll be like a double-date. I think Parker might be interested if you're interested, which you should be.

I was sitting under a poster of Jane Austen. Over my head the novelist wore a grim half-smile and a bonnet. I thought for a moment. Parker was a pre-law student who had taken a lot of the same courses as Rachel. He was liberal also. I'd never dated anyone from the left. My last boyfriend made Cheddar look like Che Guevara. I need someone more reasonable, I thought.

Sure, I could be interested in Parker, I said.

~

Cheddar showed up on our doorstep a whole hour early. He had a magnum of Yellowtail under his arm. Even though it was cold and misty, he wore only athletic shorts and a sweatshirt.

He grinned when I opened the door. Hi Brooke, he said.

Cheddar, I said, looking up from his calves. You're early. Rachel's in her room.

He stepped past and set the bottle on the counter, then looked around our living room. It's always strange when the first company arrives. Household things forced suddenly to perform. Jane smiled widely on the wall, but seeing it was only Cheddar, sunk back to her feminine stoicism. Waiting, I imagined, for a more elegant suitor.

I haven't seen you at all, really, Cheddar said. I think our parents figured we'd be best buds when I decided to come here.

I'm just busy when you come over, I told him. How's sophomore year treating you.

Fine, he said. Are you nervous about tonight?

I walked into the kitchen. Nope, I said, shifting the knife rack away from the sink and then messing around with our cupboards, hoping he'd go back into Rachel's room.

Rachel came down the hall. You're early, she said.

Is nobody excited to see me? he said.

Voting centers haven't even closed yet, she said. Parker won't be here for another hour.

Cheddar stopped smiling.

I just wasn't expecting you is all, Rachel said quickly. Here. You can put your coat in the room.

I watched him follow her down the hall. Cheddar did not like Parker. Parker and Rachel had gone to Oxford together for a school trip over the summer, and she never talked about it around him. In fact, I'd never seen the two boys in the same room. Parker often asked Rachel about "her conservative boyfriend," whereas Cheddar never mentioned Parker at all.

I sat on the couch and scrolled my phone. At that point I belonged to a very specific subsection of Twitter, one comprised mainly of former evangelical women whose politics had shifted to the left and whose relations to Christianity were like those of daughters of annoying fathers. Embarrassed, that is, but in a way, still affectionate. We were excited that night. The first black president and then the first woman president? Almost too much to believe. A new era not just for America, but for Christianity—an era in which the Church would take up the fight of the oppressed and create unity between those two parties into whom I believed most Americans fell: reasonable but skeptical conservatives and their more educated, empathetic progeny. A new world was at our doorstep.

~

I opened the door and Parker stepped inside. Jane blushed as he crossed the threshold. He was tall and thin, with a narrow, neat nose and well-combed brown hair. He wore a scarf. He held a bottle of wine in each hand.

To celebrate, he said as he set them on the counter. He rotated the labels to face us. My roommate is a dishwasher at Durant, so I got these cheap. Well fairly cheap, he said, glancing at Cheddar's Yellow Tail.

Local wine, a wool scarf, a woman president! As Parker popped a bottle and poured the first four glasses, I thought Wow, the world is continuing its march to the future. Cheddar had taken the far end of the couch. He looked very grave. No doubt the verse in Matthew came to his head, the one about not saving the best wine for last. It's one thing to feel insulted by Parker, quite another by God. Rachel got up and turned the TV to CNN, then sat down next to Cheddar, but not necessarily close to him. This was a vocal distance: it was closer than two people would usually sit, but not touching, and the space between them was fallow, unelectric. Parker sat in a chair on the other side of Rachel, and I took a chair on the other side of Cheddar.

We drank a while and talked. The election was mostly background. AP had just called Louisiana for Trump, Connecticut for Clinton. It was still early; we weren't worried about anything yet. Cheddar was the only one watching intently. Our political allegiances seemed to hang in the air: Rachel, Parker, and I together, and Cheddar, excluded. It was awkward. Cheddar refused to drink any of the wine Parker brought, opting instead for his Yellowtail. He was also spitting sunflower seeds into a spare wine glass.

What are you going to do after you graduate, Brooke? Parker asked.

I liked my name in his mouth. I have an interview tomorrow, I told him. Calvin is hiring a nurse to work in the health center. Well, not a nurse exactly. I think it's more administrative. Hopefully this wraps up soon, I said, laughing. I have to be up early.

Parker showed mock disappointment. Why stay here? he prodded.

It's a nice town, I said, embarrassed. It's close to Portland, the area is pretty, I don't know. It's better than going back to Cyprus.

The feeling of loyalty caught me by surprise. What was I defending?

Parker shrugged. I'm out as soon as I can, he said. Once you leave, it's hard to stay satisfied with a place like this. Right, Rachel? God, Oxford! We had such a good time, he said, smiling and lightly touching her shoulder.

Trump won Missouri, Cheddar said without looking.

Rachel finished her glass. Will you bring the bottle over? she said.

Parker brought it to the coffee table. Tell me when, he said, standing over her. Rachel held up her glass and watched his eyes the whole time he poured. He poured slowly.

When.

Parker wasn't interested in me, I realized. Let's see, how did that make me feel. Annoyed.

Fine, I thought, and went and sat next to Cheddar.

How's it going, I said.

It's fine, he said. Still too close to call. He dribbled a dyed-red seed into the wine glass. Then he looked at me earnestly. You know I didn't vote, right? Rachel said she'd tell you.

She had told me, but also she didn't believe him. I wasn't sure what to say. Was Cheddar embarrassed about being Trumpy? If so, why? Was he contrite? Just trying to seem more suited for Rachel? Was he trying to impress me?

Cheddar was still looking at me. Yeah, I told him. She told me.

He nodded once then returned his attention to the election coverage. Behind me, Parker was saying something and Rachel was laughing. I sat in the middle of things for a while. At that point, some of the excitement about the new world order stuff faded a little. Life would go on like it always had. Things fall apart either way, I remembered from somewhere.

Then, quietly, after things had gone like that for a long time, Cheddar said, Trump just won Pennsylvania.

What? Rachel said. What?

Cheddar cleared his throat. He took Ohio earlier, too. I don't know if you saw that.

None of us were talking. The screen changed; the camera showed a mass of Clinton supporters in a big glass building, all of them silent. Then it showed a red-hatted crowd in front of Trump Tower, chanting USA, USA. White men, mostly. Rachel began pacing in the kitchen. I poured the Yellowtail in with the nice wine I still had in the glass. I was in a daze. It's still too close to call, I thought. Parker scrolled Twitter and kept shaking his head.

It was after ten when AP called it for Trump. Rachel's restraint left her suddenly; her head fell into her hands and she began to sob. I was surprised. What skin did she have in the game? What skin did any of us, for that matter? In a way, though, I was happy she started crying. A distraction from the tensions in the room. Cheddar and I looked at each other. Whose job was it to comfort her? But when we turned back, Parker was sitting on the couch beside her, his long arm over her shoulder, her head tucked under his chin.

I stared for a second, then turned and looked at Cheddar.

He stood up and cleared his throat. I can take over from here, he said awkwardly.

Parker ignored him.

He took a step closer. Hey, he said.

Still Parker didn't react.

Cheddar tapped on his shoulder. It was a pathetic, embarrassing gesture, but I understood why he made it. Let me handle this, he said in a voice that was clearly not his, both deeper but also, in a way, hollow.

Parker tenderly detached from Rachel and stood up, sighing. The two boys looked at each other. Parker had a couple inches on Cheddar, but Cheddar looked stronger. Parker, though, seemed calm, where Cheddar's face had the sort of nervous blankness of someone who doesn't believe what's happening, who isn't quite equal to the moment.

And who did you vote for Cheddar? Parker said quietly.

Alright, I said. It's time for both of you to leave. Thanks for coming.

I didn't vote, Cheddar said.

Parker looked at Rachel. Are you gonna tell him? he implored. About Oxford?

Rachel turned her face up to Parker. Her eyelashes were clumped into black spikes from crying. He didn't vote, she said weakly.

Parker searched her for a moment. After a second he said, Fine. He grabbed his coat and the last half of one of the bottles he brought, then walked out the door. Cheddar watched him go, then turned and looked at Rachel, who had gone back to sobbing on the other side of the couch. He tried to squat down beside her, but she shrank from him. He stood up and turned to me.

What about Oxford, he asked in a low mournful voice.

I didn't know what Parker was talking about. That's the truth. When she told me nothing happened with Parker in England, I believed her. I looked into Cheddar's face and saw that he wanted to believe too, so I said, In England Parker was crushing on Rachel, but nothing happened. That's it.

Always a small bad thing can be clung to over the looming unknown.

Give her a day, I said gently.

Cheddar looked at Rachel again, then slipped on his shoes and left without a word. I locked the door behind him. There was still some of the Yellowtail left, and I poured us both big glasses and came and sat down on the couch. After a while Rachel caught her breath, then she looked at me. It was not the time to press anything. I could see she was trying to compose herself, but snot hung shiny under her nostrils and she had stray hairs poking out all over the place. What do you say? God, what do you say?

~

All That is Solid Melts Into Air

Jackson

Charles was in the kitchen with my mom the next morning. He wasn't supposed to be back yet. As usual I'd woken up late, and as usual my room was filled with the awful summer sun, and the fog in my head was thick and hot. I came blearily down the stairs and saw the two of them sitting behind the counter. Charles, silver-haired and stern, my mom hanging onto his arm, looking at me apologetically. It was clear they'd been talking for a while.

Pull up a chair, Jackson, said Charles.

I stayed on my feet. The house felt massive, swollen. It was too big for the three of us. The stone floors, the open windows, the backyard pool sparkling in the heat.

Your mom tells me she hit a car in a parking lot yesterday.

My mom looked at me and nodded, and what I'd thought were apologetic features suddenly seemed conspiratorial.

I don't believe her, he went on, looking at my mom's face. Of course I trust your mother completely, but not when it comes to you, he said, and faced me. He looked me up and down. So let's hear it, he said. What happened to my Audi?

Why don't you believe her? I asked, running my finger innocently over the counter.

You look like shit, he said. You look like you do every morning. So you were smoking pot with your friends last night. Which means you drove there. Which means you took the Audi, because I had the Prius. Which means you drove it home stoned. Charles searched my face for a confession. He went on. On my way in this morning I saw that the speed trailer had been knocked over, which you'll recall that I helped pay for. I'm sure the HOA is wondering who did it. You're in a lot of trouble, Jackson, he said. Unless you tell me the truth.

I looked at my mom. Her lips were drawn in a thin line, and her eyes were nervous. Did she really love Charles, I wondered? Either way, I couldn't let her take the fall.

Listen man, I said. I crashed *my mom's* Audi last night.

I looked into my mom's shocked face. Dear mother, I am genuinely sorry I crashed your Audi. I know how much you loved it. I have three thousand dollars in my checking account, and if you'll let me, I will purchase the car so that you may buy another.

Charles face leapt in surprise. Jackson, three thousand dollars isn't... how much do you think that car cost?

The price will be settled between me and my mother, I said.

Charles began rubbing his forehead furiously, as if I were the forehead oil there. That's not happening! he snapped. Damnit Jackson you *crashed* my *car*.

My mom's car, I corrected. Then I looked at her, but her eyes were lost in the marble countertop.

~

My mom and Charles punished me fairly—merciful and yet just. After our talk they convened and decided: No more going to Hondo's, no more borrowing cars. Straight to work or school and back. And they refused to let me buy the Audi. But Charles didn't nark to the HOA, for which I must admit my gratitude. There was a sense of finality when they pronounced the verdict, as if some boundary had been crossed and our fragile peace was no longer possible. When I got home from work that night I hauled my mattress up the stairs into the attic of my stepfather, which sounded to me very mythic. Let my exile be physical also. That attic was a small space, triangular with the shape of the roof and no more than nine feet at its fulcrum, which sloped down to corners on either side. This was where I tossed my bed—straight into the dust

against the wall, dooming myself to sleep with the ceiling just a foot or two above my head. Out of the opulence of my stepdad and these suburbs I created for myself a holy poverty, and passed my days as ponderous as a monk.

School didn't take much of my time. I rode the bus to campus and said hi to my friends when I saw them, but that was it. It was straight to school or work then back to the attic, from which I descended only to eat or use the bathroom. I sat there in my Nana's old rocking chair and smoked Kools which I blew out the window over the suburban streets. I brooded on the state of the cosmos. I was pissed, man. There was nowhere to go, nothing I really *wanted* deep down, except to want something at all. The rest of my life stared me down like the barrel of a gun. I felt in my bones the spiritual condition of my generation, which was financial and moral bastardization and a throat-tearing lividness of the soul. But I wondered how I would inform my generation of these profoundnesses. I decided to write a poem. It was called "World War 3."

In Time's leafy garden,
a butterfly lands on my finger.
He flaps, so beautiful. Then,
a Nazi appears
and crushes it.

Not too shitty, I thought. But what to do with it?

Are you sure you're okay in the attic? my mom asked me after I'd read it to her. I keep telling Charles I smell mold up there. You know, I'll have him call when he gets off work tonight.

I frowned. Have you thought more about my offer regarding the Audi? I asked. It's just sitting in the garage. I can make it four thousand if you're really that uncomfortable with the price. Just give me some time, I said.

No, she said, then un-paused TLC and sipped lemon water from a thick glass.

It struck me that I could share the poem online. Rick and Lester were both really into Reddit, so I made an account and posted it on r/Poems. For five days afterward, I refreshed my feed constantly to see how the world would react. I got two upvotes and one comment. I assumed the commenter and the upvoter were the same person because I was the other upvote. A redditor named u/krusty_komrade_1917 wrote, "Interesting use of juxtaposition." Then he sent me a private message to compliment the poem and introduce himself. His real name, he said, was Vladimir Ulyanov.

But you can call me Lenin, he said.

Lenin was a mod at r/communism. He told me he was always on the prowl for potential revolutionaries.

