Eleven seconds underwater

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Eleven seconds underwater

by

Matthew William Vadnais

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Barbara Haas

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1999

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's Thesis of

Matthew William Vadnais

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signature redacted for privacy

Major Professor
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Major Program
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Graduate College
For my parents for knowing how to let go.
For Allen Blair, Joshua Vadnais, and Patrick Wilson for knowing how to hold on.
And for Mary Ann Hudson for everything else.
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Without Barbara Haas's patience, understanding, and careful eye for what I was really trying to do in this book, this would be an entirely different book. Additionally, my compatriots here in the Creative Writing department have put up with me well, offering to distract with Frisbee golf, chess, Nintendo, and always conversation, when this book was getting the best of me; I would be even crazier without: Mary Ann Hudson, Ander Monson, Joshua Borgman, Andy Segedi, and Gunnar Bennediksson. Also, instructors who have worked with my writing have done nothing but aid and abet this process: Neal Bowers, Joe Geha, and Debra Marquart.

While this is a book of fiction the Flood of 1997 was very real, and without my home cities of Grand Forks, North Dakota and Crookston, Minnesota, this wouldn't have been possible. Finally, though individual characters are completely and totally fictional, the people I have known in my home cities are all over this book. While resemblance to individual characters is accidental, without the support and occasional dysfunction given to me by Patrick, Allen, Darin, Polly, Tom, Darren, Kim, Scott D., Scott B., Marc, Jessica P., Jessica S., Shelly, Allison A., Allison T, Ken, Jen, Christel, Tyler, Darby, Kara, Craig, Nita, C.J., Chris, Dave, Paul, Carmen, Christine, Christina, Kevin, Joel, Nathan, Travis, and a score of other northerners, there would have been no story here.
PREFACE

This is a work of fiction. Though it is a single story I discovered in writing it that it could not, at least by me, be told in a single voice. Consequently, there are many sub-divisions that defy a more conventional format. The novel is still broken into chapters but because each chapter is written in the voice of a separate character, different fonts are used. Additionally, the novel was too fragmented with so many voices so it, like many contemporary novels, is broken into parts that contain chapters which are linked by time, topic, and movement. The only other major deviations from a more conventional, academic format are "PARK MEMOS" which function both to divide the parts of the novel as well as offer perspective that is not directly located within a single character or voice.
Eleven seconds underwater

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Eleven seconds underwater is an original novel that uses a series of first person narratives to weave the story of the Grand Forks flood of 1997 and, in particular, its effects upon a community forged in a river valley famous for its winters. The book uses these narratives to explore connection, loss, self, and ultimately the difficulties of writing something meaningful about one's own life and experiences.
"The park needs a legend."

"Like a map?"

"Dumbass you. Legend alla myth, not legend alla decoder ring."

"You're using, if I may interject my post-factually liberated knowledge, the word alla any way but correctly."

"Even up then, after that doozy of a last sentence."

"Even up then,"

"So what's with this legend business."

"To explain. Place needs history. Park needs history. A mythos. A name with meaning."

"Gotta name, Louis. Gatta a righteous good name. Spider Park! Latin for hot shit, I think."

"Or bullshit. An' it is a righteous good name. But not good enough without something behind it. Gotta mean something- stand for something non-arbitrary... a story or whimsy. Want that I should brake into linguistic theory now?"

"No want that you should. But this word, spider, this symbol does stand for something. Somethin' good and solid and red and white and..."

"Freekin' cold. No offense to the lovely spider we are sitting on but nothing metal, in and of itself, is a proper mythos."

"Woah! Your talking objective truth now, baby. Listen up, yo! Nothin' made of metal. What about the Chrysler building? Statue of Liberty's gotta mythos to it."

"What was Latin for hot shit? Besides, dogma isn't mythos."

"Yeah-yeah. So fine, park needs mythology, a history unearthed."

"And we get to invent it."

"Nah. Cultivate it. It's been here for a long time."

"Right."

"The park supersedes anything, is one and the same."
"Right. No such thing as separate. The myth and the park are the same. No such thing as history. The park is timeless. The past is right here."

"So it is like a map legend..."

"I suppose. We just need to sit here a while to get at it."

"Right. Park was created when Reggie, big spider, sat down to think about where to get some weed? I can still see his shadow if I squint. That sort of thing."

"Perhaps less urban."

"What's the name of our friend, the mythic spider?"

'Reggie works for me. 'ts not just my mythos."

"Right. So what am I givin' up if we name it Reggie."

"Intent. Size and degree of hirsute-ness."

"Even up, then?"

"Even up then."

"So is it Reggie?"

"I dunno, you still like Reggie?"

"Nah. Obstinate bastard, that Reggie."

"Fine."

"Wiggly wumpus! Now that's a dignified name for a spider."

"Or a pee-pee."

"Speaking of dignified names."

"Nomenclature for the people!"

"You're right. Sounds like crotch."

"Wiggly-wumpus has been vetoed,"

"And tabled,"

"And mine's been neglected for eighteen very long years,"

"Livin' in sin and sadness..."

"No good lovin'"

"No good lovin'. How about Jambone?"

"For the spider?"
“Yeah.”

“As in French for ham?”

“Nah, Ukrainian for nice cucumbers.”

“French for ham.”

“Jambone! Mighty big spider.”

“Righteous big.”

“Righteous.”

“Screw it. Name the spider later?”

“Right on. But we name it.”

“Right.”

“This Park needs a mythos.”

“We need a smoke.”

“Two of ‘em.”

“At least.”

“A Mythos takes time.”

“A Mythos takes lovin’.”

“A Mythos takes livin’.”

“A Mythos is in the livin’.”

“Right.”

“No such thing as prelude.”

“Set up and story are the same.”

“A spider sittin’ down for some shade.”

“Two bored boys to name it.”

“A mythos in the making.”

“A mythos made.”
PART I.

SHAPINGS AND TRIBUTARIES
(1982-1991)
"Space and time are inter-twangled."

It was my only brother William who said it. He pushed up his glasses, closed his crooked teeth mouth and stood awkward solid, waiting half-proud to see if it made sense. We, evidently, were the judges of such things and Jimmy Delcro's' garage was as good a den of inquiry as anywhere. It was too early for us to be a posse' or we would've been one. We were just a run of the mill group, maybe the geeks, maybe the smart kids, maybe a pack of ninjas. Most of us were there when William said it, an early dogma in a series of adolescent, boyish, nerdy dogmas. Greased up in old clothes our mothers let us wear, we were underage mechanics for the afternoon, screwing around with WD-40, our bikes, and some of Jimmy Delcro's father's tools. Our fingers were shadow, sticky and black. We had large stains down faded blue jeans and sweatshirts.

No uniforms kept the philosophy down. William, swallowed, uncomfortable holding a wrench. He repeated himself. "Space," he said, "and time," he said, "are inter-twangled." I watched Jimmy Delcro listen. He laughed, big and goofy from his short body, noise welling up from wiry places small like William's but with different eyes, more energy, reckless and kind. Different glasses. By some quirky coincidence, a nerdy miracle of connection, they had the same birthday. Jimmy Delcro was a year younger but that, he said, was open for debate. He laughed approval, so William laughed. They laughed the same course whinnies, usually together. The rest of us, that first summer or two after William and I arrived in Crookston, just watched. We stood around while William and Jimmy went back and forth with smart-kid jabs and whatnot. Andy Vincent learned how to do it, and then Marcus Mitchell, and then myself.

"Say what?" Philip Langely said.

"They're inter-twangled," William said.

"Inter-TWANG-GULLED!!" Jimmy Delcro said, "Sure are."

"What do you mean?" Phil asked. He was fixing my bike, getting more dirt than the rest of us on his gray zipper-down sweat shirt. Philip Langely was the oldest one of us— he seemed to
age quicker than we did, fashioned himself some kind of normal kid, a Colonel among the misfits. He would grow up faster than us, probably learn to play rhythm guitar in a country band called Four Wheel Drive or Been There Done That or something else as soon as he was old enough to linger in small town bars, still in Northwestern Minnesota, living tall and inflated the way he looked at William that afternoon in the garage. “The hell kind of word is that, dickhead.” he said. He never called anyone by their real names. I mean, none of us did, but his pet names always involved the penis. And he was always Philip or Phil.

“Louie means,” Jimmy Delcro said, pulling the chain a little tighter so Phil could do whatever he was doing, “If I may so boldly answer for ya, buddy...”

“Sure,” William said.

“We mean they’re connected,” he said. “They affect each other. You have one, you need the other or your lost.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Because I’m Tangenmental,” Jimmy Delcro said. He had a way with words.

“What’s tangenmental?”

“A made up word,” Phil said.

“Show’s what you know,” William said. “Tangenmental means connected, too,” he said. “A line shooting off a circle.”

“Boldly going where no circle has gone?” I said in the right voice, the joke voice. They laughed, all of them but Phil.

“Yes. Connected but cooler than connected,” Jimmy Delcro said. “Tangenmental.”

“I still say it’s made up,” Phil said, wiping his hands on Jimmy Delcro’s plastic pants. Jimmy Delcro stopped laughing but didn’t move.

“Watch the leathers,” he said gently. It was the eighties and he was perhaps the only one of us with a sense of irony.

“Okay, prickface,” Phil said. “It still ain’t a real word.”
“Show's what you know,” William said, “Tangenmental is the only word.”

“The only one,” Jimmy Delcro said, a half-smile.

“Than how'd you tell me that?” Philip asked.

"With his mind," William said.

"Yeah," Jimmy Delcro said, "I'm also telle-pathetic."

I guess we were all tangenmental. I think. Don’t ask, not my word. Jimmy Delcro and William made it up, discovered it, whatever, but I think I, the big man in the bunch, actually got it. I kinda think they understood, but I alone understood completely. I get it right. The way I figure it we were all tangented and skewed, growing up at the age where specifics were unimportant, where age, or the date, doesn’t pin anything down, not exactly. They were older but we were all young enough to age so fast, loose track, get lost real quick in a few minutes of serious discovery. A car ride to Grandma’s was an hour and a half. One of our parents made a lot of turns, out of memory. We got there, grandma buzzed us into her condo and had cider cooking. We had vague ideas about distance but were still learning how it worked, how one place was connected to another, why highways had numbers, how Dad knew when to turn. We got into the car one place and ended up at another. Maps had lines that connected things and made sense, but they were just paper. It was more fun to think of the car as magic.

Time was loose. I don’t remember exactly when anything happened. Snow is connected to some memories, so I know they happened in the winter. Important stuff is connected with what grade I was in and that can be turned into years like metric conversion so, sometimes, I bother to figure out I was in third grade, eight, when we left Duluth. And I know that I had moved to the junior high downtown by the time William fell into the river. So, that means I was in seventh grade, which would put him in tenth, make him fifteen I suppose. But the numbers are less
important than he was looking forward to getting his license. His age means nothing compared to the fact that he had almost figured out how to get to Grandma’s on his own.

Everything else happened roughly in those years where things bleed into other things, where I spent every moment thinking “I am as big as I will get”, when we were all thinking “we are as old as we need to be, know enough, have learned so much, we were stupid yesterday, how can we get any older in any meaningful way, surely we have it figured out by now, all those stupid mistakes, that time I called Allison Lucas, wet my pants in class, ripped off the 7-11, spent a night at the jail, all of that embarrassment, all of that skin I have shed, those teeth I have lost to age. Today,” we said, “is as old as I need to be.” And then we would turn seven or fourteen or sixteen and we would forget the specifics of the conversation at Spider Park two years ago when I said I knew it all, when William said that infinity was the key, we must understand the limits of no limits, when Jimmy Delcro said I am too old to masturbate. We would age, forget, reconfigure, evolve. Age meant nothing other than how old I was at the moment I was thinking about it, for that moment, that August a neighbor asked, the September Jimmy Delcro gave me his plastic pants, said “welcome to junior high.” Date, year, grade, age itself, meant nothing more than how many Jakes had lived differently, died in some other adolescent incarnation of self, become something a few centimeters taller, wiser, older, more real for the moment.

My story is not in order.

I have no idea when any of it happened.

Cause and effect still hold true. I mean sure, such a force exists within these words, one thing begets another and all of that. But causality is swept into something bigger, a pool of memory, a time when everything was in flux, when self was always shifting, at least as much as a growing body, mine hitting six feet in fifth grade, six-two by seventh. None of it was any more fixed. All was rapid change, growth and entropy. A childhood of parallax, a speedometer seen a few miles faster from the passenger’s seat. Any retelling, even to myself is not dramatic, not a three act play, not a chain link story.
This is a match in a dark room with a gas leak. What ignites will light up. What doesn’t might smell wet and heavy, explosive even, but it will have to go without illumination. I have no control over what will flash, how or when these words will explode. My memories are connected by topic, not by time and ultimately, I am the only one reading it the right way, tangenmentally and wise. I will do what I can, but it is possible that I alone am the right height to see past shadow, know everything. Even I will only get it right once. This is it. The match will take, memory will smoke, blaze. I will take notes.

* * * * *

For the record, I looked the part. Everyone would have believed I was one of them, and yes, it was a little weird. It would have been kind of nice to know some of the kids from school. To talk about stuff I heard them talking about at recess. To not have to ask what a word meant, or what a conversation was about.

“Nah,” William said. Mom had made me ask him if he minded that I was hanging out with his friends. “It's fine,” he said. I could never tell when my brother meant anything. He was a really bad liar but made up for it by telling the truth in ways that were hard to believe. He pushed up his glasses. “Really,” he said. He got up from the table, went to the fridge, opened it, removed nothing, shut it, sat back at the table. Mom smiled a little. She thought I might've been more comfortable around other fifth graders. “It’s cool,” he said. Went back to the fridge.

She shrugged. “Think about it,” she said, gave me hug. She took her keys off of the hook by the door and went back to work. I could hear the garage door shutting. William was still at the fridge.

“I think I am comfortable.”

“Good,” William said. He decided on cereal. He poured his milk, grabbed a spoon and went downstairs. “Come on,” he said.
I got my own bowl, a different box of cereal. I sat in the kitchen, put my bowl on the table. I looked out the window. I decided to check the tree.

"Goin' outside," I said.

"If they're there," William yelled from the basement, "come get me."

"Sure," I said. I went outside without my shoes on. The grass needed to be cut again. The windmill made from painted metal would spin all afternoon, a flat yard in a flat part of the world. The wind could blow forever. I went to the tree. My parents told us it was an apple tree but we had our doubts.

There were moments where I could think of nothing more than numbers, how much longer he had lived than I had, how many more pieces of pie Jimmy Delcro had eaten, how many more times Phil had gotten stitches, Bob Stottle gotten grounded. Andy Vincent gotten new shoes, Marcus Mitchell gotten a solid report card. Yeah I thought about birthdays, about how many more parties they had had, about memories of theirs that took place, numerically, when they were the age I was when they were telling me the story. I was some kind of dopelganger, a doubled incarnation that they could see and touch, a younger version of all of them that they could talk to, advise, correct in thinking and judgment before I screwed up the way they had. Educate in ways they hadn't been, set straight early. And yeah, at times I had psychic growing pains, felt pulled into worlds before I was ready, felt too much expectation to be able to read certain things, talk about certain concepts. Or they would explain things they didn't have to, assume I hadn't figured it out, reinforce my expectations that I was somehow lessor, a younger mirror image, a kid to be baby-sat, the tag-along. Either way, I was aware of the undeniable difference that set me apart from the rest of them: I had simply not lived as long.

"I am just as tall," I said, examining the tree, checking the lower branches carefully.

"Taller. I ride fast. Learned before he did. Never fall down," I said. "Not even no handed." I pulled at some of the branches above me, branches William couldn't get to. "I can climb stuff," I said, strong arming my way up with one foot against the trunk, no one around to see me if I fell. I
had never climbed that high before, at least not in that tree. I kept going, used a hand and a foot
hold here, a single arm pull there, got high enough to sway with the wind. I stayed up there for a
few minutes, watched our patio, the Delcro house, Jimmy’s grandpa’s house. Everything that was
ours. A kid heir over looking the kingdom from a forbidden perch when the mentor is having coffee.
I was lost. They might notice in a while, and I would see them look for me, surprise them from up
high. Even Jimmy Delcro might not have had the faith to get up there, trust his weight to those
branches. I was younger yes, but as big, as brave, as agile. I climbed a lot of trees growing up, but
that afternoon was different. Only one other tree, the elm I had climbed when William fell into
the river, would leave my hands colder, stomach heavier, limbs more impatient, skin more troubled
by our northern wind. Only one other tree would find me getting out before I was ready, giving up on
whatever test I had set for myself.

I was young enough to be made of cartilage, and though I was afraid of falling, I had no
trouble throwing myself to the ground. I landed softly, bare feet back to the grass. I was restless,
the wind still blowing. I looked again, half-hearted. There were no apples.

“How old do I look?” I asked. I was in the bathroom, down stairs, looking into a big
mirror. William was reading something on the couch in the next room.

“Seventeen,” he said. “At least.”

“No,” I said.

“Fourteen?” he asked. Maybe. I had to bring my birth certificate to pay kids’ prices at the
movies. The freckles I had when I was a short were already turning into acne; my hair was getting
darker. I flexed my muscles, eighth grade muscles. I could do it, I decided looking in the mirror. I
made a face, growled. Stared down my reflection. Looked tough. I could be one of them. Growl
Growl. Not that they were that popular. I wasn’t envied, just felt strong when they let me walk
with them. More than strong even, like I finally deserved to be as tall as I was, like I actually was
that old. Grown up. Junior high lifestyle before I was ten. It was cool, I was cool. Most of the time, age was harder to think about than size, and size I had. In abundance. Most of the time I could fall back on it, not even think about experience or chronology or anything other than feet and inches. Most of the time my life with them was exactly what I wanted.

Words were a little more complex. I had them in height, looked as old, but they talked differently than kids my age. Hell, they talked differently than kids their own age. I was never sure of specifics, but I doubt, looking back, that they were either. Words were intimidating, acquired slowly, no less obvious or important currencies of age than my tall frame, my darkening hair. I, maybe poor judgment, listened to all of them, every utterance. “Intriguing,” William said. “Yak meat!” Alan Vincent said when he played Nintendo. “I am Hyperbole,” was Jimmy Delcro’s. Only Marcus Mitchell consistently got his big words right. And Philip Langely swore a lot. They loved to talk and I was learning how to. I, in the bathroom, stopped flexing and looked astute. Serious. I preened, held my chin high. I could do that too. Sophistication.

“Hey Goatface,” William said from the next room.

“What?”

“Stop lookin’ in the mirror.”

“I’m not lookin’ in the mirror,” I said.

“Stop lookin’ in the mirror.”

“I’m NOT lookin’ in the mirror.” I stopped looking in the mirror and went to change shirts.

“Hey Goatface,” William said.

“I’m not Goatface.”

“Right,” he said. He came into my room. “Let’s go downtown,” he said. He was smiling while he cleaned his glasses. His face looked naked without them.
His glasses broke before they fell off. William was in the water, sort of floating. I think I saw blood before his head rolled limp, went under. Hard to tell, too dark. For sure, his glasses had come off. Philip Langely had stopped laughing but the sound hung wild and loud above the soft noise of the river at night.

* * * * *

"Call me Patches," Jimmy Delcro said to me.

"Why?"

"It has been decided by Lewis," he said. Last names meant business.

"You make me sound like a tribunal," William said.

"You make yourself sound like a tribunal,"

"Hey, what's a tri-boonal?"

"A bunch of people who decide stuff," Jimmy Delcro said.

"Important stuff," William said. He straightened his glasses and looked at me to see if Patches was a geeky name.

"Patches? Or Patches Delcro."

"Either. Or neither," Patches said, "But let it be known, though you may call me otherwise, I am he and he am I. If you know what I mean, my man." He gave my five. And William kept still on the old yellow chair in the corner of our basement. He was playing with a spoon. And smiling.

"What am I?" I asked.

"Mental," Patches said. "And big. In need of a beatin'." He tackled me then.

"Who am I who am I?" I asked. We were both laughing because wrestling was automatically funny but I said, "I'm serious."
Patches stopped. He took off the plastic frames he bragged about being unbreakable. He threw them in the corner. “Too young for a name o’ coolness, little man,” he said and tackled me again.

“No he’s not,” William said.

“Shut up you,” Patches said, twisting a finger in my ear.

“Tell him tell him tell him,” I said, “I get a name o’ oh oh oh coolness,” I said, laughing too hard to breathe right. My face was mashed into the carpet.

“Oh yeah,” Patches said, poking me again and again with the same finger. “Caveman Grogg here thinks he gets a name o’ coolness. All big an’ stuff, can’t even knock me down. Come on, get me, ya big caveman you.”

“If he wins, he gets the name?”

“Sure,” Patches said. “Pretty big if.”

I was moving, twisting and pulling with my full weight, before he was done talking so that his voice went up as he fell. I was sweating, breathing hard. Heightened. My head itched, the room grew a little lighter and I could see the pink cool-aid stains on the carpet, could hear the wheeze the lid on the water jar was making because it wasn’t tight enough. And I could throw him around.

“Your face is really red.”

“Tell me I’m Caveman Grogg,” I said.

“I’m Caveman Grogg.”

I laughed but didn’t let go of his arm, bent it further up his back. He was strong, could hold his own against William, maybe even Phil, but he was on his stomach. His forehead would be scraped and reddish for a few days. I was bigger than all of them. I don’t know if I knew it, not fully, before then.

“Speak little boy,” I said.

“Time to negotiate, buddy,” William said, still playing with his spoon, still smiling.
“What’s neggo-sheeate,” I said, “Caveman Grogg no get smartguy talkee.” It felt good to make them laugh. Not sure if that was better than knowing I could hurt them if I wanted to. Jimmy Delcro squirmed, his wrist still secure in my grip. I was sitting on him.

“Ya vile moose, get off me,” he said, “William, get the cheese-brain off me,”

“Wrong names more owie-owie,” I said.

“Negotiate, Patchey, negotiate. Talk to the caveman.”

“Or feed ‘m,” Jimmy Delcro said. “Only language Caveman Grogg understands.”

I let go. “Ha,” I said.

“Stupid name anyway,” Patches said kindly, a little laughter, rubbing his carpet bum, “shows what you know. Cavemen are uhm, uhm... stupid, hairy things. STOOOPID.

HAAAREEY. Tell ‘em William.”


“He’ll survive anyway,” Patches said. He punched me lightly, faked extreme pain when I slapped him back. “Grogg wanna play boom-boom video games?” he asked.


* * * * *

We were all chosen, or at least separated. But we were not without our envies.

Patches had the best hair, an easy fall just below his ears, the quietest brown to match his plastic frames and let his dullgreen eyes sneak out beneath his thick lenses. William tried for years to find a hair cut that worked as well as the one Patches wore, seemingly without upkeep or maintenance.

Patches had this pink sweatshirt thing that looked warm and he said it was girlie but wore it even when it was pretty hot outside. It looked gaudy, especially when he was still wearing the plastic pants, but it fit well and he wouldn’t have traded with anyone. We all had
sweatshirts. Phil's was camouflage. He looked warm and solid in it. Andy Vincent's was also army issue. But it was stained and looked silly. Its pockets had holes in them and its zipper didn't go all the way up. He liked it a lot. Bob Stottle's had iron on polka dots, flashy against the bulk of his broad muscles. Ted Kobbins had a plain blue pull over. Mine was an extra large, caveman sized orange knit with a hood.

One would think we were too far north for sweatshirt weather, that growing up would have been all about moon boots and snow suits and thick parkas with lined hoods fringed by synthetic fur to scratch and tickle a hardened, youthful nose, cartilage lodged cold, skin gone mildwhite, pulled taut. I mean, sure, Crookston was about the winter. Our roads were brown with slush and safety salt and traction dirt for six months of the year. At least. It was common to be able to track a group of trick or treaters by the dents and drags left in the snow, to have prom with ice still on the highway out to Maple lake. Winter, rightfully so, will dominate any physical description of the area, even the children and machines brought to age and use up there; we measured walks in the amount of time it takes an ear to go numb, measured distance between towns in emergency time, how long a body can go with no heater, a candle and a box of chocolates for carbohydrates. Our cars have electric plugs built into the engine blocks, an extension cord is near every outside outlet. Every garage has a bag of cat litter just in case ice is too thick, the grade of the driveway too steep to get inside. Pedestrians don't cross the street at the bottom of Crookston's only hill, not unless they're out of towners. The one-ways exist, in theory, to keep damage down when out-of-state brakes lock up and the back end weaves; without oncoming traffic, damage is only a glancing blow; Crookston's eight thousand people enjoyed more than ten one ways. The highways, the ones that get the most use, are flat and four laned for the same reasons; if you slide, it is best to trust your velocity and coast, trying best not to over-steer. The advice we, as teenagers, got about growing up was virtually the same: no rash movements, trust wide horizons where sun means no clouds and cold and let forward movement stay forward so that no snow bank or ditch is permanent.
But my story has not, to this point, nor will it become, I suspect, a story about wind-chill and subzero temperatures. We, as a group of young people trying to shake off several generations of freeze, were much more interested in thaw, when the one ways turned into a large muddy, circle, direction uniform and sloppy, when the beet fields mushed down dark and stinky, fields of standing water before the mosquitoes, when the rivers regained slow trickle. Winter is the norm, would make the easiest subject for a gripping documentary about the north country. But it is not our only season. There are two months above ninety, two months with mosquitoes and fog lying snug against soil so we were familiar with cutoffs and tank-tops and sandals and sunglasses. And yes, even at age twelve, we owned more than one heavy coat, wore long parkas, heavy down filled jackets, snow pants that were water proof, and gloves and mittens, our wrists wrapped in cotton strips to prevent snow from sneaking its way against the skin. We wore winter and even summer. But we loved our sweatshirts.

We were all wearing them when William fell in to the Red Lake River. His was plain brown, shiny like brand new Nerf, a stretchy plastic kind of feel. It didn’t look right on him. We were all wearing sweatshirts, his was the one going darker, testing saturation and chill, September water too cold for color to bleed.

He had gotten the brown, zipper-less pullover, scrunchy here and there, smooth everywhere, from our Grandmother. William and I only got to know one grandparent. Grandma Lewis, dad’s side. She was solid, little next to William, tiny next to me. Like our parents she was nice, kind, laughing a lot. She smoked, they didn’t anymore. Her husband died when William was five. I remember picking blueberries in Wisconsin with them when grampa was still alive. A large green car. William running down the driveway. All four of us sat in front. A long drive. Sweet berries. I don’t know if the memory is real or a memory from a story heard and told again and again. William says he remembers a green coffee cup my grandfather drank from when we still
lived in Minneapolis. He has told my parents this, that grampa’s name is hard to separate from the mug. They don’t remember owning a mug like the one he describes.

Memories are funny.

Mom’s father was alive longer than Grampa. He lived in a white house with other old people. We visited it once. Mom said she didn’t know him, he had left when she was little. He drank a lot. She received a phone call in the middle of the summer. I was eleven. It was hot and we were building a new fort, wide boards and brand new nails would give us security and shade in the woods somewhere east of town. We were almost done, I didn’t want to go to the middle of North Dakota for a few days even to see relatives I liked. William told me not to say that. He cried at the funeral, more than Mom did.

“Why?” I asked. “We didn’t know him.”

“Because of that,” he said. “And for mom.”

Maybe I was too young to understand that. Maybe I was too young to realize that every relationship was important. But it seemed like mom still had a lot, even with out him. Like we didn’t need to know this little man in his white house. Like we were lucky to know who we knew, love who we loved. Like a few things of beauty were enough.

“I’m greedier than you,” William said a lot. He might have been. I had a lot of toys, wanted more. But he might have wanted everything.

Grandma was good to us. Like family, I guess. William said we were spoiled. I said thank you and played with the toys, put on the new jeans, went to the amusement parks and baseball games. I think he was right but so was I. They were good to us because they wanted to be. It was okay to accept that. They all gave us gifts. Lots of gifts. Any excuse for a holiday would find a little card, five dollars and gum. William’s started to come with deodorant or tiny bottles of cologne. Grandma gave us clothing year round. “So more presents under the tree can be fun stuff,” she said.
She gave William the sweatshirt. It was brown, something Patches would have worn, looked better in. Even Andy Vincent or Bob Stottle would have looked more fitting in it. It was plain. Looked like brand new Nerf. Would have looked punk or alternative on the others. It made William look chubby. Short. Plain. Simple. Maybe that was what he liked about it. What would have made the others more striking, more unique, on him looked unremarkable. Average.

Dad brought the sweatshirt home for no reason other than Grandma said William should have it. There was a button down for me. I wore it on picture day. William was almost done with ninth grade when the package came. He said thank you, wrote one of the few thank you notes either of us would write. We usually said thank you by using whatever was given, but he sent the note, wore it walking the ten blocks home from the high school downtown. He bought a green hat, with a wide brim and button to pull it into suave. Patches said it was French and way jennysaykwaw. He walked home in the hat and pullover, started chewing on his pencil, carrying a little notebook, an out of work journalist or something. He looked ridiculous and good.

Summer came and no one wore sweatshirts. Not until September.

Two weeks before he fell in, he was wearing the pullover again and we, he and I, had gone to Philip Langely's Grandmas to hunt squirrels. I had never fired a rifle, not even a pellet gun. Patches wasn't there, hadn't been invited. Philip Langely was the kind of man, even at fourteen, fifteen, who could convince you to betray anything by suggesting, taller and more directly than your father, that without his approval what you were thinking, doing, living, meant nothing. He was famous and reckless and had a laugh that William jerked against. But he could convince William to drink snot from a green bottle long emptied of liquor.

Phil had pirated a bottle of Jack into his grandma's. In the morning, my first hangover, we shot clay pigeons with a shotgun. William didn't want to shoot. He, a few taunts and dickheads later, was a horrible shot. Philip didn't let me shoot after I proved a better aim than he was.
William spent a few hours a month with Patches' Grandfather, holding the hose while Grampa Jim moved garden dirt in and around the greenest corn, sweetest peas in town. He left his sweatshirt in a rumpled pile on the edge of the grass, a few safe inches away from creosote soaked ties holding soil in. Patches would be with him sometimes. Sometimes, the sun and an old man with a patient trowel and tomato plants was enough to make the afternoon pass more gently.

I saw him out there through the window. Often. I never heard them speak, not when they were alone. William, his arms in the sunlight, had the strangest look on his face watching Jim's dark glasses, his careful lean, his eager digs and pokes into the dirt. Like he was seeing a ghost. Like he was helping one grow its keep, like the ring of railroad ties were a hallowed circle, Grandpa Jim some kind of skilled, hobo ghost grandpa fresh off a flat car from Fresno.

Patches and William faked ID's in our basement, before Minnesota made it impossible for a type writer and lamination paper to do the trick. It was William's idea. They didn't change date of birth. Their birthdays remained the same, born on the same day. Their new ID's left both of them minors. Only their names were different. Reversed. William as Jimmy. Vice versa.

"How else we gonna be secret agents without aliases."

"I still say you just gonna lead the heat to my door, brother."

William was out of town when Patches introduced me to Marcus Mitchell. We went swimming and Marcus made me play this game where he would ask me questions and if I got them wrong he would dig a nail into the skin between my fingers. I got most of them wrong. He was pulling my fingers apart wide, digging his thumb in. It hurt and he was proving that I was stupid.
I only kept playing so Patches could ask him questions, give it back to him. He made us quit after I got my fifth one right. "You win," he said. "Let's dive."

He had lived in Crookston before William and I did. His parents decided to move back. He knew Patches as Jimmy Delcro. "You've changed," he said.

"It's the water," Patches said.

Marcus was black though he said "Spic" if someone asked.

I couldn't remember his name at first. William came back and Patches came over. I asked if we were going to "call uhm... uhm... Biglips?" Patches didn't laugh. I did. I don't know, it was funny. The sounds or something. I started calling him that. "I'm sorry," I said finally, Patches made me.

"Why?" Marc asked.

"It's not cool," I said.

"I don't care, White Bread," he said. But he wasn't mad. I don't know what was going on. It was stupid, looking back. Racist, certainly. I didn't mean it to be but like that matters.

"Look at the Neeegros," he'd say if we saw anyone black. We'd be at the Coffee Company or something and he would shout it with a straight face and get quiet. They would look at us all mad and we'd try to explain that the Marcus had said it. They never believed us and he'd laugh about it later.

"He hates black people," Patches said.

"Why?"

"'Cause he does."

We thought we understood him. Even why he hung out with Phil sometimes.

"They're both obtuse," Patches said.

"And racist," William said.

"Yep," Patches said. "Phil doesn't like black people, Marcus doesn't like black people," he made this nasally I dunno kind of sound. "It works out."
“But Marcus is Black.” I said.

“That’s your problem,” Patches said gently. “You think we are what we are.”

I called Marcus to find out what was going on.

“What’s it like to live here,” I finally said.

“It’s fuckin’ flat,” he said. His parents weren’t home.

“I mean to be here when... you know.”

“No.”

“When you’re not white.”

“I’m whiter than all you fuckers.” Marcus said. He laughed.

On the days Marcus Mitchell let us realize he wasn’t white, I wanted to be black. He could wear purple and orange, bright shoes and do things with his hair that I couldn’t. It didn’t matter that he was half my weight, could only wrestle by pinching and taking cheap stabs and gouges at your privates. I would have given up my size for his smooth skin with no freckles, to wear the loudest shirt in town and not look too skinny in it, out of whack somehow. Perhaps it was because I only rarely realized he was black that I didn’t think about what, in Crookston, Minnesota, that perfect skin came with.

“I have extra organs,” he said. “My blood is gravy.”

Patches nodded when he said stuff like that. William and I nodded because Patches did, assumed that he understood and was wise enough that we could be wise by association. None of us got it.

* * * * *

We were all separated, treated as a group even when we were alone, by instructors and parents and even the school janitors. We thought we were young enough, far enough along in the eighties and nineties that we actually could erase the fact that we never appeared as unified as we wanted to.
Marcus didn’t have a choice, used what he had differently for different reasons that we did, would have stood out anyhow. The rest of us spoke out, drew attention on purpose, sure. But it was more complex than that. It is assumed that all kids who answer a lot of questions in class, let other kids ask them stuff before they seek advice from the teacher, are merely showing off. We were all, probably, accused of trying to prove that, beyond grades, we were simply smarter, more gifted, more valid than anyone else. But I don’t think that was why I was the most vocal part of Mr. Ranthom’s fourth grade class, why I tutored algebra before I took it formally, why I never did my own work in study hall. I mean, for most of us, it was probably part of it. I heard stories, from adults, teachers, other kids, about William in class. I guess he would offer, to his entire class, how he did on an exam, as well as exactly what mistakes he made, how silly they were, how he should have gotten a perfect score. Every test. We were probably all show-offs, for one reason or another, even to each other.

But I have suspected, later, that William wasn’t just trying to claim some kind of superiority, or to reify his position as some kind of junior intellect. I imagine that he just didn’t understand how un-interesting his successes and missteps were to anyone else. I imagine he wanted to hear the same kind of report from everyone else in the room, a commitment to an assignment beyond accepting the grade and moving on to invertebrates, long division, subject verb agreement. I think he understood everything a little better after analyzing exactly what went wrong during the test, better than after any number of lectures, quizzes, homework problems. I think he wanted to share. He didn’t fully understand competition, at least not at first. We thought we were just pushing each other when Marcus would make us get his questions right, when Patchey would lecture, when we would do base work and logarithms under the jungle gym at Spider Park.

Adults didn’t see it that way. My brother was forced into counseling for a while. Most of us were, here and there, as children. Adults were always concerned that we were too critical, too thoughtful, not happy or normal.

They were fucked.
Bottom line.

Kids do not, and should not understand that the personal is exactly that, private and only interesting to those present at the time. Not until age fifteen, sixteen, do kids end stories with "guess you had to be there." We assumed we could share enough to make up for that gap, somehow make an incredible discovery, thought, or joke known, understood, and enjoyed for everyone. Adults have lost that, or think they have. I, older, have never felt as close to another person as I did growing up. Even writing this seems futile, like no one would be interested, like this is exposition to the fifth power. And I know it is, but part of me, most of me, knows this is the most important exposition I know of. It is mine. But I can't shake knowing that what is inside must stay inside, or at least be abridged and spiced up for the sake of interest and coherence.

William, and most of us growing up, never really accepted that.

I don't know. Conjecture. Theory. Dull stuff. I do know that I never thought about it like this when I was there, in school, raising my hand again and again. We all, I think wanted to say as much of what was inside as possible, so as to hear it ourselves. Patches was the only one who's words were truly careful and they were no less frequent than anyone, always careful, even when canceling out his last discovery. William too, kept us up to speed about exactly what was going on. Marcus let us know every time he was thinking about being black. We, without theory to put this kind of spoken thought into words, did it anyway.

And we were bored. Or at least I was bored. Why bother wasting time when the answer isn't gonna come from any other corner in the room. I didn't look as abnormal as the rest of them, just impatient, a little cocky. Adult.

Mr. Ranthom teased me for it. I would pretend to get in fights with my chair, spaz out and fall down. He had a poster of Frankenstein with books on a shelf that I would fight with when he told suggested that "Frank was angry". He realized I was bored and used it, played me to amuse the rest of the class, keep them listening. We had all had him. He had changed everyone of our lives. Smart could be funny, he said. Smart can be attractive. Smart can have no limits.
But most of us, except Marcus and Phil maybe, didn't really want to be adults. Smart was fine but the adult part didn't really matter. They thought they were already important. Patches, for sure, was content to be thirteen for ever as long as no one held it against him. Me, I wanted it. I wanted to be old and it would have taken too long to grow up around kids my own age. It was just plain easier to hang out with them. Growing up in Northwestern Minnesota seemed slow enough. Not always boring, sometimes more fun than anywhere in the world. But, even when we were spacemen and secret agents and thrilled to be us, it was slow. Cold winters. Hot summers. A few trees. "Approximately ten thousand lunatics," Patches said, "and exactly one half of a hill."

Courthouse hill. William said you could tell it was our only hill because we had bothered to name it. Mom didn't even let me ride my bike down it. "Main roads deserve respect," she said. I spent six years with that bike, thick red tires, that William had gotten for a birthday but had given to me when he won another and was tired of me stealing it, walking next to it down that hill. Even if William and Patches were riding. There were certain voices Mom spoke with that needed to be listened to, gravities she could control, certain ways she could keep me young forever.

But on flat ground, and we had a lot of it, I road much faster than William, sped ahead of him with no hands, the gentle leaning swagger of pumping and balancing, almost falling around the corner to Patches house. I was off my bike a few seconds before William pulled up.

We walked into Patches' garage.

"Jimmy?" I said. He grunted but said nothing. "Patchey?"

"Yeah,"

"Hey brother," William said. I looked at him, knew he wasn't talking to me. I realized blood was only the beginning of connection, connection was luck, self, a listless afternoon, everything. That there were words that could get past skin, get in all the way, draw one person to
another, the reason we talked at all, the reason you have made it this far, flipped this many pages, the reason I am letting myself keep going.

Of course I didn't realize that I realized that. I just got happy, felt close to them, thrilled even, an extra brother was fine. I felt connection, sure, probably nothing more heady than that. But memory adds cerebral color, esoteric nonsense and extra lines and smells, draws meaning from sawdust. Extra words.

Patchey was in the rafters. There was a makeshift ladder on one of the walls. It led up to a little room his father had built for us, a few large pieces of plywood nailed into the cross beams. It was sturdy, could fit five or six of us. William called it the 'Floating tent'-- Andy Vincent called it the 'Place of Piney Goodness'-- Marcus Mitchell called it "the Den of Boredom" -- Philip Langely, when he was around, said "it'd make a good love shack'. All of us usually called it whatever Jimmy was calling it, which changed every once and a while until he settled on 'the chapel'.

"C'mon up," he said. "Take of your shoes."

"We know," William said, "holy ground."

'Right on brother."

He brought stuff up there, tin foil, string, tennis balls, whatever. He twisted shapes out of the tin foil, made holes in the tennis balls and filled them with dish soap and food coloring. We usually just watched. Said we liked his sculpture. "It's not sculpture," he always said. "Just some stuff I make." He'd work on one thing for a few weeks, put it in his closet when he was satisfied, start something else. He had to give some of it to William "just to store for a while" when the pile got too big, got in the way of his clothes.

"Whatcha doin'?" he asked.

"Goin' downtown," I said. We were still on the ground, I was having a hard time getting my shoe off.
"Wait a sec and I'll join yah," he said. "I'm hankerin' for some gummy dollars."

"THE NEED IS STRONG!!" William said.

"Yeah it is," I said.

"I got a question," Patches said. He poked his head out of the chapel, upside down.

"Should I let my bike dry before we go," he asked. "I was painting it."

"What color?" I asked.

"Yellow," he said. "Do I let it dry?"

"Nah," William said, "THINK OF THE NEED!!"

"Right," Patches said. "I guess it's done. Help me get it down."

I got yellow on my hands, left finger prints in the paint job.

"Sorry."

"Make's it snide and reckless," Patches said, "Secret agents better not have good paint."

"Why not?"

"Gives 'em away," Patches said, "Everyone would know."

"Cramp our style," William said.

"Guess yer right," I said. "Think of all the screaming girls."

"Be rough," Patchey said, put a few more finger prints into the paint.

"Speaking of agents," I said, "are we gettin' Number Six?"

"Will do," Patches said.

"We'll get him downtown," William said. "Number six is chop-chopping today. It's Tuesday, right?"

"Yes," I said and we were off, riding South on Broadway.

"Dumb ass name for a street in Minnesota," William said.

"Every town's got one," I answered.

"Yippee," Patches said. No matter how many times we road it, that exchange never got stale. I, even laughing, road faster than they did.
Number Six was Andy Vincent, but only sometimes. Usually in those long secret agent afternoons and when we were out later than we should have been, having pushed the gold padded chair against the basement window for a sleep-over escape. Mostly he was just Andy or Vince or something less ominous and big brother than number six. Names are strange. He would have preferred we called him Number Six all the time but, even in our supposed hierarchy-free, by the kids for the kids kind of government, he, like most of us, were not in charge of their own names. Only Patches was only Patches.

Anyway, it is true that Patches and William hung out with him a lot because they liked him more than the others, but we were a small enough town that they would have hung out with him anyway because he lived close. Liking someone was only part of being friends. We were friends with people we didn't like, but we wouldn't go pick just anyone up from karate lessons.

I liked Andy because he was weird. He said "Yak" and "Llama," instead of swearing. He combed his black hair straight back, kind of spiky but parted in the middle of his head, "my hair makes my nose look like a ray-gun," he said. "My eyes are lasers." He owned fifteen pairs of sunglasses, "for public safety." He wore black T-shirts in the middle of June, let his skin glow pale and thin. His mouth was small but thick lipped, could mouth the words to any song on the Cure's Disintegration and Kiss Me Kiss Me, even on shuffle, but he wasn't Goth or anything. He wasn't any stranger than the rest of us, could throw his wrist out of joint, make clicky noises with the veins in his thin-knuckle skin. "I'm cyber," he said.

"Sure are brother."

When we agreed with him, he was happier than any of us.

He wrote a poem called bovine noises. It was short, a few lines. He wrote it on a chalkboard we had in our basement. Patches drew a little cow next to it. Andy wrote with a goofy look on his face, he took pride but knew it was silly. I realized, watching him smile, chalk in his
right hand, that he was almost as tall as I was. Dark hair. Big hands. He wasn't uncomfortable around Phil at all.

"I'm right handed, he's right handed. It's cool," he said when I asked him why. I looked at the others. They said nothing. You didn't ask Andy what something had to do with something else.

"Gotta be meaning in there somewhere," Patches said.

"Cause Andy, you know, he's a meaningful fella," William said.
Andy kept writing his chalk poem.

I thought bovine was an adjective. Well, I guess it is. But I thought it meant loud or sad or something like that. I told them. They laughed but Andy said "Kick Ass! It should!"

"I have to get up early tomorrow," one of us would say.

"Gonna be a bovine morning," Andy would say, nodding his sympathy. It could be happy, too. "It's really bovine, Mark, that you're getting a computer." We started to accept the word anywhere.

