

FISHING WITH SERGEANT BARBECUE

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
San Francisco State University  
In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Writing: Fiction

by

Brandon Leslie Diaz

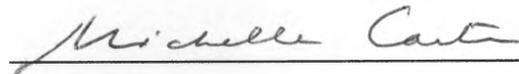
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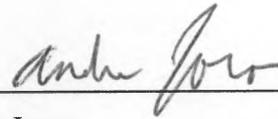
CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Fishing with Sergeant Barbecue* by Brandon Leslie Diaz, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing: Fiction at San Francisco State University.



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Michelle Carter,  
Professor of Creative Writing



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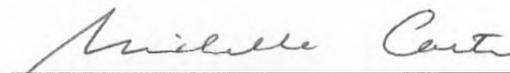
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FISHING WITH SERGEANT BARBECUE

Brandon Leslie Diaz  
San Francisco, California  
2016

This volume is an exploration of the often obscured border between fact and fiction, truth and exaggeration; the absolute and the uncertain. The strength of the materiality in these words is predicated solely on the absurdity of human experience. Everything seems fake. Everything seems real. The seeming is the lone aspect open to interpretation.

I certify that *Fishing with Sergeant Barbecue* by Brandon Diaz is a correct representation of the content of this Master of Fine Arts in English: Creative Writing.



Chair, Thesis Committee



Date

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This volume could have not been completed without help from the following folks:

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## **Fishing with Sergeant Barbecue**

We've got our fishing poles, and Dad's coffee is extra sugary, I'm pleased by his choice of frozen clams for bait, as I'm still not comfortable winding living night crawlers along a hook, like a squirming bead on a necklace, though I dare not let on, and the fishing spot is yellowed by the sun spilling onto the delta, which fills us to the brim with smiles, me dreaming of the fried catfish we'll eat for dinner, and Dad, desperately hoping I don't turn out gay, casts a half-joke into the front of the truck, squawking with a pubescent chuckle saying, You're in sixth grade now; got any pussy yet? and the signal of the radio fuzzes back in over my silence, where a rapper proclaims, it was going to be a good day.

## Sometimes You Have a Toy Gun

Sometimes you have a toy gun. Sometimes you have a toy gun that is blue, shaped like a machine gun from a Chuck Norris movie, with an extended clip, although you do not know what an extended clip actually does. It looks cooler. Sometimes you have a blue toy guy with an orange tip, just in case anyone might confuse it for the real thing.

Sometimes you have a blue toy gun with an orange tip, whose trigger hinges back slowly when pressed, producing a mechanical sound that mimics the firing of a fully automatic weapon like in a Richard Bronson movie, but only slightly, lest it be confused for the real thing.

Sometimes you run around Grandma's house with the blue toy gun on missions for imaginary bad guys. They look like big throw pillows, or cushions from chaise lounges. Sometimes the bad guys will be shooting at you as you round the corner down the long hall toward Grandma's room, where you race over the plastic runner, dodging their bullets, almost convincing yourself of the real danger, and like a hero, hurtle through the air, landing on the crisply made bed (the way only Grandma makes), falling to the far side, where you dismount from a roll, in the safety of the bed's cover. Sometimes that corner of the bed is your car to hide behind, or your stacks of warehouse crates—the ones where the drugs are in the final bust scene.

Sometimes Grandma has moved apartments. The hiding place where your blue gun with orange tip has also moved. Sometimes Grandma has rearranged her closet, and only unpacked half of her belongings. The blue gun with the orange tip only belongs to you at Grandma's house. Guns are not allowed at your house, replica, or otherwise. Sometimes the blue gun can belong to you, but only at Grandma's, when you've found its new location in the mop closet, between two boxes of photo albums. It is on a shelf that wafts of cleaning chemicals. It takes a climb on child's high chair, kept from the 1960s to reach. Sometimes you try to sneak the blue gun with the orange tip home in your weekend bag, but Grandma will catch you, removing it without remarking on it. It is easy this way.

Sometimes you try to sneak the blue gun with the orange tip home after the weekend at Grandma's is over, and it has slipped her mind to monitor your cunning. But Mom promptly empties the bag of its contents when you get home because Grandma is a smoker. Sometimes Mom says your clothes are drowned in smoke and makes a face when Grandma drives off. Everything must be washed. The blue gun with the orange tip is found and in an exchange you don't see, is returned to Grandma, where it is once again nestled up between the boxes of photos and a rainbow colored duster. Sometimes you wish the duster had some toy-ish use on account of its magnificent reds, yellows, greens, blues. This coloring is a signifier for toys. Sometimes, when you're in stores with Grandma feeling that you have behaved, you are likely to hint that you may want one, a

colorful figurine with functional joints and a utility belt, but never do you outright ask. Toys cost money, which are expensive, and expensive draws exasperation and shooting brows on the looks of not just Grandma, but on your faces aunts and uncles too. Sometimes you merely fantasize about asking for a colorful toy.

Sometimes the blue gun with the orange tip is gone. A cousin has been over for a weekend with Grandma. He got to eat junior bacon cheeseburgers and drink root-beer floats. He humped the big brown pillow after propping it up like a bad guy. He stole the gun from its shelf and is creating entirely new action scenarios, full of heroic couch dives, hot lava escapades, bannister slides, while mowing down hostile imaginary ninjas, emerging from piles of laundry to drown his sisters in death as he sprays away with that mechanical rapid-fire mimic. He even does it wearing a headband.

Sometimes when the blue gun is gone, the one with the orange tip, Grandma notices that you are bored. Despite having incurred the expense of cable, which she mentions every Saturday morning as she smokes, and fills envelopes with checks, TV only holds your interest for so long.

Sometimes you must be able to do what the heroes do, after you see them do it. Sometimes Grandma wants to hear your running footsteps running down the long hall, knowing you're playing make believe. Sometimes, Grandma warms up black coffee in

the microwave. She calls it nuking. Grandma listens to see if you've found another reason to hurtle through the air, tucking into a roll on her nicely made bed.

You haven't. Sometimes Grandma will remind you that you could always ride your bike.

You've been reduced to Saturday afternoon syndicated movies. They are rarely action films. There are no heroes, or guns, or ninjas, or headbands. One of them though, is about a man who wears a suit and doesn't like his job. He meets a woman in a leather jacket who catches him off guard with her excitable dress, and deep purple lipstick. They make waves in a bar, and soon the man in the suit casts off his briefcase and mundane life, and they end up at a motel. She uses his shirt and tie to bind him to the motel's bed. He has never had such an experience before. Sometimes you are searching the TV for more movies like this.

Sometimes it's been a while since you were at Grandma's. Sometimes you visited other Grandma with a lush backyard lawn, green like a stadium for the pros. Sometimes at this Grandma's, your grandfather orders pizza, and lets you help with the design of the treehouse.

Sometimes you miss the other Grandma and your blue gun with the orange tip, but when you go back, it is still missing. You're up on the high-chair from the 60s. It has been replaced with a plastic revolver like the ones laid out on the blankets at the flea-

market. It's like a sheriff's in a Western movie. It also has an orange tip, comes with a plastic holster dyed brown like cowboy leather. The gun is not fully-automatic, or even semi-automatic. It makes no sounds when the trigger is squeezed, though the hammer clicks. This is its only satisfying feature. Who are you supposed to kill? Indians?

Sometimes you spend entire weekends at Grandma's ignoring the new gun. Not because of its limited killing capacity, or its cheap silvery paint and orange tip, or its lack of weight. But you are pulled out of the action. Who is the owner of this type of gun? Cowboys? Sometimes you've seen them in movies. They look slow and leathery in the face. Everything they do is labored. They are not buff. They do not wear headbands. They are killing Indians and Mexicans and other cowboys, and even at eight-years-old this doesn't seem right. Mostly though, cowboys cannot dive over crates, cement pillars, Jeeps, speedboats, pallets, big caches of dope, club sound systems, or fish tanks for cover. The best they have are trees, hay, and bar tops, and Grandma's bed is not an ideal bar top. You do not feel right killing imaginary Indians. However, having a bow and arrow to shoot imaginary cowboys seems better. Indians have face paint, which even if imaginary, is just as cool as a hero headband. Sometimes Grandma allows for projectile toys, until you break something. You never get a bow and arrow, not even the ones with the suction tips.

Sometimes Dad comes home from the Army with a Stepmom and two small step-daughters. They are sweet girls and call him Dad. He playfully thumps them on the head

as a means of affection. It's their game. Thumps like compact punches just above the eye. Their father is between jails. Sometimes Dad thumps the step-daughters as they are groggy and bleary-eyed after getting out of the car after a trip to the park. One laughs. The older of the two doesn't find it funny. He means well. Sometimes Dad seems like the biggest hero on the planet.

He shares his dehydrated field rations from the war, remarking to Grandma about how you love the hot dogs and the look on your face when you discover the powdered ketchup. Powdered eggs are magic. Sometimes Dad is better than all the heroes and all the headbands because he is real. He also has the camouflage pants from the actual army, complete with cargo pockets, for grenades and stuff. He is the real deal. He has a mustache and looks like iterations of three different characters on the G.I. Joe cartoon. You rarely miss an episode. Sometimes you do.

Sometimes, since Dad is home now, he takes to you the movies. Always action. He too, loves the heroes, with their blades, and big titted love-interests, explosions, knives they dip into the bags of dope to test the purity, their haircuts, one-liners, their ability to do the splits between two kitchen counters because the floor has been electrified by two henchmen, their compound fracturing hand techniques, high-kicks, car crashes, exotic locations. Sometimes a hero is in a country in Asia, where the streets are bustling with shorter people hawking livestock. Dad says, 'I've been there.' This is how you say 'Thank-You.' Sometimes Dad is the smartest.

Sometimes Dad leaves his gun on the table when dropping you off at Mom's. When you go to touch it, Mom cries out, and Dad's voice grows deep and menacing. Never touch it. It is silvery, like the replacement gun at Grandma's. But it is no revolver. It is real. It is a real pistol. It looks like one a hero—a cop hero, right on the tail of a bad guy might have at the end of the movie. Sometimes the rap songs talk about Glocks. It might be one of those. It can be held with one hand. Sometimes, when no one is looking you pick it up and it weighs more than all the groceries you help carry in for Grandma. It is real. Hero real.

Sometimes Dad pulls the gun on someone at a wedding. His own sister's wedding. Your Aunt's wedding reception, and how about that for omens? It had rained that day. Sometimes the weather is all knowing. Sometimes it's foreshadowing. Just Dad and you racing to morning haircuts, nearly running reds. Stepmom stressing over getting the girls hair done in time. Their little brown foreheads, shiny with product. Sometimes you are sitting in the car as Dad runs into the store for a few last-minute items. Then you are racing to the church. It is time for your Aunt's wedding. The truck hits a divot in the road splashing a puddle on a pedestrian in a crosswalk. You both laugh. Sometimes Dad is the oldest child you know. The coolest. Sometimes he's the safest driver when rushing, but Grandma doesn't think so. Sometimes, when Grandma is bitching, saying her favorite enjambment—Goddamnsonofabitch—it makes you uneasy. Her stress bites at your legs.

Sometimes you say, 'I cannot stand Grandma.' Sometimes Dad says, 'Would you say that if she were gone?'

Sometimes, just sometimes, he has a point.

Sometimes Dad's fuse is so short that the potential consequences of a small slight make no bearing on his actions. Sometimes Dad is all reaction. Sometimes wedding receptions have an angry wife who has to drag her drunk husband out after too many. Other times, a fiancé will feel uncomfortable staring over at her prospective to-be, because deep down, she knows they will never be like the couple that just got married. They are trapped by inability to admit to themselves their red hearts are not so red. She doesn't want the corsage. She drinks alone and sneaks a smoke from a guest. Then she is back in, dancing with you. All seven or eight, or nine years of you, in your first suit. A haircut has accented your moviestardom, but what wins you the ladies is your dancing. You carve the floor. The wedding DJ remarks on the mic. Look at this kid go. Grandma is seemingly in a better mood after some champagne. A relative of your Aunt's husband tells you affectionately, that when you're about ten years older, to give her a call.

Sometimes, after you've danced yourself tired, and the stepdaughters start complaining, your Stepmother takes you to the car to wait. Dad is going to help collect the platters, and clean up the folding tables, and leftover cake plates with a few other

volunteers from the groom's family. One of them, slightly drunk bumps into Dad and makes a snide remark. No one heard it, but the two of them.