Poetry pages seem to draw those sorts of people, he said. Them and r/footpics. My job is to catch them before the chuds do.

What are chuds? I asked.

The Nazis, man! The Right! Incels! You're lucky I found you before the election. Where do you live, man?

1137 Embassy Villas Ave, El Dorado Hills, CA, 95630.

You clown! he said. Never share your address on here. What are you fucking stupid?

And so our adventures began. Lenin brought me onto leftist pages and chat rooms, introducing me as "his protégé." I learned a lot about politics there. I realized that the online

environment was a representative sample of America, only sped up, like the invisible, glacial forces of the country were made horribly visible on places like r/pol and other battlegrounds. That's how it seemed to me then, that America was becoming increasingly divided into tremendous, hostile forces, and that I was a new recruit in a tremendous war waged on a million fronts. I lay in the dust of the attic, sleepless for excitement.

Yes, Lenin said. It's pretty crazy.

He told me to watch a documentary called *Tortured Mind: The Specter of Karl Marx*. I sat up cross-legged in bed and watched on my laptop. Those boys sitting in cafés in Prague talking revolution! Made me crazy. I went on Amazon and ordered a pocket copy of *The Communist Manifesto*, which showed up two days later. Great book. I bought the audio version as well, and listened to it on repeat at work, hemming and hawing and flipping pepperonis like coins.

Online, all anyone talked about was the election. Even those who said that Hillary and Trump were equally bad and that all bourgeois statism was oppressive, even they couldn't stop talking about it. The consensus on r/communism was that Hillary would win and that the networks of power would remain simultaneously boring and oppressive. In the weeks leading up to election night I'd stay up late sitting by the window of the attic thinking lofty, burning thoughts. I read Marx over-and-over again, and so came to comprehend myself as a cog in a network of vast, dumb forces which, if my mind was sharp enough, I could comprehend. It wrote my sadness into a story that I was just then able to read. But what good is it to comprehend if one cannot change? Posting online was getting old. Time passes differently on Reddit. I felt I had aged many lifetimes on those chat rooms at 3am, blowing cigarette smoke into the dull light of my laptop. Much in me was changed, and while I appreciated Lenin for spelunking with me into

vast caverns of thought, lately things between us had soured for reasons I won't go into other than that he'd started sending me pictures of his dick with a small Russian winter hat perched on its fleshy head. The hat bore the hammer and sickle and when I told him I didn't want to see that, he asked, What are you, gay?

It was time for me to set out on my own. Brimming with revolutionary vigor, I decided to start organizing. I figured Hondo would make a good first convert, so I invited him to come share the reverie. I waited until my parents were asleep then snuck him up through the house. He brought over big plastic bottles of malt liquor and we drank and smoked in the light of one small lamp. He nodded solemnly when I laid it all out for him.

So what's to be done, Hondo? I asked, but he just went on nodding his head. Come on, I said. Let's talk. I've got ideas, man.

I think I don't understand, he said finally in his starched Dutch accent. You talk so—he waved his hands. Fast and crazy. I think I don't understand. Then he finished his bottle of Steel Reserve and went on his phone.

Ricky and Lester had gone to a Trump rally in Sacramento and come back with those stupid red hats, so they were not an option either. Bereft, I returned to the internet. I began researching Portland. The green northern city was a paradise of political unrest. That's how the headlines were then: antifa this, Oath Keeper that. *The Oregonian* ran a story about this bar called The Damascus, a union bar from the timber days. Now it was a den for the rowdy descendants of those old comrades, known for violence. The story featured profiles on some of the more famous brawlers: towering men and women with names like Rooster and Jawbone. One incident involved a group of right-wing protesters entering the bar to start a fight, resulting in four hospitalizations. One right-wing media personality was left with permanent brain damage

after he was struck with a wood mug. Everything in my mind had to then been theoretical; here was a place where the dramas of America were staged regularly. And so I decided—the Damascus was where I would go.

At work or in class I daydreamed of falling in with a group of radicals. It's embarrassing to say this now, but I wanted Trump to win. A win for the Democrats would probably not result in any large-scale uprising. But Donald Trump was a flesh-and-blood embodiment of the internal contradictions of capitalism, a contradiction under whose leadership the inevitable collapse of the bourgeois state would be accelerated (I'd got to thinking in those terms, in that language). If he won, I knew there'd be riots. History called. Hello history, I answered. It's Jackson Blithe. Fuck you!

I watched the election with my parents. My mom cried when Trump won but all Charles said was, Congress won't let him do anything, even though he looked shocked, too. Shit, when Donald took Pennsylvania my heart was beating a million miles an hour. This is it, I thought. I started pacing around; finally the chaos I felt inside was reflected in history. This was it. I went on Reddit. My comrades at r/communist were calling for the revolution, and *The Oregonian* reported that protests were expected in downtown Portland the next day. I knew right then I was gonna go. I'd take the Audi after Charles left for work and before my mom woke up. I'd write a little note about how I was just taking it on a day-trip to a friend's place. I'd say, don't call the police please, I am trying to do the right and noble thing. Then I'd tear up the west coast and fuck shit up.

After my parents went to bed, I moved the Audi from the garage into the driveway so I wouldn't wake them up in the morning. Then I took a melatonin and slept in my Under Armor.

~

Go Ye Therefore

Brooke

The next morning felt like after a breakup: thin and numb and all cried out. But otherwise the world was as it had been. Rachel and I had slept on the floor of our living room in a tangle of blankets and pillows, wine glasses pitched sideways onto the carpet and phones unplugged under the coffee table. She was turned away from me, still asleep. A soft gray light filtered in through the kitchen window. I turned off my alarm, got up, and lit a candle. My eyes wouldn't open all the way and it felt like the edges of my stomach were rimmed with sour wine. Rachel had fallen asleep quickly the night before, but I'd lay in the dark a long time, just thinking. About what I couldn't remember. I was tired. I couldn't imagine going to an interview.

Rachel stirred in the blankets, then became still and I heard her breathing soften again. For a moment I considered laying back down. There would be other jobs. But it would be rude not to at least show up. I had been recommended for this position, and I was sort-of friends with Kathleen, who would be interviewing me. Having decided I was going, I started a pot of coffee then got in the shower.

After I'd dressed, Rachel was awake and scrolling her phone on the couch. Tonight is gonna be insane, she said. Portland I mean. There might be riots. That's the word they're using. Riot.

I poured two cups of coffee and handed one to her. I'm sure Trump will be devastated, I said. How are you doing? I'll only be gone for an hour or so. When I get back we should watch a movie or something. No way I'm going to classes today.

You're seriously still going to this interview? Rachel said.

I can't just not show up.

Kathleen is one of the bad guys! She's the classic Calvin conservative: prejudice spoken softly. Probably the worst kind. I can't believe you want to work here at all, she said. You're walking into a den of Republican lions.

Calvin is a liberal arts school, I said. Do you have a single conservative professor?

I'm an English major, she said. I bet you have conservative nursing instructors.

I shrugged. Not all of them are awful, I said.

Rachel shook her head, then blew steam off her surface of her mug. All of them are awful, she said. Even some of the liberal ones—they're still Christians.

I hate that word, I said. And since when do you hate Christians? It's surprising that you're even at Calvin.

She frowned. I told you what I was like when I came here, she said. By the time I came around, it seemed too late to transfer. And I don't *hate* anybody, she added.

I wasn't sure how to reply to that, so I said, If they make an offer I can always say no.

I hope you would, she said. We drank our coffee in silence, then I headed out the door. Good luck, she called as I left.

I shivered as I walked. There was mist hanging in the branches of the fir trees on our street, and the lawns were white with frost. The cold woke me up. I got to campus quickly. Its brick buildings looked hushed in the cold. In the middle of the quad there was a clock tower, and beside it, a rose garden. All thorns that time of year. I felt something like nostalgia for that place and time, as though a season of my life had passed in the night.

The health center stood at the far end of the quad. It was the most modern building on campus. I walked through its swinging doors and proceeded to the third floor. I'm here for an interview with Kathleen, I said to the secretary. She asked me to sit before disappearing into the

offices. I grabbed a mint from a small black bowl on the coffee table. Beside it there was a copy of *Christian News Northwest*. The headline said, Evangelicals deliver Donald Trump the White House. There was a picture of him at the head of a long table. He was pointing at the camera. There was a wry, boyish look in his eye. I lay the paper face down and grabbed a mint, wishing I'd eaten something before. I turned the mint in my teeth and looked around the building. This, I wondered, this same money which paid for these walls, which paid the salary of this secretary, was this the money which paid Trump into office? I didn't know if that was right or not. The magazine seemed to think so. But the connection was there in my mind, and I was nauseated by it. With guilt, with anger, with confusion. And yet somewhere I still guarded a love for it, a love I could not look in its eye.

Brooke? Kathleen appeared in the doorway. Oh it's so good to see you again! she said. Sorry to keep you waiting. You can follow me.

Kathleen was a short, peppy twenty-something who had been a senior when I was a freshman. She'd gotten a job right after graduation. Now she was the assistant director of marketing. Kathleen was a legend at Calvin, simultaneously an example of biblical womanhood and business success. She led me into a small room with a table and two chairs, and I asked if I wanted coffee, which I declined.

Well let's not beat around the burning bush, she said, sliding a stack of papers into a clipboard. We think you're a strong candidate for this job. And personally, I would be thrilled to have you working with me.

My stomach growled audibly. Thanks, I said.

You're familiar with Excel? Kathleen said in a glittery voice.

Yes.

She wrote on her clipboard. Great, she said, then gave me a big smile and clicked her mechanical pencil all the way out before using the table to push it back in. And you're happy to be filling a more administrative role? Even though we're in the health center, this isn't exactly a nursing job.

Yes, I think I actually prefer it that way right now, I said, even though there could be nothing further from the truth. I just wanted to stay in town, and this was the only nursing-adjacent job on the market. I wanted to stay in that house with Rachel, located between the fanaticism of my family and the cosmopolitan liberalism of someone like Parker. I had departed enough; I wanted something to stay the same.

Great, Kathleen said again, her smile even wider. After that she began asking me questions she knew would make me look good in her notes. She was pitching me softballs. I started to feel warm towards Kathleen, almost envious. I pictured what her life must be like: an early marriage to a bible study sweetheart, driving to campus every day for work, commenting snidely on the new pastor's sermon, having genteel sex with my shirt on after a single, but hefty, glass of rosé. Kathleen's life was guiltless and simple in a way I was attracted to. Why worry about all this political nonsense? Surely Kathleen did not trouble herself with such things. Republican, Democrat, her lifestyle was immune to regimes of all sorts. Here was one who'd built her life on the rock.

Last question, she said, and I sat up eagerly in my chair.

How do you think your faith will affect your behavior in the workplace? she asked.

A good question, I thought. Kathleen was simply asking me to say that I would treat my colleagues as brothers and sisters in Christ, and that I would run spreadsheets with courage, for

the spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power and love and so on into all that. That was fine, I didn't have any problem saying it.

I don't know if it will, I said, heard myself saying.

Kathleen's left eyebrow ascended into the flesh of her forehead. What do you mean? she asked in a prim, restrained manner.

I don't know how my faith will impact the way I decide to answer the phone or print stuff or whatever, I said. The relationship is unclear to me.

Kathleen stabbed the tip of her pencil into her stack of papers, in and out. Beyond just caring for people here, she said, we believe our charge to also be outreach. After all, you would often work closely with the marketing team. So certainly the great commission would be one possible connection between faith and work, she said. Marketing is a form of evangelism, don't you think?

Taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, I reflected. Yeah I guess so.

She exhaled. So should I put that down for your answer? she said, her pen tip hovering over the dark waters of my future.

No, I said simply, as if she'd only asked me whether it was raining, and the answer was as obvious as looking out the window, where no, of course it wasn't.

~

Rachel looked at me with a kind of awe when I told her. Wow, she said. You gave her the *non serviam*.

I was sitting by the kitchen window. I'd just finished eating sourdough toast and eggs. The sun had cleared the mist off the trees and melted the frost, and everything was bright and cold and beautiful. I felt energized, incisive.

That doesn't make me a bad person, right? I just felt like I couldn't lie.

Of course not, she said. So you didn't want the job?

I don't know, I said. I didn't want or not want the job.

O-kay, Rachel said slowly. So why didn't you just lie?

That stuff seems too important to lie about.

God, you mean.

I sighed. Sure. Especially after last night, I said, not knowing exactly what I meant.

I thought you said whether you take or don't with this job doesn't matter because it won't change anything, Rachel said, smiling.

I'm not trying to change anything. Anyways, I said. Please explain what happened between you and Parker last night.

Rachel came and sat down next to me at the table. Nothing, she said.

You hurt Cheddar's feelings.

Why are you defending Cheddar?

You should break up with him if you don't want to be with him.

I'm not sure what I want, she said, exasperated.

Then why are you dating him?

Rachel just shook her head, then opened her phone and started scrolling Instagram. For a while I sat in the sunlight and ran through the events of the night before. I thought about how I'd felt beforehand, about the world being on this march of progress toward some perfect society, and I recognized something of heaven in that mindset. It seemed ridiculous.

Rachel looked up from her phone. We should go to Portland tonight, she said.

And do what?

You're a nurse, she said. We can bring some medical supplies and if it gets violent, we can just wait up the street and help out.

Why do you want to go? I asked.

What, you just want to sit around and watch TV all day?

That's not even what we normally do, I said. So what, we're gonna to this protest because we're bored?

We'd be going to help. *You* can help people. Rachel stood and grabbed her car keys off the coffee table. Let's go to CVS.

I don't know, I said, grimacing. I don't know if it's something you can just go to. Do you have to be...? but I trailed off after imagining someone with a clipboard taking attendance and kicking certain people out of a riot. The whole thing seemed so foreign.

I think we should go, she said.

I looked up at her for a second. Her long brown hair was wet still from a shower. She was tall and thin. There was a serious, almost crazy look in her eyes. She was resolute.