"How Bovine," Andy said the day William fell into the river. Phil had just said he was gonna talk to Milton Remba and get us a case of beer and some schnapps. We would have to walk around, of course. All of our parents would be home. So we would walk and see what the night brought us. "Gonna be some kind of Bovine."

* * * * *

Patches' bike, even after he painted it, looked lame and too big for him. I mean, all of ours, at least for a little while, looked just as lame. The difference was him. He possessed the ultimate poise, was able to pretend and even believe he didn't want a new bike, that he couldn't have been happier, that his geek-wheels were the only wheels in the world. And he made the best noises after loosing control, "TRYIN' TO KILL ME," he said, though it never really sounded like words
because he usually threw himself off before he could get it all out and we were laughing because we
knew he had done it on purpose—we trusted him too much to be scared.

He usually ended up walking it down the hill if I was with them. They were pretty good
about things like that, turning baby sitting that mom asked William to do into something cool,
walking with me where mom made me. But they didn’t have to. They never found motherly memos
attached to their bike. I was every inch as old as them even if I wasn’t and I didn’t get it.

“I hate the hill,” I said.

“’s my favorite part,” Patches said.

”’s pretty cool,” William said.

“I hate it,”

“Don’t think of it as a hill, C-M-Grogg.” Patches said.

“Huh?” I growled. “Grogg not think hill? Hill not hill?”

“Think of it as a mousetrap.”

“Nah,” William said. “Mousetrap’s worse than a hill.”

“Not if it’s Nerf,” I said.

“I’d like a mouse Nerf trap,”

“You mean a Nerf mousetrap,” I said.


“What would you use for bait?” I asked.

“Peanut Butter?” William said.


“Or you just hide behind it and do your best Nerf call,” William said.

“HEY YOU! NERF!,” Patches said, “COME HERE!!”

“That wasn’t good at all,” I said.

I kept walking. I was silent. It took them a while to get it. I was proud of myself for not laughing first. There are times when silence is a joke. Patches, like some joke Buddha, had developed criteria for evaluating jokes. That was one of them. "A silent joke is always funny," he said. "Then Crookston is stand up," William usually answered. It was Patches grandfather's fault, this abstracted thinking. "Grampa Jim says nothing's perfect," he always reminded us. "So. Our parents say that too", we said. But it didn't mean the same thing when Grampa Jim said it. It wasn't a way of saying oh well. It was a place to strive for. Nothin's perfect, own nothing, be nothing. Even in Jim's garden, large tomatoes and sweet beans, nothing's perfect, let it rot away, strive to stop striving. We didn't get it, not fully. But it sure felt good to make a silent joke. The other rules were easier-- never laugh at your own joke, never use the word shit in a punch line unless the joke is funny already. A few others, discovered when the laughter came. Life in Crookston Minnesota. Cold snow. A few boys laughing.

"See," Jimmy Delcro said when we got to the gravel lot in front of Marvin's Pizza Place. "The hill's not so bad."

"Huh?"

"Just think of it as a really slow vortex," he said.

"Vortex?" I asked.

"Vortex," he said.

"Vortox?" I asked.

"Vishstix," William said.

"Yuck Louie," Patches said, "I hate Vishstix,"

"If you have TAR-TAR sauce, Vishstix aren't bad."

"Who cares," Patches said, "I was talkin' about Vertexes."

"Vor-Texas?"

"Right on." Patches said, "Best little Vorhouse in Vor-Texas,"

"What ARE you talkin' about?" I asked.
"Volvos," William said.

"We've decided," Patches said, "That the hill is a vortex."

"I still don't get it," I said.

"Neither does he," William said.

"Sure I do," Patches said, "You start at second street. All bored and stuff. And you get on the hill and, and a few seconds later your DOWNTOWN!!"

"YEAH VORTEX!"

"Still," I said. "Seems a lot like a hill."

"All that work, and you don't like my vortex."

"I like your vortex," William said.

Patches smiled and waited until we were on our bikes again before saying, "you haven't even seen my Vortex. Next time, you don't get to use it. How ya gonna get anywhere, eh?"

"Dunno," I said.

"Gonna be all alone without DOWNTOWN," Patches said. "Gonna miss these dirty old buildings. Too many one ways pullin' ya in a big ole circle."

"Ohm one-way."

"Ohm circle."

"Ohm Crookston."

"Everyone likes downtown." William said.

"Sure do," Patches said, and paused. He changed tone of voice, lines went into his face, sarcasm and age. He became ugly, driven. Moments like that were the reason William would have died for him, believed in him fully. We were all a little in awe of him. "They like their downtown," he said flatly. "That's why they're fixin' it up. Restoration."

"What's restoration?"

"It's a paint job, Jake," William said.
“Yep,” Patches said, “A few new buildings, a couple more street lights. And we gotta get rid of the Mexicans who live here all happy, watchin’ the sun go down on the benches on the corner, coolin’ with their girlfriends, hanging out in groups. No matter, they all gotta go,”

“Why?” I asked.

“’Cause their squalor cramps our style,” William said. I knew what squalor meant but was confused. He wasn’t as good at sarcasm

“’Cause we’re a bunch of morons,” Jimmy Delcro said. He shrugged. We looked in a store window. He scratched his forehead.

“Not all of us” William said. “Lots of good folks. Lots of racist folks.”

“Racist folks are just more organized,” Patches said.

“Louder?” I asked.

“There ya go, Jacob,” he said. “Gonna make a politico outta you yet.”

“Like us,” William added.

“But taller,” I said. “And louder.”

“There ya go, Groggy,” William said.

“Anyhow,” Patches said, riding again, “I been thinkin’. Racist folks make groovy Transformers.”

“More than meets the eye?”

“Yeah. And they could all hook together to form BIGOT MAN.”

“Yep,” William said.

I heard the word racist a lot, didn’t really get it but I figured Patches did. His parents were wise, social workers, and I assumed they explained it to him. He could get really angry, get us all mad right along with him. He could get me to call Marcus by his full name, both syllables, feel some strange, dull sense of shame and history. I still didn’t really get it.

I followed them.
I followed them, all of them, carrying flashlights and schnapps and some beer we had scored from Milton Remba. I was always following, had always been following, even when I was walking in front. The fuzzy schnapps vision let the woods, soils and greens and underbrush near the river blur into a dark spin. I would follow them through any words, through any anger, through any odd snapping of tongue, through a trail easy enough to stumble through, safe across the fallen oak we used as a bridge. Once across safely, though William dragged a foot wet. The second time, back to home, we were going home the second time. William didn’t use the bridge. I was crying on the elm, standing safe and easy, crying. Philip Langely, older than any of us, was laughing.

“What a wuss,” he said, when there was moss on a stone William was trying to quick hop across and his feet got caught up in speed, lurched paralleled into the air, his back and head came down hard and soft with splash. No glasses, some blood, his face shining even in the dark, a scared hollow of noise opening above the wind on the water, spinning out into thick, moist laughter. I was jerking in tears but I stopped nothing, followed them in, more boys under water.

I followed them.

“I dreamt again.” William said. Downtown was three blocks wide that day—Andy had karate on Tuesday’s and he didn’t let us count the railroad tracks as part of downtown. It would shrink to two blocks, a complete and easy circle when we picked him up at eight-thirty. We were all drinking coke. Patches had bought some licorice. He was chewing with his mouth open.

“About?” Patches said. I walked a half-step behind. Watched the sidewalk, rainwater standing in puddles, dragged my right foot through the water. Slowly, walking. Stole a piece of licorice from Patches, ate it. Drank my coke. Walked with my foot bouncing behind me. Their pace slowed and I kept up. I didn’t like talking about dreams.

“I was driving a convertible.” William said.
"Mid-life crisis?" Patches asked.

"Nah," William said.

"He doesn’t drive yet," I said.

"Right, Grogg." Patches said, "Couldn’t be a mid-life crisis."

"I no get mid-life crisis. What is?" I asked.

"Baldness?"

"Nah," Patchey said. "Dad says it’s this stuff about realizing you’re going to be dead soon."

"He know," I said, keeping the Grogg voice rolling. "He been shrinked."

"Or is a shrink," William said.

"A shrinked shrink," Patches said. "He should know. But he’s got it all wrong. It’s puberty."

"Uhh..." William said, "that means full life would be what-- twenty six years?"

"Sure," Patches said. "You know anyone that old still alive?"

"Other than parents?"

"They’re androids. They never die. I’m talkin’ bout people."

"How about folks you see in Ben Franklin?" I asked.

"They’re braindead," Patches said. "Still here, thirty or forty. Sheesh."

"Phil’s not braindead," William said.

"He’s not twenty six," I said.

"Louie’s right. He might as well be." Patches said. "But he’s got a stupid name."

"Change it for him. Give him a ceremony too."

"He doesn’t want one," Patches said. His voice got lower, thick vowels, "Philip or Phil. I’m a moron."

"He’s not a moron," I said. We stopped by a light pole. Patches had bent down, was picking up some mud, rolling it into a ball. He flattened it out, bent it into a kind of star.
"He is," Patches said. He broke one of the tips off, one of the only times he broke anything.

The mud powdered back into dirt and fell out of his hands.

"Hey Llamas!" Andy said. I guess it was eight thirty.

"Nice chop-chop suit," William said.

"Thanks," Andy said.

"Hey Vincent," Patches said.

"Huh?"

"We're talkin' business."

"About what?"

"Is Phil a moron?"

"No," Andy said. "You heard about him and Amy Sanchez?"

"Yeah I heard," Patches said. "He said 'that spic really put out'. Moron."

"But smart enough to kiss her."

"I was in gym," William said.

"So," Andy said. "Can we go home so I can get some real pants."


"I think so," Patches said. "Anyway..."

"Yeah," William said. "We were playin' kickball. Coed if you know what I mean. And Marcus Mitchell says 'hey, what do you call Mexican television for kids?' and Amy was there. Phil was holding her hand and he said 'I dunno' and Marcus said 'Spicalodian' and Phil laughed and kept laughing. I don't get it."

"Why's Marcus makin' that joke?" I asked.

"He thought it was funny."

"But he's black."

"Yeah," Patches said. "So. He's still got a bad sense of humor. Phil laughed?"
"Yeah."

"Holding her hand?"

"Yeah."

"Moron."

"I kicked a bunch of doubles," William said.

"Really?" Andy asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I scored three times."

I was thinking. They kept walking, Andy and William going on about kickball. Patches was quiet too, but he seemed mad. I wasn't, really. I don't know. We used the word racism a lot in school. Enough for me to comfortable, as long as I listened to Patches about what to call Marcus, that we weren't, personally, racist. Still, all our friends were white, except for Marc and he was adopted and smart, so even he didn't really count, wasn't usually obviously different than us. Race didn't always matter and never made sense. I knew we had a large number of Hispanics in town and that they weren't treated very well, and I sometimes thought it was odd that the only racism we talked about in school was anti-black and past tense. It sometimes, listening to Patchey, seemed important to get more info. But I didn't lose sleep over it, my nightmares were more about water than skin. My subconscious was half right in its patterns of worry.

I usually figured race was like different channels on television. Nice to have all the options, be able to flip into different genres, catch a show with different nouns and verbs. But everything you really wanted to watch, really understood, was on Network anyway. Marcus used NBC kinds of language, made references to the same music we did, had every inch of the grammar and vocab we did. But he said spic more than we did, called himself a spic, called other people spics. Patches told me, William nodding, that he was letting himself roll into some kind of identity that Crookston knew how to deal with. Harder to be the one black kid than just another Mexican.

"No one believes him though," I said.
"For the best," William said.

"Yeah," Patches said. "He don't really want to be anything but Marc, you know? It's all about poise and posture."

I thought it was odd. I was German and Norwegian, would later discover with the movie Fargo, that there were things wrong with my O's and use of slang. I had no idea what German and Norwegian was. Still, I wouldn't have dared to say anything else if someone asked. Race was cable; you could flip into other channels and shows but you couldn't, shouldn't even, lie about your home station, were ultimately rooted to names and times handed down, barely realized.

But these half-formed notions were just that, half-formed. I usually just watched my mouth, made sure I said the right words and figured race wasn't no thang.

* * * * *

That night, walking downtown, I would have said that Mr. Ranthom wasn't dead, would have used him, the funny, smart, charming, very alive man as proof of hope, even in Crookston. I would have brought him up.

The autumn before, he had lent William, a few years out of his classroom, a book. Frank and Stein and Me About a monster, created by an old man, raised by a kid. Nothing literary but fun, an easy read. We all read it. William went in to return it and found a sub. A few days later the same thing.

It was my mother who saw, we could tell because her expression changed into something tight and even quieter than usual, that he had been arrested. She didn't tell us. We found out later, in easy words, from the Junior High Principal who was coming forward to put the matter straight. He had molested kids, mostly girls, Mr. Hinkins said.

That night we stole some smokes from 7-11, hit the Marb Reds deep into the pack, went to the park.

"Set up," William said.
"Who would do that?" I asked.

"Stupid people," William said, "I don't know."

"Shame," Patches said. "Only damn teacher in the whole system."

And we smoked, sucking toxin not too deep, into our cheeks and back out, a series of little puffs.

"Think I can talk to him?" William asked. "Before the trial?"

"Probably not," Patches said.

"Morse code'd work," Andy said.

"I just wanted to talk about the book," William said.

"And say what?" I said. "Man's going to jail, probably, innocent, and you want to talk about a book?"

"Yeah," he said. "Show him I was listening. Questioning. All of that."

I moved to the swings, kept my cigarette in my left hand.

"He should have left Frank alone," William said.

"That's harsh," Andy said. "Poor guy."

"He was dead," Patches said. "Louie's right. He was dead once, it's not the kid's fault, not the kid's problem."

"Exactly," William said. "The kid's gotta feed his own monsters, not some old man's."

"Remember that kiddies everywhere," Patches said. "Remember that. Don't raise nobody else's monster."

And I nodded, from the swing, sucking on the cigarette rolled in Virginia somewhere. I think, even that night, I knew we were doing exactly that, inheriting monsters, wreckage, a few screws and tape to hold things in place. I was. I didn't tell them about the faces in study hall, when the announcement was made. Kelly Johnson, Melissa Manroe. Sober, unsurprised. Maybe even relieved.
William, I later found out from Mom, didn’t tell us that he knew when it, at least one instance, had happened. It had seemed weird at the time, a talent show costume examination over lunch, in the coat room. Ranthom had said kids get nervous about costumes, don’t disturb. Weird but not unthinkable. And William had stayed outside, played tether ball the whole recess. Thought nothing of it.

We probably all had guilty connections, things falling into place, oddities ironed out. But that night at the park, even later, we said nothing. Smoked. Chewed mint gum to get the smell out of our mouths, claim we went for pizza, blame the stink on a drunk softball team, middle aged women, playing darts too close to where we were sitting.

And we watched the sky, like every other night. Stars named by someone else. We had been taught a few constellations. We new the Northern Lights were really dull dust and debris with a dead Latin name that took the dance out of the soft green hand, pulling us, some nights, further from home. We knew, lied, would keep lying even after we needed to believe something else, something beyond a perfect teacher, something beyond trust in what we had been given.

Watching the sky, those nights at the park, the night we went to the river with beer and Schnapps and a brother drowning, we didn’t know that simply voicing an admission of Ranthom’s betrayal, the pain, the pissed off let down, would help us disprove the notions that we would see nothing that hadn’t been spotted before, that our nights were not about exploration, that nothing new could be encountered, that we could only hope that we had time to sort through, pick the brightest spots in the sky, trade our new names for the real ones, already written, get the facts right before we were called in by our parents, given a last drink of water before bed.

Ranthom’s name, spoken, could have changed the opaque sky, given a sign that not everything was fated. That our hands were not tied completely. We could have talked about the river, our hands at the river, our hands untied that could cut each other deep, and with the right moments of cold, hand signals to our own mistakes, recover more than had been squandered.
But we smoked, exhaled, covered up, lied about Ranthon. Would do the same to rumors of our own monsters soon enough. This match, these words, are to untie what has been bound too long. If ink is noise, I am screaming. Letting the right wounds bleed, pink and sore. Raw. We must rub it clean, sort scabs, keep our own safe and ours, sacred and saved on a mantle or in a padded box meant for jewels and fine gemstones.

* * * * *

"They're morons," Patches said on our porch. "They ain't stupid, though."

"What?"

"The locals."

"Us?" Andy said.

"Nah," Patches said. "The other locals. The ones that surround us."

"You sure they're not stupid?" William asked.

"They know a lot about farming," he said. "I guess."

"Sure." William said. "But none of our parents are farmers."

"We don't even own pellet guns," Andy said.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Phil owns one," I said.

"See." Andy said, "Farmers ought to have pellet guns,"

"Woah," Patches said, "you might be on to something."

"But Phil's not a farmer," William said.

"See," Andy said proudly, "I was WRONG."

"Nah," Patches said, "Your totally right. By proxy or somethin'. Example, whatever."

He stirred his lemonade.

"So." Andy said slowly, cautiously. "What the hell did I mean?"

"We ain't got the first clue about who we are talkin' about."
“I do,” Andy said.
“You ain’t got the first clue about anything.”
“Right,” Andy said. “Both are true.”
“Zen Baby”
“Ohm Vincent.”
“Ohm Andy.”
“Ohm Number Six,” I said and Andy smiled.
“They’re still morons,” William said.
“Maybe the pig is the eagle,” Patches said.
“I been suspicious about the pig for some time,” Andy said.

* * * * *

“So, Fuckers,” Marcus said. “Couldja kill someone?” He was smoking a cheepo cigar, five for a buck ten or something like that. Phil had them, they were all smoking them. In the woods. Marcus didn’t know how to smoke a cigar, I mean none of us did but he really didn’t. He was swaying, off balance, a little purple.
“You’re playing exhaust pipe,” William said. “Don’t... these things’ll kill ya.”
“Shuddup and answer the question,” Marcus said.
“You’re turning color,” I said.
“More than usual?” Marcus said. “You’re just jealous, white bread mothafuckas.”
“So,” Phil said, smoke out of his mouth graceful, spit to the forest floor, “What’s the question?”

“No, fucker-face,” Marcus said, “You Able to be Cane? That’s the question.”
“Still lame,” Patches said. “It’s like... can’t... what’s the point.” He stood still, long
inhale, long exhale. “Shit,” he said, not the way he normally swore, no hesitation, no discomfort,
aggressive. I coughed cold air and stopped.

William and I were sharing a cigar, he was holding it then, while Patches stood. William
pushed up his glasses, scratched his nose, made some noises in his throat, gave me the cigar and
stood up, moved between Marcus and Patchey. He was the only one moving, his mumble the only
noise, a sick kind of start and stop noise, never really words, slow motion like the crunch of leaves
as he shifted his wait, the snapping of twigs.

“What’s going on?” he said, finally. No answer. “Patchey?”

“Sit down,” Phil said, a small smile. “We’re finally talkin’ here.”

“Nah,” Patches said, “We’re not talkin’.”

“Nice,” Marcus said, still sucking the cigar full, more color in the face, cheeks sucked tight,
his frame, ninety pounds at the most, more bone than water, tightened. He stood up too, dizzy
standing. “Hypocrite.”

“What’s a hypocrite?” I asked, or Bob Stottle asked, someone tried to break the flow.

“Me, I guess.” Patches said.

“Yep,” Phil said.

“Why?” William said...

“Some topics are out of bounds,” Marcus said. “We talk about endless shit that don’t mean
nothin’. Define infinity, talk about what is real... what is real is this question. He doesn’t talk
now.”

“That’s not hypocrisy,” William said. “That’s...”

“Common sense,” Patches said.

“Fear’s what it is,” Marcus said.

“Right,” Phil said. “‘Fraid you could do it? Why? I could, real easy, right situation roles
around.”
"I could too," Bob Stottle said, but the look on his face was goofy. He stood up too, big body, shorter than me but more muscle. "Ya get in my way n' boom...." he said. He made this ninja face and laughed. I laughed too.

"I could." Andy said, smiling while Bob kept punching trees and kicking at grass shouting boom-boom-boom but he was still looking at Marcus and his voice was flat, not Andy's this time. Maybe his military family, his brother's voice sitting in the basement talking about advances in chemical warfare, talking about bringing a knee up hard to the bones in the chest, dropping a bleeding body. The naturalness of violence, the inevitability. The naval ships on his walls, in posters, ships like the one his father sailed on. He was hard and soft, staring at Marcus, his hands in loose fists, the sweat on my forehead cold, slick. Andy Vincent was smiling a mousetrap smile. White teeth, long muscles.

"What's the point of this again?" William asked.

"None," Patches said.

"Separate men from the girls," Phil said.

"No," Marcus said, "Girls can kill just as fast as men. dumbshit."

"You know what I mean," Phil said. "I was just sayin...."

"It's my question," Marcus said, "I get to say what it's for. Not about separation. About realizing. What Jimmy doesn't wanna do. You just don't know. You could, couldn't ya, Jimmy? Couldn't ya?"

"Don't know," Patches said. "Don't know nuthin'."

* * * * *

The next September, I saw William leave the rest of us. We had finished most of the Schnapps, had beer in our pockets. We had gotten over the river using this tree that had fallen across the river. Phil said there was a military bridge, abandoned and cool as hell, a few miles
West. We didn’t believe, I don’t think, but kept moving. William’s feet were wet from the first crossing. We had crawled slowly, faces bumping into asses. He had lost his balance and nearly a shoe.

“No river named after a lake gonna get my Nike,” He had said.

“Sure ain’t” Patches had said.

It was an easy crawl for me. With a little more balance or sureness or something, William wouldn’t have been left to let fear fester for two hours on the other side of the river. It all could have been avoided.

William had been silent for most of our walk after our first crossing.

“Still hear the river,” I heard him say.

“Let it sound like a fife,” Patches said.

“Played by demonic dwarfs, maybe” he said.

He was looking for another way across. I was on the tree branch, leaning but safe, he was moving somewhere deeper, down stream a bit. He was looking at a path of rocks. He jumped to the first, I stopped moving, bent up to my knees, let my hands hang heavy by my sides. Phil was crawling behind me into me, I could feel him cold against my leg.

“Keep movin’” He said.

I kept still, almost across our bridge, head turned watching.

Him.

William.

Jump.

Brother.

Next rock.

Only brother.

Jump.

Wet rock.
He went in without a sound.
Phil's laughter, "What a wuss."
Marcus saying "fucker fell."
William underwater.

* * * * *

Patches never rented violent video games. He played "Track and Field" even though he didn't care about sports at all. He made fun of the man he was trying to make pole vault but kept renting the game, mastered the shot put stage while saying that measuring how far a steel ball could be thrown was the "ultimate injustice to a civilized fungus." The way I saw him, he was the least angry of all of us. His anger was more like withdrawal. He didn't go with us for a few weeks after the woods argument. I think William saw him, they cleaned Patches fish tank or played Nintendo a few times, walked by themselves. But when Marcus would call, or even Andy and ask us to get Patches, William would lie for him, say he was busy with his grandfather's garden or doing something in Grand Forks with his father.

Patches knew himself better than we did. I was fooled by the sculpture, the gentle shapes in snow he would leave on his deck to freeze, the soft gloveless hands, redder than they should be, carefully scraping and creating, ignoring the cold. The shapes he molded carefully, out of patient clay in the summer days we spent at eagle's' point, a few miles West of Red Lake falls, on a bank above the river William would fall into, sitting on a blanket on dry clay. He brought a bucket of water to loosen the clay, to pull it up gently, to take his time with it, to make things with names, the wheel of life, the spoon of discovery. William and I, Bob and Andy sometimes, would go with, do it too. I gave up usually, made mud balls to throw at Andy and Bob, came home with browns where my shirt used to be white after Andy lost patience with sculpting too and a full fledged, giggling, mud fight broke out. William completed his, but they had cracks and were rough and barely held together. Patches seemed to work without effort, the clay, the snow, bent and shaped
willingly, giving over to him. Peaceful. Easy. Patches had graceful fingers that he moved over the surface of the soft clay, rubbed lines out, rubbed shape and texture into the clay. His finger prints became part of the sculpture. He seemed able to control everything, the clay, the tone of William’s’ voice when they talked, the way his hair looked at school, the way he responded to everything. A rub of his patient hands and all that was not joined, not calm, not beautiful, would become finished.

* * * * *

William didn’t die in that river. He popped back up straight, wet sure, but alive. His brown sweatshirt was dripping, water in his hair, mud on his face, a little blood, and his glasses were gone. The water was up to his chest, all of his head was out and aware, very aware, going flushed as Phil and Marcus were laughing. My brother didn’t die in that river, we all did.

It was Patches who got to Phil first, stopped the laughing. Patches gentle fingers ripped into skin, more blood into muddy water, remolded Phil’s laughing mouth into a sieve leaking water and fear, changed Phil’s face into a river flowing dark.

* * * * *

“It’s so flat here,” William said one night. We were at the park, four of us, sitting on a cold metal spider.

“Yeah,” Patches said. “Flat.”

“Flat enough to stop moving,” Andy said.

“Huh?”

“I mean it,” He said. “Like... even if you were really round. You wouldn’t roll anywhere.”

“I think he’s saying it’s flat,”

“I think he’s talkin’ bout reverse momentum,” Patches said. “No way to get out.”

“Right,” Andy said proudly. “No way out.”
"Except for the aliens." William said.

"Right."

"There sure takin' their time," Patches said. "I told the alien girl I met at the supermarket to bring her friends and get us at nine-thirty."

"Why you always get to meet the alien girls?"

"Cause I'm a snappy dresser."

"Nah," William said, "He advertises in the inter-stellar personals."

"Yah got me," Patches said. "Single Earth Male, snappy dresser, seeking girl of the cosmos..."

"With vehicle..."

"To eat ice cream..."

"And practice kinky telekinetics..."

We laughed.

"There's one."

"What?"

"An Alien?"


"Where?"

"There."

"OVER HERE!!!"

"WE'RE OVER HERE!!!"

"Is it cliche to yell at aliens?" William asked.

"Nah," Patches said. "It's cliche to buy 'em a drink."

"Just in case William's right," I said, "We should show 'em that we're different than the others."

"WE DON'T GIVE A CRAP ABOUT ELVIS!!" Patches yelled.
"You're gonna get us lynched," William said.

"Or offend their head honcho."

"They're leaving."

"COME BACK!"

"Lost another one, boys."

"COME BACK!!"

"Good thing it's this flat," Andy said.

"Huh?"

"More sky means more Aliens."

"Right."

"What's it mean to be this small?" William asked. No answer for a few minutes. We clicked heavy tongues thoughtfully and didn't look away from the sky. We breathed on our hands, rubbed skin to keep it warm, pulled our arms into our heavy sweatshirts.

"No answer," Patches said. "Ask the spider."

"I get to," Andy said.

"Why you always get to talk to the spider?"

"We speak the same language," he said, smiling. He squeaked a few times.

"What's the spider say?"

"No answer."

"Let's try another."

"Anyone?"

"Another question?"

Andy squeaked a few more times.

"What'd ya ask?"

"Who's gonna win race number four." Andy said. "Let's get rich guys."

"That's abusing the good will of our metal friend," Patches said.
"Who owns the Red River?" I asked.

"I don't need a spider for this one." Andy said. "A guy named Morris, lives in Delaware. Owns the whole damn valley. Right guys?"

"What do you mean, Jake?" Patches asked.

"Well," I said, "On the Minnesota side, it says welcome to North Dakota. On the other side it says welcome to Minnesota. Does that mean you're in both states when you're on the bridge?"

"The Valley is its own state," Patches said. "Ya'know?"

"No." Andy said.

"I think the man's bein' a metaphor," William said.

"Somethin' like that, brother," Patches said. "Not talkin' state like border and whatever. It's more than that. Okay, you got a river, right?"

"Morris does," Andy said.

"Whatever. This river separates two states right? Now, like Minneapolis-St. Paul, they're way different than say... Grand Forks, even Fargo."

"Hills," William said.

"Right. Duluth too. They even got trees in Duluth. But up here, what's the difference between Minnesota and North Dakota."

"Notadnamfing?" Andy said. He was eating pretzels.

"Not exactly," Patches said. "There is one difference."

"Names." William said.

"Yup. Other than that, no difference. The valley defines us more than what state we live in."

"Yeah."

"I don't even see myself in the mirror."

"Do you see me?" Andy asked.
“No.”

“Good, ’cause I was gonna say that’s not a mirror its a window.”

“And that would have been funny,” William said, “But Patchey’s being metaphor again.”

“Sure is,” I said. “Speak it.”

“Should I lecture?” he asked.

“Speak it,” I said.

“Speak it right and good,” William said.

“Speak it bovine,” Andy said.

“Moooooo,” Patches said.

“But in English.”

“I’m talkin’ bout lookin’ in the mirror and seein’ nothin’ but dark black soil, some standing water like it is in the spring. I’m talking about smelling the stink of the beet plant, seeing the white juices cracked open on the highway, seeing the low fog hanging cross highway seventy five, my brothers. Smelling the dung and things growing. All this when I look, not outside, but at myself.”

“You see the smell of cow dung?” Andy asked.

“Yes I do,” Patches said. “I don’t smell myself. I smell the valley. I see the valley when I see myself. Taste it’s sugar on my lips.”

“That’s gotta make the alien girls happy,” William said.

“Sure does,” Patches said.

“Good lecture,” I said. We clapped.

“One of these days I’ll say something I believe,” he said.

We laughed and I realized I could see our breaths. The last day of Summer, or maybe it was already over, early September. A year before William fell in, swallowed brown water, tasted soil, runoff. The valley in the river, William, and the rest of us, face down drowning in both.
I was spooked by Patches lecture, let my mind float on it for a while, in the shower, on the way to Grand Forks, riding past the sugar beet plant. The Red River Valley. Fertile land around the river that divides Minnesota and North Dakota where their really is no division. Small towns every seven miles along the highways and railroad tracks. Difference, distinction between the towns lies only in the names, names on the signs above the grocery store, names on mailboxes, names called to re-gather children late for supper. Crookston grew around the Red Lake river, a less impressive, more ordinary stream that flowed into the Red River of the North in Grand Forks. More names, same system, same water. Our land was dark in the spring, wet with melted snow. A system of rivers trickling gently through soft mud, frozen sluggish in November. Our dark soil buried by hard snow, skated over by winds from Canada, as a whole, existed long before Andy Vincent rode his bike to the theater, parked behind the Ben Franklin, chained his bike to a red hydrant, long before Marcus got a job as a security guard at the beet plant, long before I drove delivery for Happy Joe's, before Bob Stottle went to state in track, all of us lined up with water for so his bulked up frame didn't overheat, collapse from a few too many loops and repetitions, circles. The valley existed long before William tried to jump over a river. Smells of dung and growth, origins deeper than we comprehended, paid no attention to town boundaries. Crookston was hard to separate from the farmland around it, the valley outlived all of us, even the buildings, reclaimed what it owned. Even the buildings themselves, form and content, Plato and Aristotle, grew from the fragile, fertile soil. The Beet plant on the South side of town, steam blowing across highway seventy five, like a low bridge, three, four months a year. We could smell that sweet plant stink blowing South to North, following the way of the Red, Warm to Cold.

But the land, the sameness spread across our two hundred square miles of corner, was also our point of distinction. Farm land like no other valley in the world. Sugar beets on the highways, split open, shattered. White juices mixed with black earth. Crookston took pride of its name, its place in the valley, it’s dot on the map without really knowing anything about who was living
there. People, more names, were less important than the gravity, the repetition of the seasons, cycles of reaping, sowing. The Bible was written for the Red River Valley.

I, after Patches lecture, couldn’t shake the feeling that all of us, one way or another, were already too deep, drowning already, one river or another. I, taller than all of our friends, bigger than most people I saw on the streets, stronger than even Phil or Andy, grew up scared as hell. I didn’t talk about it to them, asked a question here or there, cried in a elm tree when William fell under, tears that felt like “finally, I knew this was gonna happen, now it is.” I figured, told myself over and over, that we could beat it, that we could get out of the valley, learn to breathe real air, that I could wrestle for a division one school, get the hell out, warmer even. But I couldn’t shake it, thoughts always came back to our soil, our rivers, our water and mosquitoes, pesticides and fertilizers. I could throw you around, rip off your arms if you made me mad enough, bite my way through bone. But I was sure that I would die close to the home I grew up in, sunk hip deep in mud, head split open, blood into snow and river water. I was sure we all would.

* * * * *

“Gonna leave,” Marcus said, rubbing his black hands together at the park. “Gonna get out of this park, get some culture if it kills me.”

“Culture’ll kill ya alright,” Patches said.

“When?” I asked.

“Whenever,” Marcus said, climbing the metal bars, pulling one leg over, balancing. “Any time. I get the chance, I’d skate out of here.”

“Not you buddy,” William said.

“I got skills,” Marcus said. “I can skate. The black kid can skate. Gonna be a feature in next year’s Icecapades.”

“Cool,” I said.

“Ya’ll comin’ with me?” He asked.
"I will," I said.

"I'm waiting for the aliens," Patches said.

"I'll come with," William said, climbing up to where Marc was. "But I'm coming back here. We all will right?"

"Hell yeah," Andy said. "Damn bovine spot, this park."

"Right," Patches said. "I'll have the alien honeys drop me off."

"If you see aliens, give me a ring," William said.

"No shit, brother."

"No shit."

"So are you leaving or not?"

"Sure," Patches said. "You skate we fly."

"Hover," Andy said.

"Right."

"Here's the deal," William said. "We come back for the millennia."

"The whole millennia?" Marcus asked.

"Nah," William said. "Just the new year."

"Where ever we are," Andy said. "Dig it."

"I dig it," Patches said. "I'm in. Romantic. Like poetry, brother."

"Or a suicide pact," Marcus said.

"Whatever," I said. "We come back."

"Or just come," William said. "We ain't left yet."

"We will," Patches said. "Inevitable, handsome man like me gets a lift somewhere fruity and good where the sky tastes like apricots."

"You sound reluctant," Marcus said.

"I dunno," William said. "Where else they got us?"

"And a spider." Andy said.
“Yeah, good point,” Patches said, laughing. “Screw you Marc, I’m staying.”

“I’m serious,” William said.

“He’s serious,” I said.


“Louie ain’t even fifteen now.” Patches said.

“Right, man,” Andy said. “You the cosmic cow, infinite and old. Graze, man, graze.”

“Cosmic pastures,” Patches said.

“Big old cosmic moo,” Andy said.

“I’ll come with,” I said.

“Not yet,” Patches said. “You got trophies to win, a city on your shoulders.”

“Nah,” I said. “Wouldn’t be missed.”


“You’d come back and be myth,” Patches said. “Songs and shit.”

“Grogg no like singy,” I said.

“Grogg dumb,” Patches said. “Maybe not so big. I try again.”

He tackled me and William hung upside down. Marcus, his small body easy to throw, and Andy, slow and soft, joined the fray like it was a rugby scrum and William hung, his feet holding him above us, watching our bodies twist, disappear into laughing.

“Where else they got us?”

“God,” Marcus said, a small pucker of a smile, “I hope nowhere.”

So that’s it, that’s why I was with them. Even when I was lost, they were enough to keep muddling, to grow up next to. It is true I might not have if I had known about the river, but I kind of did, feared it all the way deep. And I wouldn’t have trusted such stuff to anyone else. And most of
the time, there was no river and they treated me like I was one of them. Like a peer, you know?

We used the word peer a lot in school. Peer pressure meant don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t do drugs. Miss Lawrence didn’t tell me what a peer actually was. I thought she was saying pure pressure. I could have understood that, that would have made more sense. But I saw it so I looked it up.

Associate. Accomplice. Equal. People you work with, spend time with, accept and want to be accepted by. “Clinical but nice,” Patches would have said of my definition. But that was what I was to them. More than just William’s brother— not that they forgot who I was. I was younger, two years than most of them, three than my brother, a little thrilled and embarrassed by their age, by the way Philip Langely could say “fuck this shit”, or talk about taking clothing off girls, touching tongues and skin. “Tits” he said. It was good to be one of them.

I was still me, though. I went to bed alone, showered by myself, didn’t have any of them, other than in reputation and memory, sitting with me in class. I wasn’t able to use William’s knowledge of base eight numbers, Ted Kobkins’s memory for civil war dates, Marcus Mitchell’s long words broken by the word fucker, Andy’s easy laugh, Phil’s blatant defiance, or even Patchey’s sculptures. I was alone always.

“That’s what it is,” William would have said if I told him, “to grow up, yo.”

“We all are,” Patches would have said. “Shit of the sham. Teen and lonely. Synonyms.”

I just wondered why no one said anything.

Teachers, until I started wrestling varsity, knew me as the younger Lewis, one of the ‘dime-store philosophers’ that hung out at Spider park, talked in the parking lot, walked the railroad tracks, were separated by free will. The only time I am sure that I did something that they remembered as me and me alone was at lunch in the eighth grad. None of the others were there, old enough to leave the building, and I had to sit at a table with small words. I didn’t talk. Instead, I watched them, the smart kids of my class. Tony Rilco had glasses and talked about history a lot. Fritz Stephans liked to ski. Albany Ruschow was a math wiz, he said. They were in speech. They were socially repressed, not funny, not as bright as they wished they were. Lonely as hell. Boring
even to each other. I was watching them, thinking about how often they cried when they got home, or weren't being watched, or were being called "scratchcrotch" or "el-fucko". I drank milk and listened to their low voices.

On the other side of the lunchroom, two kids, I don't even remember which two, started yelling at each other and they were shoving and I ran between them. Was punched a few times by both sides. My name was yelled by an adult, I was told to sit down.

"Fuck you," I said toward the voice that had yelled, "Fuck you," I said to the kids who were trying to fight. They stopped. I was bleeding but I had the floor.

"You are miserable, right?"

Neither of them answered.

"You both are. Admit it and sit down," I said. "We all are," I yelled, filled the entire white tiled room with my voice, started screaming. I felt Patches and William inside of my head but knew this was bigger than either of them. I started moving, all eyes on me. I opened a can of root beer from a milk crate in the deli line, poured it on the floor. It was splashing as I walked.

"We are pissed and bored and lonely, eh?"

Silence. Splashing pop. My footsteps. Eyes glued to me. I was taller than anyone in the room.

"Admit it. Loudly. Say 'I am fucking sad, Jake!' I am fucking sad. Get it out."

Nothing.

"I am alone," I said. "It feels like I have nothing. Say it."

I had the floor, I had all of the attention in the entire world. I was a big, rangy cat. I could have spit at them, bitten an ear off, kicked the shit out of both the kids who were fighting at the same time and no one did anything. I wanted them all dead, I wanted them all to come alive.

And I got detention, was almost suspended for my inspiring antics.

Got nothing from my classmates, not even the dickheads I ate with every day. Mom and Dad made an appointment for counseling.
“You did a good thing,” William said when I told them.

“Spoke it good,” Patches said.

“You would have gotten them to yell,” I said.

“Nah,” William said.

“We wouldn’t have even gotten up,” Patches said.

* * * * *

The Red Lake River is less of a river than it is a source for a more famous river. What happened that night is no more important than what happened before and after. It is no different than a fork, tributaries melding, splitting.

* * * * *

So, who was I? I was the tallest. That’s not fair. That’s who I was compared to the rest of us, who I was as part of the group. Who was I as an individual? As Jacob Lewis? Tall. A lot of red in my hair. Caveman Grogg. I was smart. My parents had thought about letting me skip second grade. They didn’t think I knew, but William told me when I felt stupid. But I was. Smart. Not the smartest, but smart enough to laugh when they did, make them laugh, whatever. Still, that’s defining myself in terms of them. We all were defined like that, though. At least until high school, maybe even later. Except Phil. If someone mentioned his name, they wouldn’t have been asked if he hung out with Jimmy Delcro. The rest of us were defined as a collective. Maybe we just thought we were or even wanted to be. Maybe because none of us really knew exactly how we stood as individuals. We just thought we were too young.

So who was I? Seriously, we didn’t know. We figured out who we were compared to each other, I guess. I like this more than William, less than Andy. Says something about me. That sort of thing. I liked a lot of things. William and Patches were too critical. Especially William. He
was down right picky. If it was popular it had a few strikes against it already. I liked the movie Hoosiers. I thought Goones was cool. I wanted to be a Transformer. I was good at video games. I had a crush on Val Hucksly, sort of. I loved my family. I liked my friends. I mean, it was more than that, it must have been.

I wanted them to like me. To trust me. Is that about me or them? I think that says something about who I was. It says I was willing to do things to show them. Peer pressure, maybe. But not really. It wasn't like I thought that if I didn't do something they would hate me or stop hanging out with them. I didn't really do anything I didn't want to. But I would go out of my way to show them that I was worth their time, I guess.

I wanted them to trust me, you know? So to prove it, I would tell them things about the others, when it was just the two of us. Intimacy, not holding anything back from them, saying all I knew. I became a middle man, at times, if two of us weren't communicating. Or I was a way to find things out. Especially about William.

So I would acquiesce, tag along, stay subtle and un-intrusive, not really disliked by any of them. The first and maybe the only thing I did completely on my own was wrestling. I started in first grade, never had any of those ugly weight cutting issues. My metabolism understood, kept me a constant 175 from seventh grade on. In wrestling, there is technique. You've got moves that are named and memorized. You try them out on a limp body first. You practice to get a repertoire that you can call on in the actual moment, work in your own variations. You rehearse for the moment. Try to think with your back and legs. You prepare for three rounds, get ready to pit your skills, all that time on the weights, hours spent running hallways and stairs, for nine minutes against another living person who is taking it as seriously as you are. You are getting ready for the real thing, a lot like school or your first date or whatever-- there is something real waiting and you must be ready, it will all count eventually. You thrive on the illusion that you are something special, that you have learned a lot, improved, that you are ready to encounter anything and that the form that you have developed won't abandon you when you need it.
The ref's hand goes down and you are pull and twist. A boy your own age, also kissed a few girls and cried at his grandmother's funeral, is coming at you and you can smell and feel his skin and he is different than you, separate, but he has spent as many hours learning and getting ready for this as you have. He has every bit as much of a right to be big and strong and win. And if you think about it, do anything more than just live as yourself in a very strong and quick world, you are sure to loose. Form is only so much, technique is limited. Instinct is the only thing that is individual. And it means everything. I was Jacob Lewis, the same as our friends in what we were taught, how we were brought up, but I had no doubts that I was different when the words were gone, when I anticipated my opponent going low, twisted them into an arm bar, fell through them to the ground, pulled them breathless onto their backs.

Most of our friends came to watch me wrestle. They all had words and ideas that could set them apart from us as group, as subset of Crookston. They won awards as individuals. But their words were too clever, ephemeral, shifting, left them empty and hollow most of the time. It was through me that they could know something all the way, objective and very real-- there is a winner and a looser in a wrestling match. They, I think, trusted me more than themselves. I was proud but embarrassed. I figured Andy should have been as good, figured William would've been fine if he trusted himself. They were thinkers, though, so I decided to trust their trust, let them scream from the bleachers. No one stuck me. If I got beat, I simply ran out of time. I rarely did. William and Patches and Andy and Bob Stottle, and even Phil and Marcus sometimes, found me afterwards, slapped my hand, hugged my salty body, said "kick ass little man, kick ass."

That was me.

A set of three minute rounds when my body was proof enough.

* * * * *

The only one who would've understood was Bob. He ran track, cross country, basketball. Would've been better at football, but didn't bulk up until after he was a runner.. There is a reason I
have forgotten Bob Stottle, decided not to describe him in detail until now. Patches said he was
ghost like, which is half true. He was not ghost like in the way that Grampa Jim, Patches'
grandfather growing corn and tomatoes, was. Grampa Jim was in-ethereal. Bob Stottle was
massive and thick, unmistakably present. He was not overseeing or omnipresent or anything
supernatural like that. It was an aloof quality that was spiritual. He wasn't distant or cold,
probably nicer of any of us.