Sometimes Dad is one snide remark away from jail. Even at the wedding reception for his oldest sister, your Aunt, a sweet woman who first really got you to trust spaghetti, and the richness of tomato sauce. Sometimes Dad's trigger could be pulled by a fingerless hand.

Sometimes, as you and the stepdaughters are waiting in the car, the rain really begins to come down. It is the early afternoon, but the clouds make it look like a mean night. It is time to go. There is a running woman. Your stepmother has urgency on her face and panic for eyes. She is running from the reception hall as fast as her stick legs can carry. Sometimes when you are with your Dad and your Stepmother, something has happened. Sometimes something is going to happen like a pot handle on the nearest burner left jutting out while eggs boil.

Your Stepmother flings the car door open cursing your Dad. She is saying your Dad has gotten into it with someone and he's about to kill him. She is saying it is one of your new uncle's relatives. He has said something to your Dad, something most vile that could end his days on a rainy afternoon. The stepdaughters grow quiet. She smells of cigarette smoke, she is frantic. She is searching under the front seats for something. Her hands like scurrying rodents hurtling over the floor mats. You, the stepdaughters, and the

whole world are silent. The loudness is the pouring rain on the roof of the car, your Stepmother's urgency, the banging of your heart in your little suit, the stepdaughters' absolute fright, so loud that one nears tears, the crash of your Aunt's special day nearing ruin in the denouement.

Your stepmother touches a blue cigar box under the driver's seat. It is the kind a boy might keep a rock collection in, or where an old lover keeps letters from her sailor, long since gone. Inside of this box is a gun. A real pistol, like a hero's. Not blue. No orange tip. Its sound effects with the potential to pluck human beings from the world in an instant. It is heavy.

She is saying, your Dad wants to kill this man. Words fling out of her mouth. I'm taking the gun. Do not tell him where I am.

Sometimes your Stepmother runs off into the pouring rain and out of sight, and just like a movie, where the timing of one character's exit signals the arrival of another, out of the hall comes your Dad, just as your stepmother leaks around the corner of the building, and out of the shot. Sometimes, the synchronism of timing.

He is crashing out of the hall, running full speed toward the car. He is biting his bottom lip. Inside of the reception hall there had been a matador with a billowing red cape. Your Dad is the bull from the Bugs Bunny Cartoon. He is the bull's choleric eyes. He is the intimidating ring from the snout, the hooves scraping the dirt, the pointed horns

angled at death, the immutable stare, and he is right at the driver's side door, which your stepmother told you not to open.

Do not open this door for your father. I have the keys.

Sometimes you cannot remember whether or not you, being the oldest, chose to unlock the door. You can't reclaim the memory over the clanging of your heart still stuck there in your tiny little suit. Sometimes you make up what happened next.

Sometimes it goes like:

Dad's aggression at the driver's side window scares you into opening the door. Open the fucking door. It sounds something like that. His hands like piranhas under the seat looking for the cigar box. He's found it. Your stepmother never took it. He's back off through the rain smelling blood, careening toward the entrance to the reception hall. You are frozen in fear. The younger of the two stepdaughters is in tears. Sometimes the both of them understand even less than you do.

Bang. Then, Bang, Bang.

Even the rain grows afraid and goes silent as it falls to the ground. Someone has just hit the mute button on the outside world. Then a woman is heard screaming. Then, several women are screaming, and their screams tear down the doors to the hall. Your Aunt, in all white is running in the rain, her fingers gripping tightly at her skirt, the train

of her dress growing grey from dragging on the flooded ground. Black streaks careen down her face. She is lost and running to nowhere.

Sometimes it goes like:

Dad's aggression at the driver's side window scares you into cowering with the two stepdaughters in the backseat. Open the fucking door, right now. His hands like boulders as he raps on the window. The rain flings off his eyelashes. He his blinking raindrops off furiously as if he is not already blinded with bedlam. He is a dog with his snout just beyond the slats in the fence, snapping, with its teeth reared. He is a psychotic clown with a laugh bubbling behind a funhouse mirror. He is the man with knives for fingers plunging through the mirror. He is the caretaker with the axe, splintering the bedroom door open to get to his wife and son.

He is screaming your Stepmother's name. The rain is loud. He does not have the gun. The real gun.

He's back off through the rain smelling blood, careening toward the entrance to the reception hall. You are frozen in fear. The younger of the two stepdaughters is in tears.

Sometimes the both of them understand even better than you do. Sometimes the things they will be forced to witness lay ruin to their childhoods. They will see more men with guns. Men with armored vests, and cargo pockets, and police dogs, and lights meant to scorch eyes and stun, and so many voices yelling that discerning a single one is impossible, and the rhythmic glowing of alternating red and blue beacons blasting through their front window. They will see Dad dragged from the bed and his hands and their mother's in the air, like on TV. You will be at home with your mother and step-father—the family you actually live with—playing videogames and eating pizza every Friday night. You pick out one kid-movie, and one Kung-Fu movie at the video store. You go to Taekwondo, and complain because it seems like a chore after playing all day at school. You race bikes on the cul-de-sac with the neighborhood boys. You go on adventures in the forest just a few blocks from your neighborhood. You splash in the creek and set a fire. You write letters to your crush and go to Disneyland. You record pop songs on the radio and complain to your mom about eating baked chicken again.

But sometimes it is Bang. Then, Bang, Bang.

Sometimes when the stepdaughters relay to you what will happen later, they will say that it was really early in the morning when they came to get Dad. And that as the men with the armored vests and police dogs pulled Dad from the bed, he tried to fight them off. Sometimes when they tell it, he's pulled outside of the house and his face slammed into the concrete. It is still dark out. They are crying, and the world is loud.

Sometimes the police with the dogs stick the gun to your Dad's back as his face is smashed into the concrete. Sometimes they lodge the gun right onto his neck. Sometimes the muzzle of the gun is directly up against the back of his head and his face is smashed into the asphalt. Sometimes there are multiple guns aimed at all of them. None of the guns are blue. They are all always the real thing. None of the guns are blue. None of the guns are blue and plastic and lightweight. None of the guns mimic the sounds of guns. This is certain.

## Preparing for Flight, 2005

Kathleen is David's white mother, a burdened trial attorney with salt and pepper hair. She's in the doorway now, as David and I tuck our paraphernalia, deodorant, and socks into carry on luggage. She is saying with a barrel-aged wisdom, that we be careful as to how we are packing. Things are different now for you. I am folding a coral-colored polo, whose sleeves fit snug on my biceps, placing in on a pile of new T-shirts, and a toiletry bag. The salty aroma of popcorn swims in the hallway. And Paul, David's father, a black man from Tennessee, chocolate as a milk dud, passes behind Kathleen there in the hallway, and is saying, ya'll want to wear these beards now. The fashion. You high-society 1800s? Pack your ascots, too, then. I guess what's fashionable for young men, he is saying, is changing up every few years. Mustaches were our thing. Now you guys want 'em as soon as you can get it all to connect to your chin. Have fun at the airport. Paul is chuckling and stuffing popcorn on his chin before it finds his mouth, like a teen in a dark theater. His voice, muffled with that mouth full, dissipates as he saunters toward his bedroom where the glowing television throws shadows on the hallway wall. He is calling out, but it's more distant now. Ya'll don't just look like negroes anymore at the airport. Or even half-negroes. Both of you, with that straight hair, and those black beards, you certainly aren't pirates. That light-skin makes you look like something else, now. And regardless of that name on your passport, they're looking for something else.

## **It Rang and Rang**

The son had turned down better colleges to go to school in the desert town where his father lived. The father had gotten out of prison for a second time. The father had just been emancipated formally from a halfway house, and was back at home with his stepdaughters and turbulent second marriage. The son had reasoned two things: the desert school had fewer requirements for admission, which led him to believe there would be more sex and partying, and the other thing he believed was that he could reconnect with the father, who only lived a few miles from the school. The father knew nothing about the school, but was happy his son was coming, thought he'd be a doctor. The son was resolute in his decision, despite his mother's apprehension; the stepfather remained quiet. The father was so proud of the son that he grafted fantasies in his mind: his son was

training to be a surgeon, or the son was grooming to be a high-ranking public official.

The son was actually going to study English and music.

The son's mother, though feeling uneasy about the ills of the desert, did not want to intervene in the son's decision in schools. The father would remake himself in the son's image. The son packed his most prized possessions: cream colored Pumas and blue Chuck Taylors, both guitars, posters of rock n' roll heroes (all had died from drug overdoses), his boombox, a favorite rugby shirt, a salmon colored polo, best khakis, a laptop, a booklet of CD's arranged in order from least abrasive sounding, to *for-his-ears-only*, a collection of prized hats, a box of condoms, and a crusty green weed pipe. The father had once taken the son to the local swap meet and bought a pipe; he told the son that it was a gift for his boss. The son had asked for a toy set with plastic ninja-stars, and a sheathed sword. The father had said, "What do you want that for?" The son wasn't even disappointed.

The son packed for school carefully; he had wrapped his pipe in a pair of boxers, to be stuffed at the bottom of a running shoe, lest his mother find out what goes on in dorms. The father planned to keep his distance until the son was settled in. The son stood in line with his mother for registration; they bought a new cellphone, and she helped make his bed with fresh jersey-knit sheets.

The father no longer cared about belongings. The son's very identity was composed of his stuff, objects that represented him: hats, clothes, shoes, two guitars, wall art, posters. The son believed his belongings were his ambassador. The father's only clothes were housed in an old-timey storage trunk like a pirate's chest or a footlocker from the army; he kept the trunk in a closet under a rubbermaid container that held important documents, and old photo albums.

The father bought menthols but shoplifted pork chops. The son heated up single-serving mac & cheese. The son hung up his posters on the cinderblock walls with blue putty; the posters shouted *I smoke weed! I smoke weed!* The father peeled cellophane off packs of menthols. The son pushed his bed up toward the wall opposite his roommate's. The son adjusted the height of his bed that he might neatly arrange his skateboard and guitar amp beneath. The father walked dark lots at night and pulled parts from cars, buzzing and opportunistic. The son blasted music with his room's door open, that passersby might poke their heads in. The son made many friends. The father had remembered the smiles of his friends he once had, but their faces trailed off like smoke; he could not imagine what their lives were like, so he took to not thinking of them often.

The son had promised to contact the father as soon as he was settled in. The father waited, hovering over the phone like big cat protecting its kill. The son found excuses to put off calling: *It will take a few more days to settle in.* The son went to guitar class, befriending the guys with the dreads; they were amazed he couldn't read sheet music; he

felt embarrassed. The son made friends with a blonde girl with green eyes, that he nicknamed 'Lemon-Lime,' whose smile radiated like three suns, but she was only interested in her neighbor across the hall. The son bonded with a different girl over a shared favorite rap song; she was from the richest county in the country. The son felt rich by-proxy. The son and the rich girl stuffed dryer sheets in the ends of toilet paper rolls to mask the odor of weed. The father made a call to the son's dorms, leaving a message with a provided answering service: "Hey, I'm seeing if you're all nestled in. It's me. The girls will be excited to see you. They keep asking about their brother."

The son sat on a small grass knoll passing a joint and drinking in the nighttime sky with kids from Hawaii, Minnesota, and Long Island, as on most nights the sky illuminated wispy clouds like the wallpaper in a nursery for a pedigreed infant, or a hint that next playful day was peeking just behind a corner.

The father operated excavators and track loaders with a violent man from a nearby reservation. The father and the man hid malt-liquor in their igloo lunch boxes, negotiating the fire of the midday sun; they shared the sentiment of control as they made jokes about Mexicans. The father and the man talked about illegal cage-fights that paid handsomely for victors, and decent enough for the losers.

The son got drunk. The father got drunk. The son was passed along a number to call where a woman would come to his room with a camera, and if there was enough

cash, he'd be returned a false I.D. that said he was of drinking age. The father's I.D. was run during a traffic stop; his driving privileges had not been returned by the state, which meant he'd spend the weekend in jail, which was only as inconvenient as a splinter.

The father left more messages. The son wrestled the courage to call the father back. The father insisted they'd barbeque. The son was withdrawn and reluctant, but polite; he said, "I can't wait to see the girls," which was not true. The son rushed off the phone, promising a call back. The father leveraged good behavior with the girls by dangling their brother in front of their eager little brown faces. The father lionized the son as a soon-to-be astronaut and surgeon general. The son agonized. The father thought of the son as a mountain, an emperor's banquet, a monocle, a jacket with coattails and a top hat, the latest technological advancement. The son went to the health-center for condoms.