I released a breath. What would we even need?

Google it, she said. And then we started a list: gloves, gauze, medical tape, milk of magnesium, water.

You're paying, I said once we were done.

~

Cheddar called on our way back from CVS. Rachel was driving, so she handed me her phone. Don't answer, she said. I set her phone down on the center console and let it ring out.

Even so, Cheddar's car was at our house when we got back.

Rachel groaned. I'll be in in a second, she said, so I shut the front door behind me. I wondered whether they were going to break up. It would probably be for the better, I thought. Cheddar wasn't a bad guy, as Calvin guys went. A soft Christian who liked to drink and who understood "sexual immorality" in broad terms, and a soft Republican who identified that way because it's how he grew up. To him America was little more than the smell of BBQ and fireworks on the Fourth of July. But it was the softness, the reasonableness, of those beliefs that had embedded them so deeply. We were from the same place: I understood him. But unless he changed drastically, he and Rachel weren't right for each other. Rachel was graduating in the spring and at Calvin, if you weren't at least engaged by the time the graduation ceremony rolled around, the relationship was doomed. So I assembled our first aid kit and took pleasure in coolly analyzing Rachel's emotional situation, which drama was playing out on the other side of the kitchen window.

I heard Cheddar's car start some ten minutes later, and I looked outside and saw his white clouds of exhaust sputtering as he drove down the street. Rachel's back was to me, watching him go, and I thought Yep, that must have been it. But she didn't look sad when she came in. Rachel walked into the kitchen and put her hands on the counter and used it to stretch out her back. He's going to meet back here at eight, she said.

For what?

He wants to come with us to Portland.

No, I said. What? Cheddar is the last person.

Rachel sighed. I think he wants to support his cousin, she said. I guess his cousin is a cop in the city.

Cheddar wants to come to support the police?

Rachel sighed again, deeper. That's what he says. I think he's backed off the Trump thing, but the police are something he can support. I don't know, Brooke. He doesn't know what he's talking about.

Well what about last night? Are you guys fine now?

Rachel put her face in her hands and let out a long *ugh*. Then she put her fingers under her eyes and stretched them down, making her face look ghoulish. I hooked up with Parker in England, she said.

I set the first aid kit on the table. What the *fuck*, I said. What the fuck? You have to break up with him. Does he know? God, Rachel, what are you doing?

I don't know how to tell him, she moaned.

So why are you letting him come?

I want to see if I still love him, Rachel said meekly, embarrassed at her answer.

This is bad, I said. Tonight is going to be bad.

We were quiet for a moment, but Rachel was not going to budge.

Fine, I said. At least tell him not to wear that shirt.

~

Part Two

On the Road

Jackson

Driving up through the open country I imagine what it'll be like when I get there. I'll park on a gloomy, drizzly road, walk a few blocks through an easy rain, come to a dark tavern. There'll be a man out front. He'll be wearing a beret. You know what I'm here for, I'll say. He'll nod, We've been expecting you, then lead me around back to a cellar door. Below, in a sepulchral hollow, there'll be a man with wire glasses sitting on a wine barrel licking shut a cigarette under a gently flickering light. He'll strike a match, pull the flame, let smoke trickle from his nose, tilt his head down the hall. There in the corner will be a buxom revolutionary maiden, sitting before a map, pointing, biting her finger in thought, then pointing again. In front of her, two grizzled men in sweaters will argue in the smoky glow. She will have rich and darting eyes. She will wear black leather. She will look up, nod gravely. Say, I'm glad you came, but let us turn now to what is to be done.

Visions like that tear through my head all the way up the west coast. I didn't once stop to use the bathroom, and I had no appetite because of the Adderall, so by two in the afternoon I'd curved into the wooded flats of Eugene, Oregon, and by four I'm close to the city.

On one of the hills above Portland I get stuck in traffic. Big trees grow over the freeway. It's cloudy. Ominous, in a way. I creep over a ridge and see below the outlines of tremendous buildings along the banks of a muddy brown river. Finally I come down beside it. Directions to the Damascus take me right through downtown. Everything looks normal: there are shops and restaurants, towering business buildings and hotels. I drive past a huge square in front of a domed courtroom, then take a side street for a block and there it is, the most famous antifa bar in the world. The Damascus. I park and hop out.

The Damascus is a two-story lodge-style building that looks like the mountain home of some timber baron. It feels dated and out of place next to the bourgeois shops and artisan grocery stores. I push the door in. There's wood everywhere, pale like bone. High above, hanging from the ceiling, a chandelier pollinates the air with a shy yellow light. Past a few bar tables there's a staircase that leads up to the second floor, which runs around the perimeter in a thin balcony. I imagine the place filled with sniveling intellectuals theorizing revolution over gin and tonics or working class folks pounding Rainiers and planning wildcat strikes and an old Victrola in the corner playing Charlie Parker. But there's only two people here, and both of them stare as I stand in the doorway gawking. The bartender leans his hips mythically against the bar top, polishing a pint glass. He's a big, red-faced man with a beard growing mostly on the underside of his chin. A hawk-nosed behemoth sits in front of him on a barstool, his Sorels perched on the gold footrest, a tangle of curly hair hanging over his eyes. He looks away and drinks with lonely vigor, a pensive prole. An orange beard flames the side of his face. I walk up and take the stool next to him. Instead of asking about the revolution, I ask the bartender for a mojito. As he's making the drink I say to him, So, you gonna be there tonight? I feel the guy next to me turn and stare into the side of my neck.

The bartender turns around and put the mojito on the bar top. Six bucks, he says. Oh wait. He pulls out a slice of lime and squeezes it between his thumb and index finger, then arranges it gingerly on top of the ice. Haven't made one of these in a long time, he says.

Winds are changing, I tell him, then drink from the straw without breaking eye contact. I'm here for the cause, brother, I say. This isn't a very good mojito.

The guy beside me starts laughing—a low, grizzly noise. I wait for him to stop. So what's going down tonight? I ask them both.

The giant leans in close. What's your problem with Mr. Trump? he says. Hes' got a thick Scottish accent and reeks of whiskey and beard oil. He lingers a second by my face, then sits back and laughs again. Something about the way his teeth curl out from his lip.

You're Samson! I say. You threw that Oath Keeper over the river railing at the Oregon Brewing Festival in 2014. Big fan.

The bartender thumps the glass against the bar top and tosses the rag over his shoulder. That fucking article! he says. We're not that kind of establishment anymore.

Oh come on, Rudy, Samson says. The kid's a fan. He turns to me. You wanna know my secret? Why I've never been knocked down? I nod. He flicks his eyes toward the ground where a pair of rusted oven trays peeked out of a backpack. I slip them under my shirt, he says. Fascists love body shots, and cops love rubber bullets. He finishes his drink. Tonight's gonna be fun, he says, then wipes his mouth.

Not here, says Rudy. We're moving toward other markets now. Wine people.

Samson shrugs. Don't waste your time with at Pioneer Square, he says. The real action's not 'till after the protest is done.

Thanks, I say. Then I finish mojito. All I have's a twenty, so I slip it to Rudy across the bar top. Keep the change, I tell him as I get up to go. It was great to meet you, I say to Samson, and realize I'm bowing. He laughs me out the door.

I punch Pioneer Square into my phone. It turns out it's the big courtyard I passed driving in. Dusk is coming on, strong and cold. I decide to leave my car in the Damascus parking lot; the square isn't too far of a walk. I head back down the street. Over my head helicopter chugs off toward the hills. As it passes, its black body catches the lights of the city. I follow it to Pioneer Square.

It's an entire city block just open to the sky. On the far end stand a row of tall white pillars and on the other, a Starbucks. The courtyard is filled with pedestrians engaged in non-revolutionary activities, and I'm filled suddenly with the horror that maybe I've come all this way for not a goddamn thing. The thought of driving all the way back home, facing my mom and Charles, then crawling up to the attic fills me with pure dread. There is no life for me there, I know. Even if tonight doesn't work out revolution-wise, maybe there's a job I can get around here. But then what to do about the car?

I cross the street and sit down on one of the steps to wait. My jeans and socks keep my lower body warm, but my sweatshirt is too thin. I pull the sleeves over my hands and put my hood on and huddle. Then I wake up. It's dark. 8:30, my phone says. A few people are setting up sound equipment in the center of the square. People on the street stop to look. The hollow drum of my stomach howls; I realize I've eaten nothing but mint flecks and an Adderall. I don't want to leave the square, so I go to the Starbucks. Ten bucks for a flimsy sandwich and a coffee. I sit back on the steps and pull out my pocket copy of Marx, but I can't focus.

After a while, people start trickling into the courtyard, mostly older white people. They shiver around holding signs that say things like "Nicht Mein Führer" and "Fuck Trump" and "Resist," but they aren't raised high. It feels like the early stages of a party. The city air is yellowish purple and the thousand-eyed buildings stare down. I pocket Marx and rub my hands together and walk over to the gathering crowd, which can't be more than a hundred or so. A woman comes up to the microphone and leads us feebly through chants, but stops when it becomes clear that we aren't enough to make much noise. We wait for someone to come watch.

~

Triumphal Entry

Brooke

Cheddar arrived at precisely eight o'clock, baring to the world the aforementioned, forewarned, thrice-cursed shirt.

Oh no, I said, seeing him through the window. No no.

He's wearing the shirt, Rachel moaned from the couch. There he was, broad-shouldered and smiling behind the door. Under his down jacket was the shirt. It proclaimed, it shouted to the world: Reagan Bush '84.

Cheddar, I said sharply when he came in. Please keep your jacket zipped up with that shirt on tonight.

Sorry, he said with a guilty grin. It was my only clean shirt.

Nobody said anything for a second. I wondered whether he'd worn the shirt as a childish form of aggression against what'd happened with Parker. Or maybe he was trying to impress his cousin? Or maybe he just genuinely thought it was cool. Yet again I was confused by where exactly he fell, politically, emotionally. Was he a gloating Republican? An embarrassed lover with a small wardrobe? Either way, the shirt didn't help his case.

Okay let's go, Rachel said quickly, and grabbed her jacket and led the way outside.

As we drove, I read through the comment sections of a bunch of tweets having to do with the protest. The same debate was reiterated under each: what is this demonstration going to do? People said, It's not like they're going to overturn the results of the election. There were very few responses to this question. I wondered about it. At least we were there to serve a specific purpose. I thought about raising the question in the car, but I was only interested in what Rachel had to say.

We got to the city quickly. Even the highway was dead. We parked and walked toward Pioneer Square. None of us said anything. I kept my hands on the backpack straps. What if something went wrong? What if the police used live rounds? I felt unprepared for walking into this potentially violent situation. This was something other people did. But we were already there; we turned a corner in the direction of the chants.

My first thought when I saw the crowd was, Where did all these people park? It looked like there was a medieval army in the square. There were thousands of them, arranged in a writhing glob so dense in the middle as to be pure black and spreading out thinner at its edges. I stopped under a light pole about fifty yards up a side lane. Below and to the left were the police. There were hundreds of them. Light from their sirens flashed onto the tall buildings. A row of armored cops blocked the street on which they had parked their personnel vehicles. I'd never seen so many in one place. They were dressed in black and carrying shields. Behind the front line there was a crowd of cops in various states of action: calling on radios, speaking at the crowd through a megaphone, holding on to the shiny personnel vehicles, loading tear gas launchers. This was the military. In Portland, the military. I thought, You can do nothing at all.

~

Figures of Speech

Jackson

The crowd is big all at once. One second I have space to stand, the next I don't. I get up on my tiptoes. It's not just old white people anymore: the courtyard is filled completely, thousands. And our chants! They deepen and rise and sweep from one side of the square to another, rippling and roaring and pooling in the night. The courtyard had become in the blink of an eye a place where history happens, and we are its mythic personae. Masked protesters shimmy up the line of pillars and howl like pagans scaling temple ruins. My voice fuses with the crowd, the perimeters of my body become unsubstantial, my arms and legs touch all edges. We maul on to the roof of the Starbucks, we spill into the streets, we're thousands, we're angry, our hands are iron, our voices thunder. Helicopters hover against the red roof of clouds. We chant and chant and chant until we look and see our audience: there she is, America: soldiers blacklining the streets with shields and covered faces, armored cars with riot cops honeycombed to the side, sirens flashing onto brick facades in brutal patterns.

A voice rings out, cutting off ours. This has been declared an unlawful assembly, it booms. There will be the deployment of riot control agents and impact munitions. All persons are subject to arrest. Leave immediately.

We swell and bristle and taunt. We say Fuck Trump over-and-over, each guttural *u* mounting the next. We swell the chant up over the police's warning, which is playing now on repeat. Don't they know who they are in this story? And don't they know what violence we carry in our bodies?

Our perimeter breaks; we rush into the street.

An explosion shatters us. Then another, just behind me and to the left. I drop and turn into another boom my ears pop I flip the other way but it's too dense to run. Screams and bodies shove and muck as cannisters sail into the crowd and boom and tear the air with red light and flashing smoke. Through crisscrossing bodies I see a line of black machines with clear shields. They advance. A dark thing flies from over their heads, hits a woman in the chest, she falls to the ground. It hisses milky air. A man drops a traffic cone over it and tries to squirt liquid down it but the smoke comes too fast he coughs the gas coils over the crowd a weeping scream tears the air I hold my breath I shut my eyes the skin of my hands and face itch then burn I open my mouth suck hot needles into my lungs my body shakes I double over and cough I heave fire my eyes won't open I run away the heat I fall I stand I open my eyes I see the street I run and run and run and run hands grab my shoulders I say No No No the machines they shove me down pour something cool in my eyes.

~

The Road to Damascus

Brooke

My first image of Jackson: He's lying spread-eagle on the sidewalk, face down, coughing and wheezing. His face is covered in milk and snot loops from his nose to the concrete. His eyes are squeezed tight. My first words to him: We're not the police, I said, crouching at his side. Shh, catch your breath. We're not the police.