Bob Stottle was there, even at the park, all the time and would have more per capita
punch lines and laughs than the rest of us. But there was always some thing disengaged, almost
absent mindedly absorbed. Not spacey exactly, but benevolently aloof, like his voice wouldn't
catch on a tape recorder. Ghost like, he has been unable to be caught with dialogue, but he was one
of us, no mistaking.

When we went to the pool, William didn't have contacts. The rest of us could see and
would swim away from him, let him approach other blurry bodies squinting and timid. Bob Stottle
stayed with him. He didn't tell William where we were, let us have our fun. And William didn't
ask him to. They talked about baseball as William tried to pretend he was patient. And Bob
stayed close enough to recognize, a little uneasy, but aware that we could enjoy ourselves without
William feeling completely abandoned. This is one of the few examples I can muster, searching for
proof of him. Ghost like, there is little evidence. Even the times in the weight room, him grunting
out the same reps as me, I don't remember details.

I have to turn to direct presentation, tell don't show. He was our conscience. A distant
participant, Zen and strong, in the good stuff, even in the bad. In his own life, he had, I am sure,
real struggles, had to deal with acne like the rest of us, possessed anecdotes that could be
minimalist fables, lay down real nice and funny and meaningful in quick prose.

But this is not his story. In this, he is simply the only one who came close to remaining who
he really was. He was simply a ghost of how we all should have moved, a strong rumble not
minding the circles of the 3200, grinding out miles in practice. His senior pictures include a pair of
crutches, his ankle in a cast, his track uniform on. He was about staying solid and quipping puns to grease wheels and let the world happen, keep his body a sinewy temple, suspended beyond simple, dying connections.

There are reasons I forget he was there, reasons we all do.

His story would be more interesting than this one.

But he was, maybe unfortunately, wrapped into this on. He came along with us to the river, drank Schnapps from a brown bag, seemingly more out of acknowledgment of the inevitable decay of things than any kind of passion. He was Christ-like and sad that night. Not a martyr. Just helpless, fated. He walked on the same wet trails we did but didn’t bother to crane his neck, squint his eyes, search for the Army Fort Phil had promised. He understood, I think, we had other destinations.

* * * * *

I was me, on the mat, in the weight room. I was me in my body. But even lifting weights, I got something from them. It was Bob Stottle’s form that helped me get 315 up for the first time.

“Keep the arms perp,” he said. “Trust yer joints, little man.”

“Lifting weights,” William said when I showed him I could do it, “only serves to remind me how weak I am.”

“Bullshit,” I said when I couldn’t get 325 up. “I am strong already.”

There were certain things I could trust. Easier when thinking meant nothing and my body, the twist of hard muscle, a quick throw and cover was innate. The form started as Bob’s but became mine when the hand came down and there was another body instead of a machine or loosely joined rings of metal. The body was mine. Mine alone. I am Jacob Lewis, I was Jacob Lewis. I was six foot as a fifth grader, six-three in junior high. Six-six by sixteen. I had stringy arms, tight tendons. My pulse ran deep. I could feel blood pump in my toes if my shoes were too tight. I had big hands, could sink boney fingers into dirt or skin. I had broad shoulders, did pull-ups automatically. I had to spit
snot when I ran a long way. It never kept me from finishing. I was best when I started on the bottom, let the enemy guess how to deal with my lanky form, let them pull at sinew, twisted away and up. I smiled as I knocked you down. I had good foot work, a grip that couldn’t be broken, a few more inches of reach than people in my weight class and I enjoyed it when an opponent’s joint would pop, not a sprain or anything, just a noise that meant I had changed, for a harmless moment, someone else’s body. I was Jacob Lewis and I could have trained to be anything, have read Shakespeare, have studied Physics, could see myself taking all of those things into different rings. But all the training in the world can’t erase instinct. You can’t explain instinct, it won’t get a job interview, an academic scholarship or communicate to the world who exactly you are. But I knew exactly who I was, all the way deep, in three minute rounds all through the season. Class after class, book after book, even the conversations with William and Patches and Andy and the other people I loved changed nothing. I was Jacob Lewis and my instincts were good, would have you on your back helpless the first time you underestimated me. I shook hands politely with you afterward. Assumed there were other things you did well, many better than me. I maybe still respected you. But I knew that you had seen Jacob, fully realized and alive and fully me, unexplained and real. And I knew that you would be more cautious, tentative next time we squared off because the truth of me was hidden in my glasses off of the mat, in the words I could use, in the friends I had coffee with, in the things we talked about, but the truth was that I was something to behold.

You became afraid of me, whoever I was, and that was all I needed to know.

* * * * *

"Are you gay?" I asked William. We were alone. In our basement. The TV was on.

"Nah," he said.

"It’s okay, I think, if you are."

He thought about that. "I know," he said.
"So are you?"

"No."

"Me neither," I said.

"Oh," he said. "But how do I know? I mean, I don't wanna be Phil. I don't know. How do you know?"

"Do you love Patches?"

"I don't like to look at his butt," he said. "I don't think I want to kiss him. But yeah, I love him."

"I know," I said. "He's a good guy."

"Yeah. I'd probably want to kiss him if I was, right?"

"Only if you had good taste," I said.

"And didn't care about muscles."

"Yeah," I said, "Different good taste than girls have."

"So... no," he said. "Not gay, I guess."

"Me neither," I said again. I wasn't lying. I probably knew I was straight more than William did. I didn't doubt I was, really. But I know what he meant. None of us knew anything for sure. "Infinite possibilities," Patches would have said about that. "How existential," would have been William's response. "What's existential?" I would have said. We were stupid about who we were but we knew who we could be when we were talking to eachother.

"Not gay," I said.

"I beat you up now," William said. He leapt at me. Maybe defense on his part, too much thinking for now, though that didn't happen very often. Maybe he wanted to wrestle.

"Wrong little brother you pick on," I said. "Grogg tough. Grogg make little big brother go owie, owie." I picked him up. Threw him on the couch. He leapt again, I picked him up again. Mom said we should go to bed, so we got quiet. He started to pull my hair and pinched my arm pits. I let him. It made it fairer to let him cheat.
We knocked over a plant and Mom yelled down again, “School tomorrow. Got to sleep, now.” So we watched TV with the volume off. And I looked at him, three days before river water would get in his mouth and nose. He looked ready to become anything.

* * * * *

We were smart kids. Maybe unbelievably. At least lucky to have each other. But we really knew nothing. Nothing about anything. There were girls in Crookston. We spent time with them? Nah. Not that young. None of us, other than Phil, thought we were popular enough to talk to them a lot.

“Not about popularity,” Patches said. “Phil’s stubborn.”

“Right,” William said. “He keeps talking and someone has to answer.”

But it kinda was, I thought. I mean, they used the word. People could be popular. And it so happened that they didn’t talk to those people, at least not the girls. So it had something to do with popularity even if it wasn’t like we thought that a pair of tennis shoes or a bottle of cologne would bring us kissing and stuff. I didn’t really know what the big deal was. Not that I didn’t want a girlfriend, even when I was that young. I never went through an “eeew gross” phase. Maybe because I hung out with them and they were long past that. But I didn’t understand how these people, so good with words, could run out of them trying to talk to certain people.

“Don’t know the rules,” William said, “Not when I’m talkin’ to girls.”

“What d’ya mean, Louie?” Patches said.

“I can’t just come up to them like I would a guy,” he said. “What would I say. ‘Hey, wanna get a frozen burrito some time?’ I can’t actually talk to them. Can I?”

“Yes,” I said. I looked at Patches to see if I was right. He didn’t hear me, I guess. He looked like William had finally said something dumb. Really dumb.
"Would they even know what to do?" William asked. "I mean, I have to stutter don't I? And push my glasses up a lot, right? I can't actually make sense, can I? That would break the rules. Patches?"

"I know whatcha mean," he said finally. They nodded and pushed up their glasses in shared frustration and I remembered that they couldn't see very well. "I know whatcha mean. It's about knowing the rules. It doesn't seem like we can talk the same way we normally do. Gay jokes don't work the way they do with guys. You fake being gay, a guy laughs...."

"Call someone a fag, a guy laughs," William said.

"Insult the size of someone's wanka, a guy laughs,"

"Pretend yours is huge," Andy said, "and I laugh."

"See?" Patches said. "We're laughing. Girl jokes aren't as easy."

"Girls make jokes?"

"Probably."

"Never heard one."

"Maybe they do, just not funny ones,"

"Nah," Andy said. "They do. Funny, too. Allison Lucas said I was a dickfour."

"What's a dickfour?" I asked.

"Pissin'."

"Is that funny?" Patches asked.

"No," William said. "Besides, that wasn't a joke, that was a reflex. You told her she was mighty bovine."

"It was a compliment."

"AND SHE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND?"

"Now that's a joke, brother Patchey," William said.

There were girls in my home town. We didn't know them. We knew that they were pretty and had been told that they were somehow different than we were. We knew their names. A few
other things, a phone number if we could figure out their father's name and look it up. I was
convinced that if the digits in their number added up to the sum of the digits in mine, we were
fated. Patches said that sucked, warned me I would have to share with William if that was true.
We sometimes knew what they liked to do, who they hung out with. Class schedules and where
their locker was. Mostly we knew their names, sounds that could be said enough that they named
an ideal more than a person, a few syllables said over and over again. More real than the person.

Not like best chest lists that you see on TV dramas about high school. Well, maybe Phil did. The
rest of just listed people we liked. The lists changed all the time, especially when new classes
started and new names could be learned. Names moved up, names moved down a few times a month.
But a changing of the number one spot was big news.

Allison Lucas became Andy's favorite when he learned where she lived. He made us pass
her house three, four times a day. Any excuse we could find. We drank a lot of Slurpies that
summer, rode our bikes down her street, a few blocks south of the fastest way, to get to the 7-11.
Walked Water Street home from the movies. Stopped to tie our shoes. Just to look at a house,
maybe a light on. We never saw her there. It might have not even been her house, but it was fun.
She moved up on my list and I had only seen a bad Polaroid taken three years earlier that Andy
had pinned up to his cork board. She was standing bored next to a dying tree, obviously waiting for
him to snap the picture. He said he tried to give it to her, like the pictures he had taken of the
first few "truly bovine girls," but she said she had enough pictures of herself. He talked to the
picture, told her image a lot of things, mainly to ask for a picture of him. His demands had started
larger, but it was the humble request for an exchange of pictures that got repeated the most.
Finding the right ritual was the key to finding something as magical as love.

Allison Lucas was thin and pretty. We assumed she was smart but we didn't know for sure.
Andy insisted she was smarter than any of us. "Funnier, too." Love had more to do with faith than
any kind of emotion, faith that a person behind a name would turn out to be something amazing, something that we might eventually get to know. We were fickle, changing lists and stuff, but we believed in our number one girl. And in destiny.

"Bovine is German, you know." Patches said.

"Really?" Andy asked.

"Yeah," William said. "It means Lucas."

"Wow," Andy said, ignoring my father's declaration that the word wasn't even German.

"That means somethin' good for me, I bet."

We were stupid.

* * * * *

William went out on a limb when he announced, in Patches' garage, that Molly Lott had just become his number one girl.

"That's some debut."

It wasn't cool to have the same number one as someone else, though it was understood that there would be repetition as the numbers got higher. That was to be expected. But it was more fun if we had different favorites. Molly Lott's name wasn't on anyone else's list.

"She's pudgy," said Ted Kobbins.

"Nah,"

"She does wear glasses," I said.

"So do we,"

"She can't speak Portuguese," Andy said.

"I heard she can," Patches said.

"Wow," William said.

"Ohm Molly," Patches said. I saw him wink at William while he cut a climbing rope into fray with a hunting knife, tied macaroni into the fray.
“Wow,” William said.

Patches finished his piece, a long, industrial al strength ponytail with edible beads.

“To Molly,” he said.

“To Molly,” we echoed.

“That’s the name of the piece, not a toast.”

“Don’t tell Phil,” he said.

* * * * *

It is not an accident that Philip Langely’s name, among others, has all but disappeared from this narrative. This, even in the most important paragraphs, is not about Phil. Phil had gravity and importance in our circle when he was there. But he really wasn’t there very often.

Even Kobbins and Marcus Mitchell, more similar to us than Phil, were rarely an essential part of whatever we were, not that we were aware that we were divided like this. We were unaware of anything more than who we were spending the most time with in a given week or semester. William and I would be playing super Mario Brothers and he could say that he hated Phil and Patches could nod and I could listen. But such boarders, as far as we were concerned, erased themselves quickly. Phil and William would spend a night popping Viverin like it did something, looking for booze on the side and all, I thought, would be forgiven, forgotten. Allegiance was fickle. Intimacy was easy to re-establish.

Just because some names have been dropped more than others, some names fleshed out to your satisfaction, doesn’t really reflect the operating hierarchy we grew up with. Life doesn’t work that way. Hierarchies were there, sure but we weren’t aware of them. There wasn’t one of us I wouldn’t have told my last secret to if the right situation had developed. I thought I would have done anything for any of them. I was wrong.

However, am not sure that I, even as I planned out these paragraphs and began putting this down in loose circles, realized how little their voices would surface or was aware of some gap I
couldn’t or didn’t care to cross. I am surprised. Even the amount of space given to Bob and Andy, even Patches and William, is smaller than I had planned. I thought this was about them, us, and by extension alone, myself. It may be simpler than that. I am surprised. But hindsight, a storyteller’s greatest tool, says such things are not accidents.

In any narrative, time is looped through, images and names and dates are chosen and given weight. Such choices, I thought, were made to tell a story: a story of a group of middle class, white boys deteriorating. I thought I was setting up a narrative frame, looping, returning. Knitting a river scene, brothers underwater. Such intentions are half realized. I have not, I don’t think, betrayed my intentions in terms of this group’s story, no matter how buried and imbedded it has become in something else. I have, ultimately, dropped enough names and details to serve them well.

However, in terms of the truly important story here, I have surprised myself: the climax has happened off the page— I was different than them. I was real, maybe more real, at least real enough to understand how my body moved. I know that now. I will carry my six feet and six inches elsewhere. I extend beyond this narrative. I am the only one to tell everything. I was there, a witness, part of it even. We all were. But witness can be a verb and I, more than any of them, have always been a verb. I was never just a lanky denominator in the sum of us. I am, always was, separate.

The rest of them may talk about it, may tell you what happened, I don’t know. But they will spin it, tell you what they learned, how it changed them. That isn’t what I am doing here. Witness, as a verb. I am telling you, to the best of my knowledge, what happened, not to justify, clarify or even explain. I thought I was setting out to do those things. Be a witness as a noun, like the rest of them. I know now that the act of getting it right is only important because I alone have full escaped the river, can get it right. It is important for me, in an elm tree that night, to speak, betray the most important silence we have intentionally kept from each other because all the others, still neck deep in water, would use words to tread water, try to save themselves. I am
honoring the match I lit in the beginning, letting it burn further only as an act of passing illumination.

    One night in the tree: I was watching, listening. Dry. It is obligatory, comes with my place safe in the tree, to witness. I know now it is even more my obligation to do so. Cut the scab loose with an emery board and rubbing alcohol. Keep my blood, and more importantly my feet, moving.

* * * * *

We all had lists of girls, practiced names over and over. Most of us kept the same number one girl for at least a year, sometimes all of high school. I liked Val Huckly for three years. But Ted Kobbins was the first one of us, including Phil, to have any kind of steady girlfriend. Her name was Shelly and she was my age. Tall and skinny, braces just off. She was loud and had dark freckles. But she was appropriately smart and important. She hadn’t been, to my knowledge, on any of his lists.

I, later, figured out that the months of pining that we went through, the articulation of affection, the naming of one’s feelings, are not a pre-requisite to a relationship. He, I am sure now, just fell into a relationship with Shelly. Maybe she liked him first, had someone tell someone. Or maybe it was obvious, the way she sat next to him in Western Civ, or Trig. Perhaps he mumbled conversation back to her, a few times, made her laugh, vice versa. And then without knowing it was what he wanted, or her knowing, exactly, that he was what she wanted, something else, the raw abstraction of boyfriend–girlfriend took over and neither protested, neither was too hung up with some other abstracted name and Aristotelian archetype of significant other, both were content with Plato’s shadow puppet, high school romance, where the thing was more important and relevant than the specifics of the thing in and of itself.

Ted may have not liked Shelly; Shelly may not have liked Kobbins. But they were a couple, and that meant there was love. It’s not about desperation. It’s about learning. Curiosity. Hollywood. Whatever.
We, I don’t think, understood how arbitrary every first relationship has to be, even if it involves pining. I think, at this point in the twentieth century, broken hearts, complex love triangles, and the struggles of fitting two bodies on an under-sized love seat are necessities to one’s notion of self. I observed, watching all of us, that we bought everything without questioning the framework the way we would have if love had been a class offered to seniors only, or even an after school activity with coaches and referees.

But I did it too. I had crushes, shared my lists, was envious of Ted even though Shelly was nothing like Val Huckslly. I hadn’t even talked to Shelly, not after they were a couple. I had talked to Ted’s girlfriend though, even imagined kissing her. I don’t think I wanted her; I just wanted the thing, the relationship. So yeah, it affected all of us, worked its way into envy and other muddied, blurred, genres of aging, leaving the friendly confines of the park and our childhood spider to go cold after the sun rose in different ways and seemed not to elucidate the things it had the day before, shining brightest off of new angles, new priorities. Our vision changed, partly into sight more our own, partly into sight blended by the periphery of each other’s vision, maybe most impacted by the lens of a movie camera turning slowly to back light a soft kiss, approach a bedroom scene silent except for the right music.

I don’t know. Not for sure. I may never figure it out. I do know I didn’t want to be Ted. I mean he was cool and I liked him, but I never really got to know him. When William hung out with him, I usually wasn’t there. I always figured he was sturdier than the rest of us, more capable of keeping his head above turbulent junior high waters. His relationship, the way he talked about commitment, in naive, closed mouth kissing kinds of words, was proof that I had been right. He would have made the happiest and best FBI agent among us. He played, from what I knew of him, by the rules, mostly ethical, but very aware that rules have more to do with history than any kind of loyalty.

He would tell us nothing we really needed to know.
Love wasn’t just strange. We weren’t just stupid. Love was an inevitability, even in the forms of small crushes, lists of names, hello’s traded after biology, and memorized smiles and laughter. Knowledge of love was a currency that could be bartered with, traded, hoarded.

* * * * *

I’m not sure that any of us, not even William, understood how close Marcus and Patches were, or at least had been. Years when William, a year older, would eat in a different room or period, Patchey and Marc ate together. Laughed, I think.

They discovered a construction platform underneath the highway two bypass, over the Red Lake River. We would stop there before looking for the Army Bridge. We all got to go there, but Marcus was the one who found it with Patches. They had already brought blankets, made a pulley system and a ladder from rope and wire so we wouldn’t have to risk being seen climbing down from the highway. Could climb up, sit on the platform, over the river, over the grass. A long, suspended place. Hidden.

“I’m ever wanted by the law,” Patches said. “This is where I’ll be, you want to find me.”

“Good place,” Marcus said. “Flashlights’d have a hard time catchin’ ya.”

“And I’d be two blocks from Pamida,” Patches said. “If I needed some Ovaltine or something.”

“Ovaltine?” William asked.

“Never know,” Patches said. “Fugitive is a tough life, may need vitamin fortification.”

“I think I’d turn myself in, let leaches into my liver,” William said, “before I spent more than an hour here by myself.”

“Suit yerself.”

“Go outta my head.”

“Bring magazines.”
Patches was a big monkey, using hands and wrist to lever himself around, hang thirty feet in the air from wrought iron beams.

"Get down," William said. "Brother, gonna die."

"He's alright," Marcus said.

"And I'd have my own climbing apparatus," Patches said.

"I'd come visit you," Marcus said. "Save you the Ovaltine run."

"Thanks, buddy."

Patches never told us what he and Marcus used to do, before we moved to Crookston. William asked, a couple of times when I was along, what they did at lunch. Patches usually shrugged, said it was fun enough for lunch. At the bridge, William hated heights obviously and vocally the first few times, never really stopped crawling close to the concrete, a minor shake in his fingers and wrists. But he went every time he was asked to. Claimed he went by himself sometimes. Even let his bike be pulled up by the pulley.

"Ride it," Marcus said.

"In the air like that?"

"Why not."

Patches shrugged "I'll do it," he said.

"Right on."

"No," William said. "Bring it down, my bike, my broken head."

It took us ten, fifteen minutes, every biceps out there, and a lot of stubborn patience to get him in the air. He wobbled, leaned over his handle bars, front forward. His glasses fell off. I moved to get them and we almost dropped him.

"Fuck," William said.

"You alright?" Patches asked.

"Sure."
It took us twelve minutes to lower William back down slow enough for his blinded, speeding heart.

Another Saturday, Summer light dropping into Dakota blue, we lit a fire in a spare tire they, Marcus and Patches, dragged up there using the same pulley system. The tire was flat, would work as a fire pit we thought. Without a wind block or grate, the heat would be nice. We used Kleenex and lighter fluid, too much of both. It had been a drought year and dead yellow grass, thirty feet down, caught some lit tissue, still burning. Marcus and Patches were laughing, William saying it was a bad idea in the first place and I could see, even in the shadow of the platform, his cheeks hot were hot with blush, probably anger.

"Oh shit, buddy," Patches said.

"What do we do?" Marcus said.

I saw William listening to them, watching their mouths, the way Patches' arm bounced off Marcus's shoulder. I saw William leaning off the platform to jump, when the right wind blew the flames into smolders and his lips forced themselves into smile.

* * * * *

Kobbins was the first one of us with a steady girlfriend but he wasn't the first to withhold evidence. It is too easy to blame girls or even love for the dissolution of male-male friendships. I mean at the time, even a few years after, we would have said it was as easy as that. We also would have said it wouldn't happen to us. It is in an older voice, the one I have been using for every one of these pages outside of quotation marks, a misleading voice, distorted by additional introspection and reflection, that allows me to say that the distance, little cracks, that sprung up in our relationships had less to do with gender and romance than they did with our understanding, or lack thereof, of ourselves.
It is true that we mostly, even after the period of which I have been writing, interacted with other boys. Patches and William would resent this, describe it, when they were young, as a great injustice. “Different languages.” Later, they would say it was about socialization, implied and learned comfort zones that hetero-sexistly replace nurturing and competitive dynamics with exclusively romantic ones when genders are not the same. In either diction, with any amount of theoretical lenses and improved understanding of social influences, I don’t think they ever got it completely right. Our group was male dominated, at least in part, because of luck and other arbitrary reasons. There were very few girls our same age in our neighborhood. There were mechanisms in place that didn’t allow us to recognize girls with similar interests and vocabularies. We came together with whoever was close and willing to put up with us. The fact that it ended up being boys we associated with was no more of a choice than that of which specific boys we grew up with.

When dating, in one form or another, actually started happening, we felt stresses and increased introverted-ness only because such things seemed like markedly important rites of passage, measures of self-development. Love was as much about self-realization as it was about some kind of union or a give and take between two people. It was not just an issue of preferring time spent with Shelly that caused Ted Kobbins not to walk home with us. It was an unspoken, probably unrealized, understanding that such things were not only private, they were supposed to be discovered individually. Only than could the self evolve, experience the wonder of love, etc. When Ted woke up mostly the same, mornings after he had kissed Shelly, he didn’t choose not to report his findings with us. He couldn’t. To tell us that he was mostly the same would have come as a disappointment to our ears waiting to hear something more dramatic, a metamorphosis more like the foam shapes we bought at Ben Franklin and left in a bucket of cool water overnight to sponge and grow large, bright, fully grown and colorful. We wouldn’t have been interested, probably wouldn’t have been able to understand more subtle differences. He probably couldn’t. He wasn’t looking for them. Love wasn’t communication, interaction. It was, we thought, an integral
part of self that had been missing, desperately needed. We still might think this, hard to say. But it didn’t happen like that right away for any of us. If Ted had talked about Shelly, he would have had to admit that it wasn’t like that. We wouldn’t have had the words to process this, to find the nuances of relationship. He would have had to face assertions, even leveled by himself, that there was something wrong with him.

Whatever the reasons that we came together as a group of boys, we were not allowed to develop rules that allowed us to grow, even slowly, in such ways without altering lines of communication that had been, formerly, immutable. It would be years after Patches had broken up with high school girlfriend that he told William anything about it. William and I have never had a meaningful conversation about a relationship in terms other than cursory reports of how happy we have been.

None the less, I can be fairly certain that William was in love with Molly Lott. They went out once. She kept it at that. Her own reasons, ideal crushes, whatever. He dated other people, even referred to them as his girlfriend. But she was still more important to him.

I watched. Through the window. She came over sometimes, after school. They would sit on the porch, or walk to the park, or sit on an old towel on the railroad ties around the garden. They didn’t hold hands, didn’t even touch as far as I could tell. But there was a certain intangible closeness that went beyond names or titles or even kisses that existed between them. I could see it in the window, as he picked a dandelion for her, as she pointed at his shoes and smiled, uncurled the collar of his denim shirt.

I listened to them too. For what the others’, even William, wouldn’t tell me if I asked. I hid on Patches swing set, kicking and tucking higher and higher. But listening. His voice got softer. The words were still his. She understood more than he would have let on to any one else, even when she asked about a specific word. He had to ask for definitions as often. I recognized
some of her words in William's philosophy with Patches. Lexicons had nothing to do with it. They talked and were close and could share things that went beyond proximity.

I dreamed he kissed her, let language seep into skin. I wanted it for him. I wanted it for myself. I, with hope from the two of them, proposed to Val Hucksly. She agreed. We were in fourth grade or so. We were married on my steps. My father made me repeat vows about Scoobie Doo. William made a ring from tin foil. I asked him to add a dandelion. He did so and held it on a pillow from our couch while the ceremony took place. He looked proud, even if he thought it was silly. I repeated the words, put the scratchy ring on her finger.

We went to the park, alone. We sat on the swings, separated. I moved closer, without talking. I kissed her. She opened her mouth. It was strange, salty.

Mom called me in and I went home. Nothing really changed. Being married, I thought, was easy. The ring broke. We kissed some more. Never really went on a date. Eventually I realized it was young and meaningless. She probably did first. We never talked about it. Love was to be alchemy; the first time didn’t work, we marked it off as wrong and moved on. William, without understanding any of it or getting credit for it, went through the proper transformations. Part of me still believes that Molly Lott, married for real to someone else, did too.

Guesses. Hypotheticals. I don’t know any of this for sure. Details that go un-ignited. It is as I thought at the beginning: there are limits to what I put down here that I can’t, no matter how many windows I pressed my face against, surpass. The important things about William can be extrapolated from this; the important things could have been extrapolated from our group in order to understand any of us. But there are limits. I can only unearth and display what I fully understand. I can hint and whisper about the rest of it. I can only guess that the most real relationship in William’s early life was not one of the ones altered or clarified by the Red Lake River, but a connection more real but not inherently different than the ones he had with the rest of us, a connection based in philosophy too, but framed by flowers and quiet hugs and what couldn’t be said that was nameless and important and also denied.
Epiphany is an intersection, a moment of crystallization. A moment of change, or the perception of change, a moment when something is un-shrouded, revealed, seen as something it wasn’t taken for at first. Beauty or malice, something mundane, useless, anything can be uncovered by such moments of clear-sightedness. That night, that river, my brother wet and bleeding, friends laughing, me crying noble and alone in a tree, safe, other friends up in arms, boys underwater, more blood. That night could have been an epiphany. I thought it would be when I started this. We could have seen that we were not as tight as Crookston thought we were, that we were flawed individuals, that we loved imperfectly, that we were petty or jealous or little.

But it wasn’t an epiphany. Nothing did anything but reaffirm what we knew already, didn’t have words for. It enlightened nothing. The river wasn’t an epiphany. Everything changed, but not because something was seen more clearly, evidenced more directly, beheld for the first time but because no matter what we saw, said, or didn’t say, it happened. Despite everything we believed about us, it happened. All the marks of epiphany, a radical change in behavior, an implosion, an extravagant happening, were there. But the insight, the discovery, the phenomenology— anything beyond spiritual lactic acid and hangover— none of these things happened.

We decided early, ten or eleven in the morning at the park, that we would get some booze and walk. Some kind of bovine, Andy said. It was Patches idea to invite everyone. Bob, Andy, Marcus, Phil, William, Kobbins, Patches and myself.
“Molly Lott and Rachel Jenkins,” Patches later added, “should get flyers, phone calls, memos. The works. Come to our shindig.” It was William’s first proof Patches had a crush on Rachel.

“Rachel can’t come,” William said, “she hates me, will mess things up with Molly.”

“We’re running out of high school,” Patches said. “Notions need testing.” “Be sure to get them to bring some more women,” Phil said. “If they need to be there at all.”

Getting alcohol, for us, was always a big production. It was a minor miracle that we scored some beer and two kinds of Schnapps before dinner. God says drink up, boys, Patches said. We gave Milton Remba ten bucks extra, pooled all our cash in ones and crumpled fives, gave it to him in a green plastic coin purse William used for video game money. Phil went with Milton Remba to the store. William and I met them at the track behind the kindergarten.

We brought backpacks, walked to Phil’s garage weighted down. There was a certain buzz to the heaviness on my back, illegal sure, but heavier. Like it would bring things to a head, like drinking it was hastening something terrible in the most important sense of the word. The sky was sunless, overcast, typical for Crookston in September, bright without an obvious source so it seemed reasonable that answers to some unasked question, fate sloshing awkward in bottles with every step, might be strapped to our backs.

We left the Schnapps in the bag attachment of his lawnmower. They did it yesterday, Phil said. We put the rest of the bottles in between slivers of firewood set up in tidy rows for the coming winter. We were a little sweaty, nerves a little shot, but the hard part, we said, was over.

Eating dinner with my parents, William and I were more quiet than usual. We said very little, went downstairs. Had my parents known as much as they thought they did about us, they would have realized the Television wasn’t on, the Nintendo turned off, that we weren’t even talking. We were contemplative, or at least quiet. They should have known something was up.
The phone rang at six. Patches said to pick him up, that the girls weren’t coming but that we would be fine without them.

"Marcus is here, already," he said. "Ts get a move on boys."

The three hundred feet or so between our door and Patches’ had never been longer; my legs were just as long but slow. The sun, we noticed after grabbing Marc and Patchey, had cracked through the cloud cover, a dull yellow circle falling in the sky. Pretty unimpressive, Patches said, for something so important.

Andy was waiting at the corner, saving us steps on the way to Phil’s. Kobbins was also on the way, wearing sunglasses leaning tense against his parents’ wooden mailbox. He said nothing, found a place in step with us. I could hear twelve feet scraping, rising, falling, the shuffle of six bodies walking. Six blocks and no words.

Bob was at Phil’s in the garage. They were putting stunt pegs on the front tire of Phil’s dirt bike. For balance, Phil said.

"Just in case you ever need bounce away from Nazis on one wheel," Patches said.

Phil looked at him blank, like he was going to say something impressive, but took a drink of Rootbeer Schnapps instead.

"Gotta start the sauce early," William said, "to cope with our wit, man."

Bob asked if we would cut the Schnapps with anything.

"Wuss," Phil said. "Schnapps is like cough syrup."

"Except," William said, "it don’t stop the cough."

"And Schnapps don’t make you drunk," Patches said.

We laughed, even Phil, passing the bottle. My first drink was hesitant but full, a jerky three swallows. I almost didn’t take any, in his garage, but it would be a while, forty minutes
maybe, before we could pass it again. We screwed the cap on tight again and got it and the rest of our drinks into backpacks, wrapped in old sweat pants, shirts, towels, even underwear. Heavy sweatshirts for when it got cold. Most of us were carrying tennis rackets, had been to the courts if any one asked why we had clothes with us. Phil said it was dumb but let us talk him into it. We double checked our bags, zipped up the lawnmower bag and left, cutting through downtown to get to the woods that would take us West.

The bottles were back out as soon as we were off of pavement. I didn’t drink any more, not right away. I finished a sandwich I had picked up, chewed it while Phil poured Schnapps, elevated gracefully a few inches above his lips, into his open mouth.

“Talent,” Patches said.

“Have a beer,” Kobbins said, “leave some of that for the rest of us.” “Wuss,” Phil said. “You’ll get drunk enough.”

I saw William finish a beer, leave the bottle when he bent to tie his shoes. We stopped walking so people could get another drink from their bags. William sent the other bottle of Schnapps around. Blue 100, I think. Peppermint.

“Now were talkin’,” Marcus said. “This’ll fuck with you.”

William took a shallow swallow, said, “Scope has more kick.” But he coughed a little. I saw him shake his head briskly, lean into a oak tree to stretch his calves. Our father always stretched like that when he should have been doing paperwork or when one of us caused him to miss a phone call.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Dunno,” William said, “must’ve twisted an ankle, nothing to worry about.”

“Which one?” Patches asked.

“The left,” William said.
"Must've caught it wrong," Patches said, "playing tennis."

William laughed, said, "yeah that's it."

"Good game," Marcus said.

"Yeah," I said. "Shame I kicked yer asses."

"At the same time," William said. "Like twelve on one or something." "Caveman good with little bally," I said. I took the bottle, sniffed it, thought it would have been better with Sprite. I drank, a good swallow, some burn.

"You'll want more than that," Phil said.

"A caveman needs more," Patches said.

"Give over," Marcus said. "The black boy needs more, too." He seemed eager, so I took another drink, let him have the bottle. He kept it out of his bag, holding it in both hands as we walked.

William stretched, worked on both legs, every time we stopped moving.

The woods, a sturdy little path that Patches said would be easy to follow back later, spit us onto the bank of the river. We could see the highway, the overpass bridge, even the spare tire fire pit if we squinted.

"Let's stop up there," William said, "never been up there drunk."

"Lordy buddy," Patches said, "you sure?"

"Why not," William said, "let's go."

"In a minute," Phil said. "I gotta show ya something." He took us the other direction, walking slow, bottles back in our bags, along the soft soil shoulder of the river. The river was brown, only partially clear. I couldn't see the bottom from the bank. We walked a half mile or so, highstepping over tree roots. William's ankle, evidently, was good enough to get up a six foot climb.
We hit a clearing, a flat, slightly elevated space where grass had been trampled and a rope was tied to a tree growing in the swollen river.

"Who's first?"

"Good idea, Phil," Marcus said. "Let's throw ourselves in the river."

"Sun's still up," Phil said. "There's no current here. We got new clothes in the bag. Who's first?"

"The trick," Patches said taking the rope, "is this." He swung out, feet close together, hands above a knot in the rope. "A Jedi never gets wet," he said. I saw him let go, let his body arc and hang above the slow water. Levitated there. Suspended. But he came back on the rope, staggered his way back up to the clearing.

"The Force binds us," we heard him say. "Your turn, Phil."

"No," Phil said. "Not yet."

William grabbed the rope lightly, didn't even try hanging on. Went in a few feet away. He crouched, let water up to his neck, held his glasses tight to his face with a single finger.

"A true Jedi," he said, "can pretend he's dry."

I took the rope, told my brother to duck, swung out over his head, held tight, wrestling fingers wrapped around dry fiber. The rope was thick, a soft burn to the friction, gravity, and swing, but easy to hold. I swung out, my feet high above my head, felt speed give way, an apex. I saw minnows underwater, swimming through a cloud of loose mud, a mist of dirt. There were twenty, thirty of them at least, lost in wiggle. I saw them clearly, wondered, my body stuck in the air with no motion, if they could hope for clearer water. I could tell, caught in the air, a spilt second revelation, that one of them had green in its skin, another was light blue, a thin collection of stagnant blood vessels. All were moving, catching and following signals from each others' tails. Circling. The group, a spiral of movement, was going nowhere, staying under me, would be under me all night if the rope hadn't taken me back to safety.

"Grogg need stop drinking," I said. "Grogg seeing things."
“Fuck the rope,” Kobbins said. He jumped in. Marcus and Bob followed him.

“You turn, Phil.”

“No,” he said. “I’m not getting wet.”

“Fucker,” Marcus said. “Get in the water.”

“Shut up, Dick.” Phil said.

Patches took the rope, wrapped his legs around Phil and buried his head away from Phil’s fists, twisted and leaned, let awkward gravity drag them out, a really lopsided swing. He tried to drop Phil off but they both went in.

“Fuckin’ cold,” Phil said. He grabbed Patches’ hair, dunked him under.

“More booze for Caveman,” I said. I was dry. They were in the water. They were all in the river. They got back up with muddy laughter, fell back in, crawled back up. I may have been the only one that saw Patches use his racket to cut Phil’s legs out from under him, knock him back down. Phil came up laughing but I saw his fingers curl up solid, spin his hand into fist. Patches wasn’t laughing, held the racket in his hands.

“Get up,” he said, holding it outstretched, still, sturdy. Phil tried to take it in one hand.

“No,” Patches said, whacking Phil’s hand. “Not yet.” Phil waited. “Take it,” Patches said. Phil moved to the racket and Patches hit him with it. Harder. We were all laughing. Patches did too, then. “Come on, Dick,” he said. “Wuss,” he said. He whacked Phil again and again, was, I think, going to finally let him up. Marcus pushed him before he could.

I saw Patches’ laughter snap away from his mouth, his entire mouth drop, like a glass ashtray, to the ground before his body jerked into fall and hit the water. He resurfaced without his glasses. I saw him reach up, reach up to the mud and grass where he had been standing, reach up with his eyes pulled back angry, reach up for the grin, the cheek bones, teeth and tongue he had lost, make sure they were intact, functional. I saw him force his face back together, re-sculpt it, pry his face like clay.
“Fucker,” Patches said. Laughing. We all heard him laughing. He laughed for ten seconds, at least, before we saw him go back under to get his glasses.

“Nice work,” Phil said on his way up, he was holding Patches’ racket. He tried to give Marc five or something. I saw Marc take Phil’s hand, pull his wrist to his mouth, bite deep, spit skin out.

Marc ignored Phil; we all could hear that Marcus was laughing too hard to give Phil five. Phil climbed higher up to get at a bottle and his clothes.

“Black boys ain’t got no manners,” Marcus said when he helped Patches up. He was still laughing.

Patches was too. But I could see his teeth, his lips translucent or something so I could see through to his teeth clenched and grinding. I could, for a second, hear his pulse in the air, a wet hot beating.

William was next to me and he looked tired. I saw him, he looked older, maybe studying for an exam in college, a few days of growth on his chin. I smelled smoke on his breath, a brief breathing. I heard him say help, saw a snake ribbon of veins in his eyes, could see he hadn’t slept in a week.

I saw them fully when they towed off, put on clothes and the sweatshirts, some with hoods, they had in their bags. Seven naked bodies. I smelled rigor or tetanus, something stiffening and rigid, something bloodless.

“Quit lookin’ at my balls,” Phil said. I saw that they were missing, the scrotum pierced like a coin purse, emptied.

“Nice set,” Marcus said.

“I think death is Metaphor.”
It was my only brother William who said it. He pushed up his glasses, closed his crooked
teeth mouth and stood awkward solid, waiting half-proud to see if it made sense. We, evidently,
were the judges of such things and the bypass bridge, this suspended platform connected to the
surface by a rusty ladder, connected to the ground by wire and rope that Patches had stitched to
climb, a shelf hanging, was as good a den of inquiry as anywhere. We were under the bridge, all of
us, spread out on the concrete, five feet wide. Listening and finishing the beer. I had mud on my
jeans, the only one who hadn’t changed clothes. We listened to William, one the last dogmas in a
series of boyish, adolescent, nerdy dogmas. “I think death,” he said again, “is metaphor.”

“Like ‘the old man was dead?’” Phil asked.

“More like death is big bowl of Post Tostees,” Andy said.

“No it ain’t,” Marcus said. “Death is oblivion. Solipsistic and cold.”

“Dude,” Patches said, “you Atheists are all messed around-- oblivion isn’t solipsistic.”

“Yeah it is.”

“No it ain’t,” Patches said. “Check it out. Oblivion, by definition: a void. Solipsism:
creating ones own world, right? Right. Oblivion leaves no room for self, hence a void, solipsism
needs self to have delusions, thereby a world. Syllogism: oblivion has no solipsistic tendencies.”

“How do you know?” Marcus asked.

“What kind of goddamn atheist are you?” Patches asked. “Like a void is just a cold black
soup, a warm oblivion that you, in snazzy tights and superman getup get to swim through?” He was
pleased with himself, laughed a high-pitched whisper through his nose.

“How do you know it isn’t?”

“But it wouldn’t be oblivion anymore.”

“How do you know?”

“By definition.”

“But not experience.”
“Of course not,” Patches said. “Oblivion don’t allow stenography,” he said and I saw the ladder to the surface disintegrate, rusted metal powder away, the climbing rope and chicken wire that lead down to the grass and the river melt into loose fiber and liquid. I saw our mouths moving empty, our voices spilled somewhere else and lost, tongues and lips moving without sound except for the wind picking up, twisting loud around the sound of semis passing distant, above us, overhead-- I could numbly make out separate passings close enough to shake us without us seeing headlights, the make of the truck, the face of the man driving, the face of anyone. I saw the sun, low in the sky, go out completely, darkness with no room for stars.

“Scuse me,” William said so we all could hear him, his nasally teenage voice pressed a little harder, more urgent. “Enough about oblivion. I introduced the topic, let’s deal with one thing at a time.”

“What was it again?” Marcus asked.

“Death as metaphor,” Patches said. “So, brother, death is something else, or something else is death?”

“Neither,” William said.

“Lost me,” Phil said. He opened another beer.

“Death is a wet noodle?” And said.

“Death isn’t anything,” Marcus said, “I keep telling you that.”

“I think you need to lecture, buddy,” Patches said to William. He gave him a beer. “Take us with you in this joyous excess of words, observations, and other such nonsense. Take us with,” he said.

“What I said,” William said, after a drink, “Was that death was metaphor, not that death was a metaphor or that death, the condition of being dead, could be approached via metaphor.” He paused, rubbed his chin and I could see facial hair, a new scar above his lip, thought I could smell smoke and cologne, saw him in different clothes, a cardigan and khakis.

“What is metaphor? At its heart? A Comparison, certainly. This is that, this was that. This
does that which X would, behaves like Y. Fills in the variables. But deeper than that, what is
metaphor? Word tricks, narrative ploy, a tool, a device. To explain. Indirectly, subtle like.
Filling in ovals and numbers with color and shape and smell and texture. It's meaning, is what it is,
on a very basic level. An explanation filtered through a writer's lens, some floating author hanging
just out range of the words. What I am saying, is that maybe death is seeing metaphor rather than
object, meaning, however indirect, instead of thing itself.”

"Another heaven," Marcus said. "Sellout. God giving meaning. Angels lookin' down and
shit. Been done before buddy."

"I dunno," Patches said. "All the metaphor's the same?"

"No," William said. "Heaven, some notion of soul gazing at the Earth, doesn't leave room
for individual confusions and, and, and the ways we're f*cked up right now, or even private
lexicons. Heaven's like supposed be this kind of instruction manual. That assumes that we have a
common key, even a common language. I'm saying that I think that death, if it brings answers at
all, has to take these things into account. Metaphor does that, I think, by making the truth
visceral, immediate, and present, which is why writers do it right? While at the same time,
metaphor admits that it needs interpretation, deciphering, reconstruction."

"Now there's solipsism," Patches said.

"Yeah," William said, "exactly. I think death is an awareness of that, of that
reconstruction. Bypasses it by working with meaning instead of noun."

"So," Patches said and I saw he was wearing different glasses, his hair longer than his
chin, smoking a cigarette we didn't have with us, "like a phenomenology where senses experience
meaning, aura, whatever, instead of something physical?"

"Yeah," William said. "The self is constructed, same is in life. But the stuff is different,
the stuff of metaphor instead of experience, as we think of it anyway."

"Trade the news correspondents for the poets."

"Right."
"Poetry becomes financially viable after the grave," Patches said. "Sweet theory."

"Corollary," William said.

"Bullshit," Marcus said.

"Exactly," William said.

"So where is God, in all that?" Phil asked.

"In the meaning," Patches said, "the metaphor itself. I think."

"Probably," William said. "Not sure."

"Let's go to Falcon Base."

We didn't believe that Phil knew what he was talking about. A bridge, he said, military, built during the second world war.