The son found a swimming partner and skipped dinners to do laps in the campus pool. The father only bought hard plastic Big Gulps that he could fill with ice, Dr. Pepper, and rum to medicate throughout his workday. The son was proud of his first college essay about the importance of male bonding during smoking sessions; he got a B. The father smoked cigarettes in the bathroom at home on the shitter; sometimes he wouldn't come out for hours, leaving the girls to fend for themselves while their mother worked or slept. The son swore he collapsed a lung during a smoke session in a friend's black Jaguar. The father salvaged a thirty-year-old Toyota hatchback, which in order to

be operable, was rigged like a series of booby traps. The son stuffed towels in the space between the bottom of the door and the carpet to mask the odor of weed.

The father didn't go home to the girls and the stepmother some nights, but this had been normal for years. The son was dragged incapacitated from a party by a woman he didn't know and a man with a head like a corned beef; they fished for his keys, and dropped him onto his bed, setting him up with a wastebasket for vomiting. The father got pulled over again for driving with only parking lights on; the indicator signal, when toggled, flung the headlights off with just the slightest touch, proving hazardous on long boulevards in parts of town where the police carved the avenues looking for suspicious vehicles. The son stopped going to guitar conservatory; he was underprepared, and realized he would never play like his heroes. The father got off with a warning; the cop's shift was ending and didn't feel like the hassle of arrest.

The son fucked a girl in the dorms who made voices like a cartoon character while in bed; she also rollerbladed to classes in yellow cyclist shorts, the shiny kind; she had an accent like someone making fun of someone from the Midwest, and insisted on anal sex, beaming with a grin like a lemon wedge, and the son wondered what her father must have been like. The father masturbated with hand lotion on the toilet at night when everyone had gone to sleep, but sometimes the older girls were still awake. The son fucked a girl who was flown to college on her father's private jet; the morning she left his room would be the last time she would acknowledge him publicly on campus.

The father called the son's mother. The son's mother gave the father the son's cellphone number. The father felt disheartened and in his voicemail to the son, the timber of his voice belted eagerly, but trailed off at the end of his sentences. The father was grey with rejection. The son was red with anxiety.

The son did not return this new call immediately, letting the message seer into the phone, rendering the phone almost too heavy to hold, and certainly too hot for pockets; he began to leave the phone in his desk. The son watched the icon indicate more messages. The father again called the phone attached to the dorm room; it rang like a phone in a detective show, its insides comprised not of a speaker modulating a sound, but of actual bells rapidly beat upon under its plastic casing. The son took fiery red umbrage with phones, but called back saying he'd come soon, but just had been busy with the academic rigor of nuclear biology, astrophysics, endocrinology and world peace.

The father used food stamps to buy charcoal and the ingredients for potato salad. The father made the girls clean the house. The son was called out in Piano class for playing off-beat. The son's next paper was about the potential setbacks of globalization, and instead of doing research, he'd opted to stop going to that class altogether. The father obtained a large white truck by illegal means, a truck he intended not to register. The son brought to the dorms a woman with a tongue ring, who'd looked like she'd been running for her life, all her life, ending up naked with acidic breath in his bed; early in the morning, presuming the son was still asleep, she slipped from the blankets, assumed the

squat of a sumo wrestler, and pissed a puddle on the floor, while the entire time, stirred by her movement, the son watched the event unfold, reconciling which aspect was worse—the steam from the piss, or the ammonia smell now in the carpet; he was too drunk and too tired to care. The son pretended not to notice, and said nothing as she climbed back into bed. The father picked up a woman with stringy hair he'd met while staying at the halfway house, and she sucked him off under the orange of a streetlight. The father unfolded a used scratcher producing amphetamine, which he and the woman snorted off the vinyl dashboard of the Toyota hatchback; they talked about their kids and made plans for future as the moon disappeared behind the nearby mountains.

The father appeared roaming the halls of the dorms one afternoon. The son hurried the father inside his room; nerves chewed at their insides. The son said, "I got your messages!" The son explained it had been a hectic transition. The father's pierced eyes were incredulous. The son said, "I'm hardly in my room." The father's hands were cracked and ashen, as if he'd had a career karate chopping cinderblocks. The son was wearing a designer rugby shirt with a starched collar. The father's jeans were stained with grease around the thighs and smelled sour, his t-shirt thin with a faded logo of cartoon character, holes at the hemline of the neck. The son and father wrapped arms around one another, hugging belly to belly, finishing with an obligatory back-pat affirming their masculinities. The father spoke of barbequing and the girls, and steaks, and charcoal, and used fishing poles, and the son's grandmother, and pork chops, and chicken thighs, and

potato salad, and how beef ribs had been on sale, and boneless pork ribs, and how the son's stepmother had been unwilling to get out of bed of late, and how she was using her pain medication as an excuse to do nothing or anything ever, not even clean the fucking coffee table, or pick up the girls from school. The son lamented and trembled beneath his skin. The father said, "You don't have to stay long, but the girls would like to see you."

The son's eyes squirmed in their sockets as the two exited the dorms, searching frantically for anyone who might see the two together; what would he say should he be spotted with such a figure? The son began to sweat profusely, the scorching blue vinyl sticking to his calves as his legs crested over the edge the passenger's seat. The father cranked the windows down and proceeded on with advice: "You should be eligible for food stamps since you're an adult now. There's the office right there." The father gestured. The son, let out a faint, "Hmm," and kept his eyes down the length of the boulevard, to where the road eventually ended at the feet of the mountains. The father said, "There's a lot of free money out there for you to take advantage of. Don't be ashamed. Take some free shit. Have you been eating?" The son heard the father's sentences all running together. The son said he'd taken up swimming during dinner hours. The father read the son's apprehension. The son read the father's read. The father saw it all as advice; he was parenting. The son saw it as the facsimile of advice. The father stared passed rows of stoplights down the boulevard toward the feet of the mountains, occasionally remarking about Mexicans. The son was quiet, looking at the

heatwaves rising from the asphalt. The father said, “You know your dad can still barbeque like a motherfucker.” The son knew this to be true and his insides softened, but a quiet grunt was the only affirmation he could muster. The father said nothing for the rest of the drive. The son said nothing for the rest of the drive.

The son’s heart fell as the car slowed, and they turned into a mobile home park. The son’s ego fell even further. The son’s identity fell even further than that, seeping into the floor mats, evaporating and condensing back into the gas-tank before being sucked into the the motor, where the pistons compressed it, shooting its fumes out of the exhaust and off into the atmosphere.

The father let out a goofy giggle and said “We’re here,” as if he was also in on some joke. The son stuck a plastic smile to his face. The father yelled at the girls as they shrieked about the arrival of their brother: the Californian, the astronaut, the surgeon, the emperor, the diplomat, rock-legend, King Arthur, Moses, the future-President. The father said, “Calm the fuck down, goddamnit.” The son hugged three of them, the oldest—a stepsister—sat on the couch and gestured from her perch. The son didn’t blame her.

The son surveyed the house taking in the following: pink Barbie backpacks lining the floors, a cracked laundry basket spilling with clothes beside a badly stained couch (the same one the father brought back years before from Germany), a grey pitbull puppy,

a coffee table with two pink plastic cups and one purple, the smell of ashtrays, and the voice of a daytime television host revealing the paternal truth about some innocent baby.

The father selected one of the girls to accompany himself and the son on a quick run to the store. The son played nice like a retail worker, or a hotel concierge, or a telephone advice nurse, or young teacher during back-to-school night, as he answered the girl's coloring book questions. The son walked the store thinking about his relationship to poverty as he watched a young mother with a stroller ruminating over brands of diapers. The father made eyes with the son at the checkout counter, gesturing at the young woman ringing them up. The father whispered to the son, "She flirts with me every time I'm in here, I could fuck her." The son watched the checker hear the entire exchange.

The son grabbed the girl's hand as they left the store, and asked her questions about school; she looked up at him and said, "Dad told me about the time you grabbed a girl's butt in the pool." The son thought about how he'd almost drowned once. The son thought about how hot it was, and wondered if the pink vista creeping over the tips of the mountains was worth the daily fire in the air.

The father unlocked the truck he'd obtained by illegal means. The son felt pale green nausea. The father performed a combination of jiggling the key in the ignition, and pressing at some unseen button beneath the steering column to start the truck. The father's truck howled, and the father, the son, and the girl lumbered away. The son

looked at the girl's skin which the same color as his own, though her mother was quite dark. The son looked at his father's neck, red from laboring with the violent man in the sun, and arms the same, but noticed how the father's face was still surprisingly pale. The son smirked about the term 'redneck.'

The father and son and little girl waited at a light that never seemed to change. The son tried his best to be attentive as the girl chattered on, repeatedly calling the son by his family nickname, 'Bubba.' The father thumped the little girl on the side of her ear, "Can you be quiet for a damned second?" The father said, "You talk too much." The father then made a joke about a short man with his family in the crosswalk, taking on a mocking voice, "La Migra! La Migra!" and laughed like a bully. The son hoped for the light to change. The father exhaled deeply and announced, "I hate this fucking town." The son watched the little girl rub her head in silence, sucking a pout back into her face.

The father finally drove the lumbering truck through the light, which had not changed. The son held his breath, and thought about his jersey-knit sheets. The father asked, "How come you never wrote me when I was in there?" The son peeled his mouth open, but nothing came out. The father and son and little girl bobbed up and down as the truck trudged along the boulevard, lifting them off of the bench seat at every pothole and warped section of the road. The father giggled and asked, "You remember that time I was trying to rap to a girl at the supermarket, and right when she was going to give me her number you looked up and said, 'Dad, you got a booger in your nose?'" The son didn't

remember, but had remembered hearing the retelling throughout his childhood. The son said, "Uh huh." The father said, "Bubs, this place is no good for me, I've got to get out of here." The son said nothing. The son rubbed the little girl's head as they approached the mobile home park. The father felt pale with regret. The son felt radiant with nerves.

The father spotted an abandoned shopping cart on the sidewalk, and without saying a word swerved the truck onto the curb, plowing into the cart, sending it hurtling into the drive of the mobile home park. The father let out the laugh of a thirteen-year-old boy, or a five-year-old boy, or a fifty-year-old man. The son watched the little girl's eyes; they rounded with fright, then shrank with disappointment. The son peered into the father's skull, watching for his brain to stop tumbling. The father chuckled, "Bullseye!" The son squeezed the little girl's hand. The father said, "Hey, I bet you miss your dad's barbeque, though." The father tapped harshly on a pack of menthols. The father and the son and the girls ate; the stepmother slept.

The son sat in his room for months curious like a surgeon, nervous like a high-ranking public official, wondering like an astronaut, resolute like a surgeon-general, languishing like an emperor.

The son's phone rang and rang and rang, until one day, it did not.

## EGG

The egg actually does cook on the blacktop of the parking lot. Step mom says, I told you to wear shoes, that concrete is real hot. We crack it on a chain link fence, as if beginning the first act of a performance art piece about the horrors of abortion. But we are children and years removed from the political messages of our post-Da Da peers. It is the experiment that one is encouraged to see. To challenge the summer sun's true power. Did you crack an egg on the sidewalk? To show how brave you must be to run amongst that dry heat, plunked down in a cement valley. The concrete grid like an illuminated diamond dug between the toes of the mountains. The city, a most violent John of the west, drinking from the tits of the Colorado river. This town, the glitzy whore dropped off somewhere before California. Some of the nation's filthiest drinking water. Fine enough for a big pitcher of red Kool-Aid. The secret, if you must know, is mixing a few packets of the blue, into a red dominated pitcher. Pour the sugar directly from the bag. Stir with the long wooden spoon. The spoon with the red stains, the perfect height of pitcher. It might be the spoon's only purpose.

Crack the egg on the chain-link that separates the long-term residential parking in the back, from the short-term parking adjacent to the newer building, and the lobby. The front, with the neon Motel sign and marquee, boasting of short or long-term rates. If you are ever lost in North Las Vegas, a mere minutes from the Old Vegas Casino cluster, and

the Fremont street experience, you might find your eyes searching past the Jefe Guadalajara Carniceria, running across the parking lot strewn with shards of green glass, and continuing up the walls at the corner of the building, where the stench of urine is pungent, turning right at the sticky awning of King Kong Chinese restaurant, down the drain pipe, scurrying further through the intersection toward the 7/11, just missing the white Caprice Classic as long as a boat, which holds a mysterious man you dare not gaze upon, who threatens like a Disney-villain with his angular jaw, the only thing you can truly make out beyond the tinted glass, continuing onto the other side of the gas pumps, past the woman who never seems to have any shoes but always has a paper bag, and is yelling at another man with a worn perm she calls "Pierre Goddamnit," and onto the glass behind them, straight to the door handle, bursting inside the doors, moving straight past the usual candy display, and the reflective covers for the titty books, just beyond the *We Accept Food Stamps* sign, but to the left of the case with the boiled ham and bags of single dill pickles, you can see a row of slot machines lining the wall. You can plop down for a few rounds if you're feeling lucky. Eat a taquito if you get hungry.