It had looked like war. The cannisters flew into the crowd and something like fog rose up around the feet of protesters. From the middle of the crowd rose a piercing scream. Out of the smoke came dozens of people sprinting up the street like zombies. I saw an old man whose eyes had swollen shut, as if from bee stings. He tripped on a sewer and fell, crying, onto the concrete. A group of medics rushed over and surrounded him. These medical teams had bunched in groups around us, and now they began to grab the mass of people. I told Cheddar to grab someone and he stepped out into the street and threw his arms around a young man who was running, eyes closed, like he was on fire. We helped him onto the sidewalk and I poured the milk of magnesium down his face; he coughed and sputtered.

Now he was curled up on the concrete in fetal position. He tried to rub his eyes. Don't do that, I said, and he stopped. Down the street, a line of police strafed the remaining protesters. Wisps of tear gas floated through the bare branches of city trees. The stoplights went green, yellow, red. Everywhere there was screaming.

Holy shit, Cheddar said to no one. Has that happened before? I mean that bad? Gosh, I mean I hope Brennan was out there.

Rachel leaned against a streetlight. She looked pissed. She wouldn't make eye contact with Cheddar.

I leaned in close to Jackson. Hey, I said. Trust me for a second. He gave a quick nod, his eyes still shut. I need you to take off your shirt and pants. He uncoiled and sat up shaking, then slowly stripped to his boxers. I'm gonna rinse you off, alright? Jackson nodded again. I poured water from a Hydroflask over his head and down his shoulders, then used a towel to wipe his goosebumped, trembling skin. Here, I said, pouring water on a rag. Wipe your face.

The three of us watched Jackson wipe down his white body, his eyes still clenched. Dark strands of hair clung to his neck.

Finally he opened his eyes. He looked at us like a newborn baby. Holy shit, he said hoarsely. Can I have my clothes back?

No, I told him. They've got chemicals on them. He groaned, which turned into a hacking fit. Once he'd gotten his breath, he rose to a crouch and squeezed his eyes shut and exhaled in a thin whistle, then inhaled deeply, seeming to collect himself. Then he stood to his feet and started rubbing his neck.

Thanks for that, he said, his voice still scratchy. We got whipped out there. My name's Jackson. Can you help me back to my car? I wanna buy you guys a drink. I know a place!

We stared at him dumbly for a second, then Rachel looked at Cheddar, who shook his head—of course not. But Rachel thought for a second; it was really her decision, since we'd come in her car. I think that'd be nice, she said, then looked at me. What do you think, Brooke?

What was the alternative? We could go home and things would go back to how they'd been, only worse. Or we could see what happened. So I said, Sure.

After drinking some water and collecting himself, Jackson led us casually down the street, wearing nothing but his boxers. He had a thin build, not quite muscular. In his left hand he carried his bundle of clothes, and in his right he held a small white book I later learned to be *The*

Communist Manifesto. Hey, he said to us conspiratorially. This is what the revolution looks like. Then he turned around and hacked into his elbow.

Rachel and I looked at each other and laughed: Jackson carried his pale, blotchy body down the street with ridiculous dignity. Protest stragglers ambled along the sidewalk as if it were just another night on the town, and when they saw us, they laughed. Cheddar, embarrassed, released a frustrated breath at the ground. Jackson ignored them.

Near the parking lot of a grimy-looking bar, Jackson started running. Oh fuck fuck fuck, he said as he reached a black Audi that I thought could not belong to him.

The windshield had been smashed in. Jackson squatted with both hands pressed to the sides of his head, his plaid boxers hovering over the concrete. Two of his tires had been slashed, too. Was this the cops? The Right? Who did this? he yelled. We looked inside. A brick rested innocently on the driver seat. On the passenger side, there was a black gym bag spangled with glass. Fuck! he said again. He retrieved the bag through the shattered windshield, glass shards showering onto the concrete, and pulled out a pair of blue jeans and a jacket, which he put on, grimacing as glass scraped his skin. He frowned at the smashed up car, seeming to make a decision. Then he went rifling through the trunk until he found a screwdriver, with which he removed his front and rear license plates, and which he then used to scratch the VIN number off the dash. After throwing the license plates into a recycling bin, he looked at us grimly. Well, he said. How'd you guys get here?

You're just gonna abandon it? Cheddar said.

This is your car? I said.

Jackson shrugged. It's my mom's, he said. I don't have the money to tow it, and anyways, now I've got no choice but to stick around. Then he went into the glovebox and took out all the paperwork and threw it in the trash. I'll call her later, he said.

The city's gonna have to pay for that, Cheddar grumbled.

Rachel just looked amused. Well, she said. How far away is this place?

Jackson pointed to the bar behind her. We're already here, he said, grinning.

Rachel and Cheddar and I regarded the building suspiciously. It seemed out of place for the Pearl district. A relic. Most places were chic and pricey. This place looked like a two-story dive.

Okay, I said finally. Cheddar sighed. We walked toward the front door.

A pair of picnic tables stood out front with cigarettes shoved between the planks. Shadowy men and women sat there, dressed in black and smoking, some of them with cuts and bruises on their faces. Rachel followed Jackson confidently past them, Cheddar behind with his eyes on the ground, and me in the rear, my stomach giddy with adrenaline, contemplating my friends and wanting a drink. We walked in through the door. There was a group of fifteen or so clumped together by the bar, but the rest of the place, balcony and tables, was sparsely populated. The protest had felt like the whole city; it was strange to see other people so close.

Hey, hey! I know you, the bartender shouted when we came in.

Rudy! Jackson said. I brought some friends.

Mojitos all around? he asked.

He's kidding, he said to us. No, we'll have a round of ryes, please. Your very cheapest.

We took a booth by the window. Rachel and Cheddar sat down on one side, neither looking at the other, and I slid in next to Jackson. The theme of the place seemed to be wood:

big, unpainted wood beams, roughly-hewn wood seats, a wooden chandelier from which hung a few exposed pieces of wood. Isn't this place sick? said Jackson, sipping from a small wood cup.

Cheddar frowned down at his drink. I took a sip of mine, blanched, then recovered. You like rye, don't you Cheddar? I said.

I'm not 21, he said.

Ah, no way this place will card you, man. This is where *antifa* hangs out, Jackson said, making spooky fingers in the air.

I think we should go home, Cheddar said. It's not safe to be out in the city right now, I don't think. I mean you guys saw what happened to the protesters, right? He seemed to notice Jackson right after he said. Sorry, he said.

All is well, my man, Jackson said.

Come on Cheddar, Rachel said. The good guys won. Your cousin is proud that you supported him, and Trump is president. What more could you want? Let's celebrate.

My mouth fell open. I tried to get Rachel's eyes, but she wouldn't turn my way. What was she doing?

Cheddar looked like he couldn't speak. He went on shaking his head like a toy.

Right, Jackson said, glancing from Rachel to Cheddar.

So, I said to Jackson, who are you exactly?

My name's Jackson Blithe, I'm 22 years old, I recently terminated my matriculation to the City College of Sacramento, and I'm here for the struggle, he said, grinning wolfishly, his voice now mostly back. And I'm hungry, starving. I thought I saw food on the menu at this place earlier. I can go get some fries soon, too. I haven't really eaten much of anything today. Anyway,

who are you guys? Also you probably want to keep that jacket zipped up, my man, he said to Cheddar.

Cheddar looked down at his shirt as if he didn't recognize it. Then he zipped it up.

So you guys are like Mormons or something? Jackson said.

Christians, Cheddar said, and then killed his rye.

Jackson appraised him and Rachel for a second. You guys drank those quickly, he said. Do you want another? They nodded stiffly, and he got up and disappeared into the crowd of people by the bar.

He's gonna ask to stay with us, Rachel said matter-of-factly, rotating her cup along its bottom rim.

Cheddar whipped toward her. You're not gonna say yes, are you?

Well he can't stay with you, Rachel said, because Cheddar still lived in the dorms. And he has no car and no place to stay.

He's a *random guy*, Cheddar said, knocking his cup on the table with the last two words.

I thought for a second. He could stay in the shack, I said. The house doors would be locked if he turned out to be a freak or something.

Cheddar just kept shaking his head, and we were silent.

A few minutes later, Jackson came back with the drinks and a basket of fries. Here you go, he said, handing the cups to Rachel and Cheddar. I got you one too, Brooke. I'll drink it if you don't, though, so no worries. He smiled, then sat down and ravished the fries.

You can stay at our place tonight if you want, Rachel said quickly. We have a shack in our backyard with a couch in it. It should be warm enough with blankets.

Jackson's face lit up. No way! he said, his mouth filled with fries. Then he chewed and swallowed and said, Thanks! What about tomorrow night?

Cheddar said excuse me and left the table.

Rachel watched him go, then looked out the window. I'm gonna tell him, she said to her reflection in the glass. About Parker.

I leaned over the table so she could see me in the black window pane. No, I said. Not here. Wait until tomorrow.

Jackson peeked out behind us. Tell him what? he said. And who's Parker? Cheddar seems like a nice guy. Bit of a wet sandwich though. Are you guys together?

We stared at ourselves for a second, nobody saying anything, then Rachel sighed and turned around, and Jackson and I shrunk back into our seats. Do you mind? she asked, pointing at my drink. I shook my head and she drank it. Do you? she asked Jackson. He pushed the cup over the table, and she drank his too. She grimaced, burped, took a breath. Okay, she said. Wish me luck.

Rachel, seriously, don't do this now, I said. Telling him here is gonna make it worse. We still have to ride back together.

She paused, looking after where Cheddar had gone. I'm angry now, she said after a moment. I'll feel too guilty tomorrow. I won't be able to do it.

Before I could respond, she walked off.

Whoa, Jackson said, watching her go. I didn't mean to cause any drama. He turned to me. I don't know how long I'll be here, is all.

I put my face in my hands and groaned. This is gonna be bad, I said. I knew this was going to be bad, and it has been.

Jackson was quiet.

For a moment I closed my eyes and rested in the chaos-feeling. My life had to that point felt regimented and clean, but I found a kind of pleasure in the evening's entropy. And I knew when my opened my eyes there would be a boy, an interesting, handsome-ish boy in front of me. I exhaled through my nose and sat back up. Okay, I said to him. It's still okay. You staying with us, I mean. And you shouldn't worry about Cheddar and Rachel. This would've happened anyway. I rested my chin on my hand and studied him.

What did you think would happen? I asked. Coming all the way up here?

Jackson just laughed. Ask me in the morning, he said, grinning.

~

Excerpts from the 47th Consortium of the John Birch Society
and Related Capitalist Leagues

Jackson

Tear gas sucks, man. Like swallowing bees. Funny thing too was that shivering on the concrete in my underwear I actually felt more bourgeois than ever—a sniveling little baby unhappy with his step-money. Sure, the *fuck you* felt good and punk while it lasted but was it really worth getting shamed like that? Not for any political reasons.

Brooke was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. That sounds like a romantic sentiment but it's not. The gas made me feel like I was gonna shit myself—I have googled this since and turned up nothing—and seeing a lady in a state like that is bad for the bowels. I thought, This will *not* be the first time I shit myself. As an adult. And I didn't, and maybe that was all I effectively resisted that day. More than just the dookie, what I felt in the moment was a profound and uncomfortable sense of myself as a body. I was aware of the length of my toenails, the skin on my face which was red and dry once I wiped away the water, the outline of my dick in my boxers, the *bum bum* of my heart slowing back to its normal pace as I sat. Brooke's got these sharp, analytical blue eyes, and she was looking at me with them. So I played it off, hopped to my feet and introduced myself to her and her friends, and asked if I could take them out for a drink. What was I gonna do, go home?

That would have been impossible even if I'd wanted to. Whoever smashed my windshield of my mom's Audi is a prick, I'd say that to their face. Don't care what side of the political or mental spectrum they're on. What does Marx know about something like that? Property is theft, yeah, and so is smashing windshields. What ever happened to honor among crooks? I ditched the car in the city and rode with Brooke and her group over to the Damascus. I

was in no rush to call my mom. Guilt welled up from somewhere, but I understood that this was perhaps the most important day of my life, so I cemented myself against it.

By the time we're hanging out in The Damascus I'm dressed and feeling a little better, my lungs don't hurt so bad and my eyes don't feel spikey. Amazing what clothes and fries and a cup of rye can do for the soul. I'm sitting there hoping the four of us are gonna shoot the shit and become revolutionary pals when Cheddar storms off and Rachel follows suit to tell him she cheated on him or something. Brooke watches them go, then turns back and sighs.

I'm in love with her. Not even exaggerating, either. God! She's a good-looking gal. Very pristine. I like to think I have a more rag-tag handsomeness and I can't help but picture how we'll complement each other perfectly, how she'll keep me grounded and I'll keep her exciting. Beside her I am a sophisticated stranger, but then also like a chump who lives with his parents and doesn't have friends even online, so at once terrifically strong and terribly self-conscious. But that's love I guess.

We talk about our lives for a while. I get the feeling she is as stranded as I am. We're just getting into more serious stuff when Rachel flies by our booth on a beeline for the door. She looks like she's about to cry. Doesn't even acknowledge us as she flew past.

Brooke stands up and says, Rach?

Rachel stops and turns to face us. She's looking crazy. I just need to get some air, she says, and she's got the hiccupping-crying thing going on.

Did you tell him? Brooke asked.

Rachel nods tearfully. I just need to be alone for a couple minutes, she says. Then she pushes out into the dark.

Brooke is on her feet looking after her. Should I go out there? she asks.

Probably not, I say wisely.

To my surprise, Brooke takes a seat. She sets two hands face down on the table. They are soft and tan for winter. I look up into her eyes. It's always startling to look into someone's eyes, even for a second. Especially hers. You can see all the tiny movements, the stretching color, the darting black circle. It is her, I think. But with horror I realize she is seeing me just the same. I look away sheepishly, and seem to feel her smile on the side of my face. But then she starts talking and all is as it was.

Brooke gives me the what's-what about the whole situation. Especially about Cheddar. She says smart things about him and her hometown and Christianity and stuff like that that.