"What exactly is a military bridge?" Patches asked.

Abandoned gun turrets, Phil said. Maybe even, he said, crates of old guns if we were lucky. M-16's and whatevers. He could name a few more that I forgot immediately. Said they probably wouldn't fire but we could hold them, smell the grease and old powder. A military bridge he said, when most of the liquor had been swallowed, the sun gone down, conversation turned into blurry laughter, Patches bending Andy's arm up his back, Marcus and Kobbins playing a game to see who could balance longer on one foot, Bob and I arm wrestling. I had put my sweatshirt on. A military bridge, a few miles away. Only have to cross the river once he said and a few more miles.

"It'll be more exciting than this one," he said.

"No it won't," Patches said. "Unless I get to toss you off of it."

"Clever," Phil said.

"If we go," Andy asked, "can I look for hand grenades?"

"Sure."

"Let's do it."

"What the hell."
"Long as I get back by bedtime."

"Some kind of bovine."

"Man, you been promising bovine all night long."

I took another drink, noticed the Schnapps didn’t feel cold on my lips anymore, didn’t even burn the back of my mouth. Just tasted sweet. It was hard to climb down with my eyes blurry but my hands were strong and my feet sure.

I saw Marcus Mitchell stay on the platform, say go on, boys I’m gonna sit tight for a while, heard his voice lower than it was, heard him say your mission is segregated, the black kid don’t need more WWII. I saw wipe his hands on his pants, smelled smoke from a Camel Straight, watched him flick sparks into the wind through the metal grid work.

"Climb, Whiteboy, Climb," we all heard him say from the ground, watching me slide down the last few feet.

None of us, including Phil believed in Falcon Base, but we picked up camp and went down the rope and wire. Didn’t take the bypass bridge because of the bottles in our backpack, the smell on our breath. We weren’t stupid. But we were down the rope and moving, humoring Phil maybe, restless maybe. Maybe fated. Maybe if we had called him on it, everything could have been avoided. Maybe if we had called him on it, a different set of stimuli would have set us off and mine would be a story about sand dunes or a concrete factory or a sewer system. If it had been an epiphany, I would understand what would have happened if we told admitted our destination was bogus, that crossing the river in the first place. I would understand exactly how our hands were tied, what was inertia and what was a result of smart kids playing stupid, pretending to get excited about a bridge that had seen combat in a war everyone knew was waged elsewhere.

The tree we crossed, pretty easily the first time, was over a section of river water faster than the curl where the rope swing was. There were small rocks here and there, swirls of water
suggesting depth, mist in the air. Every once and a while a branch or a piece of moss would come loose and be swept to the West. We respected the crossing enough to leave our tennis rackets and a few of the bags, the ones we had emptied of alcohol, in a mess of branches before we stared climbing.

"Water’s fast," William said, trying to keep his chest close enough to stay on the bridge without getting tree goo on his shirt.

"Just obeying physics," Patches said. "Going from more to less. Reaganomics," he said.

"And all this time," William said, "I been trying to disobey physics."

"Physics doesn’t mean you should fall," Marcus said.

"Yeah," Andy says, "It only means you can’t fly over it."

"Holy shit," Marcus said, "I think you’re right. Give Whitey a pretzel."

We had to climb an elm, six or seven feet, to get to the wide oak that lay across the water. I was plenty drunk, could barely see their asses moving in crooked wobbles like headlights in a snow storm but didn’t need too. Better balance. And something else. I could see that the branch had handles, easy to grip, easy to hold. I could see every movement mapped out in the wood, foot prints to dance to, moves to stay dry, as long as I stayed on the main branch.

"Piece of cake," I said.

"Piece of wood," Bob said.

We were laughing when William dragged his foot, nearly fell completely, got a foot wet. I saw the river, muddy and moss, decay in motion, connection and movement, reflection and swift water, reach up, hang onto his leg, crawl wet and cold up the leg of his sweat pants. We watched, all of us laughing as he struggled to pull himself back up, get across. I never saw the river let go of his foot. When he stood on flat ground again, I could see his sweat had a few hairs of moss stuck to them, that his leg, up to the hip was a dark shade of wet.

"Nearly died," he said.
“Bullshit,” Phil said. “You’d a been safe, even if you fell, the booze’d keep ya warm. Would’ve swam home. A happy pig in shit.”

“Maybe Louie’s right,” Patches said. “After all, Dickweed, that was a metaphor.”

“Why you rippin’ on me, Prick Monkey.”

“Somethin’ in the air,” Patches said. “Though Prick Monkey is great, my compliments. Poophead.”

We were drunk, laughing every time Patches said anything.

“Prick Monkey’d make a good band name,” I said.

“You want to sing Shitdick?” Patches asked, giving Phil a nuggy.

“That wasn’t funny,” Phil said but he was laughing too, maybe the best mood I had seen him in.

Even William was laughing. Though he was still looking at the river, trying to get his shoe dry, stretching both calf muscles.

“How fast do you think the water is?” he asked me later. “Undertow?”

I saw him underwater already, even as we found a trail in-between trees to keep moving. I had the bottle again and was drinking it.

“I am Captain America,” Andy said, finishing the bottle of Root Beer, “this is my shield.”

He broke it against a tree.

“Boring ass shield,” I said. “Grogg no need shield. Big dick block bad stuff.”

“I can’t feel my legs,” Kobbins said.

“Anyone got a compass?” I asked.

“Don’t need one,” Phil said. “We’re going West.”

“Mostly,” Patches said. “Sergeant Phil’s internal compass. Go, go Sergeant Phil.”

“How much further, Sergeant Phil?” Kobbins asked.

“Not far.”
“Let’s turn around.”

“Wuss.”

“Dickhead.”

“I don’t know about you white boys,” Marcus said, “but I need another drink. Who’s got a beer?”

“I got one for you.” Bob Stottle said.

“Who needs a compass?”

“Besides,” William said, “in this case it would show direction to and from my doom.”

“You’ll be alright,” I said though my voice sounded younger, six or seven, my checks still in freckles.

“If,” Patches said, “invisible waves are the foundation of magnetism, invisible waves therefore act upon objects, right?”

“Segue.”

“So,” Patches said, “am I right?”

“Obviously,” Phil said.

“No more or less than light or sound,” William said. “They cause reactions in particles, but have no mass. Forces not things.”

“But,” Patches said, “Unlike other waves, magnetism is constant.”

“Or in constant effect,” William said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Patches said. “You were talkin’ phenomenology earlier, right?”

“Was he ever,” Phil said.

“So magnetism is stimuli?” Kobbins asked.


“No memory,” William said, “equals no experience.”

“A compass is memory,” Patches said.

“A compass is a tool,” Phil said.
"But a compass shows," Patches said, "reveals what we let ourselves forget, that were always bein' acted on."

"Technically," Kobbins said, "isn't just metal?"

"No," Patches said. "Metal reacts, everything is acted upon. Which is what I am saying. We are constantly experiencing magnetism."

"Among other things," William said, "Sound, light, UV, a bunch of stuff."

"Hear me out, buddy," Patches said. "Magnetism is more important than the other stuff."

"Why?" Phil asked.

"Or at least more interesting," Patches said. "It's about direction and pull. We are constantly experiencing tugs and jerks, registering it, if only on a cellular level, processing it. We are being drawn or repelled. Something unseen," Patches said. "Like fate, if fate is about inevitabilities or tugs in some kind of time line, especially if fate is some kind of predisposition. Magnetism is like that, a more active kind of test for predisposition that we experience, register. Become, if you buy phenomenology. So, in a microscopic way, we become our destinations."

"But," William said, "We're not always heading where the waves are coming from."

"Maybe, maybe not." Patches said. "But we are, in some small way, drawn. And our bodies register that, choose to be pulled or to ignore. Not all metal is drawn. It's just a test not a tractor beam. And our bodies in some small way, experience that and remember our reaction, or predisposition, whatever. And we know that as sure as we know the way a parent's hand feels or a first kiss or whatever. We have the test results, a measure of where we are going. We experience that, become that. We are where we are going."

We kept walking toward a bridge that didn't exist, a goal we didn't believe in. Patches ripped up an extra T-shirt from his bag. It was orange, in strips. He tied it to trees, here and there.

"Why?"
"Cause I only wear it for tennis and I suck," Patches said. "And I don't trust Sergeant Phil's compass."

"Oh."

"Wanna get home eventually," Patches said.

"But are you sure we want to go back that way?" William asked.

"What do ya mean."

"Do ya think there's another way across?"

"No."

"I can still hear the river," William said.

"That's up ahead," Andy said. "Proof we're close."

"Guns and shit," Phil said.

"If I would have fell," William said, "it would have been over. The water's fast, I'm wearing more clothes. Even if I got out," he said, "it's colder now."

"Hypo's just hypo," Patches said walking, opening another beer for sipping, the cuff of his sweatshirt pulled over his hand to hold the bottle. I could see his fingers were wet, the river or some other liquid in slow, vital drips to the pine needle floor we were walking on.

"I think we should go back," I said.

"Wuss," Phil said.

"Dick."

"The black kid is cold," Marcus said.

"Wuss," Phil said.

"More Schnapps in that bottle?" Kobbins asked.

"Yeah," I said.

We couldn't, forty feet later, see Patches's orange cotton strips in the trees. But I could see every step we took, glowing against the muted greens and browns of the forest floor, could see mist in neon blow from the river, from our first crossing, could tell that it would take no effort on our parts
to ensure our return, knew that we, even before we gave up on the bridge we never believed in, were
only finding our way back to the old rotten oak, barely wide enough, could tell that direction didn’t
matter, that the destination was behind us, in front of us, with us in the wheeze of William’s
nervous breathing, the suck of Marcus’s lips around the bottle, even in Phil’s bass voice as he said,
“not much further, boys, not much further”.

“Funny,” Andy said
“Huh?” we said.
“We think we look so different,” he said, picking up a stick. “Like I think I can tell the
difference between you and you.”
“Yeah,” Patches said.
“But really. We own the same stuff. Sweatshirts. A bike.”
“Yeah but I own a crappy bike,” William said. “That’s different.”
“You know what I mean.”
“I think white bread here is saying something,” Marcus Mitchell said. “We’re all white.
The same.”
“You’re not white, Marc.”
“Still. We own the same stuff.”
“No we don’t,” Philip Langely said. “I wouldn’t be caught dead in that damn pink thing
Dick Ball is wearing.”
“Hopefully I won’t either,” Patches said. “I want to be left alone when I’m dead.”
“Pew,” Bob Stottle said, pinching his nose.
“I’ll still smell ya, buddy,” William said.
“Who’s gonna die?” Andy Vincent said. “Patches can’t die,” he said. “None of us,” he said.
“Bovine young men all of us. BLAAAAAH!!!!” he screamed. He ran into the woods, back the way we
came.
"Moron," Patches said picking up a bigger stick. He ran after Andy. "BLAAH!!"

"Right on," Kobbins said. '"'ts go back."

We started after them. Slower. Walking without big sticks.

"Maybe he's right," Phil said. "Maybe we're interchangeable."

"Not what he meant, I don't think," William said.

"I mean we do own a lot of the same things. Borrow them back and forth. Interchangeable."

"Huh?"

"Even girls," Phil said. He was talking about Heidi Kimball. A former girlfriend, "Too
good to try a lot on," he had said at the time. They had started seeing each other after Phil
already had a date to homecoming. He had talked William into going with Heidi. William said
they, the three of them, had sat on the bleachers in the old gym. He had nowhere else to go while
Heidi and Phil held hands. He still counted it as his first date. And his first time drunk.

"You said you weren't mad about that," William said.

"Jake told me you wanted her," Phil said. William looked at me. He smiled a little.

"He needed to tell you? I thought it was obvious."

"I'm just saying," Phil said.

"That has nothing to do with anything."

"I'm just saying maybe Andy's right. Maybe we're the same. Think we're the same. Think
that we can be each other if we want something the other one has."

"That's deep, Phil." Kobbins said. "Screw off."

"A lot changes in a year, Phil."

"You saying you're not interested."

"Yes," William said. "I'm not interested in her."

"Only 'cause she wasn't into you," Phil said. "But you probably whacked off a couple
times, pretended you were me, right?"

"I dunno, Phil."
"Like if you could have borrowed my hair or something you could have had what I had, taken her shirt off and stuff."

"A year ago, Phil."

"Lost some sleep all jealous. Like 'I got the same stuff, why ain't I got a girl like her.' I bet you lost sleep asking, 'why ain't I got a girl at all,'"

"Answer that for me, oh wise Phil."

"Cause Andy was wrong," Phil said. "We ain’t interchangeable. You fuckers think that stuff is a costume, there’s more to me than that."

"Like yer pretty little mouth?"

"Fuck you, dickferlips," Phil said. "You know what I mean. Why do you think I come with you, get you fuckers beer. It’s all about training."

"Like learning to walk in heels?"

"Hey Phil," Marcus said, "I seem to remember Heidi dumped yer ass."

"So," Phil said. "She dumped me after the fact. Used up anyway."

"Right," William said. "Everything you want. We be like you and we got enough goods to jerk off by ourselves for the rest of our lives. I only a had a couple of weeks worth. Imagination is limited."

"That’s what I’m saying," Phil said. "You think that life is about things and meanings, phenomena-whatever. Life is about action. You all don’t get it. What separates you from me."

I think Phil had gotten it all out before William hit him, a tight fist to the side of his head, from behind.

"How’s that for action, Motherfuck?"

"Better," Phil said, regaining his balance, spitting.

"Where’s the equal and opposite action?"

"Huh?"

"Physics, Phil," Marcus said. "If you’re a verb you gotta hit back. Or you’re a liar."
"Nah," Phil said.  "Part of the training."

I saw him twist to hit William, saw him see me rise up terrible, twenty feet tall, saw him see me step down righteous and good, fear in his eyes as my hands wrapped around his neck.

We all watched him walk, picking up the pace a little.

"Lesson's over," he said.

"So that was about teaching," Marcus said.  "Which is about meaning.  So you're wrong. Phil.  Just for a moment, life wasn't about action, right?"

"What do you know?"

"Nothin'," Marcus said.  He picked up a stick, started poking Phil with it.  "Nothing at all."

"Stop it," Phil said.

"So, what is the difference?"

"What difference."

"Between us, Phil."

"I already said."

"And proved yerself wrong.  We're not just thought, yer not just action.  What is the difference?"

"You're black, man." Phil said.

"That's what I thought," Marcus said.  "I still don't buy it."

"Don't then."

Patches and Andy jumped out of the bushes.

"What'd we miss."

"Louie knocked Phil upside the head."

"Right on."

"Shut up, Dick."

"Clever, Phil."
"I asked a question," Marcus said. "What's the difference between any of us. Not just me and you, but you and you."

"Some of us get out alive," William said.

"Or at least more alive," I said.

"Right on."

"Seriously," Patches said. "He might be right."

"So it's longevity?"

"Sort of," Patches said. "More like accumulation."

"So we start the same, some live longer, only difference?"

"Yeah," Andy said. "I beat Tyson's Punchout."

"Me too," I said.

"Rest you bozos can't get past Soda Popinski."

"Gotta dodge his uppercut," I said.

"That's what I mean," Patches said. "Longevity, more experience, more stuff."

"We're not just what we own," Phil said. "Or what we've done. I refuse to believe that."

"But you did earlier," Marcus said. "You said we wished we were you, touched Heidi like that. Experience, right?"

"Fine," Phil said. "I was wrong. Sort of."

"So what is it?"

"I'm me," he said. "You're not."

"So it's about body," Kobbins said.

"And mind," Phil said.

"But anybody can learn algebra," William said.

"And I can dye my hair," Patches said. "Lift weights, stop eating deep fried food, start eating deep fried food, whatever. The body changes."

"Maybe we're talkin' intangibles," Phil said. "Soul."
“Oh,” Marcus said, “Praise Jesus. My soul black, Phil?”

“Huh?”

“Is it? Like now, when it’s dark. Am I still black?”

“Yeah.”

“How? Why?”

“Maybe,” Patches said. “But only ‘cause you remember experiences when the light was on, remember being followed around the drug store by a high school drop out paid to keep you from stealing lip gloss.”

I heard Patches answer different, more drunk in his voice, his eyes lit bloodshot by a reading lamp, say, “Damn right yer soul is black.”

“Back to experience,” we all heard William say.

“Back to the river,” I said. We were there. Wherever we were going. I could see the moon in the water, broken by current, a gentle wrinkle.

“So is soul just predisposition?”

“Maybe,” Patches said.

“Bullshit,” Phil said. I heard him yelling, like there was bar music to shout over, like he was trying to get someone to dance with him, like he needed to hear his voice deep and loud above a fat bass line to remind him he was sober enough to keep standing, like he had been making noises like this all of his life. I saw wrinkles around his eyes, his face pulled thirty or forty years old. “I am just me,” he said. “It is as easy as that.”

“So,” Patches said, “What then? Genes?”


“That’s not soul,” Patches said, “that’s ego. Part of thought process, nothing deeper than that.”

“You oughta know,” Marcus said. “Got that ego thing down.”
"He's right," William said. "Ego is automatic and seems like self. Sure enough. Take a common experience. A birthday. Turning eight meant something special to you, or maybe not. For me it was a great moment, just moved to Duluth, got to go to a real restaurant, eat ice cream. I felt older, wiser, more myself. But I don't remember any of that when I see an eight year old. I see a child, young, naive. A child and that's it. Patchey?"

"Yeah."

"Get my back."

"Gotten."

"You're a year younger, right?"

"Sure am, never let me forget it."

"As well as I know you," William said, "I still don't know enough to be able to compare any of your struggles or shit to mine. You will always, even if your mom dies or whatever, have an easy year than I had. 'Cause I just get a piece of it and that gets compared against a fleshed out, filled in memory. Mine vs. yours. Mine wins. Ego."

"Right on."

"Yeah."

"Illusion of difference."

"But is it illusion?" Patches said. "Maybe Phil is right. I mean not really and by accident...."

"Dickfuck."

"Fuck dick, Phil...," he said. "Doesn't mean soul. But ego is a product of self, of a locus or something. Where all the neurons are firing back to, the stimuli and predispositions balanced against each other. Maybe it does come down to I am me and you're not."

"Everything else is what then?" Marcus asked.

"Important," Patches said. "Filtered through the ego to grandiose proportions."

"And action," Phil said.
“Maybe, maybe not.”

“Speaking of action,” I said, “can we go home?”

“Or at least somewhere else? Warmer?”

“Just a sec,” Marcus said and I saw the trees on the other side of the Red Lake River knit together in a barricade, a close push of fence. “Gonna play a little game first.”

“Let’s go home,” William said. “Get it over with.”

“Stand down, private,” Marcus said.

“Brother no hurry,” I said. “Grogg know what’s best.”

“What game?” Patches asked.

“Simple,” Marcus said. “Fore you get on the bridge home you gotta boil it down, let us know exactly who you are. Settle the debate.”

“I dunno who I am.” William said. “Can we go home.”

“This is the stuff of after school specials,” Patches said.

“So,” Marcus said. “We gotta do it anyway.”

“Fine,” Kobbins said. “I learned everything I know from baseball cards. Math from figuring out ERA’s and slugging percentage. History from listening to my dad talk about the fifty-three Dodgers, the twenty-seven Yankees, the Black Sox, Burliegh Grimes and his spitter. I can’t do algebra without thinking about innings pitched and total bases. And I hate baseball.”

“Not bad,” Marcus said.

“This is lame,” Phil said.

“You next?”

“I’m good with my hands,” Phil said. “If you know what I mean.”

“You can get yerself off?”

“I’m done,” Phil said.

“Left some stuff out,” Marcus said.

“Like what?”
"You don’t like me."

"Not really," Phil said. "And Patches is a fag. Stottle is okay. Lewis, both of 'em, could have been fine."

"Much better," Marcus said.

"We done?"

"That’s just reaction, Phil," Patches said. "Not who you are. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why don’t you like Marc? Why’s Louie failing?"

"Cause that’s the way it is."

"How ’bout I try?" Patches said. "I am Phil and I am, at the core, a dick."

"Nice," Marcus said.

"Nope," Phil said. "I like people. I do. I start out expecting to like someone."

"Now we’re talking."

"I expect that I will like spending time with anyone," Phil said. "I expect people to be fun to be with. To like to do things."

"Right."

"When people make to big a deal out of difference, or even the uhm... the shitty things in life," Phil said, "like I’m oppressed because of this, or I’m sad because of that... than I don’t like them."

"You feel betrayed."

"Yeah," he said. "Life’s too short."

"You’re a sad man, Phil," Marcus said.

"No," Phil said, "I’m not. I don’t have to be. And I’m not. But, at the core, I am a guy who doesn’t like to let myself get down."

"So you do things," Phil said. "Only like people when they do things to. Wallowing is not your scene."
“Right.”

“You can go now,” William said.

“My turn,” I said.

“Go ahead.”

“I am bigger than all of you,” I said. “And more afraid.”

“Good.”

“Nicely done,” William said.

“How bout you?”

“I hate hypocrisy,” William said.

“You’re a hypocrite,” Marcus said.

“And you’re an ass hole.”

“This is dumb,” Kobbins said.

“Why do you hate hypocrisy?”

“It’s pretense,” William said. “A cover. Too safe, too easy. I hate people who pretend to be something else. But I am a hypocrite,” he said, “all I enjoy doing is pretending I am someone else. I, you think, am happy with knowledge bowl, happy with my G.P.A. When I am alone, taking a shit or whatever, I pretend, even use my hands, that I am a great basketball player. I make good passes, design an offense, mainly dish, set up my teammates. But when the shot is there,” he said, “I never miss.” I heard him say something else, the reason I write, he said, the reason I will write Jake’s words, the reasons I will write everyone of you when all of this is over. “I,” we heard him say, “am the king hypocrite. I hate myself but keep moving.”

“This is depressing.”

“Let’s go home.”

“Patches?”

“I’m gifted,” Patches said. None of us disagreed.

“I am a better blanket than a lover,” Bob Stottle said.
"Ain't we all."

"That was the best one," William said. "I ever write about this, I'll use it."

"That was good."

"We finished?"

"Marcus hasn't gone," Patches said.

"Go ahead."

"I'm black," he said. "but I don't know it except when I'm with you. And I love you guys."

"Right."

"I do," he said. He took another drink of his bottle. I saw him put a shallow blade deep into Phil's leg.

We all saw Marcus kiss Phil on the cheek.

"This was pointless."

"More interesting than I expected," Phil said.

"Yeah," Marcus said. "Decisions were made."

"Let's go," Patches said and I knew we couldn't, saw the river rise up a little, the trees on the other side opaque, knew that our words weren't what they were, that no memory would ever get down what was really said, that our business wasn't finished. But I got on the bridge followed Patches in front of me, the glow and handles of the oak bridge, made it to the other side, saw the tennis rackets in the bush, pried my body into the elm tree, turned back to see Phil and Marcus right behind me, my brother looking nervous on the other side, looking for another way across. I saw time crawl, minnows from a suspended angle, my brother leave us to a trail of rocks, flat and wet and evidently slippery. I saw him jump and wobble, jump again and fall. I saw him go under, heard no splash, saw the river open up for him. We all saw him pop back up, the moon and all the melodrama in the world stuck in his hair, his eyes pulled back wide and cold, a little startled. We all heard Phil say wuss and laugh, heard Kobbins say serves ya right for leaving the bridge. I saw my brother stay under water, saw Phil's low fog laughter spread out over the river, heard it split
into echoes and return. I wanted to choke him but my fingers were spinning themselves, burrowing deep into the elm, little drills touching sap, holding me stuck to the tree. bigger than all of them, bigger than Phil’s laughter, Phil saying you dead yet, Willy, ya dead yet, bigger than the river but I was stuck in the elm when I saw Patches get back on the oak, his hands reaching to the Phil’s laughing face. We all saw Phil fall in bleeding.

I saw my brother was still under water.

Phil was underwater too. He stood up against the deep current, fear and water falling from an open mouth. I saw him sink into the soil, just twist into the river bed, disappear.

Marcus, we could all see the metal glint in the half-light, pulled a pair of left handed scissors from a pocket we didn’t know he had. We all heard him say, “you forgot something, Phil.”

I saw the metal twist around Marcus’s arm, work its way up to his mouth, strangle him. We all saw Patches and Andy get to him, take the scissors away, use fists to get him quiet. I saw Andy’s face, the bone hard skeleton head on the boot camp shirts his brother gave him, breathing through his nose, tighter than Phil, tighter than Marcus. In that tightness, that smile, I could see him, Andy Vincent, breathing mist or something like war movie air, carrying a well oiled gun and a knife sharp enough to cut toenails, moving like fog, rolling in off a black ocean with sharp teeth and this hard face grin, his pants thick camo, too many pockets for the real world, his feet without noise, his hands tightening soft around Marcus’s neck, his lips growing thin and flat and expressionless, fated with the stoppage of breath. I saw him roll back out to sea. His feet left no tracks.

There were six of us.

I saw Marcus, left winded and dead without a weapon say something to Patches in a soft whisper, saw Patches’s head turn into canvass, heard Patches say the word nigger, watched his eyes turn into hollow space. Marcus was black. I saw him get blacker, mud seep out of his pores. He was melting.

I saw Bob and Kobbins catch fire.
There were three of us, Patches and William and Me.

I saw the water drain, the river sucked up, saw William standing, pulling the water into him, saw all the water in the river, the fertilizer, the promise of growth, the motion, the connection, rain and ocean swallowed. The river was gone. There were dead branches exposed. Fish choking. My brother was wrinkled, gray, and bloated, his skin stretched full.

I heard him say, “Exactly as I planned.”

I saw Patches try to remove the canvass hood, use hands to get his face out from behind a mask his uncle owned when he voted Klan party lines in Louisiana. I saw Patches fingers severed by the cloth, his blood drip to dry river bed, saw him have to chew his way out, lick and rip with his teeth, take history in with dry swallows.

The eight of us, bloodied, walked home without speaking.

* * * * *

An epiphany is discovering something behind something, letting go of a fabric mask to find ebony or ornate metals. Growing up, I thought I was my body, the crass truth of mass, height, and volume, calculated in water displaced from the dive tank after me leaping from the high board. I thought these physical measurements were Jacob Lewis. I thought speed and other physical tests the only distinguishing marks I had, deep birth marks. I expected, writing this, to translate the river that night, decode, decipher, understand what I must have seen that night, what was under my six feet plus, something deeper than reflex and strength. I have not changed my mind; that night held nothing of the nature I set out for.

Writing this, seeing my own words lie down for me, I got what I wanted. My body was, as I hoped, just a casing. There is a spirit, a consciousness, a collection of phenomenological experiences, whatever. Maybe a soul. There is something that is mine, that is me, that lives on, takes up an
undefined space, flexes and grows beyond the confines of body, more local than cellular intelligence, more supple than blood, louder in my head than reports from my ears, the sounds of bodies hitting water too young. The epiphany has been in witnessing. This act, these words, have changed me. I was not just younger, faster, bigger, stronger, a better athlete. Difference runs deeper.

Maybe I am homage. Maybe I am vengeance. But I am not echo. These words are mine.

Don't get me wrong, a body is a good thing and I have studied mine well. Nothing I believed was completely wrong. Writing this has simply unstuck and released something more sturdy.

* * * * *

My body, six foot six inches, was left there, fingers pressed into the elm, tied like knots to the valley. I can still see it, suspended over a dry river bed, as if regretting not letting go when there was water to break the fall, a current to move a body somewhere, anywhere else.
There have always been parks. There have always been spaces planted and mowed, smoothed over with skating ice if the winter is northern enough. Spaces taken out of the city or suburb or even the small town that seems to be nothing but space in the first place.

Parks include:
- sand and grass
- something worth climbing
- something to slide down
- swings, rusty or otherwise
- playthings (springs, little digging cranes, basketball hoop etc.)
- children

In the more esoteric attempt of definition, we have taken parks to include: a pulling away of the urban and the houses; a give back or surrender to nature; a place where hands of progress put down shovels and concrete in favor of gestures of approval towards fresh air, tall trees, and anything organic.

However, a return to pragmatics, the physicality of such places of constructed serenity simply finds most suburbs planted greener for a few square blocks, occasional rocks brought in trucks to surround a pond filled with imported small fish, nine-to-fivers with children, sitting on bath towels with soda from the convenience store, dipping bated lines and hoping to bring something home to be smoked with lemon and brand name barbecue sauce, cooked on brand new Webers out of doors, a porch or balcony or some other add on to the outside world, so that smell of stocked fish hooked and grilled-- the smells of something captured, self-reliance and sufficiency, an America spun into myth, manufactured, paved over and lost is rediscovered-- is let to drift through the neighborhood, find noses and hearts in matching houses.
More esoteric still, is the argument that a park can be a single crooked backboard with chain link netting. Flat top half-court, kids who got game, the city fenced out. But a park is always a space where the rules change, pulled away from the adult world, pulled away. And there must be a few playthings, rusty metal, names and phone numbers scratched in paint. Footprints of passing, graffiti of an America coming of age.

Every narrative has a park, every park is a narrative.

It is rumored, not spoken openly by anyone but hunched upon, fretted and feared, that the park is dying, that the last real children have come, have gone, have rolled in grass, swung high, maybe snuck out to smoke before finding what they needed to find, leaving the park forever. All is finished, you suppose. The park meant something when you were little, when your feet wouldn't touch the dirt under the swing and you had to slide off and hope not to fall, when the slide was so hot you had to wear long pants but went anyway, in June, in August, in the longest sun afternoons of the longest sun summer. It was a park and it was real then and important.
You have seen children now:

• they have been, you observe, dragged there by parents who remember
• they don’t seem to get it right, not the way you did
• they, you think, are not loud in the right kind of noise

The day of parks is over, you suppose:

• perhaps they have nothing to give back to children raised on cable and CD-ROM
• perhaps they will be replaced by cyber parks, housed in arcades
• perhaps slides and spinny things will become virtual slides and spinny things
• perhaps necessary childhood feelings, fresh air euphoria and motion nausea, will only be simulated, left to the realm of the electronic
• perhaps children have forgotten how to make their own noise
• perhaps children now only understand ideas and emotions fed through a wire and flashing pixels
• perhaps children have become incapable of appreciating the plain perfection of an open park
• perhaps children only recognize beauty in byte-sized pieces

There is fear overtaking the spaces that have been given back, given to the fool-hardest notions ever, that children would want something fenced in and separate from the passing cars and mini-malls. There is a fear that the children will forget to play outside, to glory in the fake nature of two blocks by two blocks, dying grass and hard sand piled into railroad ties. That children will forget how to breathe the right way, the natural way, like the adults did, in parks during the longest nights of summer, except when the bug-spray trucks were out, leaving floaty trails of mist, honking down streets, taking away what flies and bites, making nature safe for a child in short sleeves. There is a fear of the cybernetic, the artificial, the Nintendo and super-info, the role of these things not upon yourself-- not for the adults who have seen and smelled what was natural, who have blown fuzz from a dandelion-- you have no fear of techno-rot in those who know the glory of the park. Only those who are plugged in, nurtured by data, too young to know what came before, too young to want more.
There is a doom, you have speculated, a doom coming as the swings rust, as the tennis court seeps into cement, leaves cracks by the painted fault lines, as the net is stolen, a naked rim left to dangle from a back-board, the red square sun-faded, impossible to tell what is good and what is an air ball. There is a doom, you have decided, in what is happening.

But there is always a park:

- there is a spider, metallic, with ladders for legs, four pairs of two
  "Moves his legs in pairs."
  "Quicksteps the dancer."

- red and silver with bulging eyeballs and a small but thick pole sinking into grass and mud
  "I ride it,"
  "I skim on water, all on water."

- there is a slide, chrome bright, sun-burnt and flecking that skin sticks to, is pulled the opposite way of the sliding
  "Down is no fun."
  "Painful bad."

- it can be climbed though, and the kids always do, finding new barefoot uses.
  "Even going slow,"
  "Slower than slow,"
  "Not a slide, a stick-to."
  "A gravity undo-er."
  "The anti-grav machine"
  "A broken escalator."
  "Dull buddy, dull."
There is a running dialogue, on the swings, on the jungle gym, on the metal bars to be stood on and swung down, in the scratchings and etchings on the metal springy boing-boings. There are children speaking, for years back, for years winding up. The park is not about nostalgia, never about nostalgia, but about the immediate, the space, the arena, the gathering of what is inside the space of youth and wild-mindedness and what lies outside, the airplane lights drifting, the sounds of the cement factory across a busy street, parents calling out of back doors, or sending brothers or sisters, traitors, to put the mind to sleep for the night.

This park is Spider park.

This park is rural, a small town, ten thousand people, a park on every sixth block or so. Hard to understand why, hard to understand what this town, middle of nowhere, needs with more undeveloped things. We need a mall. We need a Wal-mart. We need a Super-Target. Not more grass, more empty space. But they, twenty like this one but not like this one, are sandwiched every half-mile, ingrown into a half-square block, un-repaired, un-kept up. And despite the fear, scared old ones like yourself, listening to your CD player or reading under the light of your television, worried about the children who are growing up with modernity, the parks, this one especially, is never empty.
PART II.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE STAY IN A FLOOD PLANE
(August 1995, to May 1996)
"931135-9 reporting for mess," I say.

I expect the new guy behind the register to ignore me. While he looks at me, his maroon and gold, Concordia Food Service shirt leaches color from his hair. There is meaning, I think, in a uniform acting as bleach. I become sympathetic, narrow my eyes thoughtfully, let him hover sour and tired above me. I wait for his hand to drop on the keypad, for him to dismiss me to the meat entrees and stir fry bar, to release me into the large-tabled room next door, for him to redirect my noise into the clink of fork against plate, the shudder of ice into cup, other sounds more benevolent and in accordance with the telegraphed reports we can hear from here. He does not blink as we make eye contact. His face stays flat. He is baffled, maybe contemplating something on a macro cosmic level. Maybe just deciding how to get rid of me. Either way, I am unused to being so deftly considered here.

"College as prison is an old metaphor," he says.

"Yes," I say. I am confused. "The bison as a low, big helicopter is as well."

"What?" he asks. I get lost in the pale rhythms of his hair, mope in the abstract for a moment, chew my lip while figuring it out.

"You're literate." I say. "Woulda pulled out all the stops if I'da known."

"Wouldn't have mattered," he says.

"How'd you know it was prison," I say. "Might've been an alien enslavement camp. 931135-9, from Planet Jargon, reportin' for mess sir!"

"No," he says.

"Why?"
"We'd have better shirts."

He gives me back my card, pinches his eyes to let me know that we are done talking. More comfortable with this arrangement, I am willing to learn his name now. The card pinned to his shirt says Peter. I nod but do not move. I never move, not right away. I scan the neon letters of the hand written menu one last time and find my dull face in the bold mirror hanging over Pete's shoulder. I look cross, pale and bored, in the security mirror. The round mirror always makes my head look hollow, spread too thin, rolled into oval even with my hair long enough to touch my shoulders. My pupils are especially black this evening, deep pinholes. I look like a pasty criminal.

"Did you know convex is really a conspiracy," I say.

"Moorhead is a conspiracy," Pete says.

"But home," I say. I wonder if he realizes I'm being droll. I watch myself, blink a few times, run my tongue over cracked lips before hitting the line. I find enough things that aren't revolting to half fill my tray before I move on. The caf is crowded but I find a round table all for myself. I spread my stuff out, backpack and coat on the table, to make it look like I'm waiting for a special friend with a loud laugh and long fingers who might have gone to get some apple cobbler. I drink my water first. A few swallows are all I get before ice makes my front teeth hurt. I put the glass down solid on the imitation oak table. My mashed potatoes are chewy. The gravy is filmy and cold, the stuffing is mostly celery. But the knife in my hand feels nice. It slides its way, sharp and serrated, through meat wet with mushroom sauce. It cuts what my teeth have trouble chewing. The knife is warmer than the meat.

So is the room. Too warm. I watch my ice melt in dim light. The walls are white and wood but everything looks yellow at night. Hard to breathe in because of skinny up and down
windows that show nothing but black in thin strips. I don't think I've told anyone here that I 
hate this yellow light, that I hate not being able to see more of the outside than narrow 
segments, opaque and solid, like I would need to remember the words to a passwall spell from 
D&D games I played with the boys back home just to get outside and breathe right. No one else 
seems to mind the light. They laugh. Drink diet soda from glasses clear like mine. Chew gum 
when they're done eating. They stay down here long after their meals are over.

I only know one person in the room. His name is Stanford Muggs and he would be good to 
eat with but he has a higher purpose. He has been protesting this place, its waste and idiocy, 
starting a few months ago by distributing color brochures, printed in nice font, that document 
how much food gets thrown away. I could eat with him then. He decided a few weeks ago that 
no one was listening. It was my idea to stop taking food himself, to stand by the garbage cans 
and take scraps from peoples trays before they left. He has been there every meal since. He 
carries a sign that says, "Not hungry?" I watch him grab salad with his fingers. He hates 
Thousand Island but smiles while he chews. I hear him say, "yummy, thanks." I sometimes 
watch him for entire meals. He has tunnel vision now, no longer sees me. I have never liked being 
alone enough to be much of an activist.

Nonetheless, I have discovered that there is an alchemy to successful, lonely eating. I, 
the days I am with others, only pity people who seem comfortable with their empty tables, 
people who are quiet and dark while alone, people who can eat everything on their plates. Such 
comfort, I think, can only be habitual. People who look manic or even ridiculously lost in despair, 
who mouth things to themselves, occasionally laugh or cry in the midst of a crowded, noisy place 
and have trouble chewing and swallowing must not, I reason, be accustomed. Only those 
unaffected by the processes must actually be a product of it. There is a difference, I think,
between eating alone and being alone. Those who don’t act lonely, with no trace of neurosis, must make no notice of the misery of eating without others and therefore must be miserable.

Everyone must know this. So, though I have eaten alone more times than I want to think about since leaving Patches and William and Marcus and Bob and Ted in favor of this private school with more money for computer labs, I must give the impression that I am not used to it.

Sometimes, I draw on the one musical I did in high school to let tears well up in my eyes while I pretend to listen to conversations over the dinner noise from someone else’s table, like I was a part of something similar yesterday, like my empty round table is just about a new kind of stimuli, nothing more esoteric and sad than that. Completely miserable but completely subject to laws of a new day dawning, reversible, amendable. Not set. Just a singular moment of isolation. Not isolated forever. Other times, I have simply set out to show that I am capable of making my own noise. Truly sad people are silent, so I have banged my tray like a drum machine, pounding out paradiddles with silver ware. I have sung to myself. I have laughed at my own jokes.

One time, a meal two weeks ago, I decided to answer the clink and yawn of other tables crowded by clients wearing sweatshirts and loud voices. I answered them. I beeped like an alien and painted my face with powdered cocoa and cold water in sharp alien zigzags to prove I was not to be taken lightly. The Chicken Cordon Bleu was slightly burned, filled with the wrong kind of cheese. But I was beeping and someone with nice brown hair, "April," she said, forcing me to remember and contemplate name before comfort, beeped back to me. She wasn’t wearing a bra and I had chocolate powder on my face. I felt my scalp more keenly, pictured it controlled by a hidden, visceral micro chip as it dry itched its way into nerve and flirt mode.

"I am an alien," I said.
"I am an android," she said. I didn't believe her but I remembered where I knew her from, that we had been in the same orientation group two years ago and that she had disclosed the fact that she could pop her shoulders out of joint to impress people. I had seen a brief demonstration. We, on a first day tour of the clock tower and the echo circles built into our sidewalk cement, had discussed music theory on Mars. She had said clicks, echoes and hums were more satisfying than Earth noise because of lower gravity. I said I didn't know. But I had been thinking about it since.

"I think you were wrong," I said.

"Oh?"

"Martians understand the value of good acoustics, same as anyone," I said.

"No," she said. She touched my knee. "I mean, maybe," she said. "You'd be the first," she said. She smiled, all lips and gums, soft tissues. "At least the first I've met."

She, even with the bad Cordon Blue and my aggressive facial paint and beeping, could cut through all of my authentic alien replications and defenses to mind control. She was no less threatening than she had been when we watched the orientation films or took the tour of the residence halls. She had come to me though, so I decided that even if her motives were cloudy, maybe to abduct or punish me or to replace my nose with plastic that changed color in the wind, I was in her hands. When she asked me to meet her at the Coffee Barn for sour black drinks and poetry with leather and nose-rings, I said yes three times in human English and used my butter knife to scrape off my alien war paint. She smiled when I agreed, laughed as the chocolate didn't come off of my skin. She bent to kiss the corner of my mouth, moved to dump her tray, kissed Muggs full on the mouth, and turned a wave to me before leaving.
I splurged for the date, bought a special shirt that said, "Gonzo is a mob boss," and had the weirdo in full grandeur drinking a black and tan on a bar stool surrounded by hench-chickens wearing dark shades and Tommy guns. She met me. I was brushed and flossed, my beard left in the dorm sink shaved by three blades. My skin smelled like mint and maple sugar. The Coffee Bar left us tasting like Asia according to the stickers on the tea bags as we walked, skipping and laughing, soggy in warm air to get to April's room so we could pretend to watch movies subtitled with Norwegian words that she could translate back into the English version I was hearing anyway. I laughed at her, but a few minutes after she popped her shoulders out of joint to hug me backwards, her screwed up and bony shoulder blades flat against my chest, I chewed on her hair and slid my hand under the shiny cold fabric of her blouse when she asked me to.

"You," she said to me that night, that first date," are the kind of guy who only dances when he's drunk."

"Not true," I said doing a little jig with my normal shoulders. "Spacemen got rhythm, baby." And she laughed, turned so she could see my dance, and bent up to me, arms finally moving the right way. She held me down lightly after we started kissing. She pulled off my new shirt, holding it gently with her mouth, tacky but graceful, in little tugs to get it over and off of my head.

"The scar?"

"I was an extra in Braveheart," I said.

"No you weren't," she said, let her lips graze the purple splash of skin.

"Spacemen can be Scottish," I said.

"No lies," she said. "Scars are important."

"Ah, okay," I said.
"They are," she said. "Like finger prints, shape and direction of who you are."

"Oh," I said.

"But even more important," she said. "Finger prints happen naturally, with bend and crease, genetic areas of resistance, happenstance, luck, all of that stuff. Pretty Arbitrary. Scars are formed with heat and fissure, trauma. Like growth rings. They record," she said.

"Oh," I said.

"Like this," she said, lifting her skirt to show a flat, jagged mark against her hip. "This one is a record of rock climbing, of trust in a boyfriend, of a rope with too much slack."

"So is this the part where we trade scars and get naked?" I asked.

"If it were a movie,"

"Or a crime novel," I said.

"It isn't," she said.

"Who knows," I said, forcing eye contact, getting closer. "I could be writing this myself," I said.

"So what is it?" she said, a little smile, some blinking.

"My scar?"

"Yes."

"It's boring," I said.

"So."

"I was uhm," I said, "Playing football with other alien outcasts and I ran into a parked truck."

"Stop stalling," she said. "Nonsense is not acceptable if it's to stall."

"It's part true."
"The parked truck?"

"Yeah," I said. "I caught the pass. But there was a board sticking out of the truck and I wasn't wearing my glasses and there were three nails and they caught and I kept going. Could have been worse, could have punctured. Could have left me like a broken bag pipe."

"You're still lying," she said. She kissed me again. "That probably happened to a friend or something."

"Why would I lie?"

"I dunno," she said. "But you don't wear glasses."

"Spacemen can wear glasses," I said. "How do you know I don't?"

"Spit it out."

"I got in a fight." I said.

"A fist fight?"

"Sort of. More of a brawl."

"Jesus, Andy," she said. "Don't seem the bar fightin' type."

"Only when I'm drunk," I said.

"Nother lie."

"Yeah. No bar. We all knew each other."

"And what? Just decided to kick ass."

"Kind of. I don't know. We just sort of fell into a river and things got crazy. Long story. I uhm was trying to keep Marcus from killing Phil and got carried away. Marcus bit me," I said.

"I didn't know it at the time. Didn't see the blood till I thawed out, dried off."