The egg on the blacktop of the back parking lot looks disappointing at first. It doesn't sizzle or waft of breakfast. But right there next to the chain-link fence, stare down. Step mom hollers, just wait a second. The ground is hot. And you need to have something to report back once you get home about this strange land, the trip to visit your Dad over summer out in Vegas. Step sisters giggling, more watching you than watching the

ground, where your eyes pour on the egg. Soon, the translucent goo of the albumen starts to turn white. It will do as frying. The yolk sits yellow and undisturbed like the sun over the desert. And there's a lesson: always wear shoes when going outside, so your feet don't scorch.

The egg on the blacktop, a disappointing experiment. How you wanted it to hit the asphalt, and sizzle. To splatter flat to the pave, bubbling up violently, and the chef turns to face you, as he says, this is your brain on drugs. That's what the egg should've looked like. Certainly.

## The Condition

The woman in the cafe got up and moved. His repeated coughs disrupted like a fire-engine barreling down the boulevard during rush hour, blaring. It was disgust, like when a judge blames the victim. His coffee was particularly tasty that morning, and he'd enjoyed occasionally glancing over at the woman's tapered haircut. She was the type who trimmed her nails regularly, and did the smaller things like cleaning behind her ears. A catch. Her toes too, he'd imagined, were perfect. Fire-engine red.

Once he told a coworker, "I have this condition."

"In any case, you're going to have to tamp down on that while you're on the floor."

There was another woman whom he'd started seeing recently. He'd taken her while she bent over a bannister, holding one wrist behind her back. Then they finished on the carpet. Eventually she'd ask, "Are you sick?"

He'd suppressed the urge to cough on every date, saving it for a succession of bathroom breaks. They'd shared cigarettes outside of the bars, and later snuck a few at her friend's wedding, once she began to love him.

She was tickled watching his friends carry their couch up two flights of stairs to their first apartment. As she sat on the bumper of the moving truck, a recognizable

hacking tumbled down the two flights of stairs, draining onto the tips of her feet. She pressed her fingers into her cheek, and huddled forward. What have I done?

The cough, part of the deal like a disabled step-child. Soon it followed her onto the toilet while she did her business, showed up with her during the previews and the credits, stuck to the morning's toast, slathered into crust on the pillowcases. It threw tantrums in the shower, made them settle the bill ahead of time at brunch, even.

She began to go to brunch without him. He got needy. She'd come up the two flights of stairs later than usual, stained of cigarettes. There had been two glasses of wine poured. He'd smile and ask, "Want to split one on the fire escape?"

Her jaw might crush the teeth in her mouth. His face was green, his nose was crooked, teeth were bad, food was always too salty, and the softness of his laugh made him look incapable of winning any fist fight.

Then he cleared his throat, liberating from his lungs what had sounded like a freed fire-engine when it bounced inside of his mouth.

"I don't think you should be smoking."

"But it has nothing to do with, that," he looked up at her. "It's my condition."

## Monachopsis

Elena is going to bike the Sun Harbor trail, the one that runs along the highway, but unfortunately, that's not what you do. Christopher has insisted on your joining for a day behind the boat, negotiating wake and rope and masculinity, but of course you don't join. Tay and her people are going to be at the Rose Lounge, and then to the Spotlight Cellar, and then back to Tay's girlfriend's house for bumps and booze, with cigarettes and mixtapes, but you don't do that anymore. Toddy and them are going to the arena, but you'll be at work, just like the last time. This year, the turkey is being made by Sally (Mom, seriously? Who the hell let Sally by a kitchen?) and you are expected to get along with everyone. Is it okay if Lora takes your car?—The roads are tricky up there on the way to the retreat. You are not going. It's not your thing, remember? You imagine the people sitting on reed mats dealing with the accoutrement of the outdoors. They are all listening attentively, some even nodding, as the speaker professes in a pleasant monotone about pacifiers to life's woes. But you won't be there.

Fake it on the surfboard, the others are watching from their vans, knowing that definitely, you're a novice.

The first tee is bad. Rough for everyone, surely, you'll say. Especially at this course, the one tucked in the old growth of the hills, for the tenured academics, their

children, and the university golf team. Not so bad, but for you, it's worse. Here, where you're especially brown and poor and inept.

Drink the beer grudgingly, even though it stuffs you up. Go for a third glass of wine after dinner, even though you said you were taking it easy.

They are going out for a smoke, taking the conversation with them, but you cannot go because, smoking is not what you do. Until you smell like denim and tobacco from when you collapsed-in on yourself outside of the row of bars. Below the streetlights, the orange air held the smoke by your hands, and your friend, who wasn't smoking stayed away.

It's to the snow, and you cannot go. It has just stormed in the mountains, and pride will not let you negotiate the whole issue with putting on tire-chains. Elena insists on brunch at their new place, but she has cats, and you have allergies, so no. To the park below the shopping district, where the new families meet to picnic with their babies—you don't have one, but you do have the sniffles and a fever. So you won't make it. Christopher signed you both up to register for tickets, but you can't imagine having to say to Lora, I'm going to do this for a week. A whole week without you. So you don't.

But you do linger at the cash register to look at the cashier longer.

Once outside, you can't stop thinking about her choice of glasses, and how her haircut works for her face, and you know that she knows, and you like that about her. She

chose her shirt carefully that day, with the rose print, but the shorts not so much, because she already knows those shorts looks amazing on her ass. And two and two make four.

So you march back inside to ask for a type of milk just particular enough that it's not out on the counter, and when she pours it, it crawls into the coffee like when the wet and dry ingredients combine in a mixing bowl.

In comes the woman with a ridiculous red muumuu, so obscene that you have both noticed, the absurdity that must have gone into every choice she's ever made, and you share this over a pair of grins and colluding eyes, until the muumuu is upon you both, waiting to order. You are handed a cookie free of charge as if you've already paid, and the woman behind the counter says, hey thank you, and smiles for all of the wonders on the planet. And you are not mistaken.

Then after she's gotten off work, you're invited over warmly, and are surprised to find she doesn't have cats, nor roommates.

While she's up to pee you say her name over in your head—Veronica—of course it's Veronica. You watch it spill off of a pair of lips, syllable by syllable in your mind. Vuh-ron-i-cuh. With your hands clenched in fists of victory you thrash toward the ceiling as if you've just won. You are chilling back casually when she returns. It's what you do.

She's laughing at everything that's meant to be funny on the walk to sushi, and none of the parts that aren't. When you're done eating, she races to pay. For a second you

think about money and investments. You are happy you're not too full. She grabs your hand and you both go.

Her smile is one thousand puppies in a giant Christmas stocking. She smiles while kissing you, and you smile inside of your stomach.

Your heart pounds in your chest as if you've just been dropped off in the theater of war. Dirt clots explode in chaos just inches from your position. There is smoke and ash. Bullets break the air at the sides of your face. You can't see them, but can hear them when they crash to the sand behind you. Dust clings to the sweat on your neck. Inert bodies of your friends pile around you in stacks. There are lumps of black and brown, lifeless bodies.

But you still have her hand. Veronica. Together you slog wearily up to the enemy's position at the far end of the clearing. Your hard bodies stop bullets on impact. You're impervious.

You're back on Veronica's couch, and then into her bedroom naked. And it's heavy and it's perfect and then it's quiet.

She's there asleep, and though it's still, the world outside hints at noise below the bright orange air coming off the streetlights through the window. The shadows are long. Some sit by the door, and others climb the walls bending at the corner of the room the way a ghost would.

There are figures in pictures—people she must know.

The blackness is cold and ruthless. It stares at your face for a while, and listens for your heartbeat. Then it asks you to leave. So you take inventory of where your things are before you gather them. The blackness watches with intent. For time's sake, you stuff your socks into your pockets, bare feet, into shoes.

At the door, you pause contemplating whether to turn the locks slowly, with quiet precision or the opposite. But the blackness gets the door for you, holding out it's hand as a gesture of direction. You pause in the threshold locking eyes with the blackness. Its gaze unwavering. Yours too, locked in resolve. It outstretches its hand further down the hall, suggesting you leave, and you do. That's what you do.

## Have I Ever Told You About?

Instead, refusing to be crushed by fear, or the lines of fear, you've turned from a poor man, into thee poor man, into the parachute man, with veins like charged particles, vibrating highways of smarm, sass, big dicks, heroism.

Your suit, green. Boots. Green. Helmet. Green. The kid next to you, Martinez with the rabbit teeth of a thumbsucker, his pillowy cheeks, the only thing on his body still left in second grade (that is, if you're not counting his thumbsucked tusks)—green. Martinez not wanting to jump. Martinez, wanting to barf. Martinez, having coveted a desk job before airborne school, however unsurprisingly a pushover hiding from being pushed under, pushing forward. His spindly fingers nervously fumbling with a lighter, getting to that last menthol before the airfield, and the commanding officer cracking a joke about his cold vagina through a callow grin, like every imposing military man in every movie. Martinez rests his other hand in his lap, hoping that the plane up ahead—a C-130—just disappears. It doesn't. Isn't going to. So you might say there's a queasy sequence in his gut. His gut is yellow. And it's yellow gut to green cheeks, spurred on by the the fears of what fear itself brings, the following manifestation is conjured: The door to the C-130 peels open, like a can of sardines on their way to a battle of not being smeared on saltines. The revealing sound of engines, the blowing wind, and stretches of green field and indifferent dirt, like hard, certain death below.

Here it is:

Martinez doesn't jump, he cowers. But all of the other boots hit the ground, and he, the one who shat his fatigues, has now amassed a cascade of nicknames for pants-shitter. One of them is *Shittywalk*. It recalls when his cheeks were even chubbier in school. It's the cafeteria and Martinez had taken to coughing violently over his cheese fries, a means toward not having to share. This action, dictated by the handbook of middle school, under subsection *microbial phobias*, and the 7th grade bully fearing germs, would let it pass, those times. A meaningful victory.

But follow him back to the C-130 where we are now. Martinez is channeling a lush green garden of can-do, hoping to finally wear the blanket of sanctimony. His cheeks, fleshy green mounds, holding back vomit, he's resolved to make the jump. But of course, you there, in that green pack, will have had to have leapt out of the hatch first. You are green-means-go swinging on a light pole, a rainforest that doesn't know when to quit, a disco of green, green photosynthesis, the widest lamina ingesting the nutrients of masculinity. And Martinez, while green in the cheeks, those same ones his abuelita tell him stink of cigarettes, is green for you parachute man, as you've swallowed whole the thinning air as a means to preserve your own hiding, fluff your own stature, camouflage your own yellow belly as you fearlessly fling out of the back of the plane, nicknameless, and helplessly out of control.

Heroic right, Mr. parachute man? A distinction I bestowed in a fiction of you. If you're confused as the story leaps over truths about what's happening in the above scene, remember, it's enticing to peruse the world *in-scene* as we say, where the writing workshop leader with a mu-mu and far too many dangly bracelets will instruct, "It's so important, if your work is falling adrift, to keep your reader grounded in scene." (She makes the quotes gesture with two fingers on either side of her head). Distinct however, from *mise-en-scene*, the film-maker's term for "the shit that's in the background of the shot, that somehow relates, implicates, or further complicates the narrative." So Mr. parachute man's shot is now constructed more of the truth of a tank-mechanic using his hands to dust sand from his testicles in the Kuwaiti desert. You've just dug a hole, relieved, and wiped. You are right there on the border of Iraq. The Tasking Order in the CO's pocket reads *Action Plan: Desert Storm*. Also, and more importantly protruding out of the CO's BDUs is a coveted packet of Red Rope. The asshole always has candy, his accent annoyingly southern despite his hailing from Colorado. The warplanes have long since gone on ahead, and music from the C & C Music Factory plays on a small grey Sony, atop pickle green poker table, the kind that folds out. On the foldout table there is also a small jar of German cornichons, a pack of Marlboro Reds, a gold box of Teddy Grahams, needle-nose pliers, a near empty jar of Nutella, three screwdrivers, a jug of yellowing water, a packet of Simpsons playing cards, and an unopened can of Folgers, topped with a red bow, the red of a candy apple. The Folgers is a gift for the CO.