I think I'm more spiritual than religious, I tell her for some reason.

Brooke frowns. Sure, she says. Everybody says that. I just don't know what it means.

It means I know God, I say. Then tentatively, But really I'm more into economics.

She leans back in her chair and raised her eyebrow. Boldly approaching the throne, she muses. I don't know. You just can't think an original thought about that stuff.

Get the fuck out of here, I say, then blush. I mean I don't think that's true, right? Even so, who cares.

Brooke smooths a napkin out on the table. Concentrating on the napkin's surface, not looking at me, she says, Yeah but to say you're spiritual and not religious is to ignore what's informing your spirituality. History and money and stuff. Family. It just seems—childish, she finished, laughing. Then she looks up. No offense.

God, that smile! The word *soft* keeps bouncing through my mind. Everything—her hands, her hair, her smooth cheeks, they all seem to be part of some greater softness. A lesser man would have had his feelings hurt to be corrected like that, but I had no man feelings to speak

of. You can't act tough around a girl who's wiped tear gas off your inner thigh while you were laying on the concrete sobbing. Even if it was to overthrow the government.

So you're religious? I ask.

No, just spiritual, she says, smiling.

This is getting sexy. I'm about to speak, but then my phone starts vibrating on the table. It's my mom.

Brooke notices the name also. Uh-oh, she says. Is your mom gonna be pissed her car got smashed?

I haven't told her I've stolen it. She'll be fine, I say, then pick up the phone. Hello?

Jackson, comes Charles voice through the line. I know you're in Portland. The police have been notified as well.

They'd tracked me through my phone, I'm sure. Quickly I go into my settings and turn location services off.

You sound angry, I say after a moment. Is my mom there?

We're all gonna talk when you get home, he says. Your place in this household needs to be discussed. You can't imagine the kind of stress this has put on her. Me, too. But mostly your mom. You've put her in a terrible position.

I imagine my mom curled on the couch, sobbing. Toward Charles I feel nothing but derision. Brooke looks at me quizzically, beautifully.

I'm sorry, I say. The Audi has unfortunately sustained further damage. I have money in savings which I will transfer to you in recompense. I pause. I'm not sure when I'll be home, I say. You can call the police and tell them everything is okay.

A moment of silence, then the line goes dead.

I set the phone down. The Damascus seemed to have filled, but I feel again like an observer, outside of this place I'd hoped to feel more like myself. Everything has gone badly. Trump is still president, the revolution is quashed, Rachel and Cheddar are breaking up (I identify with this only melodramatically), and I have no home in this world anymore.

Is everything okay? Brooke asks.

With infinite sadness I look on her. The world is ending, I say. But it's okay.

Before she can respond, frantic noise and movement grabs our attention from the bar area. Immediately I know what's going on; the night has been making its sense, or nonsense, really, and I've come to feel its shape and know: it's Samson, and it's Cheddar.

The Scottish giant held Cheddar by the collar and had him lifted almost off his feet. A crowd of antifa folks surrounded them, jeering. Cheddar's face looks up toward the ceiling with the terror of all worlds. The story is mine as well. Without looking at Brooke I get up and hightail it over there.

Hey, I say, my hand in the small of Samson's back, touching the giant.

~

Cyclops

Skinny Taylor

Well Mike and I'd been drinking since the election at a buddy's place off Alberta and when CNN called it for Trump we hit the gas pedal putting back seltzers and the two of us blacked out I guess for a while which turned out to be longer than a while more-or-less one day. So there we were at the Damascus *the following evening* and I couldn't tell you what we'd done the last twenty-four hours, just woke up at the bar with Rudy tugging on me saying I had to put a card down or hit it. My head hurt but even worse it felt like a cinderblock had been dropped onto my ribcage from the top of St. John's bridge. This would have been maybe nine or ten o'clock in the evening after all the jazz in Pioneer Square.

We didn't miss the protest, did we Mike? I go, shoving on him, but he was out snoring on the bar top.

Both of you were there, Rudy says. You stumbled in earlier talking Fuck Trump this and Fuck Trump that and had a few more drinks and ended up leaving for Pioneer Square with Skip and Maura. You don't remember that?

I shook my head no I didn't.

Jesus. Yeah. Then you showed up again thirty minutes ago with your shirts to your chins showing off bruises from the rubber bullets.

So it seemed we'd had our little part in history—a nightmare from which Mike had still not awoken. Just then I noticed the whole bar was crowded with troubled souls. Something sour in the air too I learned later was the sweet reek of tear gas. We'd all come back to the Damascus to lick our wounds and I don't know but that getting beat on by the cops made us feel better

about what happened with Trump getting elected and all the shit we knew was coming the next four years.

Rudy leaned over the bar top and showed me some pictures on his phone.

Look at this, he says. You and Skip got yourselves on KOIN's evening program. The gang was watching it here on the TV.

And he shows me a video of Skip and I ripping string lights off the Deschutes restaurant in the Pearl then stomping each little glow under our heels. The headline was *Protest Turns Riot Downtown* and I felt a little pride at Skip and I for being the ones who got to be symbols for a headline such as that. History! Beware the people weeping, I tell you. So in celebration I ordered a couple pints of a tasty Deschutes lager for myself and for Mike for when he woke up, thinking nice thoughts about how things were settling in and we'd done our part and could relax a while and worry about politics once the hangover wore off and the bruises went away, mañana, mañana...

An end! I thought. Not to be, for just then Samson walked out of the bathroom ducking his head underneath the staircase that ran up to the wild west style balcony and I think to myself that if this man Samson put his big paw on the beam there he could bring the whole place down on our heads. Samson's the kind of guy makes you wonder whether God or Krishna or whathaveyou created such things as heroes and villains and characters otherwise meant to play a special role not just in the daily state of affairs but in some greater cosmic struggle between light and dark but as with most people like this it's hard to tell whether it's good or bad but of course it's all a matter of power and how you relate to it but god what a boring way to think.

Just a water, Rudy, Samson says in his big Scottish accent as he sits himself down. This accent by the way had along with his various political beatdowns made him like fine antifa wine

to some of the lady communards around here, of which there were many and legion. Part of his fame had to do with the fact he never wore bloc. He wanted the cops and the chuds to know who he was. His only uniform was comprised of his two famous oven trays, which he tucked under his shirt for body armor. He swore it was better than the reinforced tactical vests some of us would wear.

Anyway the big man turns to me and says, How was it, Skinny? You look banged up. Gah, I wish I was out there. Feds banned me from stepping a boot in Pioneer Square. Said they'd give me five years. Fucking cowards! he goes, banging his fist against the bar top. I'd eat their nuts for haggis. But tell me about it, tell me about it.

It was glorious, I say, even though I remembered nothing at all except maybe I felt like a dark gap in my memory shot through with chants and tear gas. But here Samson, I go, sliding the pint along the bar top. Mike looks like he's gonna be out a while longer. Go on and take this lovely beverage here Samson, will you?

I'm not drinking tonight young friend. There's work to be done.

For why the hell not? I tell him. It's a bad history day.

Alright, he says, and slugs half the glass.

Let me tell you the lot of us communards would have ourselves a howler each time Samson got arrested. Those little black-clad mall guards not even coming up to his shoulder and them trying to shove his Scottish locks into the backseat and him just looking at each of them like horseflies on shit. The shit of course being the cop car or something, not our Samson. Metaphors, man! Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em.

I'm goin' to fight tonight, Samson tells me and by this point he's finished the beer and ordered a Cîroc and lemonade. I don't know who I'm goin' to fight, he says, but I'm goin' to fight.

For what! I tell him. The night's over and the cops beat us to hell anyway. Nothing to do for it now, and after all who's there to fight? No chuds in here since the brawl in '14.

And what a scrum that was! Samson says and claps me hard on the back with his big woody hands. A lad in here just today said he heard it from the news. You remember when I flipped that fascist end-over-end like a log in the Highlands. I heard he hit his head so hard he lost his sense of taste! Lucky for his wife, Samson goes, elbowing me. Fat old cow she probably is.

So we go on like that harking back to old glories and singing hymns to brothers and sisters locked away. We talked ourselves into the vanguard and the clamorous din of all the folks in there became like war drums leading us to a battle with our vague but muscular enemy of the air. I was having a hard time getting drunk again considering all the old alcohol snoozing in my blood which barred the new stuff from settling. Samson though was working himself into bloody ecstasy, putting back cocktails in such copious amounts that the mix gave him antibacterial breath and with each ode a wave of lemon pledge.

As this is going on some kid walks between us and his auras were just plain bad—shoulders stiff and eyes cocked straight, tough guy like, trying to prove something. Conservative, you know, not saying there's something biological about being a chud but still there's a thing about them kind of in the way they look. Frat boy like but also soft around the edges like rich maybe. This kid pushes between us and just stands there waiting there for Rudy and I see Samson on the other side watching and I think to myself, *no good*, and *this is just a kid* and also,

this kid is in no way ready to take on an experienced political brawler which Samson in those days certainly was.

You, Samson goes. I was having a conversation with my mate and you're cutting us off standing where you are.

But the kid just stays where he is and so Samson drops a big paw on his shoulder which makes the kid finally face him.

What's your name, lad? Samson says in a low threatening voice.

Cheddar, the kid says, and his voice is not tough-guy like but high and sorrowful. You don't talk like that here. It's like when a dog too old to whine gets to sobbing and something fingers you inside but it makes you feel violent rather than sorry. Or both, maybe. This I figured was going on in Samson's head so I felt I better defuse the situation otherwise this kid is gonna get himself fucked three ways to Sunday which would land our dear tavern back on the front page of *The Oregonian*, and that might cost Rudy his job.

What's the gloom for, fella? I ask.

Cheddar leaned back against the bar. He looked ready to spill his guts, like he had no one to talk to in the whole world. I've been wronged, he said. My girlfriend stepped out on me. She told me after the protest.

Helluva night to tell you something like that, Samson said. Let me buy you a drink. Rudy! he called, and Rudy brought us big foamy beers.

Thanks, Cheddar said, and we clinked our glasses with our usual toast to the downfall of the American empire. At this the kid was quiet and Samson figured him darkly as he sipped.

What kind of man did she choose over you? Samson goes, all leaned back in his chair.

Come on Samson, I go. The kid doesn't want to dwell on it.

But the kid looked ready for the hurt. Rich kid type, he said, trying to shake his head and take a sip at the same time. I couldn't tell at that point whether he was drunk or not.

A chud? Samson asks.

What's that.

It means the enemy, lad. Samson leaned in. Ma-ga, he said slowly with his mouth open wide at the *a*'s. After a long pause, Samson flicking his eyes across Cheddar's terrified face, he turned and took a sip of his drink. Here we believe in the democratic process, he goes on in the voice of a politician. The power of the vote. Then he drops the accent and looks dead at Cheddar. Why'd your lady fuck a chud over you?

The kid's pissed at that, right, he makes this big show of killing his beer but he gags at the end and comes up coughing. His eyes are a little droopy, he's drunk, and Samson sees it at the same time and smiles.

His name was Parker, Cheddar said, his tone inflated with booze but hollow-like, no real threat behind it. And he voted for fucking Hillary.

The *fucking* sounded strange in his mouth. This kid was square, I realized, not any kind of enemy Trumper or something. Just square.

But Samson didn't care. He looked down on this kid with a kind of grace almost, his suspicions confirmed. And who did you vote for, Cheddar? he said.

The kid's face twisted, angry. I didn't vote, he said.

Is that why your girlfriend fucked someone else?

Come on, Samson, I said lightheartedly. You didn't vote either.

Samson snaps to face me. His eyes were dangerous and wild. Skinny, he says. Fuck off.

I should get back to my friends now, Cheddar said, finally realizing that he's about to get pounded into the hardwood. He moved to go but Samson put his knuckle against his chest.

What's this, he said, and with a slow delicate motion grabs the kid by his zipper and slowly pulls it down the front of his jacket. A little white *R* poked out, then Samson looked at me and grinned, then he kept going until the full *Reagan* reared its ugly head.

Fucking Christ, I said. Samson—

It's a thrift store shirt, Cheddar goes. Then he starts yipping, Excuse me! Excuse me! over the bar top.

Well Rudy walks over and sees the three of us staring at each other. Then he looks down and sees it, the shirt: Reagan Bush '84, with a swirly American flag right there in the middle.

Oh no, he said.

Samson splashed his lemon Cîroc on the kid's face and goes, You're my dance for the night. And I thought he would bring the whole place down on our heads.

~

The Unfortunate Demise of the Nephilim

Brooke

The table squeaked and Jackson was gone. He reappeared with his hand on the giant's lower back, smiling but saying something with urgency. Cheddar had closed his eyes and looked to be muttering something. The man was easily 6'6. He wore a ridiculous pair of tight blue jeans and his hands looked like giant spiders on Cheddar's shoulder. He turned and stared down at Jackson with a hawkish, belligerent profile. Everyone in the bar now watched, talk dimmed, and for a moment I was part of the anonymous collective gaze. The scene still had nothing to do with me. I could stay in my seat and watch with everyone else. But then a nega version of FOMO lifted me up out my seat; I nudged my way into the inner circle.

Uh-oh, somebody said. We got a chud in here, boys. Samson's all worked up.

Hey easy there big guy, Jackson said to Samson. You remember, me, huh? This is my friend. His shirt's a joke. We're all worked up tonight, tall man. Let me buy you a drink. One for this guy too. Would you believe his name is Cheddar? How do you hit a guy named Cheddar? Come on, you, me, Cheddar, mojitos all around. Comrades, yeah? You and me, comrades?

The bartender stormed around the bar. Samson, no! he shouted, shoving spectators out of his way. We are not doing this again! He threw his rag at the brawler's back. Everybody back up! Jackson, get your friend out of here.

Samson bent down and addressed Jackson in an oily Scottish accent. This is your friend, huh? he said. He doesn't belong here.