"Finger print," she said. "You lost?"

"No," I said. "Most of us were in worse shape than me."
"Told you it was important."

"It's not," I said. "I still talk to Marc a lot. Skin heals more slowly than other things."

"That's not true," she said. "Skin just admits that it remembers."

"I admit it," I said. But I think that when I kissed her full, moved my hand to her ribs, pulled against her shirt, I was really just changing the subject.

"I do admit it," I say out loud, chewing meat and mushrooms with an open mouth. "I do," I say again. I'm aware that I am talking to myself, more than half out loud. I am aware that I might be noticed so I let my eyes roll up a little. Strange means unaccustomed, means this meal has nothing to do with me. Means I have possibly eaten a thousand meals more meaningful than any of these people in this tiny, yellow, airless room. Marc eating his pasta in little swirling, closed mouthed chews. Patches and William working to make each other snort soda through their nose, trading well timed punch lines. A few meals, after the first date, with April. "I admit everything," I say but think she's right. I choose, and am aware of choosing, to stop remembering Marc and Patches and William let alone Caveman Grogg, Phil and the others. I shake me head, quarantine anything other than eating together memories, let myself mull over the laughing, the chewing, the swallowing, more chewing. Only the stuff of pleasant rumination gets tasted again.

I don't let myself chew the six days it's been since I talked to her.

"I am bored," she said. We were in the dorm lounge because it was a weekday and the opposite sex is too dangerous to allow access into a gendered wing full tilt with enthusiasm for their liberal arts educations that would evaporate if the policy allowed things as unscrupulous as kissing and private conversation to happen within a dorm room from Monday to Friday. I have
tried to appeal that spacemen are exempt from inter-visititation hours and other administrative constraints. She has told me to pick my galactic battles.

"Bored?" I said.

"Not with you, babe," she said. I noticed a few other couples look at us. I looked at the TV. They looked away.

"How then?"

"I am bored with aliens."

"Might as well have said me," I said.

"Serious, Andy. Just for now. Hear me out."

"Okay," I said.

"I am not saying they are dull," she said. "Just slow. Even if, and we both believe the answer has gotta be yes, they exist and then have the audacity to uhm..."

"They exist," I said.

"Yeah," she said.

"We both believe," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "Too stubborn to think we're alone in this. Right. So they exist. And maybe have gotten here."

"They have," I said.

"Okay," she said. "Listen. So they have figured out a way to get here without tripping the alarms of improbability and self destruction and infinite mass and all of the politics of the speed of light. They have gotten here. But they are still governed by things we can't understand."
"So," I said. "They'll teach us. Big classes, space college. Intro. to worm-holes, blah, blah, blah. 101."

"No," she said.

"Have faith," I said. I smiled. I kissed her.

"Okay," she said. "You're not listening." She scratched her head, let shoulder length hair wobble. I smelled strawberries and vanilla, a little sweat tied to loose molecules of perfume.

"Science is scary," I said.

"That's what I mean."

"If smelling is collecting loose particles, discarded or jettisoned," I said. "then I am not really smelling you but collating and sorting through things that you, at least your body, on some level, cellular or smaller, decided to get rid of. And I notice these bits of you. Just for a moment. And than I lose track of them. Fleeting, always fleeting."

"I take that back," she said. "You weren't listening."

"Maybe, maybe not," I say. I touch her hand. "But listen. I'm serious. It is infinitely more suave to think that when I breathe you in I am just smelling, just catching the essence, simply tripping on something related but different than you. It is down right scary to think that I am actually, in some basic way, connecting with a really tiny piece of you and then, a moment later, losing it. Everything I want happening microscopic before my very eyes."

"Nose," she said.

"Right," I said. I shook my head, made eye contact with one of the other couples relegated to the TV room. "Like I ought to be able to hang on to those particles because I know what's happening."
"Hapless," she said. "You know too much."

"Exactly," I said. "Without science I would breathe ignorant but happy. I would smell you, same as now. But every sniff would only be good, not processed as intimacy found and lost, bound up in neuron shadow."

"You," she said, "are strange."

"Romantic."

"Gone," she said. "Completely gone."

"Lovable?"

"Why not."

"Yippee," I said. I kissed her full, a few moments. Concordia, with help from a policy rooted in piety, has become a campus full of accidental exhibitionists and voyeurs. We made out in a crowded room. Probably weren't the only ones kissing. They caught a couple having sex in the chapel a few months ago. April pulled away when MTV went to a commercial for ant-acids, got louder and informative.

"To get back to what I was saying," she said, kissing me once more, quick smiles mushed together. "I am not unsympathetic to the cause of the space person."

"Good," I said.

"But I am not convinced anything truly important can come from it."

"How pessimistic."

"I am not a pessimist," she said.

"No, you're not," I said. "You're pessimistic."

"Fine," she said. "I would ask for clarification, but let's keep the tangents in check for a while."
"Shit," I said.

"Down boy," she said.

"Down," I said.

"Think about it," she said.

"Okay."

"Most theorists think that aliens, at least the ones who have figured out how to bridge the gap, get their little gray buts this far away from home, are really homeless, right?"

"Sure," I said. "In a matter of speaking."

"Living in space and things," she said. "Their systems have been trashed, stars bloated, exploded, et cetera, right? So they are doing stuff to cope with the road, leave marks, dead cattle, crop circles, implants and so forth..."

"Not et cetera?"

"Not again," she said. "How Romantic are you? Calling for repeating dialogue. Remind me not to let you write our movie. Be chock full of the same stuff, one good line, a solid word, again and again. Over and over."

"Like tangents?" I asked. She smiled. "I win," I said.

"Anyway," she said, "shat if the leap in technology, in order to get here, is somehow aided by knowledge gained from experiments that can only be conducted in the first few chapters of Armageddon?"

"The sun already inflated?"

"Et cetera," she said. "What if something implicit in a world ending provides answers about how to escape it?"

"That assumes a lot," I said.
"Yeah," she said. "But think about it."

"Okay," I said. "But it's depressing."

"Yeah," she said. "But think about it. The same thing happens on a day to day basis. Relationships. Serious commitment is forged only when the world seems like it will end without it. And only after means, sexual and otherwise, playing basketball, whatever, have been tried, experimented with, and given up as not plausible. Commitment has as much to do with adaptation to little Armageddons as it does with love."

"Love is not a technology," I said. "Not cerebral at all. Besides, for this sort of thing to govern aliens and stuff they would have to work, on a very basic level, like we do. And that ignores the fact that their understanding of the world could be completely different. I mean it obviously is."

"Still," she said, "even in a world organized with different principles, suns explode, life stems from carbon, cells multiply and divide, suffer damage from negative stimuli, adapt."

"Demon science," I said. "We can't know that's universal."

"All we get," she said.

"For now," I said. "Gotta wait for the aliens to teach a community ed. course."

"We know enough to hypothesize," she said. "You gotta grant me that, oh mourner of the lost scent particles."

"Granted," I said.

"If carbon is the only universal," she said, "even if it is the only universal, the commonalties would be enough to think that things may happen on a similar time line."

"Assumption," I said. "The circle does nothing in two dimensions."

"What?"
"We honor the circle because we discovered that when you add a third dimension, make it into a wheel, it does good things."

"Yeah."

"A world where something else, like electricity, or magnetism, or maybe anything, was given that kind of accidental leap of discovery into application could stumble through a worm hole or something else completely low-tech in many other ways. Still hunt and gather or what ever."

"I'm pessimistic?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Okay, fine," she said. "We don't know. But that's the point. I don't think that we can assume, whatever the origins of the discovery, that the folks that made it even see it as the thing we are looking for. No community ed. courses in either of our models."

"We don't get to shoot through the cosmos?"

"We might," she said. "Probably will eventually. But I think that by the time we do, we will have aged so much, we will have different notions of the outside world."

"How do you mean?"

"Technology completely changes morality, higher purposes and so on. Shatters the way we do anything."

"Pessimistic."

"Accurate," she said. "Sometimes the ideologies that fall need to fall. The web will eventually change the way we think about privacy. Maybe everything else. I read a book that said the alphabet made possible a monotheistic, capital 'g' God. We, when we figure it out will be
so different. Think about how much the railroad changed the way we thought about travel.

Relocation is no longer a mark of restlessness or persecution."

"Inevitable?"

"Sure," she said. "And even more importantly, accepted as part of the world. It is possible to move fairly painlessly. Discoveries that lead to the big one will make our motives more than exploration or curiosity, one way or another."

"Colonization?"

"Maybe. Or something more desperate and cautious that is not about seeking utopia but seeking anywhere to get off the boat."

"If travel is mandatory."

"I believe it will be," she said, "however the discovery will be made. Besides," she said, "we already have the airplane. Travel is mandatory already."

"Adaptation will figure out space when it needs to and we will move in automated ways."

"Ick."

"Not necessarily. Now is ick to your uncle. The world is destroyed again and again."

"But the seeds stay the same. We remember, study rhetoric Greek bozos pondered two thousand years ago."

"We remember what we want to," she said.

"We use what we want to but we remember everything."

"Not true," she said.

"We remember everything," I said.

"What did you say when you hit him?"

"What?"
"What did you say when you almost killed Marcus?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Exactly."

"Still."

"All I am saying is that things will spin out from here. Entropy is fast, babe."

"And the need to reassemble all that mess and chaos into something that makes sense is faster."

"Maybe," she said. "That's why the future is fascinating."

"I thought you were giving up."

"No," she said. "I'm just not banking on alien intervention. I am counting on us to somehow figure a lot of stuff out."

"A million years too late," I said.

"Maybe," she said. "There's always reincarnation."

"Now yer talkin'."

"Think about it Andy."

"Yikes," I said. "I don't know."

"That's the point," she said. "We know so little. About time, about energy, even about electricity. What do you know about the electron."

"It moves fast," I said.

"Right," she said. "But could you procure electricity from that very rudimentary awareness and a bunch of wire?"

"Who you callin' rudimentary?"

"Could you?"
"No," I said, "I couldn't. So?"

"So we don't know much. What I'm saying is that, in the timeline I am figuring, some kind of evolution of intellect and knowledge that has as much to do with whole worlds and systems being born and destroyed as it does anything else, reincarnation makes some sense."

"Splain,"

"Okay," she said. "If, like I said earlier, the key is to live out natural, billion year cycles, changing technology in small flukes of discovery, evolutions happening in individual discoveries communicated to the rest of the populace, like cells to a body, it would make sense that, even when change is relatively rapid, the whole system, the body metaphoric, is governed by some kind of consciousness. That conciseness, call it god, call it the world, call it history, is something whose only goal, after being flipped on a few billion years ago, is to live and keep living. Science, as we know it, is one step in evolution. A step about retracing our steps to this point, anticipating the next crawl forward to keep living. But it, as an idea, and we as living creatures, can not, by definition, get to the final rung. We assume that we are the pinnacle of evolution all the time because our thought process has evolved to a point of being able to call the bluff, come up with the paradigm. So we, in a very genesis kind of way, still remain the closest thing to divinity breathed into clay. What we forget is that natural selection is still working."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she said. "Reproduction politics. It has more to do with anorexia and ideas now then it did when bringing down the woolly mammoth was important. But it is working and we are just another rung."

"What's that got to do with reincarnation?"
"It just makes sense," she said, "that a world that, every day pulls forth new ideas, amendments and adaptations to Newtonian laws, old school mysticism and the days when Atari was hi-tech, would have to have a way to remember."

"We do remember," I said.

"We already showed that that's not true," she said. "Old cells, in a straight up Darwinian evolution model, are brought back in flukes of natural drift right?"

"Right."

"A kind of cellular memory, latent and waiting, to hold the new implementations up for examination. If evolution, like I think it is, is global and about ideas and notions of civilizations, Rome begetting America, America begetting something bigger that will watch the sun bloat, devise the right experiments, find a big enough suitcase, the planet needs to work like a body. Old cells, old souls, pulled back up. We, you and I, have probably witnessed every major leap of idea. We will remember it all later."

"When we invent the past life memory probe?"

"Who knows. I just know that the world moves fast enough, proves the unthinkable thinkable every five years, that I want to see as much of that as possible. Probably the only reason I keep going to class, getting shitty jobs, waking up."

"I thought kissing me was," I said.

"Kissing you is part of seeing the way things untangle, re-tangle. Smooching is as much a part of science as anything else."

"I will kiss you anytime you want. Meanwhile, I am still gonna shout for the aliens to give me a lift to the good life."

"Not smart, lover."
“You can come,” I said.

“Sure,” she said. She let her fingers wrap into mine. Watched the TV with her mouth closed.

“If,” I said eventually. “evolution is working on ideas and interpersonal relationships, natural selection would indicate that two is better than one.”

“What are you saying?”

“For survival,” I said. “Two would have a better chance, if they could evolve, even for a short life, together. Right?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Marry me,” I said. I was whispering. She wrinkled her brow.

“When?”

“When ever,” I said. “The ceremony isn’t as important as the decision. Say yes and we’re already married.”

“Okay,” she said.

“Great,” I said. I smiled. Relaxed. Turned away, let pixels flash and products be sold from a box plugged into the wall, hung in the corner of the room. I remembered to turn back and kiss her.

Our conversation got fun again when we stopped talking about space and marriage. We didn’t talk about love again that afternoon but it didn’t feel like a eulogy. She never took back her answer; I never took back the question. She said she would call before I did.

I stop thinking, chew my meat slowly, only let myself realize that my dinner is not very good. I keep eating because I only have a few dollars and may need it to see her again.
I see my roommate. He is with a few of his friends. He waves but puts his tray at another table. His name is Don. He's alright, pretty much a anarchist, an ex-hacker who's done some time and has an FBI record. He's a smart guy, believes in aliens but talks about it in weird ways, thinks that binary is the only important thing to happen in the last millennia. I like him, would eat with him if he wanted to. His friends aren't cool though. He doesn't like them either, I don't think. But he's an anarchist and entropy is entropy. Friends are luck, I think.

He comes to my table.

"Hey Six," he says.

"Number Six, to you," I say. "On duty, brother."

"Right. Let the bastards fall," he says. "Patches called."

"Yeah?"

"I left the message on the fridge."

"What did he want?"

"Your boys are goin' to Dakota, visit Louie."

"William?"

"I guess," he said. "They want to meet your new ladyfriend."

"Oh," I say. "When?"

"Call him," Don says. "Or any of them. He said he was gonna be gone for a while but would see you when he did. Told you to get a hold of Louie."

"Ah," I say. "Thanks, man."

"Right on."

"Let the bastards fall."

"Watch yer back, Six" he says.
"Watched," I say.

He moves back to his friends. They are laughing about something. I see how white their teeth are. I will not eat alone again. I let mugs pick whatever he wants off of my tray before I dump it and head back to the room. I steal one of Don's cokes, leave him a note that says, "Aliens got another one," before I call April.

She's not home.

I don't leave a message.

I call Patches.

He's not home either.

"Hello," I say to his machine, "this is lieutenant Jergens with the Willow county DNR. We have received an anonymous tip that you are storing dead or dying horses in your shed. We would appreciate a timely response." I hang up, assume that he won't hear the tape for a while.

I check my e-mail. William has written. So has Patches. It all goes down a few months from now, in Grand Forks, at William's apartment. Patches is driving up, I am supposed to also. Both messages are labeled CE: scribes. Patches says William is conducting an experiment, some kind of seance to write it all down.

"Book of God," William says. "I've got the first line: 'Earthlings are feeble.' Need other sentient folks to get the rest. Come to lovely city. No flood yet, for now, all will be dry. Winch (my roommate if you don't remember) is making cookies-- GINGER SNAPS: not just a cookie, a sub-set of yummy. Bring yer honey!!"

I write them both back, say "coming--honey pending."

I decide to send a note to April.

"Miss you STOP Need you STOP Call me STOP Love STOP Andy STOP"
I remember her laughing as my fingers type. I rub my scar, a dull echo of a deep scratch and some blood, with my thumb. I do remember. I remember her. But maybe she is right. I get Marc's number from his parents. I can't tell if they are surprised to hear from me. They don't ask anything about my life right now. I tell them nothing. I hang up. I dial.

I get his voice mail.

I hang up.

I try April again. Even her roommate isn't home. Patches and William don't answer. Machines always sound angry and bored.

I lie down, decide to go to sleep early. I can't. I roll over. I don't remember my scar ever itching like this. My nerves are splayed, insomnia or something deeper. I realize that she never called me Number Six. It bugs me. I am sweating. I swallow. Marcus was the only other one who didn't. I am either too sad or too tired to believe in coincidence. I try to placate myself. Maybe they liked the name but believe in real names, some kind of Aristotle thing, name and form. Maybe love is love even if the words are different. Maybe I am going crazy. She was right. I don't remember everything, don't even breathe my own name. I decide to go by Andy from now on. Just Andy.

I call Marc again.

"Marc," I say. "Been some time," I say. "What, three years? Maybe four? I've had yer number for a while. Sorry I haven't called. We're all gathering at William's in February. You may already know, you may not. You need to come. See ya."

I am at my desk. I punch the wood with my hand, let my knuckles ache. I dial her number again. Nothing. I am sure there is something at the bottom of this, at the bottom of why she is not calling me back, why she is not with me right now, why I haven't heard from her.
at all. I decide she is right, that it is no good to wait. I make plans to be more active in the morning.

I lie back down, let my body stretch out the skinny acre of my extra long, dark blue, single bed sheets. I realize I didn't leave any numbers or an address. It is enough to have left notice. My stomach seems to lose acid, relax and my mind slows enough to imagine April is next to me. I slow roll against the mattress as if she were next to me, beneath me, around me. But I drift off knowing it is easier to sleep in this thin bed alone.

I wake up to no messages, no e-mail. I call my brother in Florida.

"Hello," he says and even though his voice is grittier than I would like, he is there and willing to talk. He gives me the information I ask and, before noon, I have made the appropriate phone calls, talked to other live voices, filled out the proper paper work, been fitted for a uniform, told that I will ship off mid-semester to Fort Benning, warmer in Georgia, for basic training.

I find my eyes, out of habit, in the flat mirror above the scale and stirrup table during my physical. Watching my blink, slower and more sturdy than I have seen myself in a while, I realize I haven't cut my hair, not more than a trim, since high school. It has become long enough to chew on. I smell shampoo when I move my head too fast, but even shaking my head, my hair is straight and heavy enough to keep its part, down the middle, hang around the sides of my pale face, draw it out thinner.

My cheeks will be pudgier without my hair. I will look better fed.
American Crystal Sugar Beet Plant, Crookston, Minnesota: the first shot of a story has to establish tone so shoot this barely lit but with clear edges so motion is distinct and paranoid. Watch a black kid, seventeen maybe, doing his rounds. See that he is alone. Get a close up of his eyes, his pupils dilated, his mouth crooked and dormant. Watch him walk with a time clock on his hip, twisting keys so that a supervisor will know he didn’t neglect his position. Watch him walk through the seed room. See how bored I am with boxes and boxes of beet seed. See that he is alone. His motion should dominate the shot, like he could split the place in two if he moved the right way. Get enough close ups so he looms huge and powerful, like security should, even as he makes his way along metal stairs, through the guts of massive machines responsible for grinding and distilling, draining and heating, refining sugar from a beet, separating sweet from soil. See that I know my way around the place, find the key to the lab where sugar is tested and tasted without much effort. But get a close up of his eyes as a machine exhales a volume of steam and whistle. See that the place is not mine. See the black kid’s eyes when he dips a licked finger into a plastic container of crude sitting on an electric scale. See that the sugar is wasted on me. See how small the black kid is when standing in the warehouse, surrounded by stacks and stacks of finished product, his homeland, not my homeland, ready for export and commercial sale.

Rick Helstad, my boss with A.S.P. security, told me I was the first black man they had ever hired. “Though we’re not racist,” he said, which could have been true. Not a lot of black people applying for the job in Northern Minnesota. “We’ve hired a few beaners,” he said to prove his point. I laughed with him, said, “and you still have sugar to sell?” He thought that was really funny so I had little trouble, got the overnight shifts by myself in no time. I wasn’t really guarding anything; though invaluable, beet seed has very little appeal to the underworld and the desperate. I was an insurance write-off, mostly. Regardless of the lack of danger, I was left to watch the valley’s biggest treasure. It was strange to guard the closest thing my homeland had to gold and know that I was un-naturalized, hardly an heir to the soil, not even to the waste lagoons or the pellets that would be used for animal feed. I was dislocated those nights doing my rounds, guarding the property of the white men who worked the soil outside of town, guarding products of a place I had no allegiance to. But they trusted me and I could feel my chest fill the button-down shirt more fully as the weeks wore on. I stopped reading and started playing solitaire like the rest of the guards; shuffling a deck would keep me awake. When I
did a few rounds naked, my skinny black ribs showing in the moonlight, it was as much to remind and reclaim as it was to transgress.

*A Minneapolis Psychologist’s Office: shoot this one with a couple of crooked angles so we can see the shrink has a greater gravity than the black man on the other side of a sprawling desk that occupies the center of the shot. It is important, and going to be difficult, to shoot this sequence with an even hand on the camera so the room is carefully measured; even though it is not equally weighted you need to see that the therapy is working, that something in this room has taken unbalanced sessions like this one and spun them like a record with only a gentle wobble on a phonograph. We need to understand the shrink like a well-cleaned needle, trained to retrieve noise from a familiar groove so spend some time showing this middle-aged white man with good credentials, maybe a slow pan past his diplomas on the East wall, sitting behind his desk. Get a shot of his name, written in cold letters on a plaque next to his head as he scratches his face. My shrink’s name is Jeskowitz. Watch him fiddle with papers from a folder.

At first, you must only barely notice the black man in a comfortable chair across the desk from Jeskowitz. Use a tricky light so we can see how clean the air is. Watch me scratch my head, fidget. Do not have the mouths, neither the white man’s nor the black man’s, move as you loop in sounds and words, the shrink and the patient. Let the dialogue come from nowhere, as if it is out of habit, as if it could have happened at any of a thousand sessions. Get a shot of an unlit lamp as you hear the older, more comfortable voice say, “tell me again, son,” notice that he calls me son, “tell me again what happened at the river before you were sent to the juvenile detention center.” Get a close up of his eyes as the sound floats over, get a close up of his white eyelids closing pat, without wrinkles, with out eye movement, without effort. Distort the black man’s voice, make sure it is not connected to the black man. Hear the words are buried as I say, “Same thing I told you every other time.” Hear the older voice say, “One more time then. For old time’s sake.” Hear my voice, quiet and hidden say, “I already told you. I stabbed a boy. His name was Phil and I wasn’t the only one ready to do it. Anyone else had the scissors, he would have bled the same. I had the weapon, they didn’t, so it was me that did it, me they turned on when they saw his blood. Me that did time.” Hear the old man’s tongue click as he says, “do you regret it?” Hear distance and years in the black man’s voice, “same as I told you before. I regret what happened after. But Phil ain’t dead. It’s like... I needed to see what they, the
ones I actually liked, probably loved, you know, what they did after I hurt him. I needed to see them react to me, react the way they did. It was good for me. Do I regret it. Maybe. Did I need it. Yeah.” Hear disapproval in the old voice asking, “What did they, by beating you after you stabbed Philip Langley, what did they teach you?” Hear the black man’s voice respond automatic. Get a close up of my eyes. My mouth isn’t moving. Make sure my eyes are wide, serious but relaxed, like the words on top of the image are self-evident. “That they knew I was black, anytime I did anything. That I was maybe nothing more than that to them. That me doing something was different than them doing something. That I am different from them.” Hear the shrink sound like every shrink in the world as he says, “Good. You have stopped seeing their actions as betrayal. You need to focus on what they have given you. They have given you difference and strength. You are making progress, Son.” Resist the temptation to have the camera spin so fast that you are as dizzy as me those eighteen months I spent with him.

The Friday before Andy left his message, I told my shrink that his waiting room would have made a suitable studio apartment. He asked me if my rent was paid. “Hell yeah. It cool,” I said because it makes him happy when I omit and explicate. “Words,” he has said, “are a linguistic paternity suit and it does no good to deny parentage. Let history,” he has told me, “lay up on the tongue like calendar pages with thin inked X’s through every day.” The ink is black, no doubt. He encourages me to speak like I am. “Do not edit,” he says. “Authenticity is more important than well-adjusted,” he says. “Therapy isn’t a composition classroom,” he has pointed out several times, “don’t worry about speaking standard. Language is a parent, don’t fake anything. Work on the way you say the word ‘Fuck’,” he told me. “When you swear,” he said, “make it as black as you can. Make it volatile,” he said, “make it violent.”

My shrink, Jeskowitz is his name, is an old white man about the age of my adopted father. His hair is balding, pulling back slowly from his head, exposing, showing off, framing. He does nothing to conceal his baldness, no pricey implants or tricks of a middle-aged comb, and therefore looks nothing like my adopted father. “Difference is a trump card,” Jeskowitz told me that Friday. “Never let go of difference. Be black,” he said. He smiled when I said, “So it’s not just that I am black, but that I be black.” “There you go,” he said. “White English has no verb tense for something chronic. Hang on to that surety, that permanence,” he said, “it can give you strength.” His confident racism was, those months with him, reassuring. He be racist. It was probably the reason I never missed an appointment. I think it was an accident that he understood more about my life than one would expect, a well-educated ignorance that allowed to illustrate and articulate what exactly I
had, coming to Minneapolis as soon as I got out of juvi, run away from when I left the Red River Valley. He reminds me that the river system I grew up took its water from subtle sources in the South. Even people in the Valley, my adopted Father, William, Jimmy, Andy and the caveman, forget. The family I left forgets that the Red moves backwards than almost every other river in the Hemisphere.

Jeskowitz wouldn’t have understood that it wasn’t his advice that saved me those months. It wasn’t his support of my project, a tattoo I was making from burn tissue by holding a link from my silver bracelet in my Zippo until it was hot enough to blister flesh in a pattern around my wrists and ankles, that led to liberation. I lied to him all the time, told him the design was coming along, kept showing him my left ankle, the only one that was finished and had healed all the way. He never kept track or he would have thought I had twenty different ankles. He said it was an art, not self mutilation at all. So I lied to him, said that I was still working on it when the truth was that he, the first time he told me how beautiful my scars were, had let me see blood just under the skin, scared me enough by example to resist the temptation to burn away my own protections against illness and cold.

_A close up the shrink’s mouth: see how white his teeth are, how his lips don’t quiver when his mouth moves. Hear him ask, “how’s the book coming?” Don’t turn the camera to the black man as I say “it be coming along, I be trying to work as much as I can.”_

The months I was with him, even when I wasn't working at the bar and grill down the street from my apartment, it was hard for me to get work done. I had a lot of words sure, some general plane for my spiraling novel-and-sometimes-screenplay, because I sat down to work all the time. But I didn't tell him that every time I got horny or thirsty, every time I could hear the neighbors reprimanding their terrier through the thin city walls, the my notebook got put down. I didn’t tell him how lost a novel could be. My mistake was him; I was only writing what I should have told him, trying to get the tone of my “fuck” to be exactly right so his ears would bleed. I didn’t realize, until I had come back home, that my own sources were deeper than anything he could give me. I didn’t realize that his therapy wasn’t research but antagonism, that until I got back to myself I had no material. I just thought I was easily distracted.

_A Minneapolis apartment: a long shot with little movement. Do it with color film but rig it so the room is mostly blue and other dark shades. Let a single light fall through the window, splay itself onto_
hardwood. See an empty, wrinkled suit coat on the floor, a T-shirt with yellow stains a mild green in the
light next to the jacket, a half-pack of Marb Reds a few inches into the shadow. You will probably want to
use something grainy, to soften the edges, get the smell of smoke on your fingers, the fuzz of waking up to the
phone's ring. Hear a phone ringing. The sound comes in slow, increments. There is a black man in bed.
Get a good look at his eyes, count the veins around his small pupils, see that he has been sleeping for a while,
see that he is uneasy about being woken up. Chill the apartment so his breath shows through his nostrils.
The machine picks up, no louder than the phone. Watch the man light a cigarette, listen as the caller speaks.
Get a close up of me smoking.

He called me on a Wednesday. I was in bed already, had been sleeping deep. But I was there when he
called. Sober. I recognized Andy's voice before he had finished his message. Nasally and thick, he took his
time, added uhm's and ahh's the way he did at the old park, at the old bridge, in our old life. His voice hadn't
changed much in three years, I could tell. He, that night, a few more times played back in the morning, said
enough time had passed, that we needed to speak again, that I should call William and Jimmy and the others.
That I should call him back. I lit a cigarette. I was there but I didn't pick up, didn't call him back. I took
my pen from the pocket of my coat on the floor, found my notebook in a drawer, and turned on a reading lamp
so I could see my pen flash and move, leave wet ink on paper. I wrote for a few hours without editing.
Making marks, simply leaving something, getting color and substance onto a blank page. I would have more
interest in a recording of me writing that night, pictures of me with a smoke on my lip, the cigarette's bounce
and wobble with the speed and jerk of my pen, than I would in re-reading what was actually written. The
words were just words, much less important that I somehow kept writing and the phone somehow stayed in its
cradle. The first report that there was something for me to go back to had been resisted and indulged. The next
morning, when I picked up another carton of cigarettes, I bought a new pen and three more empty notebooks.

A lengthy, overt memory shot: slow film, like a tribute or a slide show of dead relatives in grainy, blistered
film with no edges where everything blurs:

--a white man: get a close up the wrinkles around his lips, see the coffee and tobacco stains, years of
teaching economics at a two-year university, on his front teeth. See him dunking his son, the resemblance in
their cheekbones, into a small pool in a front yard. Get a slow motion shot of the white man and white boy
laughing in water. See a black boy surface from underneath them, shake his hair dry. Get a close up of the
black boy squinting in a smile with his glasses off. Watch me realize my family is not my family, see the smile
remain only on my lips. My body relaxes, my eyes blink.

--the black kid, by himself. Get a close up of his hands. He is holding a pair of left-handed scissors, green
rubber on the grip. Watch his thumb slide against the metal blade, slide in and out of the finger holes. See
me put my new weapon in the pocket of my jean jacket.

--a white man and his son, they laugh the same way so you need to catch the way their noses wrinkle,
watching television in a chair. See the black kid on the carpet, lying down, with a cat on his lap. Watch the
white man tickle his son. Get a close up of them laughing. Pull the camera back to see the white man slide
his leg forward so he can, with a foot, touch the black kid on the floor. See me place a hand on his gray,
stained tube sock. See my rub my cat with my other hand.

--a white man in dirty jeans and a safety vest of bright orange standing in front of a pond. Get a close up of
the man drinking his coffee, watch him breath confident and relaxed. Know in the way he watches the pond
the way he holds his coffee that he owns this land, that he is not working as you watch him move this way.
His son, you can tell the way they squint into the morning sun with the same confidence, is there too. So is
the black kid. See him removing the skin of an orange with his thumb nail. Watch me eating with my mouth
open. Back the shot up again so you can pan off the pond in the background, see mist rise off the water.

Move back in on the white man and his family. The camera should shake a little as there is motion in the air
and the white man moves his mouth and points and his son, see the wrinkles around his eye as he squints at
the birds just like his father, raises a shotgun. The camera rocks abrupt with the blast. Catch a second shot
with more flash than bang. See something, in the distance, fall. See the black kid, weapon-less, jump up and
yell you got it so loudly you can hear it in the way his mouth moves and his shoulders pull back excited. See
him jump. See the white man smile, bring his hand to his son's shoulder. See his son, two years older than
me, return a father's pride with a quiet, knowing, grin. See me realize I have dropped my orange into dirt,
try to wipe the fruit clean.

--watch the black kid stick his cat in the freezer. Get a close up of his face when he opens the door. See that I
am pleased that she is still alive

--the white man driving a four-by-four. His son is in the passenger's, three white boys and the black kid in
the back. They are all singing. Get a close up of my face, see that my mouth moves no less happy than
William or Jimmy, or even the caveman with the orange hair sitting next to me. Move the lens closer, past the
singing mouths, the hands moving. Get a close up of the metal bulge in my pocket, see the outline of the scissors. Make sure to see my face, understand I didn’t remember my weapon was with me most of the time.

—a farm house kitchen: steam rises from the bird so you can smell the crackle and pop of the grease cooking out. See the white man and his son chewing duck with their mouths open. See the way their mouths grind in the same circles. See the black kid’s braces shine, reflect a little bead of light in the lens. Watch him struggle with corn on the cob. Watch the white man slather butter on a piece of bread, do the same for his son. Watch him, get a close up of his face, as he notices the black kid with the corn. See the kindness as he eventually reaches to help, severs the corn from the cob onto my struggling plate.

—a sped up sequence, fast enough to be funny, of a drug store and the black kid dodging and evading four employees in blue button down shirts who pretend to do price checks on lipstick, condoms, magazines while following. Watch the black kid move stuff around the store, leave empty handed without paying for anything. Get a close up of my smiling mouth, my teeth straight without braces, as an employee asks me to open my coat and I reveal that I have taken nothing.

—quick shots of the white man playing, faking a muscle cramp while arm wrestling with his son, working with his son’s ball handling ability by playing tough dee in front of a driveway backboard, showing his son the grip of a curve ball, how to tie a fly line, how to hold a pistol. Slow the shot down so you can get a close up, patient shot of him sipping coffee from a travel mug with a spill proof top as he patiently considers, more thoughtful than the previous shots of him with his son, a chess move. Watch the black kid waiting. Get a close up of the board so you can tell, when he finally moves, that his has left his queen unprotected on purpose. Watch me take it without thinking.

—a slow motion shot of the black kid back in the drugstore. Notice he is unwatched. See my face, bored, confused, as I get a candy bar into my pocket. See me throw it away, next to the bank’s drive up window, on my way back home.

—get this next one, the longest of the series, with a strobe light. It is dark, the moon is up and there are kids, white boys around a river. Get a close up of the black kid, see him drink from a bottle, watch him get confused when bodies start falling on eachother, when William went in first and words and fists started flying. See the black kid turn on the white kid, both of them on a tree branch. Get a close up, slow motion, still in strobe lighting, of the black kid’s mouth as he shouts something to the caveman with orange hair who is crying in an elm tree. Hear me say help us. Watch me put my weapon, the scissors from my pocket, into
Phil's leg and chest. See blood, even in the flash lighting, on both of the blades. See another white boy, my best friend but who's counting, move closer, knock me into the water. See three other white boys get wet, their fists coming down on the black kid. Faces are unimportant. Get a close up of white hands in the air, fingers pulled into fists, landing on my face. Watch my glasses break, the skin above one of my eyes split open. See blood get in my eyes, let the camera's vision blur too. See me drop my scissors. Watch me bite one of the white kids. His face becomes visible as he pulls the black kid's arms behind his back. Watch Andy hold me as Bob, Ted, and William try to subdue me with punches. Watch Jimmy Delcro, see that I loved him in the way I smile at him, kick me while he moves gracefully on the oak tree bridge suspended above me. Shoot the film slow, drawn out. Watch the black kid do nothing to protect his head, his jaw. Watch me bleeding, struggle to catch my breath when they finally let me go. See the comfort I take that Phil is hurt more seriously.

The truth is a blank sheet of writing paper. Words are unimportant. Folded in the right ways, the truth can fly. When I finally started writing about Crookston, the few nights after Andy called, I was careful to get only what I took, not confuse myself with what they gave me. In my book, Jimmy Delcro is Frank-Without-Nicknames. The black character named him. In my book there is no river. In my novel, my left-handed scissors have become a small length of bungee chord, more obviously supple, more obviously how I thought of my scissors, more about binding than separating. In the novel, no one, not even my character, understands the chord as a weapon. I wrote it that way even though that meant I couldn't get the scene when I showed my friends my weapon. They couldn't tell me it wasn't a weapon. I had to find other ways to show that I wasn't trying to lie when I told them I wasn't black.

In my novel, the black kid doesn't believe the boys working at the drug store, the way his teachers look at him, doesn't believe that he is any more dangerous than anyone else. My character does not, as early as fifth grade, carry a weapon that can pass as an art supply. My character is not made to ponder that while it is true that a pair of scissors isn't a laser or even a hand gun, it can puncture something as thin as skin. I had to find another way for my character to consider his adopted family hunting. Without the careful choice of his own weapon, it was hard to show him considering Harold's shotgun, even my brother's, no more dangerous than a pair of rusty blades held together by a hinge I could lever open, snap shut. I could only let him watch his father and brother hunt grouse and deer on they owned south of town. He couldn't misunderstand the flash of powder, deep push of a bullet, or even a wide snag of shot to be no more violent than my scissors. It takes longer in
my book for my character to hear the noise of those guns. I have written a way for me to live deaf to my valley's weaponry until he felt it actually trained against him.

There are no cats and no freezers. In my book, my character sees what happened at the river before I did. There is no river and William, his name is Luther in my book, doesn't need to fall in order to instigate what needed to happen. In my book, the violence doesn't come from other muted violence. In my book, words connect to motion. In my book the black man can hear Jimmy and William saying what they really said. In my book the black man learns to translate, is not taught by a river or anything else. In my book, the black man is allowed to start the fight, to choke Luther with the rubber chord on a rooftop they gathered on to be closer to independence day fireworks. In my book my character is more honest, less paranoid. He doesn't envy a weapon like I did, isn't tricked into thinking he should have one. He, after everything goes down, doesn't chose more exile than he is forced into. In my book the river, that whole mess, is just another line of dialogue, not a breaking point. Unlike me, my character gets to react and initiate, not plan for the river, for the wrong reasons, his entire life. He is not looking for a way to sever. My character, in the same way I do when the words finally come down fast and easy, simply fashions weapons, means of articulation, as they are needed.

A Minneapolis apartment: shoot this with the same lights you shot the phone call. See the black man pack a bottle and his writing supplies into a backpack. Get a quick shot of a stuffed suitcase next to him. Watch me hold my lefty scissors, see my finger trace the blades, the rubber grip. See me leave them on the bed.

I saw my shrink once after Andy called before I, unannounced, went home with a sixty seven dollars and ten changes of my favorite clothes.

A waiting room two days after Andy called: Shoot this one with a sharp edged film and good lighting. No color. Everything is black and white in a waiting room. Come up over the magazine table. Spread issues of Time, Newsweek, Utne, and Money into acceptable chaos. Bend a couple of covers into crease, a single coffee stain, maybe a small tear, from the bottom up. Decay is fine but make sure the camera moves slow enough get the titles-- no sports magazines. Read: a mind occupied with the right words and diction is healthy. Syntax. Lift the shot just a little, pan from left to right. A chair. See the string metal
base and frame, a clear eyed silver. Bring the lens to focus, a tied-in-place pad. A black man, early twenty, needs a haircut. Me, but the face is not important. Get his hands holding a drink, his elbows leaning on his knees. Get his paper cup half-full of one South American Starbucks’s brew or another. Get the steam rising, let it reminisce of a street scene with lamp-lit sewers exhaling. Definitely get the steam as it rises from the coffee, drifts into the black man’s hair, the black man’s eyes. My hair, my eyes. See the man’s hands shake as I lift the cup to sip. Then, after a few moments, patience is important, move real close, see the man’s eyes reach out, search the room. See me breathing, waiting.

I got to the waiting room earlier than usual, had even stopped for coffee. I was tired and my face felt slow. But I was there, was sure there was much to talk about. It was in the waiting room that I, without realizing it, decided to give up on Minneapolis for a while, to go back to the valley. This doesn’t mean I had stopped hating where I came from. The truth is thick skinned, like a heavy fruit you can’t shell even with your sharpest teeth. Only whetstoned metal and the hope that your slow thumb won’t get caught too close will cut deep enough. The truth grows its own protection.

My shrink was fond of me saying that. He especially liked it when I said, “the truth be thick skinned.”

The road: get a shot in color of white lines moving quickly in yellow light. Make it as automatic and passive as possible. See, even without a voice over, even without my eyes, that there was nothing active about my voyage home. A decision is just a decision. The road moves by like fate, without control. A simple choice to hit the road, to catch a bus, to get picked up from Duluth to Grand Forks. A simple, active choice. But the trip is passive. See the road move past. See, without seeing, that my eyes are blank, a little nervous. See that I have no control.

Returning, even the ride I chose in Duluth, was about a decision. Maybe the most important decision I have ever made. The black boy in the river picture fights back when Andy holds his arms like a cross, refuses to be martyred and exiled, a chapter in someone else’s book. I didn’t go back because I had no options; I went back to fight. But watching the road, the lines move past, sure that there were cracks and potholes I couldn’t see in the darkness, I started to forget that I had chosen anything. Fighting back was as simple as a bus ticket, a skipped appointment with a racist shrink, a thumb in the air. Going home, even living with William and seeing Jimmy was no more controlled than measured, rhythmic highway marks a constant forty-five feet apart.
that pass with or without agency. I chose to return. That kind of motion takes care of the rest itself. Even behind the wheel, no one ever drives their own way back home.

The waiting room, but just the black man and his coffee: a long shot so you can see that, maybe for the first time, the black man is comfortable in the chair. He is thoughtful but not antagonistic. Zoom in, see that my eyes are clear.

I didn’t know, in the waiting room after Andy had called, that I had decided to go home. I knew I was thinking about race, about the Starbucks coffee in my hand, about the kitsch value of oppression. I knew I hadn’t forgiven anybody. Going home has never been about forgiveness. I went back to the valley to be closer to who I loved, who I was still angry with. I didn’t know this, not exactly, in the waiting room. But I knew something was being set right. I could see my novel-and-sometime-screen-play being finished by the end of the year. I knew that what I ever I told my shrink, I would tell him as myself. I knew there were decisions to be made.

A Minneapolis bus station: black and white, the same film as a waiting room. Bus stations, especially when one is going home for the first time in some time, are as black and white, as distant and distorted, as drained, as waiting rooms. Magazines, make sure you get the magazines to draw the parallels. Take an extended pan of the place, the lazy eye of the man selling tickets, over-familiar eyes, desensitized to the comings, the goings. Anesthetized. Get an extended shot of people, their clothing, their baggage. See if you can tell who is leaving home and who is going home. See if their is a difference in their walk, their demeanor, their mouths moving in conversation if they are not alone. Slide the camera a long a track. See how often somebody checks a watch, scratches a cheek. Bus stations are strange places. Use what ever tricks you need to in order to capture that, a sense of stillness and waiting before a longer period of motion and waiting, the awareness that one is already on one’s journey. See the futility of independent motion, a woman seemingly anchored to her suitcase on the tile floor, a man with his leg crossed who seemingly hasn’t moved but to cycle through papers in his Tribune. See the bus station as a collection of little rituals, quickly-developed habits that if abandoned could somehow cause the bus to come and go without a proper connection. See the bus station as a collection of separated, clearly divided journeys with similar destinations. See the parallel between the people in the shot, the distance between, the way we only talk to who is coming with,
seeing us off. Get a close of the black man entering with a single bag. There are other black men and women
but he is smiling the widest. See him keep his cigarette lit from the outside as he observes the station. Hear
me, see my mouth move as I yell, “Who’s going home?”

I tried to get a direct ticket to Grand Forks but it was nineteen bucks more than I had with me.
Duluth was on sale for only nine. It would be a straight shot from there to William’s place and I figured I
could hitch a ride on highway 2, some trucker or another heading West. It would still be two hundred miles or
more but I figured I could make it.

In a high school creative writing class, I got in an argument with Jimmy and William about
Kerouac. I said, at the time, that he was a racist bastard, that his road was a white road, that he was merely
relegating himself to that mode of travel, that the supposition that it was a kind of freedom assumed that
financial security was not a luxury or privilege but a burden. That the fact that he remained conservative, a
Republican even, after his travels, was proof that Jack’s road was a birth right, not a place for desperate,
ievitable self-examination at all. That me, the women in our class, Jose Alvarez, and a few others weren’t
invited. That evening, looking at the ticket prices in the bus station, I saw the act of hitchhiking as being open
to me as if Jack’s road could be transgressed against, inherited in spite of the founder. Not only was I adopting
the master’s thumb, I would do it wrong, to return to a suffocating place rather than to escape from one. I
vowed to read it again. I picked up a copy to give to William as a peace offering, or just as a gift, from the
magazine bookstore. William would keep it in a brown Buick that didn’t move for the last six months I lived
with him. The book would be lying dormant in the Spring of ‘97 when the Red River of the North flooded
and William had to find a way out of town without it. I would break a car window to get it back, the pages
wrinkled and pruned by mud water that got past the locked doors. I would read it in a single night.