Your balls are good, and although it is hotter than what you imagine Hell to feel like, you're all smiles. Today is more of a R & R day, as your orders have you in place for at least 72 hours. It's been shit-talking and jokes and wagers on pointless tasks, like *who can hit the spare tire on the humvee with the football, first-try*. But more importantly, the unopened can of Folgers. You've been eyeing it all morning, along with Martinez, Foutts, Specialist Yun, and Dempsey. Martinez and his stupid grin is a potential giveaway. It is the CO's birthday. The platoon Captain, the one with the mysterious Southern drawl despite hailing from just outside Denver. The fucker loves the band Poison, coffee, shit-talking, and unabashedly helping himself to his subordinate's cigarettes, lotion, tissue, Nutella, pastries, Pepsi, and M&Ms. He'd taken to the habit of unfurling his fingers into Martinez's powdered ketchup at chow-times. "I'm gonna need a bit more, Martinez, you won't miss it." After a bout of poker, just a few days before now, he made Specialist Yun take an extra shift burning the shit-barrel, on account that Yun had won too many hands for his liking. "Them's the rules, Yun." Then he thumbed his nose like a shitty uncle.

So a can of Folgers for the Captain's birthday. They'd managed the bow, too (perfect for our *mise-en-scene*). You and the others are standing around, and to wash him with camaraderie and repute, you break into happy birthday. The sun has gone down, and the temperature is plummeting. In the light of lanterns, you're all there, arms folded, watching as the Captain cracks a smile, his eyes softening as he shakes the can. It's

contents rattle around on the inside. You position yourself in front of Martinez, whose grin is growing suspicious.

“What the fuck is in here, guys?” the Captain inquires. He begins to peel the lid open. “This sure ain’t no fuckin’ coffee,” he chuckles. You’re all staring now.

You start in, “Your ass don’t need anymore coffee, but we are tired of you taking our candy.”

He sticks the red bow to his head, peels open the lid. In place of coffee beans, the rainbow of M&Ms. Bags and bags worth. He plucks a red one, and tosses it at Foutts. A green one at you. Then suddenly, as if to shower the lot of you all with an affectionate assortment of candy-coating, the Captain with the strange accent, plunges his entire hand into the bottom of the can.

Recall our *mise-en-scene* from earlier. The camera of your mind found: a pickle green poker table, a small grey Sony, a mini jar of German cornichons, a pack of Marlboro Reds, a gold box of Teddy Grahams, needle-nose pliers, a near empty jar of nutella, three screwdrivers, a jug of yellowing water, a packet of Simpsons playing cards, and an unopened can of Folgers, topped with a red bow, the red of a candy apple. Speed of the frame-rate on the can of Folgers with the red bow, so that you may play it slowly in your mind, and hold on to its color. The color red in the flicks is a foreboding color, one

that signals danger ahead. As you are picturing the table now, the only thing in focus in the red can of Folgers.

The CO, the Captain, the one who grins like a shitty uncle, or a smart-assed barista, or your favorite bar keep at the spot in the Produce District that opens at 6:00am, or the ex-football linebacker with a tree-trunk chin who generously watched out for you in your freshman year when the predators thirsted over your girlfriend, or your favorite boss at the Asian fusion lounge, or the Bull-Terrier that was certainly a human two lifetimes ago—that guy now has a scoop for a hand.

He is reaching into the red Folgers tin. The one with the M&Ms. The rainbow assortment of candy-coated chocolate inches thick for two knuckles. Martinez is going to explode. But that next joint, the one ending at the fingertips, plunges to the bottom of the red can of Folgers. There. There, where his hand—your CO's—plunges to the bottom, scoops at a nice whole log of brown clumped clay. The kind of clay that confuses the system of synapses when the fingers expect more candy-coated chocolate. The kind of clay, that is actually from three pouches of field rations, your MREs.

A fetching coil of shit, made of dehydrated scrambled eggs, chili, and powdered ketchup. It mashing there between his fingernails with small boulders of candy running to bottom of the Folgers tin as it replaces the space his hand has displaced by smashing the turd.

You realize later that the CO had reached into the before and the after. To watch a man's eyes fire when a man glows from glory to gastro-intestinal.

It was instinctual that all of you ran away immediately, tears streaming down your faces. A true army story.

When you are showing the movie of your words later in Frankfurt, the mise-en-scene is still the same. A handful of your shit and M&Ms. A face lit by a lantern, and atop a head, a shiny red bow, and there in the sand, a tipped over Folgers coffee tin, red, just like you're used to.

## UNTITLED

### 1. MRE

Powdered ketchup + water

Red No. 5 syrupy

for dehydrated hot dogs

*Look! He loves them*

### 2. Vlad Dracula's Grave

*Your father loves wurst + whole grain*

In Frankfurt/ Off Base, now

But the Schnitzel!

And

*Your father bought a second BMW + autobahn*

3. The Young GI

Tosses infant from high-rise barracks + balcony

In Stuttgart/ Hours screaming, then

Bounced in the snow

4. Kuwait Crossing

Crunchy black skeletons + convoy

Air campaign first

Custodians inventory them scorched black mannequins

“If crawling for death, help them out.”

Pistol, for this

Address final roll of toilet paper, and the sand that doesn't sing

Under another

Black night's monstrous veranda

5. Bart Simpson Doll

Send home + Nintendo

## 40. Flag

Rectangular banner + white gloved hands

Sweeping snapped per/ regulation prescribed in manual

Now, a triangle of stars

Half-step march to mother (if alive),

Then widow (if present),

Place in hands/ salute

## 51. Primetime

Blonde + tears, pencil-skirt

Tells the camera confessional:

I mean

I really thought we hit it off

I mean

I literally had the best time

Like

I can't believe (tears)

I've been eliminated so soon

## He is Still Waiting

Now:

A shining plate of drugs right there on the nightstand, and the question was: should he sneak a line for himself or wait until she came back from the bathroom? It was her girlish apartment. Her hook up, her drugs. Her ripe prize of a body.

So, not one to subvert the stayed dance of norms, he thought, that the correct thing to do, would be to wait.

Before:

A shining new guy at the restaurant where they worked. She had flung down upon him like a do-gooder running for student body president. I'm Tiffany, she'd beamed at the espresso station. Her Cheshire smile. His juvenile goatee that wouldn't connect on one side. Joseph, the slicker, seasoned scoundrel of a bartender passed behind her, mouthing something resembling *She's a fox* or *She definitely fucks*. He'd opted to read the latter.

Within a week, she'd insisted they go for drinks, just the two of them. She knew of a pool-hall. Joseph said, "Dude, she fucks."

Pool seemed perfect. The necessary innuendo laden in billiards. The pedestrian tango of brushing past your opponent's ass on the way to canvas that next shot. Come, come, to my corner pocket. Freshly manicured hands wrapped around tapered wood. Balls exploding in all directions. Tits on the far side of the table, cleavage bisected by the corner pocket.

"We can hang out, and see where it all goes," she had said. He had opted to only hear the latter.

An errand before pool. She knew a guy. Drugs. He drove, she navigated.

In the car he sat thumbing the steering wheel while double-parked in some happening neighborhood, and contemplated whether or not the hazards were more inviting to the eyes of passers-by than their worth in safety. West Hollywood felt like all reality shows had ended at once, converging on a stretch of glittery apartment complexes. Rows after rows of Volkswagen Jettas and no citizens that had skipped leg day. And his date was the one that knew one of these citizens, and swore by this particular citizen's drugs.

"His drugs will break your dick off," she flashed a Cheshire smile before slamming the car door and racing to the foyer of the adjacent apartment.

His eyes dipped through the night landing softly on the back-pockets of her jeans, as she hustled away. That ass he thought, could power a school for orphans. It had its

own chorus of celebrities singing a song to donate to its cause. All of them stacked in a studio, with songbooks in their hands, cameras rolling, trading verses on the Callipygian might of that booty, at the tops of their lungs. All of which made him tremble, that on this night, with a date gone well, he might get his chance at a verse.

He clicked off the hazards. After all, it should've been just a moment. But it wasn't. Up there at the building's foyer, behind the palms and shiny rocks of the retail landscaping, his date had not yet returned. It had been three songs on the radio, and a set of commercials. So it, goes, he thought. You have to make nice when you pop into someone's apartment on a Friday night to buy drugs. What if there's a wife inside just pulling the popcorn from the microwave? Or a docile crew of moderately square coworkers over for a fantasy-league draft? The knowlittles and knownots. Discretion is advisable. You're there to, er—get your, um, pink jacket! Or hard drive. Sure everyone knows what's going on, but they don't have *know* know.

Back on the street, a young man in denim cutoffs and runny mascara somewhere between the age of 19-43, swept by the car sobbing, and screaming about 'Goddamnit, Ricardo,' into a glowing phone. West Hollywood, it appeared, had lived up to his name as a chauffeur for the flamboyant. Sequined chiseled manfaces. There would be a couple strolling by arm in arm with pecks and biceps permanently in the flex position, as if on their way to the world's only black-tie banquet for work-out clothes. West Hollywood. Gays dudes, he would learn later, always have the best drugs. (This nullified the scenario

by which there might be a wife inside the dealer's house). Not the neighborhood for wives, or coworkers, he thought. A song about opening wide and saying 'ah' for your birthday played on the radio. He clicked off the hazards.

Where the fuck was his date?

She had left a silhouette of perfume there in the passenger seat—vanilla and strawberry—which had reminded him to check his breath. Administering an autopatdown for gum, he came upon its smelly counterpart: a pack of Parliaments.

His body had known that he didn't smoke, except for those few couple times: enduring the specters of adulthood. Fired by that asshole. Cheated on by that bitch. Fridays.

Smoking on the whole pulled his stomach to queasy. Just not enough to keep a pack away from arm's reach. The dictates of nerves.

And in the present, he was still double-parked, thumbing the steering wheel. It was possible that she could detest cigarettes. Joseph might have warned, "She's not into smokers. But she fucks, bro."

Smoke could get sticky on his fingers like date-repellent. He worried about losing his opportunity to plunder her denim. Cigarette stink would be the moat to his siege,

stifling his conquest of the ripe prize of her body, were she at all put off. The stress of ruminating on it all, it had seemed, would be perfect cause to light one.

Just after his tenth birthday he had asked his dad about smoking. Dad was crouched in a catcher's position out on the balcony, drawing slowly from a menthol.

"Why do you smoke Dad?"

"You'll understand when you're older. It's about stress."

The video in his mind, perfect Technicolor, complete with solar flares swimming across his dad's brow, the edges of the frame, marginally opaque. Dad there exhaling toxic fumes like a betrayer, as school would have it. Smoking, bourn down from the bosom of Satan, cast onto the degenerate classes with whom he did not associate Dad. If non-smokers were upstanding citizens, then smokers were serial rapists.

He'd leave the understanding for when he was older and on the way to a billiards hall, on the way to pulling panties from some ripe prize of a body. Some stressful time.

It had been three more bad pop-songs, a call-in request, and another set of commercials. He was still double-parked. A shining perfume place-holder of his date had served as no substitute for the real thing. Where the fuck was she? He was not going to be able to fuck the perfume.

An unopened pack of Parliaments burning a hole in his pocket like his dad had always said about his allowance. That pack, antidote for nerves, stalking his lips like some Mephistophelian dealmaker, coming alive right then, bearing its crooked nighttime smile, crying out, *suck me boy, suck this white tip!* It might have unwrapped itself then, pulling a tether to a lighter somewhere nearby, like it would in a few years when he'd sit on the porch of some duplex, puffing and puffing on the eve of his dad's funeral, looking up at the useless nighttime clouds, the same ones that would sneak back when the norms of *I love you* once in the morning and then in the evening wouldn't supplant for his absence at home. Or at a dinner party with the woman who would violently blast her way as the main topic of therapy sessions for what will seem like years.

No longer shiny ripe bodies. Just cold and porous pretend smiles. And all the cigarettes he could want. Joseph the scoundrel, still behind the bar will fill a bourbon and say, "No shit! How you been, man?" He's been mostly absent from work, floating to the brink of niceties and norms with HR until his boss calls him in on a Friday.

"We've had to make some decisions."

He opts to walk the twenty blocks home. Passes a man between the ages of 19 and 43, screaming at a bus bench with a graffitied picture of a realtor. At home, he boils and egg which he eats standing up with salt and hot sauce. Who does he know that owns a gun?

Now:

A shining manicure with a Cheshire smile rapping there on the passenger-side window, fluttering a small package like a kid with that golden Wonka ticket, breast and ass and perfume with a Wonka ticket. And the question was: what was he waiting for?