God's truth, Jackson replied. We'll leave. He grabbed Cheddar's arm and pulled him toward the door, looking back and gesturing for me to follow. Then Samson lurched forward and shoved Cheddar between his shoulder blades. Face leading he plowed straight into a wood beam,

then crumpled to the floor. Jackson spun around and stepped between them. His face was calm. Leave, he said to Cheddar, who needed no convincing: he got up and sprinted out the door.

Jackson watched him go, then turned. Samson approached like a titan emerging from the sea.

You owe me a punch, Samson said, a few steps away. For your friend. He pounded his chest at the crowd. It dinged metallically. Then he turned back. Where do you want it?

Jackson pulled out his copy of Karl Marx and gazed down at the iron-bearded sage of unrest. Seeming there to find some direction, Jackson flung the small white book at Samson's face. The giant threw his hands up in defense, and Jackson darted in and grabbed what turned out to be the top of a pair of oven trays under Samson's shirt. In a swift motion he yanked them down, like slamming shut a window. The guillotine dropped down the giant's pants. Samson howled and grabbed at his crotch. Jackson snatched my wrist and we ran, exploding through the door and into the night. A group of people leaned against the wall behind the picnic tables, smoking in the shadows. We scanned the parking lot: Rachel's car was gone. Had she left us? Or had Cheddar taken the car? I looked back at the scene inside the bar. Samson had returned to his feet and was trying to shove past Rudy, who was leaned up against the bigger man trying to keep him inside.

Jackson looked back and whistled. Well, he said. Probably we should split.

We ran across the street and over an empty lot, then ducked into an alley choked with weeds. A light rain misted our hair. No one came after us. Jackson sat down on a wet stack of tires. I leaned against the wall and tried to catch my breath.

Holy shit, I said. What was that? What did you do?

The realness of it fell on Jackson's face: he grinned like a child. How 'bout that? he said. That's what the boys online would call praxis!

His excitement was contagious; I found myself smiling, but only for a moment. Where were Cheddar and Rachel? Where was the car? I called Cheddar and put it on speaker.

Where are you? I said when he picked up. Did you take the car?

His teeth were chattering and his voice was weak. I'm circling the neighborhood, he said.

You've been drinking, I said. If you crash that car...

I sobered up, he said soberly.

Cheddar, it's been like half an hour.

I sobered up! I got thrown into a pole and I sobered up.

I tried to channel my irritation through the phone. Is Rachel with you? I asked in a small, threatening voice.

I thought she was with you guys.

Jackson whistled and looked at the ground.

I'm gonna send you our location, I said. Come back now.

I hung up and called Rachel. Straight to voicemail. Jackson got to his feet and slicked his hair back. I can check the Damascus again, he said. Maybe she's out back or something.

What? No. You can't go back there, what are you talking about? I heard what your dad said on the phone. The police could be looking for you.

Jackson looked stunned. You heard? he repeated dumbly. Well it's in the open, then. You can see the shit I'm in. And also that's not my dad. Alright, I'll stay, he sighed, and sat down on the tires and began fiddling with the thin tip of a weed.

He looked oddly pitiful. There's nothing sadder than a hero without a quest. I put my hand on his shoulder. His muscle felt soft but resistant. I imagined laying my head on his chest. He looked up at me, surprised. Then I left.

The streets were slick with rain and bleary with light from storefronts, gloomy and somehow intimate. Weeds in the pavement cracks blew against rusted chain link fences. Shopping carts stuffed with wet cardboard lined the road. Guttural fragments of speech drifted in from somewhere in the night: the conversations of strangers, broken and arrhythmic. I retraced our flight and found my way back to the parking lot.

The shadow people were still there, out front against the wall. There were three of them: a tall, lanky woman with blotched mascara and a constellation of upper lip piercings, a fat man with a scowl carved into his face, and a much-younger boy who had blonde hair and an elfin, mischievous bone structure. The kid was muttering under his breath, a strange grin on his face. He looked intoxicated on something strong.

Hey, I said as they watched me approach. Have any of you seen a girl my age around here? She came through the front door maybe fifteen or twenty minutes ago.

Rachel, right? the woman said, and blew smoke. I nodded. Sure, she said. Rachel was a sweetheart. We loved Rachel.

The fat man spoke up. She vomited over here, he said gruffly, pointing at a pile of orange goo on the pavement. She was gone. Fucked up.

Where'd she go? I asked.

The impish young man laughed and slurred something, then laughed again even louder. The tall woman looked at him and nodded maternally. The fat man stared at the ground. The young man went on laughing, then stopped suddenly, his face twisting into a look of smug eagerness directed at something over my shoulder. I turned around. A cop car rolled silently up to the side of the bar, its lights off. My heart bumped and sped up. After what happened

downtown, what could they be but the enemy? The realization startled me. Which side was I on? Were there sides at all?

I know you, the young man whispered, as if a fog had cleared in him. He jabbed his finger at me. You were with that kid, he said, his smile lifting with excitement. The kid that knocked down Samson. His mouth formed an *o* and he looked in disbelief to his companions, hooting a little.

I froze. No, I said. That was someone else.

No no, he said, slowly shaking his head, the beginnings of a cackle on his lips. It was *you*.

I shot a look over my shoulder. The passenger door opened and an officer stepped out, his vest protruding off his body like hideous black muscles. The space around him seemed to darken. He spit on the pavement. A gun hung at his hip.

Hey officer! the young man shouted playfully, one lanky arm in the air.

Shut the *fuck* up, Pip, the fat man growled.

You looking for somebody, officer? the kid kept on, grinning.

The officer looked our way, smeared his spit with his boot, then walked leisurely toward us. I turned back around; heat flashed in my cheeks and I couldn't stop my hand tapping and tapping on my thigh. All my life I'd obeyed. Now here I was, for what? Because I thought voting for Hillary was tough? Because I turned down a job? Because I watched people get teargassed?

How you folks doin' tonight, the cop said in an easy voice, his hands clasped at his waist.

I turned around and tried to calm the muscles of my face.

The tall woman adopted a languid tone and said, We're doing fine, officer. Is there something we can help you with?

She knows, she knows, the young man chanted, clutching his hands to his chest and rocking on his feet.

Don't mind Pip here, the fat man said. Someone must have spiked his drink.

The cop raised his eyebrow. You alright, son? You don't look old enough to be drinking.

Just fine, the fat man said, putting his arm over the boy's squirming shoulders. We're on our way home now.

The cop looked annoyed, but didn't say anything. We're responding to a disturbance, he said. Did you folks happen to catch what went on?

No, I said, lying to a cop for the first time, the lie coming easily.

Yes! She was right there, the young man squealed, pointing at me. She was with the one who knocked down Samson.

The cop towered over me, and looked me up and down with impatient beneficence. His dark brown eyes rolled with authority over my body. As if I were a physical threat. The word *stepfather* burst to mind as I looked at his blocky jaw and close-shaven cheeks. Maybe just because he looked like any middle-aged white man who wasn't my dad. Or maybe it was this claim of power by title. Illegitimacy, usurpation. The state filling the empty chair of the father, which would normally be filled by—who, God? The fat man coughed a smoker's cough and finally the cop broke his stare; I'd been too busy leaping along associations to process fear or capitulation.

The cop lowered his voice. You folks weren't down in Pioneer Square, were you?

I looked at him with new eyes. Fear was replaced with an equal measure of anger. Or more accurately, *irritation*. Now just to say the right thing.

Nope, I said.

The cop sighed. When he spoke, his voice took on a legal hardness which indicated we had crossed some boundary. From then on he talked like a transcription of someone else's words.

We have a witness here who claims you were with him, the cop said, pointing to Pip over my shoulder.

The tall woman cleared her throat. To tell you the truth officer, Pip took bad hit of acid, she said, her lip piercings glittering as she spoke. He's fine, though, she said. No need to arrest anybody, he's got no idea what's going on.

No no no, Pip said. I saw her there. She was with the one who knocked down Samson.

Pip, you took five tabs, the fat man said. You don't know what you saw.

The driver-side door of the squad car opened and another cop leaned his head out. What's going on over there, Brennan?

One sec, he shouted back. Then he turned to me with impatience. We're looking for a man who matches the description of what happened here, he said. Now if you know something you aren't telling us, be informed I have every legal right to detain you until we conclude our investigation. So, do you have anything you want to tell me?

I said, Nope.

Whether it was because he was tired, or angry, or fed up with this night of disrespect toward law enforcement and the new president elect (who he supported either politically or vocationally or both), the cop tiredly said, Okay, come with me, and I followed in his steps as he led me to the squad car, opened the side door, and gently helped me inside.

The tall woman called after us, She didn't do anything! You can't arrest her she didn't do anything! Hey!

You're not under arrest, he said in the frame of the door. But you are required by law to remain here. If you feel your rights are being violated in some way, you have the right to legal representation. You have the right to remain silent. If we conclude that you're not a suspect in this investigation, you are free to go.

The other cop leaned against the hood and watched.

He shut the door and walked away.

~

Nothing to Lose but their Chains

Jackson

There's a mouse who keeps poking around this rusted old barrel and sniffing at me. He doesn't seem to mind the rain too much. Even from this distance I can see his eyes. They're little black orbs on the side of his head. He looks at me with either all the intelligence in the world or none of it. I can see everything here. There's a trash bag drooping over his head that's got half a paper plate falling out. But the mouse doesn't care. Where's your family at, dude? What kinds of things are you getting up to tonight? He flicks rain off his whiskers and stretches upward, paws dangling in front of his chest, nose poking into the air. He sniffs once, twice. Perfectly balanced on his hind legs. My toes flex; my hands curl into fists; I'm rapt. A pause of exquisite length. The mouse stops, drops, and scampers across the gravel, deeper into the alley, off to his own adventures.

Farewell.

Brooke's taking a long time. At first I went on Twitter, but it was just Trump talking shit about the riots or people talking shit about Trump talking shit about the riots. Or some set of conversations like that. None of my concern. So, for the first time since the drama with Lenin and the other communists, I went on Reddit. There was a disconnect in my story as I understood it, meaning I could sense that the events of this night were being organized differently by the people I was actually with. I wanted to get on the same page, get at the truth. So I wrote a little how I got teargassed at the Portland riot and then defeated a rogue antifa warlord in single combat. All of it sounding very historic and heroic. I leaned back against the brick wall and snapped a picture of my face, but you couldn't see much because my flash doesn't work so well. I posted it anyways, then put my phone away and got cozy on the wet tire to reflect on things.

There's the drama with the mouse and then I open my phone back up. The Reddit post has exploded. In just a few minutes I've gotten over fifty upvotes and a bunch of comments. People asking for more of the story. My phone becomes a powerful thing, the site of the workingmen horde. At my back I feel the whole proletarian class. I am an avatar of the digital struggle for the soul of this country and the means of production. I flex my bicep and watch it stretch the sleeve of my jacket. When Brooke comes back, I'll look like a Shaolin monk dropped across time and space into this gloomy trash canyon. I'll say, Hello.

I've started responding to some of people's questions when Cheddar barrels into the alleyway hollering, Brooke's going to jail!

Yo, I tell him. Brooke's already pissed at you, dude. You shouldn't come in here yelling like that.

Jackson, shut up for a second, he says, eyes flinty in the thin light. I was driving past the Damascus and I saw an officer lead Brooke to his squad car.

My stomach drops and keeps dropping.

What are you talking about? I ask. Why would she—? Cheddar, what?

What are we gonna do? he says. Then, bereft, he leans his head against the building opposite and moans.

I take a breath. You saw her and just left? I say. Did you see whether they stayed in the car with her? What were the officers doing there?

Cheddar flips around. Did you want me to swoop in and save her? he says angrily. What would you have done? Don't even answer that.

For the first time I really notice him—his broad shoulders, his thin blonde hair styled poorly, what look like transition glasses. His jacket is still unzipped and I can see the Reagan

Bush thing, which I feel fond of/nostalgic for in a way I can't explain. All the Christian stuff Brooke said about him comes back to mind. He steps out of the background of the night and here he is, an absolute square. We're fucked.

I sit back on the tire. Just like that the romantics of the night are gone. I want to get a bottle of Colt 45 and plop down in this alley and drink and let my spirit float up into the rainy night. What can we do? There's nothing. It's the cops. It's authority. Cheddar seems to know it, too. He sinks down against the brick wall and drops his face in his hands. For a moment we linger there in mourning.

Cheddar mutters something.

Huh?

Cheddar lifts his face up and looks at me. What do you think that guy would have done to me if you hadn't stepped in? he asks.

Who? Samson?

Yeah, he says, confused. The huge guy. You know him?

Sigh.

I thought I did.

He squints at me, then shakes his head.

Well, Cheddar says after a moment. What would he have done?

Shit, I don't know. Beat you up.

Cheddar stares out of the alley, back toward the way we came.

How did you guys get out of there? he asks. Did you fight him?

Are you on Reddit, Cheddar?

I don't even have a smart phone. See? He pulls out a blocky red thing and flips it up, revealing a full keyboard. I have an iPod touch, though, he says. At home of course. I didn't think there'd be Wi-Fi out here.

Jesus, I say. That's pretty weird. And I wonder how he might be different if he'd been online. Would he have discovered revolutionary communism? Would he have fallen in with the fascists? Or maybe he would be one of those status-quo cats, just as revolutionary and stupid as everyone else. Matter-of-fact, how might I have been different if I hadn't been online? For a second both our lives go a little staticky. Everything that feels so firmly *me* could have just as easily been otherwise, and I wouldn't be here with Cheddar in this alley, I wouldn't be evading the cops, and I wouldn't have gotten my first lover in years arrested by Portland PD.

A moment of reflection there in the alley. Big time.

But yeah, I say after an interval of silence. I fought Samson off.

Dang, he goes. You're like David.

David who.

Cheddar gapes at me. The king, the psalmist. You don't know David?

What are you doing here, Cheddar? What am I doing here? What are we doing here? What's going on? I put my head in my hands and groan. I'm *fucked*, man. Then I hop to my feet. You know the cops are looking for me right now? I say. That's probably why they got Brooke. I stole that Audi that got smashed up.