Shoot the shrink’s waiting room again with the same black and white film. Get a close up the
metal chair. See the pad tied to the frame. See a piece of notebook paper with writing on it. Blur the shot so
the words don’t come in clear. Make sure you can see it is my handwriting.

I didn’t know I had decided anything and then I was writing a note. I told him I was tired of words.
That words were my work not my life. That I needed to go home. That he had been wrong about everything.
That I loved them for the same reasons I hated them. That difference doesn’t need to mean disconnection.
That he was fucked. That he be fucked. I underlined ‘fuck’ with curly lines, made a pretty flower spiraling out
of the k. I drew the outline of a colored face, made the nose broken and thin, disjointed like mine. I didn’t need to tell him to color it in, really was sick of words to and with him, but I wrote it anyway. I wrote that he would need to look hard to find the right crayon for my face, that I would have to look even harder to find it where I was going but that I accepted that. Home is still home, I said.

A Minneapolis apartment in two kinds of lighting: alternate the shot between the phone call blue and something summier. Two black men, one in each shot, switch in and out the same space. Be careful so we can tell that they are moving the same way, to the bed, to the window. See that they smoke the same brand of cigarettes, drink the same whiskey. See that I look more tired. When the other man sits at the desk, he is not writing. He has a television on, can afford cable. See that I was healthy there, even as thin as I was, that I didn’t fail to make it. See that I can drink as much as the second man without stumbling as I move to close the window, as he moves with no less trouble to turn his television off.

In my novel, my apartment is closer to the main character than my life in Minneapolis was. It was fine. I found healthy cognitive patterns, cut way down on the booze, the weed, even the Marbs. But the place was more alive than I was. I was ready for a life in the cities but not for mine. In my novel-and-sometimes-screenplay, we need to see the place recover with another healthy tenant. In my novel, we see that he, the new person without a name and more facial hair than I could ever grow, is ready for the city, ready for a job down a different street than I walked those months. I don’t include the nameless new black man to talk about cycles of race; he is only black to be visually interesting. I show him to talk about the place, the apartment, the city, that carries shadows of people we haven’t met, people who trace footsteps and thought patterns, who are privy to our most sheltered places and hidden rituals without even knowing our name. The new black man is unimportant; it is the place that I was interested, this place that is an apartment for a single person, a place distanced from anyone’s home. We just need to see that it is possible to decorate the place, to bring home into it, that the new black man has refashioned his home there. We see that I was ready for something similar, to reclaim and recreate a home with those walls, that hardwood floor, that bedroom, and the hours I spent writing on the desk. But we see that the place taught me something else, told me that going back was the only way to actually stay in a room of my own.

In my novel I, my name is Mika instead of Marcus, get to figure this out right away, decide to go back without the insomnia, the shrink, the long-whiskey nights, chapters I have omitted, revised, or forgotten.
An M&H convenience store in Duluth: see how yellow the light is, how it reflects off of the glass keeping the ice cream and diet soda cold. See how differently the black man walks than the white people in the store who have their own vehicles. See me remember, once again, that I am going somewhere homogenized, returning to isolation. See for a moment the black man hesitate, think about going back to the bus station, before he buys a piece of construction paper, some string, cigarettes, a black marker and a coke. See how automatically his hand moves when he writes “Grand Forks?” on the sign, ties it around his neck. See that I am bored but determined, that the final decision has been made, that I have found the right way to stick up my thumb, that I am relieved that I have no more choices to make, that the journey is no longer in my hands as a distracted looking white man with curly hair and a pullover beckons for me to follow him out of the door. Keep the camera rolling so you can see the checker share a laugh with a customer buying a fountain drink. Hear him wheeze as he laughs. Hear him say, “he made a sign,” as he lights a cigarette. It is important to observe a place after you have left. With a camera and this script, the possibility is open to me.

In my book Tony Morgan, the man who picked me up, is a woman. He looked alright, smelled like weed. I put my suitcase in his truck when he asked me to. I almost took my notebook with me but thought it would be rude to ask for light to write by and the road would probably be rough enough to make it difficult anyway. “You pick up a black hitchhiker before?” I asked. “You’re black?” he asked. I was pleased that I had made the sign.

The road: get a close up of black asphalt. Hold the shot, let impressive black stretch out gentle and wide in front of the lens. Use whatever film you want, let the road change color or black and white into the same dense shade of gray. Make sure we understand that the material is the same from Minneapolis, North to Duluth, West to North Dakota. Even if you don’t show the chaos of a skyscraper shadow or the melting softserve of a suburb girl’s dropped Dairy Queen cone or even the patient bend of Highway Two as it arcs along the Red Lake River through Crookston, we need to see that the road, the simple surface of flat ground, is the same. Their is an arterial, a vein, something that covers distance, connects what is disparate. See the road. Get too close, fuzz so the color and surface and texture blur and bend and we can see anything we want in the pale gray, like a map legend written in hidden ink that you have to cross your eyes to decipher.
Get a close-up of my face. Or maybe it is Jimmy's, William's, Molly's, Andy's, maybe even the caveman with orange hair and intrusive cheekbones. Get a close up of my face.

A road trip, especially going home, is always about distance. The road makes me remember maps, learning the states with my adopted father and an atlas, seeing how close things are on paper translating into miles and miles. Highway signs have large numbers, convert in increments of seventy into hours. No matter how much time a trip consumes, the road is constant, with you the entire time. It is odd to contemplate motion.

The truth is thick skinned, layered like an uneven fruit. I never left Crookston, never left Grand Forks even though I didn't live there until I returned to it. I merely covered distance, took the highway out of town, walked to work on different roads than Jimmy and Patches used to get to class or the mall or wherever needed getting to. But that was physical place. I was stunted, not Freidian or anything, but hung up on something. Roads, especially the highway back home, by being nothing more than distance, only serve to remind me of how close I stayed, even when I was Minneapolis, five hours, three hundred and fifty miles, away from Crookston.

I'm sure William doesn't understand why, if I was trying to get home, I went to live with him. Why I didn't find Jimmy since we were closer, a shorter trip and better friends once. Or why I didn't just go back to Crookston. I'm sure William is trying to figure it out. I sometimes feel him breathing on my neck, his hand on my shoulder as I write this. The truth is, I would have gone to St. Peter or Moorhead, where Jimmy and Andy drifted off to, but they hadn't made it any further away, in any real sense, than I did. Even during Andy's stint in Georgia for basic he was in our valley, not far at all from the melt and runoff that made it into the Red Lake River.

I went back to find my friends, to fight-back as myself, to find my Crookston. Put place isn't just people. Place isn't just physical either, but it is important. My Crookston, even though only William moved there, seemed to lie in Grand Forks. Two, three times a week, when I lived in Minneapolis, I would dream about Grand Forks. It looked like Crookston: the damn, the bypass bridge, all of our haunts. But it was Grand Forks in my dreams. One river feeding into another, the Red Lake into the strange water of the Red. Everything flowing North. So I went home to a place I hadn't lived yet. I was called and I went. I knew I was right to go; the dreams stopped when I got there. William and his roommate Winchester, a stubborn man, skinny and tall, with rag curls, converted a walk-in closet into a bedroom for me less than a week after I got
there. Czar Nicholas, a stern and private man with curled hair and a lot of body, almost as tall as William's brother, sometimes called the house and asked for me.

Though there is no river in my novel-and-sometimes-screenplay, there is a river system in my life, places of joining and mixing. There is a river, actually two in intersection, in Grand Forks. And though our city didn't stay dry for long, for a while, when I was smoking cigarettes on the foot bridge with Czar Nicky, William and Winch, sometimes Patches was there too, while we watched water from our old river, the Red Lake River with its noise and our blood drifting in from Crookston and places East, mingle with our new, more famous, more steadfast river, the Red and its promise of a distant destination, I could forget the river flows North and take many months comfort that I was finally home.

A reunion scene. shoot this one in real time. The black man double checks a sixth street address against a rumpled piece of paper. He has a can of Guinness in his pocket. He knocks. A white man, see the look on his face, answers the door. Hear him say, "My God, Marcus." Watch the black man hug him. Hear me say, "Call me MacArthur."

In my novel, William understands my character's new name. In my book, William understands the legacy of that, great white, indigenous-people-protectors name. I'll be back to liberate, he said. And he came back. With guns. To liberate the Philippines. To subjugate. In my book, William understood the irony, the transformation. In my book, William didn't have to ask about what had happened since he last saw me. In my book, I didn't have to choose not to tell him. In my book, he, his name was Luther, spent no time trying to imagine the difficulties of a returning ocean, trying to write the storms I had pushed through, trying to understand the color of the sun when I finally drifted, soon to be victorious, into that final harbor. In the book, I know that he understands that my new name, finally a nickname, has been carefully chosen, that irony is not assimilation. In my novel-and-sometimes-screen play, he understands that I returned to liberate him, to liberate his brother the caveman, his body suspended and hung still above our first river, to liberate a black kid, his name was Marcus Mitchell, who was stuck in that old water with his arms pinned while his white brothers come down with words and feet hard to the side of his head.

In my novel, I don't have to guess how much he has figured out. That I am silent about the journey back because it isn't important. That, unlike the twentieth century, liberation is not about a bold declaration of journey spit out in full volume bravado to din its way over stories of the original indiscretions, the slave
stations, the 'servants' quarters, the size of Jimmy Delcro's shoe as it bounced off of my ribs. That liberation is not about memory lapse, remembering the victory instead of the struggle. That liberation is not about separation, denial, things being severed and erased.

Liberation is about bleeding from the right vein. I didn't tell him what I had been up to because that had nothing to do with why I had come. I was changed and I needed him to know that much; I had made it back and returned with new weapons. That was story enough. After he hugged me hello again, I pulled the beer out of my pocket and said "get two glasses." We split the beer and I stopped his questions. He had little choice but to agree that I should stay with him for a while.

A vehicle headed home: use your cheapest, most sacred film and complex angles. See a black man in a passenger seat. See, without my eyes, that I am hostage in this car, that my trip is second to the driver's trip. Get a good look at the driver, a white man. Show his hair, the purpose of his lip as he drags a smoke with the window cracked. See that he controls the electric windows. Show him talking to the black man, their mouths moving, even laughing. But know that he is driving, that even as we laugh, hear his voice say "you're a writer?" that my destination is unimportant to him.

This is an important shot so don't skimp by filming it from just one place. Though tempting, minimal realism won't do for this. Make the film cheap and low budget, some scratches even, but change cameras. re-shoot, make the talent drive the same stretch of road again and again to get enough footage. Make sure we know that the shot, changed angles, the same tree through a window from a different angle, took several takes to get into the form, after splicing and editing, that we get to see. A trip home is not a single trip. See, without showing it, that if I had taken the trip with him four times, I would have only made it home once. See, without my eyes, that his car is safe and I am reluctant to get out as it rolls off the highway, turns onto Demers avenue, moves into downtown Grand Forks. Hear him say, "this is the busiest intersection in North Dakota, can take you anywhere." Know that I, three out four times, wouldn't find a way to get him to stop. That every direction would stay open to me. Show the road, the car, from every angle. A trip home is not a single trip. Light refracts, moments diverge. No one drives their own way home.

In my novel, I left Minneapolis sooner, almost right away. In my novel, I took the same way home, borrowed Kerouac to hitch a ride from Duluth to Grand Forks. In my novel, I spent less time in Minneapolis, am on fewer drugs, drinks and prescriptions. The place is more important than my life there. The trip back is
more important than the place. In my novel, I don’t show much of my shrink, don’t talk about the
misdiagnosis he gave me, that he said I was manic, that he said I was bipolar, epileptic, that he even said the
only thing wrong with me was that I was a black man from a white town. In my novel, the part of my life in
the cities that is most important to me is the trip home; most of the Minneapolis section of my novel-and-
sometimes-screenplay is spent in Tony Morgan’s car.

It was kind of a cheap tactic, on my part, to make him a woman, to assume that sexual difference
means tension, can act as a metaphor. But I didn’t invent the male gaze, the white male gaze. The gaze exists,
I decided writing the book. Inheritance can be manipulated. I was shooting for irony.

In my novel, Tony Morgan’s name is Allison. She doesn’t, in the book, tell me where she is
heading. When I tell her that I am a writer she asks if Shakespeare was black. I make a point to describe her
collar bone and fingers, talk about her being invasive and disarming, hard features. In my book she is beautiful
and I don’t have to watch the road. She calls me B.S., which I assume means black Shakespeare . I never
bother to clarify. I, in the book, find her off-putting and, simultaneously, am thinking that it is okay if the
stretch between Bemidji and Crookston, ninety miles, takes as long as possible. She, in my book, is
threatening and very white. She has been to England, has taken spring break in the Caribbean, has been to
Venice. I smell her breath and let my elbow linger against hers.

Her laugh is abrasive, like a spurt of steam in the machinery at the sugar beet plant during an over
night shift. She scares me every time she thinks I am funny. But I am drawn, to her lips, spreading efficiently
over straight teeth, a boney hand to the wheel as she laughs. She tells me I should shower more, that she is a
little nervous, has never given a ride to a black man before. I tell her I am skinny and weak. She says it’s still
a little scary. I, in the novel-and-sometimes-screenplay, have struggled to show how intimidating she is, how
tempting it would be to convince her I was interesting if I could. She is smart, a faster talker than I am.
You’re slow, she tells me in the book, for a writer.

I, in the novel, am a little heart-broken when she pulls out a handgun and tells me to get out of the
car. Leave your money here, she says. I make an attempt, in the book, to be ambiguous about the reason I
don’t want to leave . I talk her into taking me the rest of the way, tell her that I don’t have much left, that I am
desperate. She studies me then, asks questions: at gun point, learns the names of my parents, my friends, even
my shrink. Something changes in her when I am not scared enough to get out right away. She keeps the gun
trained on me though I promise her I won’t struggle. She keeps me talking the entire time. She makes me tell
her about how I choked Luther with a bungee chord, about why I am coming back. Unfinished business, I tell her. How white, she says. It is her idea to change me name from Mika to Macarthur. She is joking, making fun of me I think. But when she demands for my wallet, still at gun point, I decide without telling her that she is right, that the name works. I don’t protest, give her all I have, but ask if she can let me keep a couple bucks for smokes and a gift for William. His name is Luther in the book. You’re making a mistake she says. Home ain’t here either, she says. Come with me to Arizona she says. In my novel, I can see her knuckles around the base of the gun, as she says it. Come with me, she says. Start over for real, she says.

I understand you better than you think, she says. I can help, she says, but I won’t make you. I think about it. I ask her if she will let me get my notebook from the trunk, try to give myself excuses for changing my mind and getting on the interstate, South with her. She says she doesn’t want to get out of the car, that if I want my novel I have to come with her. That my story belongs to her now. I surprise myself, Mika surprises himself, with anger. We start yelling at her, tell her I’m getting out. I lie when I tell her that I don’t give a fuck about the novel. I make sure the reader knows I am lying. She yells back, tells me I am a shitty writer, that without her the book will never get finished.

I give her my wallet, save a five for myself, and get out on fifth street next to Big Cigs. I am lucky, I would find out later, to be only five blocks from Luther’s house. I, in the book, make sure the reader knows that I watch her drive away, almost run after her, screaming with my arms flailing. The gas station, in my book, is empty except for a tired looking man who sells me a pack of Camel Lights and a box of convenience store donuts. Glazed. I claim that it was that night, at William’s, his name is Luther in the book, that I borrowed his, a white boy’s, notebook and started writing the book you see before you.

The road: get a shot of it moving in automatic baby’s bites. See the black man and white man/white woman in the car. See them talking. Know, even without a close up of my face and mouth, my eyes, that choosing to return is only part of it. That there is luck involved, tires need to stay full, pistons need to stay moving, fuel lines need to stay open and unblocked. See that I am watching the road nervously, that my final test is simply to trust that I can somehow stay on its flat surface, ride unafraid. See, in quick images from your steady, faithful camera, that the road will try to reject me. See semis over-turned on the side of the road, the concrete smooth over with ice, the sky push down cold fog. See the road slow down, try to split in detour, try to obscure. See the road. See, without seeing, that my eyes are pressed to the window in stubborn observation,
that even after I see the numbers on William’s house, that I am too superstitious to let the road, or the camera, see how relieved I am.

Tony Morgan, who really drove me home, was a soft looking man with a curly beard and dense hair. He smelled like weed and cologne, gave me a few hits from a joint before we were even out of Duluth’s city limits. He was on his way West, “way West,” he said, “Oregon or anywhere.” There were burn marks in his vinyl seats, a yellow tree hanging from his rear view. I told him I was a writer and he pulled over at a rest stop and made me get my notebook from the trunk. He nodded as I read to him, sighed in contemplation. He smoked and listened to me, bought me a Pepsi from the rest stop machine. He didn’t always laugh in the right places but he was getting into it. He waited until I had read about thirty pages or so before he moved to the bathroom.

I told him everything about Minneapolis, about why I was sent to Juvi, about the river, about going back. William and my novel know less about the three years I spent out of the valley than Tony Morgan does.

“What’s lithium like,” he asked.

“Like emotion by numbers,” I told him. “Where you feel a code, a word, be angry, sad whatever, instead of actual emotions.”

“That sucks,” he said. “How long you been off it?”

I answered all of his questions. When we drove through Crookston, twenty-two miles from my destination, I took him past my parents’ house, to the park with the spider that William and Jimmy spent a lot of time, even showed him the rope swing.

“The past is strange,” he said. “Come with me to Oregon. Start fresh,” he said. He gave me another drag from the joint so I could think about it.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. “But I want to finish your book.”

“It’s not done,” I said.

“Still,” He said.

“Keep it,” I said.

“No.”

“Keep it.”

“You sure?”
"Nothing I need in it," I said. "The past is strange."

"Then I'll buy you a new one," he said, "to trade for it." We stopped at Big Cigs. He bought me some smokes, a notebook with a dolphin on it. He waited for me to look William's address up in the phone book, wrote it down so he could send me my notebook when he was finished with it.

"You sure?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Go on, get to Oregon."

I almost went with him. I am sure he almost sent me my book, probably remembered late at night, forgot the next morning, remembered again after the mail had gone out. He never sent it. But I have no doubts he read he every page, forced himself to decipher my shaky handwriting.
William claimed that it had nothing to do with the fact that I placed third twice in Minnesota's state single's tennis competition that he suggested we play racquetball instead. He said it had nothing to do with wanting to win. It's too cold for tennis anyway, he said. I didn't remind him that he had come to every regional game I played in high school, that he had seen, several times, Grand Forks's ten indoor tennis courts.

I was annoyed that he was still afraid of me. Still, it was charming enough that, after all this time, he still wanted a more neutral setting for what would amount to a private conversation, so I pretended not to understand why he had suggested the change in plans when Brent and I ran into him for the first time since high school at a coffee shop three days earlier. We met his new friends, drank the coffees he bought both of us, and watched a sloppy game of Chinese Checkers. I noticed, as he was concentrating, that his eyes were as green as they were in the photo I kept on the top of the plastic case that held all of the pictures I had been given in high school.

I saw him a few times, went to one of his plays, in the few days between the Urban Stampede and the racquetball court. We met at the Y at eleven. I was ten minutes earlier than William. He looked tired as I watched him approach, walking off of sixth into the parking lot.

"Sorry I haven't had time for a shower," he said when we were inside.

"We're going to sweat some," I said.

"True enough," he said.

"Strange man," I said.

"You're still the most perceptive person I've ever known," he said.

"You wouldn't have said that in front of Brent," I said.

"Case in point," he said. He was blushing, I think. "I've missed you," he said.

"Me too," I said. "Court five okay?"

"Sure." he said.

"Should we volley for serve?"
“In class last year,” he said, “we took turns shooting for the back service line. Closest without going over gets the serve.”

“You took a class?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Gotta B+ but my instructor was crazy.”

“This is a setup,” I said.

0-0

“So,” I said after I won the serve, “you seeing anybody?”

“Yikes,” he said. “Still forward. Everything up front. Um... okay. No. I’m not. Not right now.”

I had the serve first, looped the ball to his back hand. He one-handed it softly into the corner and moved to the middle. He had given me a forehand and I put good top spin on the passing shot.

“Nice,” he said.

1-0

“Not right now?”

“Yeah,” he said. “A lot of short term stuff. I mean, jeeze, I get crushes all the time.”

“So you ask girls out?” I said.

“Quit teasing,” he said. “Yeah. Been known to. Sometimes they go out with me, sometimes a few times. Things go alright for awhile.”

“Normal enough,” I said.

“Hardly,” he said. “I have a dangerous heart. Gets me in trouble again and again. Bloody awful couple of years.”

“That’s not good,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “I mean, um..., my heart’s always kind of slow to catch on and stuff. It’s just been harder this last bit since um... now that I don’t have an reason not to fancy absolutely everybody who could possible hurt me.”
"What reason?"

"Well I..." he said, "you're more perceptive than that."

"Oh," I said. He wasn't smiling. He looked at me more directly than he ever had in high school. I left the ball too far away from the back wall, gave him a passing shot of his own.

"Unrequited was safer," he said.

"Seemingly unrequited," I said. If he was bolder, I was bolder. "Didn't always mean unreturned," I said.

He gave me a loping back hand and I drove it hard to front corner, left him no chance to play the carom.

"Nice," he said.

"Your friends seem cool," I said.

"Sure," he said.

"I know you told me the other night," I said, "but are they all theater?"

"Ain't we all?"

"Officially," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Specially the Czar..."

"Nicholas?"

"Yeah," he said. "And the old married couple."

"Trevor and Lynne?"

"Liz," he said.

"Right," I said. "It was loud."

"But yeah," he said, "They're all theater."

"That's cool," I said.

"Yeah."

"You've got a good life here," I said.
"Yeah," he said. "Get a new one every few months when we do another show," he said. "Theater people. Words permeate skin... um... sink in. We all change every show. Kind of funny, really."

"Explains the short term romance stuff," I said.

"'cept it's only half-true," he said. "We wake up sometimes, as ourselves. A few hours till rehearsal, gotta find our own words."

"That's when you're the you I knew?"

"Maybe," he said. He bit a lip and shrugged, watched the ball spin flat as I strong-armed a nice serve into his weakest corner.

2-0

"Trevor and Liz seem nice," I said. "How long they been married?"

"Four years, I think."

"How old are they?"

"Twenty-three," he said. "Maybe she's twenty-two."

"God," I said. "Young."

"Yeah," he said.

"But they seem happy."

"Sure," he said.

He hardly moved, let my serve bounce twice with only a weak, empty swing.

3-0

"Still warming up," he said.

"Sure," I said. "How'd you meet them?"

"Class," he said. "Candy asked me to do a scene for him. Me and the Czar were in it."

"You're a strange man," I said, "all those nicknames."

"Nicknames are important to theater people," he said. "More characters."

"You've always used them."
“Maybe I was always theater,” he said.

“Maybe.”

“But I think,” he said, “when you knew me last, Patches, Six, my brother, the rest of us...”

“Yeah?”

“We were just bored,” he said. He smiled as I laughed.

“Explains a lot,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“You ever have one of your own?”

“A nickname?”

“Yeah.”

“Not really,” he said. “I mean, you were the only one really, maybe Marc, who called me William. I don’t know, last name count?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Cause no one said Lewis. Just Louie and stuff, so yeah.”

“Patchey said Lewis some,” he said.

“When it was business,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Business. Good to hear you remember,” he said. He was closer to me than someone expecting to return a serve should have been. I could see that he, even if he hadn’t found time to shower, had trimmed his beard into sharp lines of contrast, heightened the strut of his chin. He was wearing contacts.

“Why’d Trevor call you Dion?”

“What?”

“The other night.”

“Dion’s the love god,” he said.

I smiled and he shrugged. I turned to the wall, didn’t wait to see if he had figured out that we had resumed the game. I put the ball into the corner perfectly.

“The love god needn’t hit that,” he said.
“Actors,” I said.

“Some of us,” he said. “Not me really. Just for fun.”

“Mistake,” I said. “You’re good.”

“You saw a lucky show last night,” he said.

“First time I’ve liked Shakespeare,” I said.

“Hardly Shakespeare the way we do it,” he said.

“Still,” I said, “you were good.”

“Thank you.”

I don’t think he was ready for the serve.

He played Trevor’s slave, Dromio of Syracuse the night before we met for the game. They had washed up on one of those strange, comic, Shakespearean islands. The director, I never did get her name from William, had done a nice job of casting twins for the show. It wasn’t until the final scene when William and Trevor finally confronted, face to face, the two actors who played their separated, double selves, whose lives they had invaded, that most of the audience figured out that it wasn’t just two actors for four roles. A woman sitting next to me exclaimed. “My God, there were four of them after all.”

I didn’t have to wait for the resolution to figure out that I had known only one of the Dromios in high school. The other actor had died his hair, and worn contacts to match William’s eyes. They were about the same height and had spent two months trying learn how to get there vowels to sound the same. He made the same swinging gestures that William did. But, even after three years, I had no trouble telling which skinny, awkward man on stage was William. He, when I knew him, claimed that it was hard to distinguish his eyes from his friends, that there were layers of sameness brought down with the snow and wind of our surrounding communities. I decided, bridging the gap of an invasive arm rest to hold Brent’s hand while watching their

*Comedy of Errors,*
that William was wrong. He possessed certain intangibles, the way he held his chin or mouth, the way he said things, that even the most advanced acting techniques couldn’t disguise. I have tried to tell him every time I have known him that characters are just characters, names and relationships only names and relationships. That there has always been something immediate, something acute, something incredible that was his alone. My eyes, my breathing, even the clichéd pit of my stomach have always known which man was William.

“You were funnier than your twin,” I said.

“Grizwell?” he said. “Nah. He’s great. We’re twins, ya know.”

“You were better,” I said. “Trust me, William.”

“I dunno,” he said. “Griz is great at physical things, falling and stuff. His body is more honest than mine.”

“That’s pretty flaky,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “but it’s true. I might be better with words.”

“Certainly got more of them than he does.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But not just that.”

“More honest?”

“Maybe,” he said, “in the same way he is with the physical.”

“Always able to say what you want?”

“Only on stage,” he said.

“I was going to say...” I said. He laughed and stammered as I served. The ball went off the rim of his racquet, drifted slowly, harmlessly short of its mark.

6-0

“Am I a better actor than a racquet-ball player?” he asked.

“It’s early,” I said.

“Right,” he said.

“So anyway,” I said, “you were good.”
"I'm glad you liked it," he said.
"Yeah," I said. "I still thought the end was weird."
"Fifth acts always are."
"Yeah."
"Too much to tie together," he said.
"Yeah," I said, "it always comes off weird, too magical."
"That's what makes it a comedy," he said.
"At least back then," I said.
"Sure."
"If I ever write something with five acts...," he said.
"If?"
"If."
"You're still writing," I said. "Tell me you are."
"Yeah," he said. "Any way, if..."
"When..."
"Fine," he said, "when I write something with five acts, I'm going to pull some kind of anti-Shakespeare."
"No happy endings?"
"I don't know about that," he said. He was close to me. "Happy endings are alright. No trouble with happy endings."
"What then?"
"Um," he said, "I just think we reject the fifth act of a comedy because we don't believe in magic anymore, don't believe in connection and loose ends being tied and wrapped."
"See it all the time," I said. "Movies."
"Yeah," he said, "but it doesn't sit right. You know? Didn't with you."
"So happy is fine?"
"Sure," he said. "Tied up is bad. My fifth act will sever more than bind."

"That's happy?"

"I don't know," he said. "But that's... that's me, I guess. A fifth act Diaspora. Undo what was bound together. What was seemingly inseparable."

"Cursed," I said.

"You should know."

"I..."

"I mean..." he said. "I'm sorry."

I didn't know what to do so I put the ball back in play. I couldn't be sure, but I think he was still looking for my face as my shot went past him. I registered the sound of my point as it hit and echoed from the wall behind him.

7-0

"Speaking of disconnection," I said after I had the ball back in my hand, "Marcus is back?"

"Yeah," he said.

"He's alright?"

"As much as ever," William said. "He goes by MacArthur now."

"You boys," I said. "Why tap into that legacy?"

"Cuz he's Marcus," he said.

"You really don't know?"

"I know what he told me," he said. "I'm glad he's back, he looks healthy and seems mellowed since the river and stuff. But no, I don't really know what's gone on with him. Or with any of my friends."

"What?"

"I mean," he said, "I never, not with any of you, have more to work with than what you'll tell me."

"Good thing I'm not hiding anything," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "everything's been as honest as possible between us."
I almost didn't serve, almost asked him why he was being so short with me, almost yelled, maybe even almost finally kissed him. It was a simpler matter to play the point out. I double faulted, both shots a few inches too long.

"Your serve," I said.
I almost didn't serve, almost asked him why he was being so short with me, almost yelled, maybe even almost finally kissed him. It was a simpler matter to play the point out. I double faulted, both shots a few inches too long.

"Your serve," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"I just meant that..."

"Let's just play a point or two," I said. I was rocking on the balls of feet, holding the racquet parallel to the ground, swinging it gently. He didn't say anything, put the ball to my backhand with a Z serve. I was handcuffed.

7-1

"...," he said.

"Serve."

He did, weak and to center court. I put top spin on my shot, hit it as hard as I could. It came off the back wall pretty high and he backed up on it, tried to read the bounce, play it as it mandated, take it soft to the front wall. But he misjudged and skipped the ball off the floor.

"I was there," he said.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry," he said.

I put the ball to his forehand, risky and accidental, but he double hit.

"That's a carry," he said.

8-1

"I mean," I said. "That in the grand scheme of both of our lives..., it's not that important that we try so hard to dig stuff up."

"Oh," he said.
“I’m sorry.”

“I disagree,” he said. I served and he didn’t move.

9-1

“Let’s go home now,” he said. “Say hi to Brent for me.”

“That’s what you want,” I said.

“No it’s not,” he said. I served and he didn’t raise his racquet.

10-1

“10-1.”

“That’s not what I want, Mol.”

“Yes it is,” I said. “To be my fault. Obviously and easily.”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

I put the serve in the corner. It practically rolled back to me.

11-1

“I think it is,” I said. “You’ve been hostile and insinuating things since I got here.”

“Hostile?”

“Yes.”

I served again and he hit back with all the anger in the world, slammed the racquet off the wall when the ball skipped short.

12-1

“Yes,” I said. “I would call that kind of thing hostile.”

“Right,” he said. I served, got a little impatient left him to much room on my left side and he took advantage of it.
“That's not what I would call it,” he said.

“What then?”

“One of the um...,” he said.

“The what?”

“The only woman I have ever been in love with,” he said, “even if it was um, was high school and I was young and... it was not returned or whatever...”

“It's not that easy,” I said. “Serve.”

“The only woman I have known that I was in love with when I was, that I actually had a connection with....”

“Serve.”

He did and I put it back soft. He ran up on it.

“Disappeared,” he said. He hit it hard and low. I returned it with help from the left wall, thought it would cross him up. “From my life,” he said. “And I lost what I never had,” he said. He took his time, put the ball back, deep off of the wall. I did what I could with it, took it to the ceiling, tried to get it over his head.

“And I want it back,” he said. “Any way I can,” he said, put a safety shot high off the wall straight to my back hard and I buried it.

“Nice,” he said.

“Good volley,” I said.

“And,” he said, “since I can't help but thinking that if I... if I had been more honest then, even a few months after you and Brent got together that it would be different or something that I can't, can not let myself start over without getting at... at whatever it was that happened.”

“Timing is bad,” I said.

“I can't do it, Mol,” he said. “I can not be less than blunt.”

“And I have nothing I can say to that,” I said. “It hurts me, alright?”

I served and he let it go.
"That's the last thing I want," he said.

"I know," I said. I put the serve up and he hit it as hard as he could straight up.

"Game point," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay, here's the deal. We can talk about anything. I mean it. That's all I want. But I'm not going to pretend I didn't feel..."

"Than we can't talk about anything else," I said. "And I'm either cold and heartless or I have to admit things that I can't, that do no good, that make things even harder to understand or leave Brent in a really dubious place. Look. I loved you, alright? I did. I might still. But I love Brent. Maybe in different ways, maybe fate, maybe timing and luck. But it doesn't make things easier to put us through this again."

"We never went through it the first time," he said.

"Bullshit," I said. "We never talked about it."

"I went through it," he said.

"I matched you tear for tear," I said. "You forgot about it every time you went out with somebody else, forced yourself to forget, to be supportive, to be nice to Brent, to be as good and solid and unspoken as possible. You pretended it was over, even to yourself. I watched you, William. I watched you pretend it was over, that you had fallen for somebody else or at least given up on me. And for awhile, a few weeks at a time, you believed it. You did. And you could stay close to me, get most of what you wanted, a relationship that meant something, without having to confront anything. We still had lunch. You could talk about anything, tell me Shelly was pretty, that you kissed Megan, whatever. And you believed yourself. Even just a little. Right?"

"Sometimes," he said.

"I didn't," I said. "I saw it was stronger every day, that you wanted me more than you could admit. I saw it in every gesture. And it was my fault, mine, right? I had gone and gotten involved when I knew you were interested. And we had lost control and become closer than I have been with any other man including
Brent. But I couldn’t, especially with you not admitting it, do anything without hurting him dearly. And, though I knew, I was scared that I could be wrong or whatever, that you may not feel what I knew you felt. Or that you weren’t who I thought you were and I didn’t really love you. We had something and I couldn’t test it. I couldn’t, okay? I couldn’t. And you didn’t do anything about it, didn’t ask me if I would be willing to test boundaries, to try again. You didn’t tell me anything. But I knew, I watched it happen again and again had to watch it, had to let it. It hurt. I cried a lot. But I couldn’t push you far enough away because I loved you. I was in love with you. I felt like I was cheating on you every time I kissed Brent our senior year. I thought about how bad it would make you feel if you knew what we said to each other, saw how we touched and it made me nauseous, William, nauseous. But it had to be you. It had to be you to bring it up again or you weren’t who I thought you were. I needed you to be bold.”

“I am now,” he said.

“I needed it then,” I said. “Bold is desperate now. It would have been brave then, when we had a friendship to risk. It would have been so brave to show up and just tell me, or to just try to kiss me. Because I could have been so mad at you, I could have, after everything, hated you for trying again. I could have. But I wouldn’t have. All you had to do was speak. Yes it would have been scary, it would have been so brave. So of course you didn’t, because I knew it scared the crap out of both of us. But you had to do it to prove me right, to help me, and the thing is that i knew, still know, that I was right. But you didn’t trust me at all. And I had to go to bed, every night, knowing that. Had to see you every day and know that you wanted me but were scared and that I couldn’t undo anything. It was you who let yourself forget so if you want to spend all of this morning and half the night remembering, expressing everything go right ahead. But don’t you dare think I don’t already know. I do, William. I know.”

“We should have been more than we were.”

“But we weren’t,” I said. “So we shouldn’t have been.”

He tried to let himself cry, to let himself shudder but couldn’t. He looked at me.

“Game point,” he said.

I put the ball back into play softly, let it hang right on his forehand. He didn’t bother to return it.
“Good game,” I said.

“Hardly,” he said. “My serve.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“This hurts.”

“Right,” he said. “Not brave at all of me. So what is? Trying, after that to reconnect. If, on some basic level, we after finishing the game, best of three, haven’t re-established what we were three years ago I will forget it. Trying to be friends again,” he said, “is what is brave now.”

“Or impossible,” I said.

“Exactly. The bottom line is this,” he said, “I have enjoyed having you back in my life and I’m not willing to let my heartbreak, not after what you just said, screw that up. Maybe we don’t love each other at all anymore. I think we do. I could be wrong. What is bold is testing that. You’re right, my confession is easy now. Easy compared to really trusting you, just being here with you. Starting over is as bold as love.”

“Alright.”

“My serve,” he said. “How have you been. Molly.”

“Mostly miserable.” I said. He served and I swung awkward, left him the whole front court. He played it low off the wall.

1-0, 0-1

“What was wrong with Concordia?”

“Cash,” I said.

“Why transfer to UND?”

“I’d be closer to Brent,” I said.

“Not as close as if you went to Bemidji,” I said. “Could have even shared a place, right?”
"This is starting over?"

"I gotta know what I've missed," he said.

"Maybe," I said, smiling, "there was another important relationship, I really dorky man with bad hair that I wouldn't have minded catching up with."

"Really?"

"And B.S.U.'s O.T. program sucks."

"Yeah it does," he said.

"How 'bout yourself?"

"Since we last talked?"

"Since high school?"

"I been miserable too," he said.

"But what have you been doing?"

"Important stuff."

"Theater?"

"Kind of."

"Wrote some stuff?"

"I had sex," he said. He served and my contacts went fuzzy. It was too hard, trying to blink them back into place, to catch up with his spin, get the ball back to him.

1-0, 0-2

"That's great," I said.

"A couple of times," he said.

"Good sex?"

"Beautiful," he said and we were laughing and he somehow put the ball in play and there was nothing I could do about it.
“No,” he said.

“Bad sex?”

“The worst,” he said. “I’m really bad in bed.”

“Good god,” I said. “This is catching up?”

“I keep spraining things,” he said.

“Spraining?”

“My tongue mostly,” he said. He served when I was doubled over.

“That’s cheating.”

“Four-zip,” he said.

“Cheating,” I said.

“Harassment maybe,” he said. “I’ve become an asshole.”

“I don’t doubt that,” I said.

“That would have hurt the old me,” he said.

“Sure,” I said.

“The problem was,” he said, “I kept doing this,” he said, flicking his tongue around wildly, “strained too many muscles. I tried just sticking it out. No good. Traded a sprain for old fashioned hyper extension?”

“The membrane,” I said. “Connects the tongue to the floor of the mouth?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Rubbed it raw.”

“God,” I said. “The first few times I made out I...” He put the serve into the corner and I couldn’t move.

“You’re a dick.”
“Yeah,” he said. “And a liar.”

“No tongue weirdness?”

“No exactly. But it really was pretty awful,” he said. “No love is bad.”

“I know,” I said. “I mean I don’t know, hasn’t been my problem. Love makes it great, only way I’ve ever had it. But it’s fragile, you know?”

“No,” he said. “I’m not brave enough for that,” he said. “Remember?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. He put the ball into play and I whacked it so it rolled back to him.

“I get to serve?”

“I guess so.”

“So yeah,” I said. “It’s been alright, great even. But Hollywood is still Hollywood. Makes me wonder what I’m missing by having everything I want, you know?”

“We could have sex right now,” he said. “I could make love, you could just use me. We both get what we want.”

“How did I resist you?”

“You realize this is just a mask for the pain right?”

“Sure,” I said. I served and he hit it past me.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk about sex,” he said.

“Maybe we shouldn’t.”

“So,” he said. “How often do you get biddy?” I was laughing again when he served, barely got my racquet on it.

1-0, 0-6

“Eight times a day,” I said.

“Right,” he said.

“Eight.”
"Eight," he said. He served. "That's a lot," he said and I just looked at him like I had nothing to prove.

1-0, 0-7

"Nice bravado," he said.

"I got crass too," I said.

"Crass ain't bad."

"Not always," I said. "Brent does crass just fine."

"I'm sure," he said. He turned away, let the ball go in slow motion, come of the wall at hip level. I leaned it to it.

"I got no complaints..." I said. I hit a liner to his left. "'bout his crassest moments."

William fumbled the return.

"Ball," I said holding it up.

"Titanium," he said.

"It stinks," I said.

"My balls stink too," he said.

"Crass," I said. I shook my head. "I don't know about this startin' over business. How do they smell, pray tell?"

"I dunno," he said.

"Liar," I said. "Rosebushes?"

"No," he said.

"Pineapple?"

"No."

"Okay," I said. I served it nicely to him.

"Frozen burritos," he said. I started laughing before he slapped the ball back to me so that I couldn't get to it fast enough.
"Frozen burritos."

"Yep," he said, moving to the service area. "Beef and bean," he said after the ball was to me. I choked, let the racquet drop from my hand, swing by its loose string.

1-0, 0-8

"Yuck," I said.

"Serious," he said. "It freaks me out."

"Serious?"

"Yeah," he said. He served. "You have any idea how many burritos I've eaten?" I couldn't recover fast enough.

1-0, 0-9

"No more talk of genitalia," I said.

"I prefer the word gonads," he said. "Gotta be PC."

"Gonads is lame," I said.

"Are lame."

"No," I said. "What kind of writer are you. Gonads is singular."

"No its not," he said.

"Yes it. Gonads. I just mean the word. The word is lame. Gonads is lame."

"Are."

"Is."

"Are."

"Who cares?"

"I do," he said. "Matter of pride."

"Prince Grammar."
“No,” he said, starting to serve. “If it’s plural it’s not just mine that are lame.” I somehow got to his corner shot, pushed it over his head, back to the front court.

“Is lame,” I said. “Take that.”

He dove, got there. The ball caught an edge of corner, died for him.

1-0, 0-10

“Are lame,” he said.

“Fine,” I said. “Gonads are lame.”

“What I’m sayin’,” he said.

“You’re playing better,” I said.

“That’s cause we’re dissing my gonads,” he said. “Assaulting my manhood and all that. My game feels less pressure to do all the work.”

“That’s how it works?” I said.

“That’s how it works.” He said. He served, howled a grunt and knocked it gently into my knee.

1-0, 0-11

“How butch,” I said.

“That’s what I am saying,” he said.

“No more gonads,” I said.

“No more gonads,” he said.

“No gonads.”

“What then?”

“So how have you been?” I asked. I looked at him. I smiled but kept swaying in my crouch. He took my cue, didn’t answer before he put the ball hard to my backhand but I was ready for the return and knocked it past him.

“I’ve been Okay,” he said.
"You have a good life here," I said.

"Yeah."

"I really like that Liz."

"She's a strong woman."

"How so?"

"Candy," he said, "he's quiet."

"He'll get louder," I said. "Just a guess." I shrugged.

"I'm not sure how much longer they'll be together," he said. "But yeah, I like her a lot."

"They'll be together fine," I said.

"They're actors, Mol."

"So they what, have me fooled?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Why not you?" I asked. "Why would they just act for me. I don't buy it."

"They act for everyone."

"Then how do you know they're not fine? They don't act for you?"

"I know because I'm not an actor," he said. "I'm a writer."

"And stories go how they seem to."

"No," he said. "Stories go how they have to. Like entropy. Where a Shakespeare comedy is wrong, tries too hard to get everything to connect the way the audience knows it should. Confuses the audience wants with what the story needs. A story binds what is unbound, sure," he said, "but it also unbinds what is bound. Or at least rebinds it. That doesn't happen, there's no story. Nothing but a reaffirmation of what was already there. A story can't bind what is already bound. That's not a story, that's stasis. A single sentence would do, not five acts. And stasis, avoiding entropy, a single, perfect sentence that goes un-revised only exist if you believe in magic. Liz and Trevor are trying, you can see how hard they are working. And everyone knows they should be together. But they don't believe in magic. So story takes over. Story is conflict. Story is never just sad, never just happy. Story is just right. Inevitable. In order to avoid that, something's gotta be magic"
"I don't buy it," I said.

"Then why are you here? Because we fell too far apart. I couldn't keep from asking you, you couldn't stay away. If I'm not right, why are you here?"

I thought about it, could only answer with my strongest serve, a hard, low shot to his left. He took a step and returned it. I put it back, he played it faster. I put it back to him, he played it of the left wall first. I put it back and he knocked it high. The ball bounced all the way to the back, came off with backspin. I put it back and he swung even before I hit it. He plucked the ball from the air.

"Nice," I said.

"Thanks," he said.

"Sarcasm," I said.

"I'm right," he said.

"But you're not writing it," I said. "I don't buy whatever logic that is. Your a story teller so you see through things, know the way things have to go. I don't buy it."