## May I Have Some More?

He thought that surely they would invent more words. More ways to say what he meant with precision. Certainly there had to be a better way to describe a pair of failed children like his.

There are more. More.

More of what was left to get absolutely correct when standing over the sink, he would think. He would think, this is how I will name them, this is what I will attribute to myself. There will certainly be more ways to tell how he failed them, and his arms flail as he sits in traffic as his coffee loses heat.

His childhood quandary: why aren't new biblical miracles happening in his day? Well, he reasons, those things simply don't happen anymore. Just like how there's no more room for more words.

More for description so the doctor's nod would be sincere understanding, not a supposition. I have described it perfectly. Make me more better.

There will be more ways to say how the gadgets light the room up when he's sad. Sadness is not it entirely—He has overeaten because fuck it, that's why.

More popcorn words for the work world. A new word finally has an opportunity to be used in a public setting at a luncheon at the main office. The meeting is a *learnch*—

'lunch' and 'learn' combined. It used to be a *teach-in*. He will be professing more of the same from his presentation from the previous learnch, just rearranging the order.

He will not be more desirable any time sooner, or those many times later, and the bartender by the antique register will never find him more attractive. He does not need more words for this.

There are more Tuesdays before payroll goes out, and it's whatever's in the cabinets for dinner.

More instances of less speaking as utensils clank on plates. More passing with intention to not bump hips, or rub arm hairs. More hours in the thick dark where sleep won't visit.

There will be less talking, but surely, surely there will be more words, at least—more, many more words.

## **Panoptic Paradise Complete with Bombing**

This is what it's like to buy cocaine off the street in Nassau: charitably easy.

The quality: Scorsese movie, fuzzy Studio 54-clips, with high-waisted men's jeans, reflective platter with conical snowy mountain under those disco balls, sweaty boogie below big hair, and atop platforms, all that powder, a Mick Jagger hotel room, the viper room's back lounge when River Phoenix still had a heart-beat, any 13 yachts in St. Tropez, that redhead's after-hours party on Mulholland.

The quality: A searing scourge of joy. White crumbs numb euphoria.

This is Monday, April 13, 2013, down the front steps of the Nassau Hilton, out across the roundabout about with Vishan, one of the husbands of the bridesmaids, and easily the most natural ally on account of his shared rap and rap things, waxing philosophical, sports, and a good party. It is the late afternoon. The lens of the atmosphere doesn't much clamp down on the heat of the island. On the other side of the roundabout, a Shell station where the white tourists who've opted to rent cars are filling up in boxy sedans.

Alongside them, the dwarfed economy cars of the locals: Tercels, and Geos of the 90s.

The compact cars of the third world, white and champagne in color. The locals, with their

windows rolled down, vehicles lacking air-conditioning. They are in maid's uniforms, gardener coveralls, Starbucks aprons.

Then there is this car. A man in a long-bodied Mercedes Sedan adorned with aftermarket rims and tires. His car shines first in the sun, and is still shining as he pulls into the awning of the Shell Station. The man, bald, dark-skinned, well-filled out, with the calm of a vacationer who'd just left a massage. Vishan knows this is no vacationer, however, but a local.

This is Monday, April 13, 2013, where earlier that morning a series of bombs tore through crowds of athletes and spectators in Boston, killing three, and wounding 264. We had learned of it first on our treadmills in the hotel's gym, then later over eleven-dollar mimosas as the coverage poured over the screens at the bar. Outside, fortunate kids splashed in the pool, as their parents sought to tire them out early. The mahogany women, with big smiles passed out towels to the hotel guests and said nasty things as those guests walked away. The coverage on those screens glowed with banners of breaking news, and the score-tickers on the sports channels scrolled of the attack, as its scale turned their sportscasters to somber anchors, whose wrinkled foreheads demonstrated the mournful tone their producers had deemed necessary for all ensuing broadcasts.

This is Monday, April 13, 2013, where in four days time, one of Cora's best friends is tying the knot on a ceremony just down the beach from from our balcony. Where afterward we still have another two days in the Bahamas to recover from our sunning, and libations, before heading back to our offices where we will pretend to work for half of our days.

This is Monday, April 13, 2013, where after Mimosas, Cora and I are going to venture into downtown Nassau, just as a couple, to visit their Capitol buildings, and play tourist in an adventure tailored to our tastes as a pair. Our gifts bought, for one another. Hand-holding, joking, spontaneity, cruel people-watching as we lambast French tourists with pot bellies and bad sandals for men. I will re-apply sunscreen to her freckled arms and neck. We will load up on cigarettes and trinkets for our mothers.

This is Monday April 13, 2013 where after Mimosas, but before going into town, Cora is in sunglasses in the lobby, marching toward me, her jaw askew as if she just ran over a cat, and says to me, "I've just got an email from Kenny's girlfriend. What's inside of it is not pretty. Are there things that we need to have a talk about? What have you got to tell me?"

This is Monday April 13, 2013 where after the bombings and mimosas, Cora and I catch a shuttle into downtown Nassau, where outside of a cigar shop, I sit her down on a bench and tell her that this message, the damning content of the email is true. I fess up to classified document. Fat French tourists walk by in bad sandals with sunburned necks. Cora is shaking, and is having trouble with the cellophane on the cigarettes. I tell her, that when we were first together, I did do the things the email says I've done. I did them multiple times.

I say what was true for me, that I was in a different place in those days. She is shaking. Her teeth are grinding so hard that her molars are going to splinter. I walk into the cigar shop and buy many bottles of rum. It smells of ash in the air, fire you can taste. Nassau burns its trash on the edge of town.

This is Monday, April 13, 2013 where after the bombings and mimosas and the email and the confession and the taxi back to the hotel, I'm alone. I walk in the hot orange sun to the first American establishment I can find. I eat a few bites of Burger King, tiring of the ketchup; it's made with cane sugar and not suitable for my pallet. My stomach is a ball and food is not suitable.

This is Monday, April 13, 2013 where after the walk back to the hotel, all the wedding party has heard of our morning. Vishan, the husband of one of the bridesmaids finds me and we walk to the Shell station, where he spots a dark man in a Mercedes. Vishan, looks at me with grin of a coy devil, and says “This is our man.” The man beckons us into the backseat. He asks through his Bahamian patois, what we’re looking for. Vishan, confidently says, “some white.” We are driven from the tourist area—with its A-frame signs, women in maids’ uniforms walking with parasols, the varicose veined Europeans and their fanny packs—to a part of town without hotels, but family dwellings made of thatched tin. There are street dogs catching light in their eyes as the sun descends from its perch in the sky. The dark man leaves us in the car for no less than a minute, before returning with a small bag he tosses in the backseat. He says, “Go ahead, taste it if you want.”

We are driving back to the Hilton. The dark man is listening to a radio broadcast of the American basketball playoffs. We talk sports and then we pay him and get out back at the Shell.

This is Monday evening, April 13, 2013 at a Shell gas station opposite a roundabout outside of the Hilton in Nassau, Bahamas. Vishan says to me, "Well, we're going to have to make something good of this week. At least something will have to be okay."

## Once Upon a Time, a Boy

One evening as I sat on the edge of the bed folding laundry, I happened upon a documentary about a boy who'd cracked his head open in a half-pipe. He was a budding snowboarding phenom, rivaling the very best athletes in the arena, even winning the sponsorship of Nike, who'd erected for him and his buddies, his very own "big-trick" practice space.

Just weeks before the winter games, the kid shatters his skull attempting a new trick during a training run.

The crash, filmed by a buddy, records the audible devastation. Voices behind the camera howl as the athlete torpedos face-first down the slope, the impact sounding like a stack of porcelain dropped from a roof. Most of that sound—the boy's face meeting the snow, is followed by his scorpioned body scraping the curve of the half-pipe.

Around his hospital bed is the normal scene of parents and siblings and a devoted girlfriend, not over twenty-five years. And then he's in a chair, being pushed down a bright hallway by an adoring fan, his younger brother—a boy with Downs syndrome—so ecstatic to be his hero's helper. Their parents look on with a team of neurosurgeons. The girlfriend wears a brave face, and a pullover and Uggs.

And then that young man from the crash is at home in a wheelchair, eating cake at a welcome party. There are balloons. His buddies serenade the living room with the sounds of male energy and videogames. But, the boy's speech is slurred like a drunk's in a bus station. His once handsome and spirited grin is traded in for an unsure snarl, like a confused baby. His mouth pulled open, ropes of saliva hanging falling from his teeth to his lips. He no longer looks like 19, but 19 months. He is simultaneously marked by joy, and confusion.

The doctors assure his mother that he'll never be the person he was before his face exploded in the snow. It's a TBI. They call his injury a *TBI*. It's when the brain itself is injured, like a groin is injured, or a jaw, or a spinal cord has anterior damage. Its symptoms, the doctors say, are varied and long-term. The injury—this boy's—is tied to memory, to balance, to cognitive processing. Tied to his very personality. His ability to rationalize the very things a mother has to show you.

The doctors inhale, pause, translating in their minds what might be most comprehensible explanation to lay-folk. To a wanting family. They collect themselves to the left and right of the plastic tomography scans.

So the brain, itself, they explain, has been physically injured. With this type of injury, what you take as his progress can be misleading.

It is the auspices of normalcy.

Some time after this young man has blown out candles and smiled for the pictures, he calls his mom a bitch at the dinner table, as she tries to help him with his food.

You're a dumb bitch, he slurs.

The dad frowns. The older brother recoils, and admonishes, politely. The youngest brother (and biggest fan) flings his arms around the kid.

I love you. I'm so happy you're home, the youngest beams.

His girlfriend, tucks in her fuzzy pink pullover, and pulls close with an empathetic half-smile.

Then the young man's hair has grown back, covering the hook scar from where the surgeons drilled into his skull and stapled it back together. His friends crowd on the L-shaped couches and play videogames in their socks, and talk shop. The girlfriend, tucks lovingly on a loveseat nearly out of frame, reading a magazine.

When the shriveled boy has had some seasons of physical therapy, he is walking with cuffed crutches. He accompanies his buddies out to the snowpark, with the gravely slush of boards over the packed white, the runs, the lifts, the lips, the jumps, the vert

pipes. These are the same buddies who were there as the kid trained for the Winter Games, the ones who held the camera for the crash.

Through slurred speech, he cheers his friends as they careen down the slick hills. His smile swings wide as he watches with admiration. His face shows an unmistakable recognition. Before him is all of the honey in all of the hives, in all of the forests with all of the trails, in all of the pools filled with all of the money and toys, in all of the glowing freedom that anyone could ask for. His Valhalla, where he'd touched thrills, and was king upon the powdery mountain.

But he cannot strap in, again.

While the doctors are amazed that the young man has got up to walk, has vision, and speech, they know the most troubling detail of his injury. That is, that they don't know. They don't know enough about TBIs to help treat the brain back to normalcy. In fact, it's curious to them, this entire team of highly specialized neurosurgeons and cognitive psychologists, that he's even made as much progress as he has. They don't know exactly why some aspects of the young man that were there before have returned, and why others haven't. They don't know the best way to say it to his girlfriend. His parents. His jovial and special younger brother.

But what they do know is much worse. Between their white coats, and desks, and conferences rooms they know that if the boy is to ever hit his head again in any minimally violent capacity, that he will likely die.

They know that him strapping in a snowboard to join his buddies out on the mountain, in that Valhalla, is a death sentence. They know that his blurts at the dinner table will continue, that his tantrums will flair sporadically, and increase in number. They know that his ability to process the social norms of all of the interactions that a young man must encounter, have been wiped. That he, himself will perceive nothing wrong about his ability to navigate this post-crash world, but everyone else will. He is an interpretation ghost. His buffer system transmitting the input and output has been scrambled. They know that it won't seem strange to him when he makes a racially inflammatory joke as his buddies pound away on videogames in the den of his parents' house, and the room falls deathly silent. Or that his rude observations about his girlfriend's dress won't be snatched by a filter on the way out, but will careen past his lips, grabbing her soul in the process. That he will tell his mom to fuck off in front of his physical therapist, and that he will smile as if he's just eaten a tasty orange, and will see nothing wrong with it all.

My Woman is now sitting on the edge of the bed, where I'd been. Now, I'm on the floor. Our eyes fixed on the screen. Our puffy, swollen eyes watch as the young man

believes he's still got it, out in the clean air. He is powered by his essence, claiming dominion over the mountain.

We watch as he defies his mother's wishes, and competes in a downhill qualifier. A friend tells the camera, it's like he doesn't know he's not the same.