Cheddar's mouth dropped. You stole it?

Well, from my parents. I'm not sure about the legality of it. But yeah, I stole the car. It was fucked up when I took it anyway. I mean not *that* bad, but still.

Dead serious he goes, You have to go back there. You have to go back there and turn yourself in so Brooke can get out.

I pretend to actually consider this. My thighs shake and my palms are sweaty. I wipe them off on the inside of my jacket pocket. What would turning myself in even look like? I can't picture it except in the mold of some B-list movie. Me walking up to the cops growling, I'm Jackson Blithe. I'm the guy you're looking for. Now let the girl go. Then I'd spit and hold my hands out for cuffing, raise my jaw to the rain.

Well, I say, trying to keep the fear from my voice. Let's go check things out first. We can see if she's still being detained.

Cheddar looks at me suspiciously. Alright, he says, then follows me out of the alley.

We cut across the street and ride the sidewalk toward the Damascus. The rain's coming down harder. Cheddar's jacket isn't waterproof; the down looks like it's starting to sag. We say nothing as we shuffle quickly down the wet pavement. The streets are close to empty—it's almost midnight. The Damascus rears up like a circus of lights and we stop at the curb out front of the parking lot. My stomach kicks: there's a squad parked by the front door, sitting there like a beached orca. Through the tinted back window I imagine Brooke's shivering silhouette. In the belly of the whale. The parking lot is mostly empty. Inside I can see a pair of cops leaned against the bar talking to someone behind the counter. Rudy, probably.

You've gotta go in there, Cheddar hisses.

What is my life? I walk through those doors, then what? The cops cuff me? Shuttle me back to Sacramento? I imagine the long trip in the dark, silent in the back of a cop car, a blocky silhouette up front spitting sunflower seeds and telling me to shut up. Nine, ten hours of that. Or would they lock me in a cell in Portland? If so, would Brooke visit me? Why should she? Say I

do the unthinkable and turn myself in: What would I have to lose, exactly? My comfortable life in the suburbs. Another decade sweating out pizzas before I get the corner office overflowing with invoices and mini bottles of UV Blue in which I'd spend my life making sure the upper class gets their shit with anchovies. A life making sure my cog in the great machine turns and turns. Chatting idly with other little screws of the machine over lemon water, watching TLC. Lenin's *what is to be done* takes on a sudden personal flavor. What should I do? What is my life?

Nothing not worth giving up.

Breathe. I push off from a light pole and make my way across the asphalt, slick and dark like I'm treading the night sky. Beside the cop car I hesitate. The back window is tinted a stifling black. Even so, I think I see movement, Brooke's darkened hand rising to the glass. I place my palm against the cool surface to meet her. If really she is there. I collapse my palm to a fist then go on toward the building. The cops have their backs to me. They're tall and square. Their belts are lined with all kinds of scary shit. Rudy's face rises between their shoulders. He's talking quickly, nervously. For almost a minute I just stand there looking. I think of my mom. I think of my friends back home. How far away everything is. I take a breath of night air. It smells like rain, which smells like sky and stone. I reach for the door handle.

~

No Greater Love than This

Brooke

The cop car was a frigid, evil place. Its backseats were made of rock hard plastic. It was so cold I had to sit on my hands to keep warm. There was a metal barrier like a fence dividing the backseat from the front, as if I were a threat to claw my way through, attack the driver. Just behind the gear shift a shotgun stood upright, a dark obelisk rising toward the sky. I looked it up and down, from the thick handle to the trigger, from the pump to the shells on the side, up to the dormant barrel. Rain fell staticky and metallic, a panorama of sound. I started to cry, hard, in great wrenching sobs. The tears I wiped became cold on my hand. At first it was out of panic and self-pity, but then my emotions changed shape. Instead of sorrow it was a dense, thrumming anger. At what? That I'd gone to the protest to help and ended up getting arrested? That if they charged me with something I'd have a hard time getting a job for the rest of my life? That I could actually be put in jail? I didn't know, but then some lines from the bible stacked themselves suddenly in my head. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the darkness of this world, against wickedness in high places. These words touched my body with steel. It was as if my whole life I'd contemplated a stream from its banks, but right then I was pushed into the water from behind and swept away feeling everything at once. The feeling was so abstract it came as a single, burning sensation. A visitation of fire. My mind opened. I wept.

It lasted a long, dilated moment. Then it ebbed away gently, the Spirit flickering out from the tabernacle. I would have done anything for it to last. I exhaled and wiped my face. The cops were still inside the Damascus. What could they do to me? They were only flesh and blood.

I was at peace, perfect equilibrium, until I looked out the window and saw a very pale Jackson ghosting across the parking lot. No! I thought. What are you doing? Back by the street I saw Cheddar chewing his nails. Jackson came to the window. He put his hand to the glass. His face was obscured because of the streetlight behind him. I knew he couldn't see me. It was such a melodramatic gesture, there was part of me which wanted to laugh. Then he took his hand away and walked around the front of the car toward the Damascus. I scooted to the other window. In the moment I felt a deep camaraderie with him, at his valiance, his ridiculousness. Admittedly there was a sliver of me which swooned. But there was also a strange and sudden jealousy. What visitation had he had? Why was he the one sought after, even if by the law?

Jackson hesitated by the door. I held my breath, glued to the window.

Two things happened at once. Jackson swung open the door of the bar, and the door behind me, the door to the cop car, opened. Cold air poured in against my back.

It was Rachel. The door was unlocked from the outside. She smiled a villain's smile.

Hey, she slurred. Let's go.

What the fuck are you doing here, I whispered. Rachel! Close the door!

Stunned, I turned back toward the bar. Jackson had heard the click from the car. He held the door open and stared over his shoulder, frozen in the doorway. The cops fell quiet and half-turned around. They had not yet looked to us.

We should go now, Rachel said.

I felt myself scurry out of the car. The pavement was hard against my shoes. I walked briskly after Rachel, who was looking straight ahead with an almost comically contrived nonchalance. Halfway across the parking lot I looked back. Jackson had let the door close, and, once past the view of the window, began running toward the side of the bar. The cops hadn't

moved. They were still looking through the doorway. One of them said something to the other, who nodded. I turned and put my head down and hustled toward the street at a lilted jog. Rachel did the same. Cheddar had vanished. One more look back: the cops started walking toward their car. A whip cracked in my blood; I took off running down the sidewalk.

We flew across the street and through an alley then came to a dark wooded park. The road which ran around it was lined with homes. They looked vacant. At the far end of the park was a ravine tangled with bare, gnarled trees. A thread of mist lay over the grass. It seemed a good place to hide. I looked back but no one had followed us. There, I said. We slipped across the field, Rachel just ahead of me. Massive firs rose like sharp shadows around us. I thought I heard sirens, a helicopter. Paranoid, I looked to the sky. Had Jackson been caught. And where was Cheddar? We came suddenly into a clearing, then, once across, ducked under low-hanging branches and into the darkness.

The banks of the ravine were muddy and water ran down through tufts of grass into a stone drainage canal. It was pitch black. We crouched and caught our breath. It'd been such a long time since I'd actually ran with any purpose, the feeling was strange, primal. Rachel sat down in the mud, huffing. You could see the shape of our breath in the pale white light that filtered in from the street, distorting rather than illuminating. From the mud rose the smell of grass and roots and wet growing things. My veins zipped with electricity. I felt I could run all the way into Washington.

Where did you go? I asked Rachel after a moment. We looked for you.

You're the ones who left! she said. After I threw up I went over to a gas station to get a Sprite. Literally right down the block. When I came back, I saw you guys driving away in my car. I didn't know what to do.

We slipped back into silence. A car droned by on the street and when it turned, I saw one of its brake lights was out. It rolled down the dark avenues. There was so much to say.

Why did you do that? I said. That was insane. What if they'd seen you? You saw what happened to all those people tonight.

Rachel shrugged. I was mad, she said. I saw the cop put you in the car, and he didn't seem to lock it. I hung around the edges for a while to see what they would do. When Jackson went back in to talk to the cops, I thought it'd be a good enough distraction for the two of us to get out of there.

I stared at her. The reality of what we'd done started to set in. I tried to run my mind along the bible verse again, but the words were flat in my head.

We need to get the car, I said. We need to get out of here.

How's Cheddar doing? Rachel asked, and the question hung ridiculously in that dingy, dangerous place.

I'd forgotten, Rachel had no idea what had happened with Samson.

He's fine, I said, then pulled out my phone and dialed Jackson, turning the brightness down just in case.

Someone picked up the phone but didn't speak. I froze, looked at the numbers counting up from 00:00. Had the cops gotten him?

Hello? I said weakly.

Holy fucking shit, bounded Jackson's voice through the line. You and Rachel okay? God I thought it was the cops calling on your phone.

I almost cried with relief.

Jackson, was all I could say at first, giving in to a smile. Where are you?

How ya doin, he said, and I could see his face with perfect clarity, just from those three words. I think I'm in someone's backyard, he went on. There's a trampoline? I don't know. I'm under a gazebo. Pretty nice place.

Rachel and I ran in the other direction, I think. We're by a park. I'll drop you a pin.

Sounds good, he said. Tell Rachel I am tremendously impressed with her. A solo de-arrest? I never thought I'd see one in the wild.

Rachel grinned at me.

I'll tell her, I said. But for now we need to get out of the city as soon as possible. Cheddar was the last one with the car. Have you seen him?

~

Biblical Masculinity

Cheddar

My dad was a cop and he taught me a lot of things. Never trust a bartender who measures his shots. You can know a bad guy by the way he kneels at church. Don't start fights, finish them. St. Peter never let one politician into heaven. Stick to the Old Testament; the New Testament is for city people and women. That nice feeling you have when you're driving the fields? That's America. Obey the law most of the time and you have the right to break it some of the time. If you get caught, face the penalty. A real man owns up to consequences, even those administered unjustly. Because that's what Jesus did.

My dad would have never done the things I saw those city cops doing. Never. Even so, I didn't run away when Rachel helped Brooke escape from the squad car. But I didn't try to stop them either. There was a wood fence nearby which I ducked behind until they passed. Jackson ran away as well. It was remarkable that none of them were caught. But I guess the cops in Portland are just not as good.

Sin was all over that night. Rachel cheated on me. Jackson stole a car. I got drunk and was almost beaten up by antifa. Portland rioted. The cops shot their own citizens with tear gas. Did my decision not to run have to do with the fact that I was angry at Rachel for the Parker thing? Yes, I believe in telling the truth, so yes it was a little bit because of Rachel. I've repented for it. But mostly I did it because of my dad. For a long time I crouched in the weeds behind the fence, during which time I realized some things. One, my jacket was not waterproof. Two, I did not actually love Rachel, mostly I was upset that she'd cheated on me. Three, I was right to be upset about this. Four, my dad would unequivocally, undoubtedly, belatedly, with total spiritual acuity, stay and face the police without necessarily revealing the updated position of my friends.

And five, that this decision would strike a balance between competing notions of righteousness involving loyalty and justice. So I decided to stay and face the law.

I came out from behind the fence and made my way toward the officers. Having recently discovered Brooke's mysterious absence, the two of them stood by their squad car talking seriously into a radio. One of them was tall, the other was short. As I crossed what felt like the infinite distance between the fence and the law, I tried to channel the godly manhood with which my dad would face these trials. But my bones felt like liquid. I'd never really been in trouble before.

The taller cop, a bulky bald guy with blank eyes, dangled his hand near his holster as I got close. He smacked gum and looked me up and down.

Hello, I said shakily.

You need to leave this area, he said, chewing. We're in the middle of an investigation.

The other, shorter cop turned around to face me.

Cheddar? he said. What in the holy fuck are you doing here?

It was my cousin Dick. He'd moved away from Cyprus a few years before, but I hadn't known to where. We were never close. My heart started pounding. I didn't have time to think about what my dad would do, if he would've done anything different. So I decided to bail as soon possible.

Dick, hey, so weird to see you here, I said. Haha. Well, I don't want to interfere with your investigation, just thought I'd come say hi.

I turned and started to walk away.

No, stay here a second, he said. Investigation isn't really the right word. This is my partner, officer Brennan, Dick said, gesturing toward his beefy fellow cop. Officer Brennan looped his massive thumb in his belt and glared at me. His jaw muscle pulsed with each chew.

Cheddar. Great to meet you, I said, simulating a scenario in which Samson and Officer Brennan joined forces to beat me up.

What are you doing here, Cheddar? Dick asked. His voice was friendly, but underneath there was a current of suspicion.

I was with the people you're looking for, I said.

Officer Brennan suddenly reached down and flipped the latch on his holster. I took a startled step back. He reached in behind his pistol and withdrew a pack of Double Mint. He ripped some of the cardboard off the top and spit his gum into it. Then he dropped the wadded gum into a separate compartment on his belt, in what looked like an empty flashlight holster. Then he replaced the old piece with a fresh one, breaking the stick cleanly with his tongue before falling into a quick chewing rhythm. All this with his eyes fixed on me.

What? Dick said. Why? Do you know how much trouble they're in?

We came as medics, I said, a veneer of confidence over a combination of shame and fear. I was separated from them after the protest, I went on, only partially lying.

The gum smacker hocked and spit on the ground as if on my comment, then rubbed it in with his boot. Looking at me the whole time. Smack smack smack. Irritation began to replace my terror. From somewhere deep an image came of Officer Brennan walking around Pioneer Square beating people with a nightstick, gnashing gum all the while.

Well you did the right thing not running, Dick said. We appreciate your cooperation. Do you know where your friends are now?

Smack smack smack. Officer Brennan's jaw like a horse's. Sizing me up like he wants to punch me in the face. Smack smack smack.

I don't know, I said. They all ran away before I could stop them.

Some friends you got, Dick said. Leaving you behind.