"Stories work like that," he said. "Life works in stories. Memory works like that. How many times you told the story about our date."

"Once," I said. "To Rachel."

"Only once?"

"Yeah."

"That's why you don't remember it," he said. "If you had to tell it all the time, it would be important to you, carve its way into truth. If you hadn't told it at all, it would have been magic. Once is a recipe for forgetting. Why you don't remember."

"But I do."

"No," he said. "Or you've never let yourself. What were you drinking when you spilled it on your lap?"

"I told you," I said. "I can't do this."
"You showed up," he said. "We have no choice. It's how stories work. What hasn't been played, must be played." He served. I didn't move.

0-1, 0-12

"I don't need to," I said. "You're wrong. Your rules of story don't govern this. I showed up, I wasn't sure what that meant. I lied to Brent, said I was going to study this morning. But I don't need to do anything. Story isn't life," I said. "Life doesn't care about the ending that needs to be. It happens like it happens. I didn't set anything in motion by meeting you here, even by lying to Brent. I can stop right now."

He served and I let it go again.

0-1, 0-13

"My point," he said, "one way or another. Story takes care of itself."

He served and I surprised myself by moving to it, slamming it hard against the wall. He moved up on it, put it softer into the front corner. I had to run to get it, played it hard to the back but pushed too much, let the bounce come back to mid court and he got there. He had the entire back to play with but let the ball go off the side wall too soon. It slowed down so I recovered. I hit it hard and low. He fell over but got it back. He had misjudged too. I didn't have to move, caught it on the short hop on its way up, let gravity lift it high and back thinking he was still on the ground. He stood up and moved backwards, spun and put it straight to the wall. I put it back. He put it back. I put it back, with topspin, he put it back with slice. I buried it in his deepest corner and he tracked it down, had to take it off the wall but hit it hard enough to make it back. It drifted to the side, caught a corner edge and died. I stuck my racquet out and got a piece of it. The ball moved to the wall slowly, seemed to catch in the air. The point was stuck in the air, our words stuck in the throat. Suspended the way a body catches for a second on a rope swing when momentum turns on itself. The point was stuck in the air, our words stuck in the throat.

Long enough for me to find his locker, to find him sitting cross legged on clean tile, his
shoes off. Long enough to sit next to him, to touch his knee with my own stockinged foot. Long enough to touch and pretend we weren't touching while he read out loud, something he had been working on the night before. The ball was suspended, caught long enough for him to anticipate correctly, position himself behind me so that the best shot I could have made could be returned efficiently. Long enough for me to believe my shot had had already hit what it was supposed to. Long enough to believe that it didn't matter, that it could stay suspended forever.

The ball hit the side wall. He was still in his crouch, readied, when it dropped short.

1-0, 0-14

"Thought I hit that better," I said.

"Me too," he said. "I was ready for it."

"I know," I said. "Game point."

"Hmmm," he said in the way he had always said something that meant he had been thinking about it for a long time, probably since I got there, and was finally bringing it up, going to play it off like a spontaneous thought, an out-of-nowhere absurdity. He used to do that when he would suggest catching a movie, since Brent had a game anyway. Never admitting it was plotted, intentional, even wanted.

"What," I said.

"It just dawned on me," he said, he always said. "The racquet ball court would make an interesting place for our story."

"What?"

"I just think," he said, "there is something poetic and immediate about this space, a box with opaque walls, two people, a very rhythmic pattern of words and movement."

"Are we talking sex again?"

"No," he said. "Subtext."

"I don't think so," I said. "I mean, I'm not the writer I guess. Seems really forced to me."

"It's a gimmick I guess," he said. "Just seemed, watching that last shot that it... you know... meant more than just a ball falling short, you know?"
"I don’t think so," I said. He had been waiting for that shot, I think.

"I just think it’s so overt that... that it could work."

"Like what," I said, "so you can score at home? A fight with close captions."

"Our story’s not a fight," he said.

"It’s also not a game, William," I said.

"Don’t write it," he said.

"I won’t," I said. "You won’t either."

"I dunno," he said.

"I don’t get it, William."

"Don’t get what?"

"What this is all about," I said. "The game’s over. You’re doing all this stuff, spin and angles and starting over but nothing’s changed."

"That’s what I’m saying."

"Except it has," I said. "Time is time. We are different now, even if its just about timing. Nothing has to have changed for everything to have changed. No amount of spin reverses that. The game is over."

"Best of three," he said.

"No," I said. "It was over before we got here."

"Who won?"

"I don’t know," I said. "I know I did alright. That I don’t need this. Not like this. That this doesn’t have anything to do with who we were."

"Then don’t write it," he said.

"I won’t," I said. "Promise me you won’t either."

"I can’t," he said.

"Then don’t make it us," I said. "I can’t deal with that."

"It wouldn’t be us," he said. "At least not like this."
"Then alright," I said. "If it's not autobiography, not us, not true I don't care. But you can't... reduce or, or the opposite even, like inflate or whatever, you can't change what, what happened, what we were to this story. You can't. We were never a game. This wasn't us, William. Your story can't pretend to be true, can't pretend that it can figure anything out just by finally keeping score. Everything was figured out a long time ago. Your story can't pretend to be true."

"Everything pretends to be true," he said. "I pretended when I never said I loved you, said I was okay with what happened."

"You're pretending now," I said.

"No. I'm not an actor," he said. "A story teller, maybe an ass hole, but I love you Molly Lott. I love you."

If he were telling it, I would have hit his serve back to him, played him tight into a corner, taken the ball. I would have scored a few points on my turn, given it back to him, made him work for that last point. If he were telling the story, we would have stayed for the third game, finally got on track, played some longer points. If he were telling it, points would come in spurts and the lead would change again and again. If he were telling it, the rubber match would have gotten locked up at deuce. We would have taken turns with advantage, given our best shots to try to take that last point. But it would have always come back to deuce.

It is his fault, not understanding how right he was, that I have written this before he could have, testified first that I left before the final game started, that he should have known better, that it was his own theory, Shakespeare's weakness he said, that he should have known better than to try to bind what was never unbound, that I had no choice but to leave him there to wait for the next bus home.
CHAPTER 5. HOW WE AUDITION

-- Czar Nicholas--

We always start with Chekhov. We don’t want to confuse anyone with plot. There is relatively little happening, in terms of action, in Chekhov— an entire act can be captured in a single sentence. We start with Chekhov because of that— lack of dramatic action makes room for character. Plus, we find that preparation is minimal because the language carries more than just words. Reading Chekhov aloud, one can easily smell the season ending, fruit and vegetation being drifted under by substantial snow and wind-chill. One can take their cue from the language, let it inside, let it come to life. Or one can find only monotone, let the consonants pile up in bad translation, and run completely flat. Either way, we learn a lot. If the words of winter, vodka, and revolution too late or distant to change anything— if these words find roots in one’s body, one can expect a roll when all is settled. If one’s body or mind doesn’t understand Chekhov, one can hardly hope to be a North Dakotan.

I am not a naturalized North Dakotan. I was born on an Air Base in Southern Germany. An ex-girlfriend told me she never should have trusted me because I looked more like a Greek Statue than a Norwegian. When I asked what she meant she said that I had too sharp of a jaw line and that my hands weren’t big in the right way. My skin was too soft, she said, to know what to do when a tractor catches a wheel in a ditch. My hair grew in curls too thick to press under the band of a harmless green ball cap. I thought for a while, until I came out, that she had been right and that I should find a bus somewhere more urban, less hostile. Demographics are misleading. I understand the wide open sky, orange with the glow of Grand Forks lights on a winter’s night, better than anybody.
When I first came out, it was only to William Lewis. Winchester and MacArthur wouldn’t have been shocked or upset by the news; they would have been happy for me. But they would have treated it like any other announcement, like I had confessed that I had never been interested in chocolate, that all the Mars bars I had eaten were just about being afraid of something else. They would have down-played, wouldn’t have acted like it was important that I told them first. Liz and Candyapple were still in town together and I would tell them eventually, would have told them at the same time I told William but it seemed they would take it too seriously, demand perfect wording, perfect elocution, practice. With William, I could say gay, say I am gay, no more rehearsal than that.

I originally, when the depths of my closet were separated from the adjoining hallways and harsh light of high school, gave acting a shot on a dare. The girl who dared me, a sort-of-girlfriend, didn’t realize she was daring me into a stereotype, maybe even a cliché. She just thought, perhaps more perceptive than I now give her credit for, that I had an aptitude for such things, doing voices, carrying my body in different ways. She thought I would be good at it, she said. I wasn’t, not when I started. I was too forced, trying too hard to act: I made faces and grunted in bathrooms at convenience stores to keep sharp, stay in practice; I pinched my voice, tried to figure out how the character would talk if he were a character, not how he would sound if he were actually alive; I used the same tricks that I did when I tried to get my thin voice to match my curled reflection in the mirror, get my voice to sound as large as my hands were; I, at first, was afraid of believing that I was the character I put on enough to let it inside of me.

I finally realized none of the put-on things I developed on my own, in front of a mirror, even working alone with the script in my parents'
beige carpeted living room, came with me when I actually got on stage. That I somehow panicked under the lights, let all the bravado go and sounded like me, like Nicholas again, but louder and faster. I hit the consonants harder. So I worked on that, on how to control the little things in a big man’s voice, keep it loose, let it play, work to surprise myself, my partner. I got larger parts. Moved up. Vladimir, the way we did him, was taller than even Beckett would have dreamed for. Six foot five by then. Closer to the heavens, I said, so as to fit the role. I was commended for being willing to make my work part of myself. What choice I got, I said. But what I meant was that I had become unwilling to play anyone who I, in some major way, wasn’t already.

Three weeks ago, in April, Liz and Candy and William planned a camping trip to Minnesota to celebrate all of the melting, the color coming back from the freeze. They had finished touring Shakespeare to high schools. We were all gearing up for a production of Chekhov’s Vanya. It wasn’t a flood year so it would be a good trip. Lake Itasca is great, William said, the Mississippi in utero. It’s amazing, Candy said, something small starting something massive. You should come, William said and I agreed as I had never been to the headwaters. Candy and William were sure there would be room even for me. But Liz approached me separately, said she needed me not to come, that I wasn’t involved, that I should stay by the phone while they were gone.

I played the tallest Mercutio in North Dakota. It was my third time with iambic and I was getting more comfortable with metered language, carefully parsed diction. It seemed fitting that even in the most traumatic of moments I would speak in words that came out so poetic and measured that it couldn’t help but be detached somehow. Mercutio was good
for me, got me nominated for two theatre festivals and a scholarship. More importantly it let me see myself for the first time as an intangibly separated middle-ground, an innocent bystander, a benevolent and wise casualty. We turned the lights a neutral orange, a color that belonged to neither of Verrona’s families, for my death scene. I didn’t make a lot of noise, let my body lay all the way flat. You worked hard, my director said, too not overdo that, to understand him all the way through, even when he was just an emptied body. I smiled, did the role in DC at nationals, was pleased when I saw a judge tug at his beard, shift in his seat, touched beneath bone, but the truth was I didn’t work at all-- I had already met Liz and Candy and William, already been to high school, already been a negotiator, already let separation seep deep enough to keep a live body’s chest from moving after death has set in. I had already been dead some time.

If it were up to me, we would make everyone in this city earn their parts with Chekhov. If it were up to me, even locals who can trace the title for the land their house sits on back seven generations, would have to prove they understand what it means to live this far North. Sure, the title-- proof that it wasn’t your eyes that decided this was as a good a place as any, proof that it wasn’t your hands that worked against the first couple of winters here to keep a fire going, the wind and snow away from the windows, proof that you have inherited these winters and rivers that you never chose-- this kind of proof goes a long way to getting a role in our show. We, if it were up to me, would simply make sure that one had earned it. Chekhov, if it were up to me, would simply be to test that inheritances are understood, fully considered; if it were up to me we would never assume that even forty years of residence meant that one was well-cast and suited for this place of mine.
I have cared about every character I have filled, every stage I have played on, every outfit I have been measured for. I have been careful about the work I have agreed to do. In the hours after the city has quieted and the last green university bus is pushing past pre-plow snow to return winter-drunk students to their beds, myself in any combination of these costumes, I have imagined myself in each of these costumes, combined them, this production's shoes with that one's suspenders and pork-pie hat, fancied myself en collage, a composite holding an artistic place in the theatrical work force as if all my roles have left something residual, a deposit, salt and lime on my cheek bones, as if I can move forward as a collection, a multiplicity with a single, burning, core.

That is being challenged tonight. Tonight, my other roles are shed, old skin on stage boards underneath lights and curtains long since down. Tonight I am just Nicholas Douglas and barely that. My names isn't even on the rodeo program. Still, tonight is the first time I care about something I am getting paid to do and even though my success or failure here will not be connected by people watching to other passings in my life, I will become a more credible Nicholas Douglas, a broad and lengthy snap-together assembly of marrow and tendon and other softer tissues, a long history of high-water, low-water. Tonight will count, add to what I carry with me and it matters more that I though it would when I answered the ad on our call board. The promise of money makes it professional. Even if I am the only actor in the show, even if our stage is dirt and moving animals, even if there is no program for my name to appear on in a brave font, tonight is a point of departure from hobby to occupation. Tonight in this clown suit, I am the old Douglas come forward, all out of bluffing and puffery, to see if I can make it. I am filling different shoes, shiny red rodeo shoes, but I will be paid well and treat it like any other work I have taken on.
I have dreamed of Russia like an ice sculpture, beautiful and cold, frozen almost solid, swiftly melting Russia—Chekhov's Russia—a Russia all white with midnight sun, or cherry blossoms, or fresh snow moved in the slightest ways by human footsteps, navigated by depressed serfs, depressed nobleman, and depressed intellectuals, moving so slowly, they were easily taken for part of the landscape. I have dreamed an entire village of people as pretty and as inwardly hostile as the miles and miles of cold white ground and cold white trees. I have ridden in rich carriages, horses pulling into snowy half-light. I have smoked cigars, snow falling lightly, with men in courtyards next to empty churches. I have had Vodkas in sitting rooms, speaking plainly with soft whiskered students about the necessity of work and the comforts of a good fire burning, snow held out by a thin pane of glass. I have found comfort walking by myself, following a frozen river weaving through a motionless orchard. I have left deep tracks that will be erased when the wind picks up. I have lived patiently with and against the fragile scenery of a century dying. I have woken to notice I was sleeping on a loosely tucked hand, to feel the deep urgency of idle blood pumped against its will and I have, for the next few nights, slept differently.

William, I don't think, knew of these dreams when he named me Czar. The name is not quite right as Grand Forks isn't exactly the same and in the dream I do not smell of perfume and fine oils. My detachment from either place, my city or the village and landscape I have found sleeping, is not a regal detachment but about empathy with the land, about fading too common. The places are not the same. My Grand Forks can not be Chekhov's Russia until it is written about.
I had to audition for this rodeo job so I started with Chekhov. My new boss thought it was funny, laughed before he made me get my nose measured, made sure my head would hold the wig on with only a few bobby pins, that my skin wouldn’t break out from all of the powder white. He has assured me, even a few minutes ago, that I will survive no matter what the crowd, my bosses, anyone else thinks. He is certain that, even with this being my first day on the job, I will not die. Rodeos, up here at least, I have been told, don’t kill people. Realizing mortality and success are not the same isn’t making me any more comfortable. I stretch my hands and my legs, begin to apply my make up.

When William and Candyapple Dobbs got to a pay phone, in Bemedgi, a few miles from the headwaters of the Mississippi, it was me that they called. Liz had left them there, they said, headed back to Missouri. I called in sick for work, was assured someone else could take tickets at Movies Four for me, and drove as fast as I could. I fell back into old habits, rehearsed silent support by watching my face in the rear view as I drove, forcing my mouth into appropriate positions, trying to get the look I wanted down, automatic. I worked on a look of concern with no need for details.

This job, like all of my best work, started with Chekhov. My feet, bunions from Dad’s side of this mess, barely fit into the puffy red shoes. The chaps are Velcro, loosen easily but I think I have my sponsors convinced that I can keep the costume together. I am ready to go. My face is done up. Exaggerated eyebrows, charcoal or something, nothing we used at school, to make them blacker and wider. For expression. I have trained my face for this, let my old nervous tactics come back. I spent
extra time with mirrors, compact and full sized. Watched myself for a few hours without noise to see how exactly how I can move in silence. I have rehearsed, developed an arsenal. Planned gestures, canned reactions, base codification of the face. Things that I feel have no place in Stanislovsky's Theater can come to the fore tonight. I have been told that the audience will expect fear and surprise.

But I have a few tricks up my sleeve, have perfected a few of them. I am pretty sure I can nail a look of stupid curiosity. I ready to provide a wide-eyed blissful provocation of danger. I have honed a narrowed determination, a confident self-sacrifice for the enjoyment of folks behind the metal gate in the grandstands. But the one I take pride in, the one I hope will make me famous, the one that should spook anyone watching is almost blank, fated. That the animal following my smell to close in on me, the crowd eating peanuts, the people I am trying to protect, are all insignificant-- that all is beyond me, that I have no control, wrong place wrong time, could have been you in this pit with the bull at your heals.

I am almost on. I will not be perfect tonight, not sure if I will be good enough to even keep the job. But I have practiced, will do my best to give a few people a reason to come back, look for the clown that warned of motion independent of consequence, pondered how God is pushing life and death, made more evident the hard-wood safety of the cheap seats.

The lease on my third floor apartment, downtown so I can see the river, only a few minutes drive from my favorite theater, has been extended for seven years.

Chekhov would approve of my fears that even the strictest of contracts is not insurance enough that my place will not drown or burn, of my belief that I will remain home only as long as my home will let me.
Fear for the park is real. Not just that it is disappearing, but that it is changing, being corrupted.
Not just by technology but by the children themselves, and by children one grew up with,
children who turned out wrong and let their kids out too late.

You tell your own to beware of the wrong kind of parks

You have always known that they will rob you blind in Central Park. It may be wooded and
have grass but you will never stop smelling the city. They will ask for directions, have a second
person in on it, take your purse or brief case or duffel bag. They will be nice and smell like mint
and perfumes and look lost and gentle. Or they will just knock you out, hit you with chains
leave you bloody. Or they will have puppies and grab your watch or wallet, pull that chain
around your wrist and hope the snap is clean enough to fix. You will, any way they do it, loose
anything you are carrying.

"Just your shorts and shirt," you tell your kid who is heading out. "Don't even bring your own
basketball." You install a basket in your drive way, with crank that lowers the rim, low enough to
dunk. Illusions of being great will keep them outside the garage, near enough to call for.
Illusions of excellence will save them.

You make sure your child knows a kid can get shot:

- for shoes
- for Tommy Hilfiger
- for being a mediocre basketball player.
You saw a child at your own park, the local park, the one with the spider. He was playing harmonica and talking to himself on your way home and his hands were bleeding and he was the only black kid who lives on your street, in your safe town, and he was playing some harmonica and singing nonsense. You were almost worried enough to call his adopted parents.

You will remember to tell your own children.

On the eighth hole of the Frisbee golf course in Mission Kansas, boys and girls are lined up waiting for men on lunch breaks with good money and cars that can drive up to the tee, valor seats that feel nice on their legs and arms. They carry their own rubbers.

Things you can buy at a park:
- smack
- crack
- NO2
- crank
- speed
- dope
- weed
- h
- over the counter headache powder
- a Camel Light for a quarter.

You get home late, doing some shopping twenty two miles away at the mall in Grand Forks, get back to Crookston eleven thirty at night and there are six nineteen year old boys sitting on the metal spider. Two of them are smoking and they look allusive, like writers and geeks, and you remember that most of them were in Knowledge Bowl. You watched them as bright children and thought they would be something and do something with themselves and here they are. They have come back so skinny and dark.
The one with brown hair and a beard, William his name was, you think, is smoking like he is getting away with something. He supplies a little grin and a dimple when he sees that your car is not his parents'. And they are laughing and showing their teeth to the night. And the black kid, his name is Marcus for sure, you know all the black kids in town, he is coughing real hard and you try to remember the last time you saw him and you remember the harmonica.

You can't look away. Not just for gossip, not just to tell LuAnne or Shelly or Hank or Albert, but because there is something threatening in the way they are sitting and talking, something too easy about how they sit or stand in shadow and half-light. They are violence; they have gone crazy. You are thinking that, even if they don't admit it, it is them that will finally kill America. You may not find these exact words, articulate it like this, but it is what you are thinking. They will kill the dream, they will destroy all that has been built. They are capable of breaking each other down.

"We should be past that", you think, "we should be past that brother against brother bullshit, but they will hurt each other, destroy the buildings in Minneapolis, push the button, picket the Walmart, misunderstand the common man," you, despite voting Democrat last November don't think 'common person'. "It is they," you think," who will burn the suburbs to the ground. They are laughing now but they will never be happy", you think, kissing your child as soon as you inhale the smell of youth, scents of growing too fast, in his or her room. You hold your child close to your chest, focus on their eyes, the soft curl of hair that needs cutting, maybe the first straggles of facial hair or mascara not washed away, focus on your child's sleepy mouth and try to block out the teeth and eyes of these teens at the park. You block out the park.

It has all gone wrong.

"You're half right", they would say. "We are the ones," they would say. "We ain't above or past anything. We make each other bleed everyday, one way or the other." They smoke, know it is killing them. "Addiction is a sign that I want, that I will always want something," they would say, "that I am still alive."
And, they would say, we are alive:

- we are watching your Saabs
- we are watching each other die,
- we were six goddamn years old when we heard the word AIDS
- we were around when the kid was killed at the mega-mall for wearing a Orlando Magic jacket
- when O.J. Simpson went on trial

"We watched all of this shit happen," they would say, "we still see it. And we still go out," they say. "Where we goin'? Nowhere, to the park, to fuck each other, to shoot up," they would say. "Or maybe not. Maybe we're just talking. Maybe we have words when all you got is pictures, media, and sound bites," they would say. "Reports that tell you how often we fuck," they would say, "but tell you nothing about how we're trying to make love, how we sometimes do. You watch us on the news," they would say, "and you forget that there is love at all."

You, they would say, just remember:

- the handguns and the dead black boys on the TV
- the pregnant teenagers in your kid's class
- the faces missing at graduation
- kids sticking a pack of smokes or chew in their pants at the Hy-Vee
- kids ripping off condoms because they are too embarrassed to pay for them.
“Too embarrassed means too young,” they hear you say. But you really mean that they will never be old enough, that they have lost or will lose everything, that it is they who have forgotten how to love, that they don’t deserve to find anything, that it is their sex and drugs and music and clothing that have killed love, destroyed the last park even as you are putting in a sand volleyball court and a swing set.

Your windows are rolled up so you don’t hear anything.

“The park is dying, I watch its violent death every commute,” you are thinking. “We have lost it forever.”

It is only half-dead, the children say, these children who have heard every word you and your television have said every year they have lived, their minds high or tired, their eyes a little bloodshot. It is only these kids who still beg for something that can be saved, sweep up the court, put a blanket down to kiss for the first time, sit on a metal spider to make sense of what you have given them.
PART III.

CONTINENTAL DIVIDE
(October 1996)
CHAPTER 6. INTER-TWANGLED; NIGHT TO DAY
--Patches--

10-8-96. 11:10 PM

I am starting something I have no faith in. A bribe, on a spiritual level, thrown at the feet of a mad monkey. Monkey dances. Mmm... good banana. Monkey stops dancing a few bananas later. Probably the same. Same monkey. Older? Yes. Hungry? Not right now. So it was worth it. Despite the fact that the monkey don't change, he gotta dance. Or at least admit that it makes as much sense to banana dance as it does to head to the monkey-enlightenment section at Banes and Noble and sip three cappuccinos down while perusing the keys to laying claim to monkey self. Monkeyhood. The beauty (as I explain this to myself) of the dance is that it is only a state of being-- aware that it is only that-- not an end, not a journey-- a state of being that is obviously temporary because it can stop. Monkey stops dancing. State changes. It can change. And, even cooler than its statehood, is the fact that it has a very real and knowable goal. One you can eat. No bananas in the self-help section-- no bananas in monkey realization. At least none that will be eaten in the foreseeable future. So dancing is a kind of monkey realization. A moment, a distillation. To be monkey. To want banana. Man say banana comes from dancing. Dance, mad monkey, dance. If monkey gets wise to the scam, man late with banana or banana tastes like urine, the dancing stops. Can stop. The dance itself remains uncontaminated, monkey bliss if you will. Beautiful sell-out. Punk rock monkey doin' the dance to get a little chow. Probably wanted to dance anyhow-- this way he gets paid...

Okay, there are a few problematics (as Louie would say, fitting since the good karma banana I see before me is his doing) in my justactory shim-sham. Sham, that's a good word for this. Here's the sham: Monkeys don't really like bananas. Years of monkey socialization, what with all the cartoons and all. Man's got him convinced that's what it is to be monkey. No self determination. He, even if he really does want the damn thing, would probably rather bob for it or win it in a poker hand. The dance is oppressive? Hell yes, monkey says, oh yeah. But monkey knows he's down, knows he ain't callin' the shots. Figures he's got to eat something. And he gets to pick the dance.

And that's it. That was the shit of this sham. Louie says "Patchey, do it how you will but do it."

So I am.
Patchey is the monkey.

What does it mean to identify yourself by a nickname you didn’t choose? When is say I am Patchey—mad monkey already dancing—am I me? Or William Lewis’s Patches, William’s take and sniff of what I stink like? Gaaaaah. Dunno. Does it bug me that I don’t know? I didn’t think so. It’d bug Louie—hell, it does bug Louie— which is why he’s asking for the dance in the first place. Shit. Maybe I do have faith in this. Dunno. Just want the banana. Monkey gotta dance. Whiskey first? Why thank ya, don’t mind if I do.

W

10-8-96. 11:24 PM.

a play in one act

10-8-96. 11:26 PM.
I like the feel of ‘a play in one act’. I think it would be part of the title, no matter what I was writing. It’s so final. One act. A play in one act. Need I say anything else? You wanted what it all means. What we get. There it is. A big letter and one act. A whole bunch of tadoo, a little noise, lights go down. What it means.

I need a story, I suppose. Dunno. How these writers do it. Maybe monkey stop dancing. Don’t have much invested. Could probably weasel the banana out of him anyway. Could sculpt this thing easy, no trouble, and he wants words. Sculpture is better. Automatically abrupt, automatically complete. It exists. And that’s all. It is.
A play is closer to that. Distilled, stripped away of almost everything but what is said. I think I can do that better. Besides, everyone I know is writing a novel....

W-12. A psychiatric ward in an urban hospital.

10-8-96. 11:49 PM.

That’s it. A ward. All wackos here. He wants what is. Wacko is. Wacko was. As for the urban part, that’s a lie. But not really. Everything is urban now. We all get MTV. We know the slang. No such thing as small town.

I’ve been led to believe that writers of realism do research. So I should research the mental health field so the reader buys it. Or Louie does. Same thing. But I didn’t sign on for no research. And most of anybody doesn’t know what a real ward is... they haven’t done the research either. Perhaps research is really a quest for a handful of details that won’t smell fishy. To trick the reader into buying it. Louie calls it selective detail. Seems more like a character I played in D&D once. He was a gnome. Not the important part. He was an evoker, called upon untapped forces to shoot flame from his nose. A little bit of power but mainly fraud. The rest of the guys he was hangin’ with, high level dragon slayer sorts, needed to be shown he was useful or they would have left him in the dungeon. So he lights a couple of fatties with nostril flame so they can smell the burning. Tells them he can bring fire from the sky, melt the skin offa anything. And they buy it. Tiny bit of fire, smells real, and they see a magic user. Let him call the shots and he’s little more than a four foot Zippo. He wasn’t even an illusionist. The illusion was made from small, very real, pieces. Dramatic realism in a nutshell. Whatever. I still don’t want to research.

I’ve sought counseling twice. If you don’t count growing up with two social workers for parents. Never really gotten any further than the waiting room. Something therapeutic about just going in. The waiting rooms, both of them, were white with cute pictures in frames. Easy access, over-sized mirrors. As few hi-tech implements as possible. Very roots-first environments. Places with hyper-clean air, hi-tech in and of itself, but
too good not to breathe deep. Relax. Take a long look in the spotless mirror, a sobriety check in a pub
bathroom. Without the brown spots on the glass. Fix your hair, tongue to your front teeth. Watch yourself
breathing. You must be fine, to fiddle with appearances this much. A reminder that you still care about
yourself enough to keep looking. Helps right away. Makes up for the fact that it takes three hours to actually
see some one. Or maybe that’s therapy too. Down time.

That little test, a number two pencil. Agree or disagree. Tricky order, the mundane next to the spooky.
“l sometimes kill chickens” right after “l jerk off”. Followed by “l sometimes kill chickens right after l jerk
off.” The temptation to rig the whole thing. Don’t kill chickens, don’t jerk off but yeah, you mix the two and
I might be interested. Fill in the strongly agree oval for the really crazy stuff. But you never do. To
embarrassed to admit to being God. Probably more therapy, that test. After all, you’re aware what stuff is
really crazy. Yeah right I do that. Must have something of a handle on things.

It was probably a scam. Not therapy at all, but a bureaucratic trick to fool me into believing I was fine.
Rejoin society. Keep buying ho-ho’s. Keep the insanity brewing. A setup from top to bottom.

Screw it. This is not a real ward. Monkey not writer. It’ll smell how I think it ought. Monkey got
power now. Dance, mad monkey, dance. Get down, get down, get down...

Kafro, Kally, and Sonsky.

10-9-96. 12:03 AM.

In honor of the new day dawning, I have rounded up my characters. Three scraggly sounding folks from a
twisted nursery rhyme. Rub a dub dub, get into my tub. With Kafto, with Kally, with Sonsky. Kafto? Why
shake Djibouti. Traded a solid, oil based economy for a dance craze. Maybe not, but the name’ll stay.

On the other hand, the Kafka resemblance could be a snag. Louie’d say don’t do that. Don’t call upon a
dead man for help. Sink or swim with your own people. I say screw that. Anyone with that much Kafka on
the brain is aesthetically superior to this little monkey dance, gonna see right through it anyhow. I like the
sounds, so it stays. Besides, the way I figure it, at least he’s one of the few great-dead-white-men who never
actually managed to finish anything. I might as well yank him around for a while. Maybe this is the sequel.
K gets into the castle. Hell, K gets a job for a bank, forecloses, skims off the top, owns the whole damn village. Not only closure, but happy. Kafka goes to Hollywood. Right on.

Okay. Enough of that. Who is he really? Why is he here, in ward 12? What makes this a story that I ought to tell/create/repeat? Let alone one that does everything that Louie is asking for, makes sense of our past blah, blah, blah. These are the questions.

Kafto. I should probably start with myself, in as much as I am writing this. Probably the easiest. I can see myself institutionalized. Haven't actually stuck with the counseling thing, its too rational and I immediately become convinced I'm as stable as I'm gonna get, but yeah I think I may be lingering in a permanent pathological condition and should probably be taken out of the loop, locked up somewhere without sharp objects. Insanity is far more seductive than mere instability. I sometimes, usually the nights frozen burritos taste good, assume it's inevitable. The only option. Even looked it up once in the yellow pages. Didn't actually want to go anywhere, I mean shit, it was the middle of the night and I was too tired, in no shape to drive. I figured they had to have a phone number that would take care of everything. Like ordering a pizza. So I looked it up. But I wasn't thinking right enough to find anything, looked under the wrong headings, got distracted by the rest of the phone book. The words on the top of page alphabetical order's really cool when your fucked up. Bookstores-Bowling. Child-Churches. Cocktail-Computers. Furniture-Games. Gas-Glass. Graphic-Gymnastics. Jewelers-Karate. Manufactured-Marriage. Mufflers-Music. Tire-Toilets. Fascinating. I laughed. A lot. Decided it should be a stand up routine. I've taken the book with me to parties, read it aloud. It's a good indicator of who's been smoking what. They laugh. But I always do, specially that first time. Something really funny about compound words that make enough sense to conjure images, enough sense to be dangerous... you walk in to Sears and ask for a tire-toilet, or where you can go to enjoy a game of bookstore-bowling... they'll point to the ward. Maybe that's how Kafto found it. Read the yellow pages, blue prints of the universe, found new words, new realities. Absurdity in the very filing system that keeps society safe from life threatening disorganization. He found it, the absurdist's loop-hole, asked for the chaos, the new worlds open to a man who knows about graphic-gymnastics. "It doesn't exist, not for real Mr. Kafto". Denied. Not spoken about. The real conspiracy. The yellow pages people taking over. Pockmarks of a cultural wasteland.
No. This yellow pages stuff is much too fun to be the right story. Maybe it can be mine. Academia and income tax finally kills Jimmy Delcro, creates “Patches: absurdity P.I.” Busting the chops of order and sobriety everywhere. Your street signs make too much sense and say nothing of the existential; violation of ordinance # blue chicken: no artistry whatsoever. Signs without words, that’s what you need. Po-mo world needs po-mo signs-- “stop” is too smarmy. A false sense of security. Real signs need to be un-translated... there is truth in the un-translated, the misunderstood. Eventually the signs, the blue ones with flashy hologram diamonds for example, will accumulate understanding, enough people stopping or yielding or changing lanes or watching for rabid dogs or just honking a lot. Those meanings, social ones, will be honest. Change as the world does.

Growl. Louie wanted deep not fun. And he said diatribe was boring. I don’t get it. I’m never bored when I’m diatribing. Maybe tonight I am... driven, just a little, to put this diatribe down and go back to the task at hand.

Back to Kafto. In order to have successfully committed himself, an interesting spasm in the muscle of the English language, this... to be committed... the premise for this little monkey dance... in order to have actually pulled it off Kafto needs to have more pluck than I do. Intestinal fortitude.

Hold up. What the hell is intestinal fortitude? Pro wrestling announcers say it. But it can’t be bad. Fortitude of the intestines. Making do without roughage. Getting by. Kafto’s got it, or at least more luck than I have. Figured out how to get to the ward. My instincts plus action. To sign up for treatment. And so he has. To be fixed. Kind of dull. But real. Or maybe not. Not real as in this is the way the world actually functions, people actually do this... but real enough that I can relate to it. Looking for something. Not much difference between him walking up the marble steps (no need for research to figure out the hospital has got to have marble steps) and why I actually sculpt rather than just thinking about it. To act. To cut things in half, glue bronze cat heads onto wooden bowling pins, tie a dancing dinosaur together from driftwood. Lookin’ for answers, I say. Lookin’ hard enough to actually do it. Same reasons Louie writes... even Marcus, though he’d never admit it. Says its like whacking off without cleanup. I used to buy that. Tonight, all twelve words of my play scream bullshit. This is the messiest masturbation around.
So alright, Kafto is the three of us, at least. He writes, or tries to. I'm beginning to figure out what that's about; he will as I do. Louie and Marcus have been writing novels ever sense I've known them. Ha! I've researched something! They haven't finished anything, so neither has Kafto. This isn't about not being published. I suspect that's a reason to go to law school, work at Wendy's, do something else. Not commit yourself. Writer's block, but deeper, now that'll fuck with your head. Even that's not enough to actually go in, given up. I've been messed up, really sketchy when I couldn't get work done, looked at the ward as a few nights away from deadlines and my own bed. Not sketchy enough, or desperate enough, to figure out how to get there. Kafto starts the play in the ward... this means he knows how AND thinks it'll do something. I could understand that. But only if I'd been there before. Or I was really freaking out.

Like fighting with Karen. The stupid stuff fighting. Pissed with myself and she was just trying to be there and be supportive and just listen and than I'd get mad cause she wouldn't interrupt me when I was going on and on about how stupid I was, what an ass I was. Or I'd get pissed because she was disagreeing, being patient and loving... showing me how shallow I was in the first place. Circles and insomnia. The back of the throat bile taste. Cold coffee. A clock that blinks the wrong time, unplugged, plugged back in. The sounds of an old house being moved around in, empty creaking. The way a bed feels when you know you aren't gonna sleep. Not ever. And she was getting tired, sleeping on my arm and my hand was going numb and her breathing was bugging me, too close to my neck, a tickle but worse. So I'd wake her up, start talking about what I was thinking, what was wrong with me, which I didn't know, just hated myself, did it out loud, more circles more yelling. Maybe she'd hit me. Maybe I'd hit back. Desperate circles. I'd cry and than realize I didn't care enough to. Just stop, just a trick of the muscles, go completely straight faced when she was holding me, roll my eyes bored over her shoulder so she couldn't see. Start laughing and say something, say I love you, try to figure out why, grab on to that and ride it for a while. Nothing there either, another muscle trick. Start crying again... three in the morning stupid... knowing that sleep'll help. But the crazy has inertia, an energy that keeps you up.

So okay, I know more than I thought I did. What Kafto is thinking, the way his gut feels, the way his eyes won't focus all the way... but he's got have a reason to actually do something about it. Karen without the
parts of Karen that wouldn't drive me there herself. Karen without the Karen that put me through the reverse when it was her turn for psychosis... an open fridge door, a broken ceramic ashtray turning into screaming... better at skipping the hating herself part, going straight to hating me. Gave me perspective, probably part of the reason I never found the right help-line. Too hard for either of us to go anywhere else. Even when she hated me it was my number she called, her bed I fell into... problem and treatment at the same time. Therapy hands on.

Okay, he gets part of my past. Needs his own. Supposed to say something, for Louie big smoochie, about where we been, what we dug up, figured out. But be arty, impress the pants off of him. So I need to hint. Good enough. Kafto was a white man in a white man's world. No shortage of stories about who is he, what he can do. He's seen the ads and the movies, heard Newt's good news about biology and hunting giraffes, been told he can be anything, seen the examples. They aren't him. He doesn't want to drive James Deans' Lambourghini, has never gotten through a full episode of Baywatch no matter how many boobs wobble in slow-motion. He has no temptation to eat raw meat. Has cried during a McDonalds commercial. No clue what any of this makes him, what he is other than privileged, supposedly, and that, on the bad nights, don't mean shit. So he writes. Looks for answers there. And has the occasional cocktail. Giri drinks, pink umbrellas. And bourbon because it's not just butch but bluesy. Admits that clean drinking glasses are lacking in ambiance. Talks a lot about writing, to everyone he knows. But doesn't do it very much. Hardly ever. Only when he feels ready and that takes a hell of a lot of talking about it.

A while back, maybe a different city, he got fed up. Felt like he couldn't make sense of any of it, he was sick of starting new novels, so he got help. They fed him enough of what he wanted to hear, worked on cognitive patterns that would be more 'productive' and set him loose. He kept telling himself it worked, so it did. A few months, maybe a year or two, later. Now. He admits that it hasn't. Been hearing things, or thinking he's hearing things, for the last couple of weeks. Either he's nuts or thinks he ought to be. It had him on edge, expecting to flip out. And he did, beat up an old man for no reason. None that he can remember. That's the thing that's driven him here. Not the incident... it felt pretty good at the time, he'd been expecting shit like that to happen since high school. He could process it, make note blah, blah, blah... but he doesn't
remember. He doesn’t remember anything. Lots of times, last few months, my whole life, I’ve figured shit out, solved the mystery, seen the hyphenated secret agent code at the top of the instruction manual. In class, at the bar, talking to the slurpy guy at 7-11. Figured out, and said aloud, the most important seven words in the universe. And they’re gone. Other times, like the guy he beat up, he figured out what was wrong, what needed to be done. Why shit has gone the way it has. Forgot that too. Doesn’t remember even why he thought he was sane. Thinks he writes to remember, to record what is, and it isn’t there when he’s looking back at it. So he decides to heal again, writing about it as it happens, brings a tape recorder with him to the ward. I don’t know if the white coats would let him, but they will here...

Fine. Two more names, who are they? Not the lead, ha!! Sonsky. Teacher. Mentor. Great orb of wisdom. Knows the way to the good shit, the wine they don’t serve to anyone, the toilet with the warm seat. But his directions don’t make sense. His gift is telling you things in ways that mess you up enough to think you said them in the first place.

Kally. Got to be a student, too. Looking for answers? Sure. Different than Kafto, different talents, but enough of the same to be a rival. Admiration and jealousy pass both ways, the only kind of relationship that actually means shit. The kind that pisses you off more than anything. She’ll be female. Mainly because I say so. I don’t think I’ve seen this kind of relationship written about unless both characters are men and beat the shit out of each other, pound on their chests and yell a lot. It’ll work better if I’m not tempted at all to let it go that way. I don’t think I’d let myself create a woman that stupid. Hopefully she can save Kafto, who has just experienced being a real man for the first time and might become addicted to testosterone, from similar tarzanish antics. It would be a real bitch if, in writing this, I was to find out that Newt is really right. Kafto leaves the ward for a safari hunt. Trade Kafka for Hemmingway. Yuck.

Kally-- a former security guard for a potato processing plant. She figured out how to listen to the potatoes, to their stories, touching them in as many ways as she could. Management found this disturbing.

Tony Kafto- probably has a borderline personality disorder. Recently beat a man, probably a stranger. Committed himself. Out of fear. And curiosity. To remember. His second time in a ward, both self-inflicted. Claims that his novel-in-progress is the only thing that gets him out of bed. But usually waking up is.

10-9-96. 12:42 AM.

More distillation, these character descriptions. Louie claims that that's the key to writing, the thing he is setting out to learn. To create living, breathing people without relying on type or skeletal list of details. Plays defy that. I've, not that even seen plays that are like JIM: five foot ten, black hair, a hundred and eighty three pounds, a birthmark on his left shoulder of the Eiffel tower... like shit, I wouldn't mind being Jim, gotta find that birthmark... it's absurd. But I dig it. Take the mystery right out of it, let us know who the characters are before anything starts. Who wants reading to be as hard as actually living, getting to know people. Besides, the few sentences you would put at the beginning of the play are the ways you think of people anyway. After all the hub-bub of getting to know who someone is, which admittedly is the fun part, we still simplify.

I was having coffee with Maggie, yesterday maybe, before Louie called and started this mess, and I realized I had no idea who she was. Her outfit was really normal, no funky-goddess like I was expecting. She looked even sketchier than usual, hair all out of place, eyes darting around. Not the same girl at all. We didn't just fuck around, less jokes. I was disappointed at first. But we were actually saying things. We started talking about ex-es. She went through the list: names, a few good things a few bad things. People known, past tense, finished in a few sentences. Ex. My turn. I had less so I could have taken more time, fleshed them out. But I didn't, just character descriptions. *Rachel: tall and thin in as many ways as someone can be tall and thin-- found good Christian guilt every time she said bitch or shit but had no problem saying faggot-- never
smoked or drank coffee because she had no interest in anything that you needed to acquire appreciation for--claimed that eating disorders were a hoax but kept her nails real short just in case she felt fat and needed to vomit without all the scratching and gagging. Karen: small and hard--thought she could run fast enough to fly--the kind of person you would run after, maybe to keep from landing hard, maybe to watch her leave the ground--liked whisky more than beer, the stairs more than the elevator, the quickest route anywhere." Plays save you the work of figuring this out what you should be expecting in midstream--you get to start with something known, be surprised by Maggie without the beads, see change or lack thereof more readily. The dialogue, twists and thickenings that will go on, can be focused on more easily. Besides, I think my task is easier if the reader/audience knows more about who the characters, especially Kafto, are at the top than they do to themselves. Efficiency in this monkey dance. I loved Karen after all. Yukon Jack burns a little, tastes more artificial, more contrived. But why waste time? I am running out, another empty bottle soon to paint or fill with colored water. Will need more to finish this.

_Ward 12, room C. Three single beds and harsh but dim light. Three in the morning. Kafto’s first night. He has a small tape recorder. Talks softly but boldly. He is alone but raising his voice would conjure others._

10-9-96. 1:13 AM.