The young man catches an edge immediately. He crashes into the plastic orange guide netting.

Now, My Woman is crying for the boy, and grabs the puppy from the floor, clutching him close, like a human infant. The boy's little brother finds out he's tried to snowboard again. He is betrayed. He is devastated.

I am matching socks quietly.

Dad—my dad—wound those same roads, through the Firs of the foothills, past the towering Sequoias, until finally being apprehended by the FBI. I was thirteen. He had been reported missing for a week, but really, had decided to kidnap my sister—my stepmother's daughter—and sped up the California coast. He was not missing at all. He was found by rage. Dad had crossed state-lines with a child. Things had gotten federal.

I sat at the kitchen table with my Aunt and Grandma, the both of them in tears. Grandma put down the phone, her exhale so elongated, so heavy, the table sunk down

into the floor. My Aunt reached over to touch my hand. Grandma pressed fingers into her eyes.

They'd apprehended him.

There are so many things I have to tell you about your Dad, Grandma sniffled. The words hit my face like a stack of porcelain dropping from a roof. Then Grandma clambered from the table into the next room to weep. My Aunt turned to me, clutching my hand even harder.

It's just not right, she spouted. It's all just not right. She squeezed my fingers. Nothing has been right since your dad was sixteen. *He* hasn't been right, she explained.

Her lips trembled as she spoke. She was fettered and incredulous. I was stinging.

It's all not been right since that accident! I know, she went on.

I could hear Grandma heaving in the next room.

My Aunt pulled my hand close to her chest and locked onto my eyes. Then she started with the tale: We don't talk about this much, but I know it! I've known it this whole time. When your dad was sixteen, he took your Grandma's car joyriding in the middle of the night and flipped it. It was a T-top and he wasn't wearing a seatbelt. The car skid for two blocks before sliding into a light pole. That whole time, your dad was sliding through that broken glass and asphalt on his head. I got there first, and when I did,

he was sitting on the side of the curb with the paramedics. The car was done. Your dad looked dazed but they said he was fine, and he came home that night. What would I have known? We were all so relieved. So, so relieved. But when we took him home, I knew he wasn't fine. No one likes to talk about it now, and no one talked about it then. But I know. I know. I *know* I know. That's my brother, and no one wants to say it, but he's never been the same since.

In a few weeks, I'm towering over the the bed spitting venom at My Woman.

You fucking bitch, get out, I say. You fucking bitch. You fucking bitch. Get out of my house.

The puppy clammers to her lap, baring its teeth, separating the threat from its mother.

Days later, the elderly neighbors watch My Woman struggle to negotiate the last of the boxes into her car. The old vet in the wheelchair, sticks out his dirty fingers a final time as a gesture to the puppy. He says, you be safe now killer, we'll all miss you around here.

My woman waves to the old man, and helps the puppy into the car. She does not look up at me.

In the documentary, the young man's girlfriend eventually leaves.

My Woman, now no longer My Woman, wound her way up the coast, through to  
Firs of the foothills, past the towering Sequoias, and kept winding the roads until the trees  
are called something else.

## **powder pink**

Once I cheated on a woman. Many, many times. She found out while we were on vacation in the Bahamas. We were there for a wedding. A woman contacted her on the internet. It was the most mortifying experience of my life. There was a terrorist bombing that morning back in the United States. All of the women at the resort looked at me like a predator. My woman only ate cigarettes the entire trip. Later, she moved away with our dog. I lay in my apartment in the dark eating Chinese.

Now, I have not cheated on this next woman. Once we stood in the kitchen and I thought about how she was the most beautiful woman I would ever kiss. Tonight I can hear the fan blow her dreams through the dark in the next room. When I go to the bathroom I pick up a pair of glasses off the sink. I think they are mine. Once in the light, I can see that they are powder pink. I am extinguished. Soon, I'm moving away and the new woman will stay with the new dog. They don't have Chinese where I'm going.

## Stick Figures

I put down my green tea to attend to my vibrating phone. It was Kai. He had just gotten off the phone with his dad, which was a bigger deal than just a normal phone call from a normal dad. Kai's dad had recently spilled out of jail into a world that no longer wanted him.

In the back and forth of texting with me, Kai relayed an icy vulnerability: he had just been weeping on his knees in his bedroom. The conversation had scooped him out, leaving his innards arranged in a neat row like those overhead shots for photographs of trendy food, or artisanal workshop objects. The arrangement is called 'knolling'. His heart and lungs and larynx on a flat plane of treated wood.

But what had reduced Kai to tears wasn't the back and forth of the conversation with his dad, but a letter that had prompted the need for the phone call. He'd gotten an envelope in the mail which contained an illustration. It was a drawing from his dad. The drawing, plain enough, featured a stick-figure running toward a finish line, cheered on by onlookers. Kai made sure to text me a photo.

The racing stick-figure was wearing a shirt that said 'Kai.' The figure cheering in the stands had a shirt that said 'Dad.'

A sweet show of support, the kind of drawing you might get when you're rising from the ashes of a lumbering sickness—let's say mono—in the hospital during your sophomore year of high school. The drawing, with its pedestrian linework may have been done by your seven-year-old sister who had most recently been excited about the lost of her bicuspid. Your nurse—the nicer of your two attendants—tacs it up on the wall by your bed, just above the Mylar balloons. The drawing is a charming gesture, but when you are recovered, and the Mylar balloons have lost their last blows of helium, it might go right in the trash with them, and assorted generic cards. You are ready to be done with the hospital's peach walls and your time with mono.

But the circumstances of the Kai's drawing and its features are really what pulled the steam from my hot green tea. Kai is not in the hospital recovering from mono, nor is he a sophomore in quaint high school in a good neighborhood. Kai is twice the age of high school student. He is finishing an advanced degree, buried in an isolated coastal peninsula, in a sparsely populated country. Where Kai is for school, before the snow crushes the earth and the clouds eat the sun for months at a time, it rains nearly every day. Kai is frequently alone and his shoes get wet when he walks to campus from the house he rents.

Kai's dad was convicted of something horrible. But it worked out that he was only jailed for a short time.

This too, it not remarkable for this story. The story is currently about this drawing.

What pulled the steam from my green tea was not Kai's concession that he'd just been crying like a baby, or the circumstances hovering around the drawing—the isolation in the sparse country, the awkward implications of Kai having a casual chat with his dad who has just gotten out of prison—but the actual *drawing itself*. The skin and teeth of the illustration.

It was stick figures like the kind scribbled by a kid who's checked out in fifth period, and would prefer to doodle while sitting in the back of pre-algebra. Stick figures: reserved for the visual anecdote on the airport cocktail napkin between the traveling attorney and woman at the bar, in the private member's only frequent flier club. Stick figures: strung up for a game of hangman, when no one could spell 'n i g h t m a r e.' It doesn't hold space as high art—the stick figurine: the basic circles and lines and crude pencil strokes.

But still, I abandoned my cup of tea to spend time with it through my phone's screen.

The drawing crushes. Here's the setup:

There are two important subjects. Kai's dad and Kai. The setting is a track with a finish line and a crowd of unenthused onlookers seated in bleachers, depicted by long

horizontal lines running across the page. Everything else is blank space, except emotionless stick figures taking up space in the bleachers like placeholders.

The stick figure running in the foreground has a shirt that says 'Kai.' The cheering figure in the background is depicted with a shirt that says 'Dad.' In the distance is a banner between two sticks that says 'finish.'

Kai's shirt is a box with sleeves. His head is tilted forward, long limbs in a position to indicate motion. His face, unlike the common stick figure's circle, is a crafted side profile with a pointy nose, like a human's. A real boy.

The dad figure has line-hands raised. His mouth open like a capital 'D' on its side, like an orange wedge, like a half moon, like the equal split of the pie chart, like a shield cut in half by the swing of a berserk foe, like a mouth gaping open allowing the sound of cheers to escape. Cheers loud enough to crash down from the bleachers onto the track, to cheer on Kai, depicted there, almost at the finish line.

But even this is hardly the part that steals the steam from my green tea.

Really, the hoarders of my attention, those who caused me to altogether discard my tea, were those placeholder stick figures on the bleachers. The ones that are not 'Kai,' nor 'Dad'—the drawing's true subjects. Instead, it was the plain others. Their generic otherness arresting my gaze. Filler on the generic bleachers.

Here's the setup:

The faces of those unenthused onlookers stare straight on, toward me, the viewer, perhaps toward the track, but their expression is clear: they are unenthused. Their mouths are not crested up in scoops of smiles, sideways half-moons. They don't have expressive eyebrows, angled toward the sky. They are not in suspense, fear, grief, anticipation, bemusement, anger, excitement, dread, exuberance, mild delectation, or sadness. Their mouths are represented by short, terse horizontal lines, crested by two dots for eyes. It is the blank stare into the nothing. Not out to the running figure, Kai, nor the finish line. But straight toward the beholder, the me, as a I stared down at my device. The unenthused onlookers, hardly looking at the event before them. Arranged like apathetic travelers at the gate waiting to board their flight to somewhere windier. Arranged like a bucket of fake ferns in the office of a wholesale auto supply shop. Like factory workers in coveralls spilling off trucks during the rise of Mao, or detached Oompa Loompas in a long line at Human Resources waiting to collect their Christmas bonuses of chocolate (again). Their sated faces, swept by nothing, but each one's green 'do coiled to perfection.

This was the detail of the unenthused onlookers sitting there in the bleachers. At least thirty of them. Their straight graphite mouths slashed out with care by their illustrator—Kai's dad, showing what he knows about the world in a graphic representation. The drawing saying, *if you feel like no one cares about you, I do.*

And so Kai was at his knees and wept, and called his dad, then me, and my tea got cold. But my tea getting cold is hardly remarkable for this story. Nor is it about the sorted discourse between a father and son reconciling the more awkward parts of their relationship due to a most unfortunate set of circumstances.

However, it is heartwarming to consider the gravity of such, though. Safe like a new pair of socks. Nothing is more warming than how your mind, right now, is mimicking the very idea of reconciliation, assigning synapses to paint a portrait of that image in fall lighting: brush strokes tumble maple leaves from a tree, and more strokes—a delicate wrist motion—send them trickling across a long residential block, where the glow from a simple halogen streetlight illuminates the foreground finding two trepid men softening, cast in shadows by a grand evening glow, then they get out of their cars, and walk toward one another, breaths unheld, arms unfolding amnesty, forgiveness in full bloom, the moment of the embrace, arranging their heads in the neck of the other, that their whiskers graze as their faces collide, birthing in the smallest instant for the two of them only, the meticulous peculiarity of being alive. It is cold. Their exhales you can see there, blow out to the aurora.

Unfortunately, you've failed them, reader. You'll have to repaint the son. The son is taller now. He is the tall one. Symptoms of time. So participate in the above exercise with the appropriate proportions in order to continue, because the damn tea is now cold.

The tea part is a lie. And maybe even, the Kai part, or part of the Kai part is a lie, some fiction tossed at you like a sex rag, but somewhere in there, you care. And you care because you could be Kai, and often feel flat like a stickman on a page so insignificant as to have 10<sup>th</sup>-graders in art-history classes rendering penises in greater detail than your thinning graphite existence. We've all had those days.

This story is now about prison drawings.

For your consideration, imagine a setup that includes a White-American male, old enough to have summited several stints in the military. Grew up in poor in a working-class neighborhood, and dressed up comfortably, and most authentically in Black-American culture. He clung to rap and funk. Could breakdance good, better, best, in the neighborhood. Wore a perm for curls. Wore an aptitude for savagery. Wore an attitude for fighting, (lest one actually need to test the whiteboy).

He fathers a child with a gorgeous Black cheerleader, sweeping her up into military housing on the closest naval base. And when the violence of being and unbeing rudely cuts the line of ever-after, the setup shifts to three human buoys bobbing just above the surface, blowing apart from one another. Two of the buoys stay tethered as they drift, before one less fortunate buoy is snagged into the estuary, where the stink sews itself on your clothes, weighing down your hair, passing a film over your arms and wrists,

fingers. It is disgusting. If you want to know what it tastes like, you'll never be able to smile in an airport again.