Officer Brennan laughed in my face, then went back to smacking his gum. Unwelcome visions from the night before played out in my head. I thought of Parker, his cool, false masculinity. The easy way he put his arm on Rachel's shoulder. Then: a dim pub in London, the two of them jetlagged, feeding each other shepherd's pie. Parker closing his lips over the fork, smack smack smack.

Well, Dick said after his partner had quit laughing. Did you at least see how your friend got out of the back of our car? To be honest, we're puzzling over it.

SMACK SMACK SMACK. I could've sworn it was getting louder.

Could you stop smacking your gum? I snapped.

The smacking stopped. Officer Brennan looked at me with a shocked expression.

Whoa, Dick said. Easy there Cheddar. There's no need to be hostile, now. Officer Brennan's been a smoker since he was thirteen and just now he's trying to quit because his dad died of cancer last fall. The gum helps him.

Fuck you! I thought, stunned by the words' heft in my head. I'd never thought anything that clearly before. If there's one thing I can't take, it's a guilt trip. I've been getting it since I was a kid, from my dad, from my church, from God.

Fine, I said. Sorry.

It's not me you have to apologize to, Dick said.

Officer Brennan resumed a quiet, subdued chew, looking at me expectantly.

I'm sorry, I said to him. I didn't know about your dad.

The two of them looked at each other, then bust up laughing, bending over and slapping each other's backs and hollering.

Cousin, you shoulda seen your face! Dick said. Cancer! God, that's funny.

That's classic Dick and Brennan right there, said the gum-smacker, high-fiving his partner. That's gotta be the best I've seen anyone react. You've got some guts snapping at me, though, kid. Good for you. Good for you.

Well his daddy's in the force, Dick said. You've got the gene same as me. We're a blue-blooded family.

Hell yeah, Officer Brennan said, the bad cop bit now totally dropped. You consider following in his footsteps? It's a great line of work. Especially nights like tonight. By the way I like your shirt, he said. How about Trump for the win?

He put his hand up for a high five.

There was a small planet in me somewhere, small but significant, which exploded in a miniature supernova. I'd been the butt of every joke for years, it seemed. Even my name, Cheddar, was a joke. Everyone thought they could just walk all over me. I'd always teared up when I read the words from the Tea Party flag: Don't Tread On Me. No more, I thought. No more treadin' on Cheddar.

I left Officer Brennan hanging.

No, I said. I don't think I want to be a cop.

Dick just shrugged. Alright, he said. Back to business. Tell us how your friend managed to get out of the squad car. Did she have an accomplice?

No, I said.

Did you actually see what happened?

No, I said.

Well then why the hell'd you come over here? interrupted Officer Brennan.

I thought it was the right thing to do.

Both of them stared at me. I thought they were going to start laughing again, but they both looked suddenly serious.

Get the fuck out of here, then, Dick said. I'll see you at the next family reunion.

Sure, okay, I said, and turned and started walking away. I could hear them whispering behind me.

Wait, came the deeper voice of Officer Brennan over my shoulder. Do you know a Jackson Blithe?

~

The Ever Expanding Union of Workers

Jackson

Don't say nothing, Cheddar. Don't you say a fucking word.

From behind this fence I can hear the two cops shaking down Cheddar. He's played it cool so far it seems, but he turns around when they mention my name. My legs feel shaky and my bones feel thin; I'm tired, tired. And I don't want to spend the night in jail. Maybe the fugitive life isn't the life for me. Maybe I'm more of a Marx than a Lenin.

Before Brooke called, while sitting under someone's backyard gazebo, I went back on Redditt and told people the situation. Someone on there was a pre-law student. She gave me some advice about the legality of everything, which made me feel better. Maybe I wasn't fucked after all. So with confidence I headed back toward the bar because I wanted to see if the cops had left and whether or not we were all off the hook.

I wonder now, though, did Cheddar stay behind when the rest of us ran? Or did he get caught on the street when we split? Did he know his cousin was a cop? Is he a traitor? Or a victim?

Pull through for me, big guy. I send the thought his way.

I don't know a Jackson, Cheddar says in a new voice. Who is he? What does he have to do with anything?

Well we've heard that Jackson was with your friend Brooke tonight, his cousin said.

Nope, says Cheddar. I don't think Brooke ever mentioned anyone named Jackson. And also Brooke and I met in Portland before the protest, so we drove separately. So I have no idea where she could be.

Hell yeah, Cheddar.

There's a pause. The two cops look at each other. Something seems to pass between them.

One more thing, says the other cop. Have you seen this before? From his pocket he pulls out my copy of *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx and Engels stare blindly into the night streets.

What's that? Cheddar asks.

Cheddar's cousin looks at the book and then at Cheddar. Can't you read? he says. It's communist paraphernalia. Should be a misdemeanor to carry around, in my opinion. We heard it belonged to your maybe-pal Jackson.

That'd make him an out-of-state political agitator, says the other cop.

They flatter me.

Just kidding, says Cheddar's cousin, who then makes a big show of walking all the way across the parking lot to throw my book into a trash can. Cheddar shuffles awkwardly on his feet and the other cop just smacks his gum and watches.

Nobody cares, he says when he gets back, a little out of breath. And your friend is pathetic for carrying him around.

The blow is mostly rhetorical, but still, it falls hard.

I'm telling you I don't know him, Cheddar says, and pulls at the bottom of his shirt to show off the Reagan Bush thing. I'm on your side. I'd tell you if I knew anything, he says. Swear on Sunday service.

Tears nearly spring to my eyes. Cheddar is the long-awaited comrade.

The cops regard him suspiciously for a long moment, then his cousin says, Alright, well make sure you report anything you see or hear. See you later, Cheddar.

And the two of them tuck their tails and return to their car. I pound my fist on the fence as they drive down the street in surrender.

Fuck yeah Cheddar! I say, hopping out into the parking lot once they've rounded a corner. You're a hero of the working class.

Cheddar jumps. What are you doing here? he says. Were you behind the fence for that whole conversation?

For most of it, I say. You duped a couple of pigs, including your own cousin! I could kiss you right now, Cheddar, seriously.

Reluctantly, Cheddar smiles. I take it as an invitation and walk over with my arm out, and we clasp hands and touch shoulders, comrades at last.

Well, I say. Let's go get the ladies. Where'd you park?

Cheddar's quiet on the drive over. I'm sitting shotgun, watching the streetlights play on his face. I feel a deep sympathy with him. He looks vexed, haggard, a patriarch reflecting on the decline of his estate.

You're worried about Rachel, I say.

He flips his blinker and hooks a left, steering into a dark residential street. His eyes ride with the turn. They flick out the driver-side window. It's dark out there.

He sniffs. We're broken up now, I guess. I could understand why you wouldn't care, though since you don't really know us, he says. No offense.

I feel like I know you guys better than I know anyone on this earth, I reply.

He doesn't know how to respond.

Make another left, I say. The pin shows that they're in a park a ways down this road.

You're into Brooke, aren't you? he says.

Shit, man. I'm in love, I say, and it feels so good to do so. She's perfect. She mentioned something about you guys growing up in the same little town. Don't tell me if she's not as great as I think she is. I don't wanna hear that, man, cuz my mind's made up. I'm staying in Oregon.

The silence didn't part well for a comment like that. The residue greases the air between us. For the first time I can remember I feel embarrassed at a little outburst, or at least aware of how someone might react. Will he be annoyed that I'd presume so much? Is he still protective of Rachel, and so wouldn't want me around? Does he feel the same way about me that I do about him? That last one tastes a little funky; I shove it aside.

I think Brooke is into you too, he says.

There's wind in my gut and it's blowing up, down, and sideways. It's like I'm a little kid.

Hmm, I murmur. That's good.

Cheddar glances in the rearview, then flicks his eyes back to the road. I don't wanna do this, he says. I can't face her. He shakes his head. I'm angry, really angry. I don't get angry, Jackson. It's just not something that happens to me.

Pull in up there, I say. They're coming out to meet us. I get it, though, I tell him. I mean not exactly, but still. It's almost over. You can sit up front on the way home. I'll sit in the back with Rachel. You won't have to—

Blue and red lights flash behind us. It's eerier without the sound of the siren, more predatory. The beams stain the overhanging trees. By their light I see Brooke and Rachel waiting on the grass, paralyzed.

Fuck fuck fuck, I say. It's done, we're done, fuck.

Cheddar's stoic. He pulls to the side; the cops cruise in behind us. The rearview is strobing red, white, and blue. In the side mirror I see two silhouettes appear from the squad car.

Stay where you are! one shouts toward Brooke and Rachel.

Their hands fly up in the field.

A flashlight pours in from the driver side, blinding. I squint and cover my eyes. Cheddar rolls down the window, looks right into the face of his cousin.

Long time no see, he says. You guys should step out of the car.

~

Utopia, Heaven / Home

Brooke

The lights came on and we froze. Across the street I saw a light come on upstairs in one of the houses. Someone peeked through a window. It was close to middle of the night, was it really necessary to turn all the lights on? You could see the strobing all down the block, even in the park where it flashed on the trees. I imagined a little girl eating breakfast with her mom the next morning, asking, Did they get the bad guys, Mommy? I smirked at the image, surprising myself.

Rachel started to panic.

I'm going to jail, she said. Oh god, Jesus. What are they gonna do? Am I gonna be put in handcuffs? Are they gonna call my parents?

Jackson and Cheddar stepped out of the car. I felt better with them here, but oh, Jackson was so close to not getting caught! And now what would happen to him? One of the cops came walking toward us, beckoning the others to follow. Mud squelched under their boots as they approached. I still couldn't see their faces because of the lights, but I knew it had to be the same one who'd locked me in the car. This moment seemed to last a long time. The rain had stopped and everything was still, quiet, cold. We gathered under the trees, those six of us. Two cops with their backs to the cars, the four of us in a half-circle around them. The light made our faces strange, like primitive red and blue war paint. Jackson especially. His eyes were hard, his jaw splashed with American color, the trees and night behind like he was some Neolithic patriot, roaming the dark fields of the republic. He kept glancing at me, which I returned with longing. I felt pressure in my lower body, or perhaps the absence of pressure. I wanted to put my arms around him, sleep. I felt so tired.

Well don't keep me in suspense, Cheddar's cousin said to me. How the hell'd you get out of the squad car?

It wasn't all the way closed, I said. The seatbelt must have gotten caught in the door.

Bullshit, that door was shut and locked. The only way to open it is from the outside. How about you, miss? he said to Rachel. I haven't seen you before.

Rachel looked pale even in the strobing lights. Her lips were slightly parted, as if they wouldn't close. And her voice, when she spoke, was weak: No, officer, she said.

He glared at us, moving from Rachel to me to Cheddar, lingering over each of our faces. He had a black square on his chest, a bodycam. I looked into the lens, imagining that something awful was about to happen, and that in that dark hole I was making eye contact with millions of potential witnesses. On Jackson's face the cop settled. You, he said.

The hardness went out from Jackson's features.

You're looking at some trouble, son, the cop said. We found your car. That was a sweet ride, too. We heard from your folks that you stole it. Bottom line is that you could be looking at grand theft auto on top of felony vandalism and felony riot. We heard you assaulted someone too, back at the Damascus. That's all serious business, huh? Would hate to make an example out of you.

First off, Jackson said. I have it on good authority that this could *barely* be considered theft, maybe misdemeanor joyriding *if* my stepdad decides to press charges. Second, I was here to protest, as is my right. I was not involved with any violence. Even if I was, it's tough to stick someone with a felony riot, especially after all the press coverage you boys are gonna get for the gratuitous and downright amateurish use of tear gas and nonlethals. So good luck finding a jury who will be sympathetic to law enforcement. Thirdly, I didn't smash the car. I'm sure you can

look at the cameras outside the Wells Fargo building. And as for the assault, Jackson grinned, I think Samson would agree that was mutual combat. You don't have shit.

Silence fell over the circle. The flashing lights took on a weakened, almost ceremonial aspect, as superfluous as a feather in a hat.

Cheddar, the cop said. Are you gonna let someone talk like that to your cousin? To a man of the law? What's your pops gonna say when I tell him about this?

Do you know Cheddar's dad? I said. I'm not saying he's a great guy, sorry Cheddar, but I don't think he'd have looked kindly on the way this night has gone.

As I spoke the steel came back to me. These were just men, yes, but they were also more than that, their arms bound and maneuvered by strings from the ground. Maybe Jackson would say these men were neither good nor evil, that it was all relations of property, and that good and evil were defined by these relations, and maybe I would agree with him, but there is also something more, something beneath. At least that is what I have come to believe. And that belief, whether true or false, made me, at least in that moment, strong.

So you're from Cyprus, too, huh? Dick said. He clicked his tongue. Too bad. You're in more trouble than anyone. You're gonna be the talk of the town.

Jackson stepped forward, breaking the half-circle. The lights still strobed on his face. While the gesture itself was threatening, the energy coming from him was not malicious. It was more trifling than that; less self-sacrificial and more, in a strange way, curious.

Sorry dudes, Jackson said, as if merely to a friend. You guys should just get out of here.

The big cop, shocked, opened his mouth to say something. But before he could, Cheddar looked pleadingly at his cousin and said, Just let us go, Dick. Just let us go. We're all tired, there's no reason to keep at this thing.

It's fine, I said. I'll go. They're not gonna leave here without one of us.

They will, Jackson said, still jutting into no-man's land.

Are you threatening an officer, son? said the big cop. He had his thumb hooked on his belt and was loudly chewing gum.

Easy, Brennan, Dick said, and tapped the lens of the bodycam on his chest. Then he turned to face us.

Well, we're gonna bring you two in, he said to Jackson and I. Just to be safe.

The bigger officer stepped forward and drew cuffs from his belt. He put his arm on Jackson's shoulder and spun him around; Jackson complied, his face completely blank.

Dick stepped up and pulled my arms behind my back, facing me out toward the dark field. He began reading us our rights. I looked over at Jackson, but his eyes were on the ground.

Do you understand the right I have just read to you? Dick finished.

Yes, I said.

~