You are home now, whizzing toward the bathroom to rinse this ilk off of your skin, but as you race to the end of the hall, you catch sight of the stacks of dishes pooling at the sink like the chores were having a hiring fair (but it got rained out), so the dishes wait impatiently. You give them a snide glance. Time to pee and right out of these fucking shoes. Time for this bra to go, unfurl, unfurl them and feel a small freedom. But betrayed! A betrayal at the vertebrae. Your fingers frantic at your back, but this bra is new and the clasp links in the front. You've forgotten. And you're still so fucking slimy, blanketed by a film of commissary after-shave, concrete hallways, and death corridors running long and dark, all smelling of piss and all that solitude. Chamber after chamber of solitude, and once (recently, in fact) you awoke from a nightmare in which you couldn't produce your credentials when the visit was over. Visitor badge, gone. State identification complete with photo in which you dare not smile, because what you do for work largely involves developing relationships with condemned inmates, and smiling before that camera, for that credential, for your purposes for needing it, is perhaps cruel. No Smile. Your materials were with you: briefcase, accordion folder, notes, sworn declaration and other papers. But as you signaled to the guard that your interview duration had expired, he cracked a wicked smile, turned his head up and howled. With his rubbery hands on his hefty belt, he pulled the oxygen from the room and sucked it into

his belly, and laughed and laughed. And as the apparent gloom of your circumstance set in, you realized that what separated you from freedom was a simple plastic lanyard.

Luckily, it was just a dream. It's time for morning tea. The window slats have been purposely left open. The sun crawls over your bed supplanting the need for an alarm. The radio announces a fatal accident, traffic is in knots. You skip yoga, because it's imperative that you get on the road as soon as possible. The drive to the prison is over an hour. Monday morning traffic offers its gratitude crudely. To the left and the right, and all sides of you are the faces of torpor, ennui, and the stains of tedium. There is camaraderie in your simultaneous suffering; there with the strands of cars and their owners. You're all in it together, though separated by carriage, it is a wicked hue of solidarity. Damned is she who, with those windows rolled up is shaking her head back and forth, singing heartily, from the bottom of her diaphragm, to the latest pop hit on the radio. Damn her. Damn her. Damn her until the coffee spills onto her phone, rendering her unable to text her boyfriend to inform him that her husband has just left town. You hope she crashes.

Today you're to meet with Joaquim Earl Cyrus, a man condemned to die for shooting wildly into a store, killing a little boy on an errand to buy tortillas. Joaquim was a roiling seventeen-year-old then. Today, he is a placid forty-nine. He has also done other horrible things, but the boy is what seats him on death row. It's possible that he will not

make it to fifty. His face is a neutered brown. His eyes are soft black pebbles, and lips sit full and pink below a thin mustache, like a Spanish pirate.

You're not admitting it, but your powder-periwinkle nails are in his honor. Hands and toes (though he won't see the toes). They match his state-issue dress. And those luscious strokes of mascara in the mirror, for him too. Lipstick—beside being a dead giveaway—is just an obvious stitch too many. You opt for a matte gloss. His case is helpless for appeals. The state has retreated from sob stories since the new Governor took office. But you've done the diligence of flying to speak with witnesses and secure statements from his maternal aunt, Lucinda, with lips full and pink like his, but everything you've recorded, transcribed, and schlepped off to be filed for consideration will dolefully go unheard. The state will not soften.

Descending the stairs seems effortless as you are more excited than you would admit, even to your cup of tea. Suitcase X-rayed. Your lanyard flashes to Ron, flashes to Sharon, flashes to the new guy, Santos. Santos gives the clear. A guard somewhere you cannot see presses a button initiating a loud buzz and the clank of the locking system rights itself, unlocked.

Death row is a particular section of the prison that scrapes you with calm. Once you've passed the first long cement hallway, you're upon the death corridor, and the eyes fly upon you. The sound is different in there, like being underwater and hearing someone

shout 'shark' from the beach. Time is languid and slippery, which does not apply to your heart at all, which is planning on beating its way out of your chest.

Remember don't twiddle your fingers.

Remember to be a good listener.

And you recall the smell of commissary after-shave as a guard walks Joaquim into the meeting room, in his powder-periwinkle state-issue dress. Today you are going to inform him that his hope has been lost to the dark. That it is the last time you'll be meeting with him in that legal capacity, as the state plans to deny any appeals. That in accordance with these things, you'll no longer correspond with him on yellow legal paper, where his Bic pen slashes look so meticulously crafted, it is as if he shrinks himself to the size of ant in order to dance the strokes onto the page, his letters always all upper-case, and some randomly with serifs, the lines packed so tightly with letters, as if the notes must parallel the prisoners stuffed in their chambers, having let loose an insistent explosion of words on the page, no space between anything, because he's fire urgent about expressing how it is, like you're always wearing a halo, and he sees your lips in slow-motion when you speak, and sometimes just the gestures in your hands make him feel calm, that God designs things with great care and attention, the natural extension of which is protracted hope—the opiate of the undead—you radiate for him there, hovering off of your seat, the light in the room, you the birthplace of all nebulas, the

Peaceful Mother of the upstate, the benevolent Ruth of the Row and more of what you mean to the affairs of his life.

You are having a sip of tea.

You are inhaling deeply imagining the surfacing of a red phone in a room that is a designated chamber where Joaquim will be read his death warrant.

You think of how the word 'awkward' is the shortest sold term in the history of language, and is probably the less talented step-brother of the word 'tragedy.' You've been invited to sit on the other side of the glass for the execution, along with Joaquim's mother—a woman born with a sneer on her face and her arms crossed at her chest. She says nothing to anyone.

There you are, all of your senses confused. Sound shifts in brightness. Time changes pitch. You swear to God as they strap Joaquim to the chair that he can see you through the glass, even though it only goes one way. He's looking directly at you, mouthing the words 'how – do – I – do – this,' 'how – do – I – do – this,' with such desperation that his once full, pink lips are now thin flaps of rot. How you would kiss him if you could.

And over there on the wall is the red phone, which for certain both of you can see. Its basic plastic shape like the classic every-phone, just without the number pad. Calls go one way only, come one way only. Rectangular housing with a sturdy handset. Atop it all

a small lens, the illuminating signal that the Governor is on the phone, only if he should call. If only at this late hour, the line should sizzle, with a kindhearted man on one end, a man getting right with his God, some incumbent Governor softening on the fat of the world, there to deliver Joaquim Earl Cyrus to redemption, his eyes so desperate, and your lack of answers to 'how - do - I - do - this,' feeling if you just think it hard enough, that line will fire—the thin line between the keeper and the kept—but no.

No.

Peel your powder-periwinkle nail polish. The warden gives the signal. It's the last time anyone will ever see Joaquim Earl Cyrus.

Your insides feel like you've just ingested powdered glass. Mouth dry. Heat is swimming from your stomach to your throat and back down, oscillating like a child's game that lights up. I'll put my hand on your shoulder when you get home, but I know to remain quiet. To the kettle now. Tea can be soothing as you practice all the machinations of grief you think you're supposed to perform, but some you make up along the way: scrub, scrub, scrub because you feel dirty; lie on the carpet like a starfish; take off only one sock. Stay like this for hours. When the sun comes up, I'll make an inside joke about chimichurri and you'll say how Victorian we are. We'll be suspended there, for just a second, in the fog of our flimsy privilege.

But then, you settle back in on the letters. I see the corrections stamps on the envelopes. The yellow legal paper spilling out. The goofy smiley faces. The necessarily enjambed words. The prisoners always with so much to say. It's not just Joaquim's stack, but all of them. Soledad, San Quentin, Ely, High Desert, Pelican Bay. Removing a tea bag from your mug, you explain to me that the letters from the inmates, they're all the same. Even the little symbols and drawings. How you could throw up the whole pile like a clumsy maid, and when it fell, different letters could fall into different envelopes, and essentially the contents would be unchanged.

The stories of hope. The little vignettes of optimism, and family, and existential tranquility. The desperate dreaming. It feels so cruel to read, you tell me. These things they long for, it cuts at your fingers. You need to read them with a lead thimble.

But you pass through, like a sociologist, or a social-anthropologist, as you pluck different letters from different stacks, and motion me over to show me what you mean:

The smiley faces. They are all the same. Plucking from this pile and that pile. In correspondence to you. Soledad, San Quentin, Ely, High Desert, Pelican Bay. I'm amazed. More than circles with dots for eyes. They are like early cartoon renderings of classic American characters. The sweeping mouths and button noses, like mimes or proto Mickey Mouse, ever positive, sunny, flirty, full of rapt attention. Some wink, others having panting tongues and whiskers. The shining eyes. The devious grins. And stroke

for stroke eyelashes. The time! How much time? All of the time there implicated in the drawings, and once I see just a few more examples, I'm deflated. Overcome with grief, for the circumstance of some, and not others. If nausea was a way to die, it would be drowning, so I leave the room.

On the edge of the bed I recall seeing Dad for the first time since he'd gotten out of jail. The trailer had smelled like used fry-grease. The girls in a frenzy that I'm there; their brother. Little brown heads bob back and forth as they leap between the couches. Stepmother yells to quiet them down. The sound of their voices like cartoon characters.

In the backroom with Dad, his eyes flicker like a freshly lit cigarette as he takes me in, "Damn, boy, you look just like me, but black."

Out of a footlocker he pulls stacks of crudely drawn comics. Bic pin on yellow legal paper. The impressions of the pin strokes stealing to the other sides of the pages. He tosses me one. It's a multi-paneled comic, whose protagonist is tall black man with an afro. The lips take up a third of his face, his nose, and bulging eyes the rest. In the panels where he talks, the detail on his lips obscures what he's going to say. His face becomes all lips. His afro fully pinned, bursts out of the frame on the page. In the final panel he drops a stack of plates. Through his non-moving balloons as lips, looks toward the reader and says 'Sowwy, Boss.' His bottom lip droops down to the floor.

"Pretty good right?" Dad chuckles.

I am loading an error.

Just then, Stepmom walks in the doorway. She beams at me, and folds her brown arms in front of her chest. Her skin like milk-chocolate, a Hershey's bar, darker than my own mother even.

"Wow, you are growing up to look just like your dad," she says.

At his funeral, she is frail and in a wheelchair. Apparently, she's lost some teeth. I've not answered her calls in months, but I'm polite on the day of the service; the ritual of niceties. I'm a wax figurine of myself, with a committee of hugs for the relatives that have made their way to the Veterans' cemetery. The shift of Earth is starting to pour more light on the day as spring makes it way into the year. I refuse to remove my sunglasses. Time is wobbly.

A short man I don't know escorts me to a small room. Grandma erupts from the doorway shouting, "Stupid Nigger." Inside is Stepmother, leaking out odd whimpers from behind a pair of dark sunglasses. She sounds like a drunk trapped in a bus-station. I'm in the room as next-of-kin to sign off on something. It is an order for repatriation. Stepmom wants to be buried next to Dad. Grandma is outside burning down small countries. I can hear words like 'bitch' and 'nigger,' but it's hard to hear from under my spacesuit and fishbowl over my head. Sound is wobbly. Someone has finally wrangled Grandma, and I connect the circuitry to laugh, but there's an interruption in the line.

This is what it's like to watch two soldiers with white gloves fold an American flag: They step in a sharp cadence, their movements at precise intervals. A well rehearsed dance for death. My father's picture, in his dress greens, rank at his lapel. Metals flung from his breast, looking out onto a world of held breath.

But this.

This is not a story about any of that. Your tea is getting cold.

This is a story about prison drawings.

## The Pit

What you're waiting for is for is naught. I'm not about to tell you why because of my stomach ulcer, and you've heard what they've said about adding more tension to that pit. But, being in knots is for the nervous. Besides, we're two miles and a donkey's dick out from the sheer comfort of "nervous," motherfucker. You'll need to skip toward where the speed bumps have reflectors, just to begin at nervous. Or if you want to pretend to cower from the pit behind those sheer curtains, I have lights to blast right through those, to reveal your outline, the color of bumps on your flesh. Red like your ulcers and them panic hairs around your neck. That wind becomes the intruder in your moment. You could slam the window. And the next moment of panic, with the compound red crawling your putrid flesh, like a vine, so white, and sickly. And they used to welcome your intrusions into their dirty sheets from the sweat they poured with others. Makes me laugh—that window is slammed. No stray hairs clinging to your shirts, stuck in the folds of your passenger seat with leftover perfume. Car. Imagine a car. But first imagine courage. Squinting your sickly brain for that one, eh? Here's some wind (which you're full of): Breathing it fully is exhaustive, which is why when you connect the dots, the cats are gone. The birds too. They don't crawl. They don't reveal their wings. They're slammed up against purpose, and your hairs are now thin, which is more of that cold waiting. So your nerves, weary? That stomach folding into its own messy intruder. The pit is just below the window, where the crows wait in the cold dark. Open it too wide, and you may skip to the moon.