I know how he feels. There are eyes that are not my eyes, watching this screen. I can write a thousand mundane words, mutter, drool and froth till I amuse myself, and nothing goes any further than me. But now, tonight, thanks to Louie’s stupid invitation/challenge/seduction (I am still not sure what part is working) I am writing something loud enough to conjure others, loud enough to get past my own ears, something meant to be heard. This shit is bad enough without the idea that it will go further, testify against me. So I have, to this point, run back here rather than push forward into text. I can ramble here, throw spelling and grammar away. Nothing has to have a point, pass higher scrutiny than the most basic one--am I expressing myself. How well or to what degree are non-issues. There is no art-fuck hierarchy, no rules I don’t know. There is no such thing
as being incapable of journal entry, assuming one is literate and has access to word makers of one sort or another.

Not so with this W business. This is to be art. In the most basic sense that Louie’ll read it. I am not concerned that he’ll hate it. He’ll dig the fact that I bothered to take him up on it. Any disappointment will be stifled by his amazement that I am literate at all. Or perhaps not, perhaps he is expecting something real. The point is that I am not all that concerned with whether or not he will dig what happens next. I am more worried that I am somehow incapable of even finishing it in the first place. I write fast, here. Three, four paragraphs every ten minutes. It has taken me, between erasing shit and pondering implications blah, blah, blah over an hour to write about sixty words for him. The simple fact that he will be reading is making my mouth dry, tongue sticking to the palate in a crooked stutter, words caught in the throat the minute I leave this and go to the W file. I am trying to do something solid (so I guess I am concerned, unavoidably with his reaction) and that means thinking about how he will read it... and yet I am doing this, not him, and so I am trying to hang on to what ever instincts I have... the result is a little empty yammering, the safe stuff, and a lot of silence.

At least this is a play... I owe all sixty words to the fact that they could be dull. And even they took a few hours. With no phone calls, no pretty girls knocking on my window, no roommates to drink with. I know that this will get put down, no matter how much has been done, with the first distraction. Still, I am trying to do this, so it must start... the play begins..., I have set the scene as much as I can without letting the action, one way or another, happen. I'd work on the bibliography now if I had done research. Maybe a nifty title page, but that'll only be one letter long. Not much of a delay in that. So the giddy-up dance, the second guessing, the stuttering starts. Am I saying this because I believe it is right, or true, or even appropriate or because I think someone else will? Ahh... I um... was... uhm.... wondering...if you were...um... busy this Saturday? Oh really... want to go... to a uhm... movie or something? Junior high all over again. The drowning begins.

Kafka never meant to publish. Low estimation of himself, demanding day job, whatever. So what, he just wrote like it was a journal and didn’t play ownership games? I mean shit, I backspace over stuff in here and I know it ain’t going nowhere. Still, it makes sense that he could pull off some of the stuff he pulled off because he was convinced it was just between him and a couple of fuckers who he, if only with some tiny part
of him, knew he was better than. A colony of mice who pipe to each other? Sure, why not. No one’s gonna see it ‘cause I suck. Might as well give it a shot. Once it’s down, on paper, no amount of doubt, no complex of any sort, no lack of formal writerly wisdom, can undo it, take away what is obviously there. He merely needed to trick himself into letting go enough to say a few words. That’s the whammy. Talent takes over from there.

Shit. I felt awkward about just letting a character’s last name resemble his. Two hours and later I’m scouring his legacy for clues about mine. Don’t feel awkward in the least. Even think I’m on to something. I actually finish this and I’m gonna be one arrogant fuck. Observation about writin’ Patchey #1: ego has more of a role than it does in sculpting. Pretend I have something to say, some thing to make the keyboard fingers move and it’ll happen. I can get in the water, drown good and proper. Let the fear go, at least as much as Tony is going to. Speak softly into a cheap tape recorder, locked up with the task partly by outside pressure but mostly because some part of me thinks it’s gonna do some good.

Blub, blub, blub. The water is rising and I’m gonna cope, not fight. Louie and I spent a lot of time at the pool, growing up back home. He didn’t want to use the high board. Thought he’d go too deep too fast. I used to tell him that you could breathe underwater if you bit the bubbles you made diving in. He tried, said he couldn’t see them without his glasses. I’ve got better eyes...

Ward 12, room C. Three single beds and harsh but dim light. Three in the morning. Kafto’s first night. He has a small tape recorder. Talks softly but boldly. He is alone but raising his voice would conjure others.

--Tony Kafto:
I uhm... "Are you willing to stay a while?"

(laughs)

Alright.

Here again. Prepared this time. No sharp edges on a Sony-- "Yes Mr. Kafto, you can keep that." So I... "Uhm... thanks," I said. One of my cell ma... confederates... saw me bring it in.
I unwrapped it. Peeled off an old gray towel, one of my parents' wedding gifts, put the recorder on the table and I looked up and... she... was watching... small eyes... no blinking.

(Imitating Kally's calm)

"Use it with wisdom."

(re-finding himself)

Just keeping track. Man's gotta document, I said. Now they sleep... and... I have nothin' to say... silence my only project, tape rolls on... catchin' every blank page, every... every uhm... every disfluency... recordin' the quiet...

Wish I had a smoke.

Room looks smoky... hazy. It's so white. White sheets. White floor. White walls. Fuzzy in the dark. Like a hand of fog, palm up like I hold a leaf, like I carry an egg.... like I caught the keys to my first car.

Catch carries and holds
in finger smoke...

(a proud beat)

See... if I woulda had this last time... I'd... I'd remember...

Woulda done something with it. Written up the healin'. A book on the shelves man, my picture like, like... the black and white writer picture. Hair gently askew... combed flat but blown by a good wind. Cheeks tight, hard stubble... sweet looking... eyes soft, wet like. I... woulda, would have uhm... gone to the dikes, like usual, a brown bag bottle, same old, but it woulda gone down different. Same water, same mudwater goin' north, and the... the sky woulda been the same gray... but Idabeen so... so warm, man...

Get there now, I will. Shit yeah. Warm me watchin that old dead world, same old, but me'll be ready to watch and stay gentle and alive. Find a better laugh, find the river laugh, understand the way water moves. River'll still go north, move like always, but I'll find perception, sharpness in that... that flat trickle to Canada. Understanding.

This is the trick, this is, is, is the way, man, you know? When it, when it's like, like... three in the morning and the stomach keeps ya up, too much caffeine or something, anxiety, whatever, and its like... like all those other middle of the nights, but, but a different shake to the equation. Like... like you can't sleep cause the good is coming. Right. Yeah. Not like the blankets ain't warm enough nights, or the pillow can't lie flat enough nights. This is... this is the good shakes. Know what next morning is. Ain't no fear in the world. Next mornin'
gonna, gonna like change the color of your eye windows, change the way you see, bend the shape of the clouds, shit yeah, show you how to draw ‘em eyes-closed, heart-open man, change the way the city sleeps... bring the whole picture outa static into shape. Make sense of three cats speakin’ limerick. Outa an answerin’ machine with no words. To sleep is to maybe miss what’s comin’. I’m not missin anything now, not now, I’m ready. Vigilance vigilant. Watchin’ the night, man.

(He watches the night, man. Keeps his tape running, eyes wide. Best posture he’s had in weeks. The night is going to unfold, the hand of God come down with ruby lens glasses or sacred necklace or an answer key or something that will set everything into place. He waits, tape running. The audience must wait with him. Beat, beat. Waiting. Their impatience, his calm good shaking. The audience will shuffle in their seats, maybe cough, maybe re-cross their legs, maybe get up and go see a play without pauses, maybe the Neal Simon piece playing down the street at the real playhouse. Kafto will watch, hold the vigil. The tape records the silence. The sounds of an audience bored and pissed off...)

10-9-96. 2:19, AM.

When I was little, I spent Christmas eve, every year, on my parents' queen sized mattress. My room was too close to the card table in the kitchen and they knew I'd keep coming out if I could hear them. So the Grandparents slept in mine. I remember the sheets being cool, so much room to roll around on, more comfort than six of my normal beds, but no sleeping. Anticipation. And then the sound of the final present being opened, the final mystery revealed as more junk and an empty promise of more magic next year. The gut left empty. Even plum pudding in rum sauce tasted sour.

(Pauses = anticipation. We start expecting something big after about thirty seconds of nothing. Even bigger after two minutes,
something to justify the nothing that came before it. So too with Kafto's vigil. But most tapes run for thirty minutes. At least. Maybe a light trick, clever ups and downs to show time changes. Maybe audio Kafto doesn't acknowledge. Maybe a ringer in the audience does poor taste stand up. Whatever. Kafto IS WAITING patiently, shakin' good for the WHOLE TAPE, maybe a little bored but undeterred, the good is still coming, soon it will be Christmas, no matter that the hand of God doesn't come down and he notices no stage effects, no burning books. Nothing shows up that wasn't already there. Three beds, three people, only him awake. Nothing else. The tape clicks off, fed up and bored even if Kafto isn't. He turns it over. Starts the vigil again. Maybe reluctance and doubt now. A little.)

10-9-96. 2:24 AM.

A buddy of mine did his senior project this year. A video camera and cheap TV with "the truth" spray painted on the screen. He said it was transforming the medium, sculpture that leaves ya no choice but to see yourself. I said it was just a hi-tech mirror and overt symbolism. Mundane and nothing special. But I spent hours watching the truth of myself making faces. They let him graduate.

(tape rolls for a while. Less of a vigil, even more like a contrived theatrical pause. He eventually speaks without realizing he shouldn't be... hand of God forgotten for this attempt at a story, maybe the new novel.)

--Tony Kafto:

I saw him. This little man. Yellow teeth, thick knit green sweater. I heard him saying that... no not yet, he uhm... I heard him laughing... yeah, sure I did. Still hear it when I get too quiet... a nasty laugh, painful, smells like smoke, sounds like playing a trumpet or somethin', without uhm... without knowin' how... a lot of blowing... a few hoarse noises... I don't know... I uhm, I can, I can feel his face, his face soft
on my knuckles..., can see him scrape bricks with his back, slidin' down heavy... left him bleeding... half uhm..., half sitting, face smeared with dirt and... I... tried to leave him. Sittin' there, under brick and city shadow. But I couldn't... couldn't uhm...

he's still with me, on my back heavy. Laughin' music. His... music... followin'... a soundtrack... a movie score, telling me when I should be scared, when I should be happy, as important as the visuals... shut my eyes it's there... talk to someone else, words poppin' out like bacon grease, drippin' off my chin in quick burns and... it's still there... music like a...

laughin'... laughin' 'cause he knew somethin' I didn't...

(beat)
Still don't... here again... but prepared this time... not wasting anything.
FINDING MY SANE SELF, take one...
I am Tony James Kafto. I am... I take pleasure in a good... in a good rain. I have been to Cleveland...
I am a leprechaun...
I want to sleep....
This bed is comfortable. Good as a hotel room... No springs. Soft sheets. And no Nerf blanket. Guess they trust me not to break it.
Better than last night.
Last night...
I slept in... uhm, I remember sleeping last night. Not much of it. Just the bourbon. Aftertaste... fuzzy on the tongue.
A word from my sponsors.
DO YOU WANT TO REMEMBER MORE? DO YOU DRINK A BIT MORE THAN YOU SHOULD? DO YOU HAVE CONVERSATIONS WITH PEOPLE YOU'LL NEVER SEE AGAIN AND WISH YOU HAD THE WORDS TO USE OVER?
Get a Sony.
(angrier)
I know there was water. I slept on a sidewalk. It was, it was hard. And wet. I remember a light in a window, yeah, yeah, a window. I remember, I remember uhm... an uhm... an open window and this woman talkin' about someth... she was sayin' that...

(beat)
I could hear her....

(beat)
I'd know her voice. Her voice... her voice was beautiful...

(beat)
Maybe she was singing....
I heard her...
(SONSKY pokes his head out and sits up friendly. He hasn't considered that he might not be communicating; the body language that accompanies his words is not charades but the language of an impassioned and accomplished story teller. Words are sounds. Just sounds.)

--Sonsky:
Krishum poso boolin korodomanos.

--Tony Kafto:
Shit... hi.

(He starts to shut the tape off- but decides not to. Not missing anything, even this.)

--Sonsky:
Boroko mae-nonno. Koloko tautus.

--Tony Kafto:
What?

--Sonsky:
Korodomos sokanta. Sokanta col, sokanta respu, sokanta porse.

--Tony Kafto:
I'm sorry, I don't.... I... can't...do you speak English...

--Sonsky:
Poso sha cla nago shi-rembo... boo-bah... ta-gna tole... za tro sha pa... sha-ko... sha-bip.. salancha esporo. Salanch esporomos.

--Tony Kafto:
Not makin' sense. Slow down.

--Sonsky:
Kasha poso shi-gna, poso shi jent, rento koli sestu... sokanta say noko talon. Endo pia moto.

(Sonsky stands up jerky. Begins to dance a dance not of rhythm but of boot-camp-broken
cadence. Violent and tired. Kally is awake, maybe has been for a while. Speaks.)

--Kally:
Hi Tony Kafto.

--Tony Kafto:
You're awake. Good. Good, good, good. Look at him. He always do this?

--Sonsky:
Sokanta golago, balon sokanta, ta-nabo mae-beeka...

--Tony Kafto:
Carryin' on like this. Sokanta... sokanta...

--Kally:
Shush Tony Kafto. Heart o' quiet's a-beatin'. Fat and purple beatin'. Lub-dub. Lub-dub.

--Tony Kafto:
Really.

--Sonsky:
ta-nabo solees, ta-nabo retora, ta-nabo patron..., 

--Kally:
You hear it a-beatin.
--Sonsky:
tae-nabo alon.

--Kally:
Hear it slapin' down wet.

--Sonsky:
Bloto y condo...

--Kally
Drummin' like a beaver tail drums.

--Sonsky:
na-pa ta-ko cla ga son techo...
--Tony Kafto:
You’re translating.

--Kally:
No. You don’t need.

--Sonsky:
sokanta solono... sokanta respu...

--Kally:
Don’t need a translator.

--Tony Kafto:
I think I do.

--Kally:
No. You know what he speaks of, heard its call. Lub-dub lub-dub. A call you to work. To dance. And you tried, but found your trumpet skwa instead, your toot-basket, and got scared. Thought you lost the beat.

--Tony Kafto:
Of course I did.

--Sonsky:
sokanta ra sha lambo...

--Kally:
Welcome, Tony Kafto...
You’ll want to record this.

--Tony Kafto:
Ahh... thanks. I, I am. This is... not what I uhm... expected. This is what, group?

--Kally:
Sure.

--Sonsky:
Echo sokanta.

(Kally gets up, moves in circles with Sonsky, her cadence less fierce, less
active, but creepier than Sonsky's... charmer and the snake)

--Tony Kafto:
Oh this is nice, good... good... uhm... I uhm...

--Sonsky:
Tar tolomos, hondo koko tar... condo mae-nonno, y slop o tar...
antar... contar... meka son tar... tar a tar shepo...

--Tony Kafto
Ahh. This is initiation. A secret handshake, right. I can
dance.

(Kally speaks in conspiratorial whispers.
Doesn’t want Sonsky to realize that Kafto
doesn't understand.)

--Kally:
No. Not yet. Not this song. This song's not for trumpets.
--Tony Kafto:
Oh. That’s uhm... that’s a shame. I was so looking forward to...

--Kally:
You’ve tried this song before. You don't need to show him the
trying. This dance is algebra. Rhetoric. A dance with America-
numbers telling you how to move-
You won’t need numbers.
You get your own song. You are a trumpet.

--Tony Kafto:
Okay.
Uhm...
I don’t... No.

--Kally:
Listen.

--Sonsky:
Kolo stauko, shem-po staw cla nego a lanta, nego a capella,
sokanta tar, sokanta liberato, tar a tar, sokanta tar... y a
lontar kanto clay pencho, kanto sokar quasi costo, tar y chopo,
tar y sta ka, tar es mo ta nodo, o canto o chanto o canto,
sokanta godoto, Kristi godoto, godotomos respu.
--Tony Kafto:
He's not... I don't hear... this... this isn't uhm... he's...
he's not talkin' to me.

(Sonsky approaches Tony Kafto and tries to pull
him to an embrace)

--Sonsky:
Pero poso condo la rencha-taypo, la rencha christi... ho neko...
ho pencho... ho dotta.

--Tony Kafto:
Okay okay... okay... maybe he is. Still... this is..., this
is...

--Kally:
Shut up, Tony Kafto.

(Sonsky will eventually get Kafto to his feet,
try to celebrate with him. Sees stars flying
like perfect fish, a thousand directions free.
Sees beauty. Sees it in Kafto. Want's Kafto to
see it.)

--Sonsky:
O, ho neko... ho pencho... ho dotta... tako-no. Shako stoki,
koki tanto pae mo leeki. Poso yoto.

--Tony Kafto:
(Sonsky is trying to embrace him, jumping and
tugging.)
Don't... Get away... What the fuck, man...

--Sonsky:
Tako-no. Tako-no.

(Kafto tries to speak to Kally who, distanced
from this, stands Zombie soft)

--Tony Kafto:
Get him off me... this is fuckin' nuts... get away from...
stop it... stop it... this... what...

--Kally:
Listen trumpet... prophecy.
Answer him.
--Sonsky:
Tako-no...

(The reality of Tony Kafto’s surroundings dawn on him; he knows where he is at for the first time, the white walls cover up everything he has known before and he sees how little difference there is between the city, his life, his friends and this room. He is looking at a map and finding his place in inches that mean hundreds of miles lost. America, heart of quiet, his America, his city, his life, is beating in his ears fat, but he doesn’t recognize it as the others do, he thinks it’s just another panic attack... but he hears it and the black and white static buzz of dead air, unused frequencies, the holes in his memory; his life in his ears loud and scary. He laughs and laughs...)

--Tony Kafto:
answe...answe... answer him.... man’s, he’s... hehe’s...
he’s... talking ’bout tacos... taco taco taco...

--Kally
Listen trumpet.

--Sonsky
Tako-no... tako-no... tako-no...

(He has been getting louder. Finally embraces Tony fully. Kafto in laughing submission but continuing to voice broken protest and what he thinks is imitation... Sonsky in celebration and prophecy, an underdog touchdown in the first quarter.)

Tako-no... Yoto poso. Y la contar, etar, sto tar. Nego el lanto. Ranko tok... Kang tong ska, kaskoto. Shampo shampo.
Rangata tako-no... tako no... tako no... yoto poso. Yoto poso.

(Builds to a final sound, the final yoto poso is a whelp of hope, a howl realizing victory. He dances up and down jubilation with a befuddled and thoroughly exhausted Tony Kafto, still half-laughing. Sonsky stills finally and smiles, successful and proud... Tony Kafto stops
laughing and makes eye contact... the smile leaks from Sonsky’s face to Tony Kafto’s... Sonsky somehow returns triumphant but drained to his bed and collapses content into the sheets and wraps tight and sleeps hard. Kally and Tony Kafto are alone in the world.)

10-9-96. 6:15 AM.
Sheesh. I gotta get a Sonsky to English dictionary. Or maybe not. His was the easiest dialogue. Let the fingers go, man. Gonna play havoc with the old spell check. Say it how it sounds. Louie’s gonna bug out. “Ya drunk, Patchey?” Sure. Kinda. But mostly not. I wanted us to know about Kafto before this started, not now. We need to be almost as baffled as he is or there’s no story here. Louie’s gonna call it a gimmick and I’m gonna say words are a gimmick. He’ll say not really. I’ll say shoulda asked a writer then. Gimmicks are all I got. You wanted what is... what was... a bunch of gimmicks. That’s it. Nothing concrete about what was, nothing concrete about this. I’ll leave the startling memoirs to him or Marcus. Still, this better not become a one gimmick pony... desperately seeking more gimmicks...

--Kally:
Sit down.
It made you tired.

--Tony Kafto:
Please...

--Kally:
You heard it though. Heart o’quiet. Fat and purple- tired and bloated.
It made you weak.

--Tony Kafto:
Don’t.

--Kally:
Weak like America.
You don’t want to be weak.

--Tony Kafto:
I... uhm... I don't want to uhm... I don't want...
I don't want to be awake, alright? I need to go to bed...

--Kally:
It won't always make you weak. Don't worry about that.

--Tony Kafto:
Look..., I don't..., I don't think this is helping. I came here to...

--Kally:
To fix, to extract. That won't help either.

--Tony Kafto:
I want to. I want to sleep.

--Kally:
He says you are a trumpet.

--Tony Kafto:
No... he said booka booka booka which... unless I... which means somethin' like "you... you are a monkey face."

--Kally:
No.

--Tony Kafto:
A walrus, fat and bloated.

--Kally:
A trumpet.

--Tony Kafto:
A sandbox.

--Kally
A TRUMPET.

--Tony Kafto:
Okay. Fine. A trumpet.

--Kally:
A trumpet.

--Tony Kafto:
A trumpet that want's to sleep now. Please?
I have a bed....

--Kally:
An instrument to solo.

--Tony Kafto:
Tonight I have a bed... and I want to lie down flat...

--Kally:
An instrument that wakes... an instrument that punctures sharp holes and fills them with fruit and rum.

--Tony Kafto:
I want... to let my feet fall out over the edge of the bed... to breathe...

--Kally:
Can I ask you something?

--Tony Kafto:
...breathe moist hospital air...

--Kally:
You don't have to answer this, but...

--Tony Kafto:
smelling of antiseptic...

--Kally:
How's it feel to be a trumpet?

--Tony Kafto:
antiseptic... killing germs... I uhm...

--Kally:
I've never met a trumpet...

--Tony Kafto:
I want to feel the antiseptic come into me and... I just want to close my eyes wake up clean.

--Kally:
See... I'm not a trumpet...
--Tony Kafto:
Let me sleep...

--Kally:
I think I would like it.

--Tony Kafto:
Let me...

--Kally:
I'm not complaining...

--Tony Kafto:
please shut up...

--Kally:
I like what I am...

--Tony Kafto:
Shut up..

--Kally:
I do...

--Tony Kafto:
shut up...

--Kally:
It's good to be camera. And a typewriter. And a baton. See...
I'm a, I'm a lot of things.
But I'm not a trumpet. I think it'd be fun. I think I'd like
to be a planet of sound.

(beat)

--Tony Kafto:
I don't want to be a trumpet.

--Kally:
I know.

--Tony Kafto:
I don't...
--Kally
I'd trade...

--Tony Kafto:
Sure.

--Kally:
No. No trade. Can't trade.

(beat)
Go to sleep.

--Tony Kafto:
I...

--Kally:
Sleep... Tomorrow's a tomorrow... sleep now.

--Tony Kafto:
I uhm... right... sleep.

--Tony Kafto:
Sleep for now great trumpet.

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah...
Sleep...

(Kally disappears into sleep. Tony Kafto is alone again. Watches his cell mates for a few beats of recovery. Speaks into recorder.)

This...
I don't know...
this... is... not how it's supposed to be... I'm s'posed to be... I am supposed to... heal and, and I think I can but this... this doesn't help.
These two... hopped up on somethin'... they were, they were in my face, saying things like... well I guess it's recorded isn't it?
One of them in voodoo-speak, the other... uhm... throwing metaphors 'round like... like spray paint... or cotton candy.
Air and sugar...
My head's so... tired. I can't put up with... I can't do this every night.
But... I wasn't..., I didn't... I wasn't cool... I mean, she... she was jealous and I..., I... shit.
Still shake... but shakin's slower...
Gotta sleep...
I can't stay here, but... where else to go? This is the healin' place and, and that's what I want so... I stay. I sleep. I sleep now.

(shuts off tape, lies down uncomfortable. Tosses and turns, finds a spot, stops moving. A few beats uncomfortable as he. Lights down.)

10-9-96. 8:30 AM

10-9-96. 4:32 P.M.
Sleep is for weasels. No trading monkey status, though I been tryin'. In class, since class. Can't fall off full, not now, not mid-dance-- W's wide awake, monkey's restless, refusing to sleep from the skin in, lungs fillin' up with good, good air, the seventh lap in the two-mile we used to run on the gravel track back home, inertia pullin' the body into crooked jerks and stumbles, I can smoke this time and it won't fuck me up, but the same thing's drivin'. Momentum. A refusal to sleep. A need to keep straight up and down and moving. These shakes are different than Kafto's, different than mine last night. Insomnia? Nah. Thought of that already, checked the sky. Sun's still up. This shaking, this wakefulness, this moving of my fingers against the keyboard...this ain't an inability to pass out. No deficiency here, baby. These shakes, these are the shakes of addiction. Addicted to the truth of me with no sleep, the dance running its course, strikin' crude somewhere down low, deep in. What was-- bubblin' up true-- soul tar, hot and chewy. An excavation. Diggin' it, diggin' it, gotta keep diggin' it. Pullin' it up, good aad bad. The bile with the bubblegum. All of it. The swallowings of me, the swallowings of twenty some years. Painful at first, this belching, this dance, the gagging and resistance. But then... now... it gets comfortable... oh yeah, habit hits the muscles in charge... an autonomous pump of the gut. What it means to vomit the right way, let the whole world pump back up, drip around in and out my mouth, get the chin wet, let it drip, drip, drip... staining a shirt Louie doesn't know he gave me. Metaphor only, Louie, just in case you be readin' my mind right now, long-range telepathetic brutha. Monkey even got metaphor goin'. Dredging waste water, un-swallowing, finding ways to let it seep out of my
fingers, staining these pages with bold, bold finger prints. Mine, mine, mine. Addicted. This is a celebration of ignorance. No stopping ignorance. I know nothing, I know everything. Look out Socrates, I’m spittin’ back serious phlegm, the goo of what is, what it means--

It must be finished.

I believe. Ohm Monkey... Ohm Patchey...

I was wrong earlier, always wrong earlier. I am right now-- the lights can’t stay down. Yeah, it’s still a play in one act-- I can’t get rid of that-- it’s the best part... but I was wrong that it has to end there... the finality of a darkness is over-rated, relied on way too much... for the weak and simple that need an ending to their endings. Defying the implied brevity is cooler... a play in one act that keeps tripping along, winding down, curling up, setting the alarm for the next afternoon, twisting in slick sheets, thinkin’ its over, wrapped up... and then has to keep going... no choice, we must keep watching... without an intermission chance to sneak out. What it means. One act, again and again. Nothing happens. Twice. Maybe even three times. Without down-time. No sleeping-- sleep will not do for a monkey of my stature, big-ass monkey, King-Kong wratlin’ the cage, bendin’ the bars, sayin’ I am ready for this. Patchey is the monkey, Patchey is the king of monkey, Patchey made the monkey. This dance is gettin’ finished, here and now, gettin’ writ into stone, gettin’ pressed into molten word flow lava on the tongue blowin’ up outta this little funky-ass suite o’ mine. Gonna flood the world with the heat and stench and stinkin’ truth of a monkey on fire. I am the monkey and all y’all, Louie and everyone, gonna have to dig and swing to my fat mambo. I am Rasputin. I am Socrates. I am monkey. What is, monkey is, I is, I got this and it’s the real deal, chicken without bones, the salmon salad fresh offa God’s mixin’ bowl...

I’ve been doing some thinking. Not the same as sleep. Class was class, desk little more than a really hard sleeping bag so I sat in the corner, let the mind flip in circles, let the words of Western Civ perforate my thought bubbles. The reverberation was freaky man, like the lecture was just a few inches off, missing the point. The truth was in me. I almost spoke it, corrected the errors of a few thousand years of funky goings on. Decided that would be rude, to let it all out there, to start lecturing as a student of the game, so I bit the tongue,
came back here... get set, get ready, gonna swing, gonna groove, gonna finish the whole damn thing, right here, right now...

(I lied. Earlier, in the way the lights went down, so this stage direction is really a revision-- no sense going backward to change what was, might as well do it here, inspiration coming as it comes, the muse gone scatter-brained in protest against too many feeble-minded years of linearity-- good thing these aren’t stage directions for the bible-- “Jesus rises”, followed by “oh yeah, three days ago, a few pages back, he was like crucified and it is our duty to now inform you, for the sake of continuity...” anyhow, the muse has more power here, so we (the collective of stage directions) have voted, in strictest confidences, and have decided that we would not only revise in progress but hold the whole thing up for the sake of shameless tangent and manifesto. That being done, it is now time to re-examine said stage direction: What used to read “lights down”, should read “lights down slow enough to be over, to lull us into closure even if we think there is none, credits that convince us the movie was good, a final twist and spasm that makes the naked fumbling feel like sex, a perfect light fade, you must rehearse this, make it go down just right, finality, the conclusion, the curtain call, the unmasking, the comfort of mundanity and order reasserted, coming soon-- lights fade; with suave gusto.” And now? Lights up suckers. Audience can’t leave yet, nah-nee-nah-nee-nah-nah-nah-nah-nah-nah-nah-nah... the sitter will get over-time, stomachs will get emptier, the car will be colder when gotten into... our little show ain’t over, lights back up. Maybe a different playing area. Behind the audience so we see our shadows where we least expect them, have to crane our necks and suffer. Music rises. Music, something of a constant and fuzzy rhythm that beats on for a while, growing louder as we find Tony Kafto alone on the stage, ignoring it. Maybe we don’t hear it either, but it’s there,
the reason we’re impatient with this show, with this three page stage direction, with this pageant of non-sequator, the music beats on, swells and fills our ears sick, the reason prefab houses are filled with our VCR’s and slapstick, men with snot on their faces, the reason we keep laughing, even in college, when we fart the smell of old eggs, do it in bed, pull the covers up to sniff and amuse ourselves... stupid music we’re dancing to even if it is silent, maybe written down on big poster board held by a bad mime who has to shout. Whatever, we’re dancing to it, have been dancing to it, and the America music doesn’t leave but a trumpet comes in. One trumpet, an impossible trumpet, a wonderful trumpet that swings and drags Tony Kafto for a moment, sweeping him under salt water undertow, ripping him under and around before he realizes it is his trumpet, lays claim to it, takes control of it and moves in rainbows and candy canes. Magic. Magic so strong we ignore America’s loud quiet and see and feel and hear only his trumpet quick and powerful—chewy like a milk dud, warm and comfortable like a cup of tea on election night. He is alone and perfect. In control. Music swells and face goes trumpet stern, moderate, no big smile— but he knows what he is. Music cuts not abruptly but of completion and lights go out, nothing special about this fade, again.)

10-9-96, 4:57 P.M.

Observation about writin’ Patchey #2: It’s getting easier, I’m getting faster. Muscles work on automatic, a little less stuttering and awkwardly—God save suffixes—since I am simply pretending that either everyone or no one will read this and in the end it really doesn’t matter. It’s my dance and I will dance it right, good and proper, and it will leave my hands and I will deny all connection, blame it on something I smoked or swallowed, let it stand on its own, testify against itself. I will know it’s mine in private, pay homage to its greatness, sculpt a big brass W and hide it... look out, this is becoming a multi-media event...

I fear that, with the increased speed, is decreasing accuracy, or that I am becoming too willing to go on instinct alone: breaking rules that shouldn’t be broken... perhaps smart-ass stage directions that taunt
reader/audience while being pompous and self reflexive aren't written not just because no one dares to but because they simply don't work. Dunno, I think hell, another gimmick, bully for me. 'Sides, more justisfactory shim-sham, here-- I think that stage directions that can bend back on themselves are what is, overt signs that there is SOMETHING on top of meaningless action and dialogue, something hopefully paying attention, mulling it over, bending back on itself, digesting the shit of this sham-- just out of the range of our sonar, enigmatic to the rest of us just trying to remember our lines-- Kafto has no clue he's subject to stage directions, but certainly the stage directions themselves understand what's what-- it's fine time they get the voice to do something about it, transcend their place as an oppressed second level, meta made trivial, omniscience glossed over, awareness and perceptions dismissed, reduced to convention-- not only am I the mad monkey I am interpreter, giving voice to what lies beyond. Liberation is sweet... next weekend I'll learn to speak Dolphin...

So now what. We got Kafto dancing. Must be a dream, I'm thinkin'. Man shakes himself asleep, just been told he's a trumpet, gonna play with your head, more than frozen burritos I presume, maybe even more than fake crab meat, mess you right into hallucination half-sleep. But what a dream! Dance, Kafto dance... let's spread this out, I do mine, you get yours. It occurs to me that for a guy who is planning on writing his way through the universe, he's pretty much incapable of speaking... hmmm... that must change. But I don't think I'm willing to let him find his voice again, not for now... I need a gimmick to take care of this...

Heh, got it. Kafto remembers. Healin' place yields memory and he gets one. The dream, the dancing, his trumpet... what a bad metaphor but I'm sticking with it, lettin' it blow full and he gets a little aftertaste. I often think, when I remember my dreams, been a long time on account (I think I'm gonna go cowboy, on account that there shurain't enoughen hootch to get outdaee-ar soway...) where the hell did this sentence start? I got distracted by the cowboy in my soul. He wears a big hat and spits a lot. Rides a horse named Horse, shoots a gun named gun.

Yeh! My tangent came back to me-- I think in boomerangs-- like weed lettin' yourself get two conversations goin' on at the same time, like life in general but too stoned not to admit it-- my proof, Cartesian
style: statement A is said and forgotten, statement B (a completely new entity, non-congruent to statement A) is then said and also forgotten; meanwhile statement A is remembered and the world (or at least two people in the world) rejoices and something meaningful is added to statement A (we'll call it A Prime) and then is immediately gotten rid of as well... thank heavens, statement B comes back and... this could go on longer than I am willing to document.

Back to my original diatribe... I AIN'T SLEPT SINCE OUGHT SIX. But when I do, and dream to boot, I remember everything. But there's always this nagging feeling that I remember what I felt and not what was. Phenomenologists fuckin' with my head, telling me we be just a cluster of perceptions, sayin' life as we know it, isn't life at all, but a list of experiences. So I take that to bed, (a good-good time I might add, go phenomenology in bed!!) where I become, dreaming, the source of this shit-- the cluster of experiences AND the object being experienced-- the whole damn setup. And I wake and remember and have to wonder if it is any more knowable than anything else. I think not. I am usually sure that my dreams are different than what I remember. Which seems whacked. But I'm usually sure that I am whacked. So I have to question that as well: if I am whacked, and this concept seems whacked, than perhaps I simply can't discern its non-whackedness and it really is dead on, which would mean that the two, dreams and memory I think I'm talking about, are the same. Or are they different? I have managed to turn myself about.

Whatever, Kafto IS whacked, so his dream IS different than his memory. My final offer. This may mean, alert the union, there is irony approaching in them thar hills. the oldest gimmick finally comin' home to roost and drink up all my fire water...

I would be a damn charming cowboy. Irony working already. What is.

--Tony Kafto:
I remember, my uhm, dream I remember I was, I was in, in, in a um... this is the first time since... a long time since I remember dreaming, I was uhm... the walls, the walls were olive green and some sorta peachy color. i was... uhm... waiting in
a, in this, this place and there were people for miles, stupid expression that, there were a lot of people... didn't say much, not to me, not to each other, not to anyone. Stood waitin' for something but I didn't know what was coming and, and I didn't know what I was there for, not at first, and I was happy. I mean I don't remember much of this part, just standing and not thinking about anything... didn't think about askin' someone what was happening, just standin'... in a blue suit..., cotton, maybe a sweatshirt... somethin' comfortable. We were all... uhm... waiting I guess. Not in line. A mob. Yeah, yeah we were, we were uhm... just standing there and I had... uhm... I had time to look around, at the walls and stuff. Green bricks the size of televisions and... and I could uhm... I could uhm, could hear the floor slurp, sticky I guess, only a few people moving, every step slurped like uhm, like Velcro or... paper ripping. And then... I heard, that... the uhm, Green-Sweater Man laughing again, that shit don't come off, been with me awake, since I left him bleeding, his painful hacking, the unearthing of a world of smoke and tar, his coughing laugh and I... first time in my dreams though... heard it in a different way, suppose it was a trumpet... was it always a trumpet? Dunno, could have been and now I have the words, could be that Greeny laughed like a mouth harp before and now thanks to booka-booka-booka man, it's morphed into something else... hard to say... I'll ask a shrink... if I ever find one... Anyway, the tune, man... the laughin' like music, was different than I hear it awake, more like a melody less like a broken drum machine, same panic as usual but it uhm, coughed and melted into different tones and stuff. But it was, it was still the same, but here it was like, it was mine... I mean, it was coming from me... but I could feel Greeny... his laughter was in it... his yellow teeth singin'... And I, I had to get out of the room. I couldn't stay anymore. I don't..., I don't remember being upset before... or even impatient but... the music started and I wasn't the same, I was moving... moving through the uhm... crowd, just pushing my way through and I...yeah... yes, yes... my shoes didn't, didn't stick or slurp or... anything. I brushed into a couple'a guys I think I recognized and then I looked at their faces, or for their faces... and the, the lights just, just went out so fast and, and I felt these hands on my shoulders, and I got... uhm... I got spun around and I decided to uhm... I remember reaching out and this... this... person? Something reached back and we danced and I was pushed around at first... a couple of moves I don't know... I think it dipped me... and then... and then I uhm... started to lead... I did...
yeah... the music was loud in my ears and it, it didn't sound so, so fake, not fake like before... it was loud and copper... like a penny just cleaned... loud like a lawnmower and I, I knew what it wanted me to do and this... this thing that I was uhm, that I was dancing with... this person, he became a person then, right when I remembered the song and started uhm, started to lead, he became the old man. That's it, he became that guy, the guy, the guy that uhm... was talkin' in tongues... and he was letting me lead. I spun around the room, around the room, it was uhm... not bright anymore... it was black... hardly lit at all. Candles through a gauze curtain... Everybody else... they were, they were still there, watching me dance I think... hard to tell... they became shadows or invisible... made of ash... I could have blown them down, spread their dust... but I, I didn't care about... I hardly looked at them... I wasn't really lookin' at the old man either... just hearin' the music and pullin' him along and spinnin' him and it was... it was... we didn't run into anyone... it seemed empty... and then, then I started to... I couldn't breathe for myself... I was breathin' and still leadin' him around but... but I felt his breath, and the music and the... weight of the whole room... his breath on my neck and I smelled after-shave... it wasn't after-shave it was... soot or sweat or something... hard work... and every time he breathed I breathed and I could, could uhm... could feel myself leakin' out of me, like smoke or water, or wine, sweet like strawberries, drippin' from me to him, and I had control, I could, could leave anytime I wanted but, but I... I didn't and let myself go and it all came out and flooded him and I felt him drownin' in me, my song loud in our ears and... and he was smiling as I let go... I let him go, stepped back to look, when I had nothin' left, nothin' but control. And he smiled... his teeth were soft... proud... then...

10-9-96. 5:53 PM.

And then? What then? Running out of phlegm here, already spit it too thick, Louie'd say, how the fuck is an actor supposed to remember all this. I say ha, that's the point, excess and deep murky water. Sides this isn't theatre... just a manifesto, no need for actors. Kafto's gettin' better at tellin' his story, pullin' up bits and chunks, too much nothing, a little substance. What is. Dig it. Even if you can't perform it.

Speaking of getting stories back, I ran into Maggie again, after class, and disorder was restored. She was wearing this wicked-bad skirt that didn't fit right, wrapped too tight with every twist and shuffle, and her
lips were sticked too dark, this bloody color and she looked so funky and right and it was good. We grabbed a soda and she asked what I’d been doing, knew I hadn’t slept, deprivation radar or I wear fatigue on my sleeve, whatever. I lied, said nothin’ about the monkey dance. Said I just been up wrestlin’ with old ghosts. She asked which and I said you don’t want to know this, not important ghosts, petty ones. And she gets upset, says I always dodge with her and I say not dodgin’, just not capable. Don’t have the words yet. And she touches my face scary, I mean beautiful and smelling good, but intense, the mother of all drill sergeants. So I open my mouth and let it go, expecting the words to end real quick and suddenly I’m spitting out this crazy story that I don’t remember remembering, certainly wasn’t dwelling on it last night, don’t remember dwelling on it ever, not since high school at least, and well shit... I might as well do it here, maybe it holds answers. Gotta trust the subconscious... besides, it’s still easier, no matter how slick I’m gettin’, to write journal instead of W...

We, the Crookston folks, were swimming a lot, one summer, and little Jake asks us how long we can hold our breath. He says he’d been reading ‘bout Houdini who could hold his for like six minutes or somethin’ and we say yikes, let’s try. We weren’t at the pool, so Louie says alright, everyone must go find a bath tub and a stop watch and check. Marcus says that’s stupid, we should just go to the pool. Louie says nah, this is about trust, trusting the water, so we should have to trust each other. We agree, I back him up for the hell of it. We go home separate, report back. Andy comes back, says he did it for nine minutes, I say man you only been gone six, he says yeah, only seventy seconds, and smiles. Marcus comes with ninety. I went near a full two minutes, came out with my eyes blurred over, seeing color in all the lights, blurred rainbows and stuff. Breathin’ better than ever, tasting the oxygen. Little Jake comes back says he went two minutes ten. We say wow, but believe him, big kid that little Jake. We say you the man. He says no, me the cave man, have big lungs, go deep and long time. We say where’s your bro, he says he still in the house. We wait, say what the hell, he been under for thirty minutes or what? Drowned in the name of science, what’s going on? He finally shows and we say so? He says eleven. We say bullshit. He says no, eleven seconds. We say yeah right. And he says he tried about thirty times, kept coming up without thinking about it, grabbing air even if he didn’t need it. We say alright, something’s messed with you, Louie, let’s go check it out. So we troup over to their place and fill the tub again and Louie puts on shorts cause we don’t deserve to see his gonads and goes under...
eleven seconds later he comes back up. Goes down, comes up. Eleven seconds. Says it’s not like he can’t go longer, he just can’t stop himself from coming back up. I say shit, must be the tub, let me try, strip my clothes off, say this is crisis, my gonads will be fine, go under naked. And it wasn’t the tub, I could have been under for two minutes again. But I was thinking about Louie, and he was right, eleven seconds was long enough. To think about what a body means without air, long enough to know the rest, any more is too much, overload and the important stuff gets lost in the blurred vision and burning lungs. I surfaced early, hit eleven on the head, stood up dripping naked and said shit, you’ve seen God. Louie smiled, said about thirty times, kept thinking somethin’ wrong with me. Rest of the summer, we had a holy number, worked with good stuff too, making out on a high school movie date, whatever, things in eleven second increments. Enough to see what is. How sweet, how small, how fragile. More than eleven seconds was to see too much, remember nothing.

So alright, people can pull stuff out. Maggie gave me back this, Kafto’s gettin back his. But the tape has limits, need a new gimmick... more Sonsky? No, that’d be too easy. Shit, I’ve already answered my question. But you want to talk about gimmick...

Observation about writing Patchey number three: I am like Louie, ditch running back home. Louie and I went out, a while back, the night they announced life on Mars, went out all haughty with affirmation, to the ditch next to my folks’ house. And Louie says he can fly, and I’ve seen this before with Karen so I say yeah sure, but he says he can feel the pull and it isn’t his so he starts running and Louie is usually one slow-ass muthafucka, but he’s running and I’m sayin’ watch out, and he’s moving backwards, slowest way to run and I watch him for a few seconds, till he gets out of sight, and he never has the guts to let go and let himself fall. And I walk to get him and he’s three blocks away, walking toward me, said he covered six blocks in the time I saw him running. I believe him, Louie don’t lie to another asshole, and we know he should have just jumped and he’s all shaken up and I’m a little jealous. He tries to get the great hand of the spirit or whatever it was to grab and pull him again and of course he can’t. Gotta take your shot when it comes, gotta let yourself trip, trust whatever has you running this fast...

--Tony Kafto:
then I woke up sick... empty without hunger, rather smoke than eat... still don’t have a cigarette... I wake to, to this...
white walls... whiter now, too much sun, sun fallin' through the window, flowin' through in handfuls... the room smells like... like paint thinner... old man's gone, not here... the other one... the typewriter... she sleeps nice, all tucked into herself... so still... I shake daylight, she sleeps through it... too calm... this place is... this place is not right... too safe...

(a beat. An idea. Shuts off the tape, goes to Kally.)

Hey... wake up... hello...

(shakes her. Touches her after Kally wakes, one hand on an arm.)

Wake up...

--Kally:
I'm awake...

--Tony Kafto:
Good... I uhm..., I was... wonderin' if you could uhm... tell me, tell me more about what the uhm... what the old man was sayin'. Last night. Tell me more...

--Kally:
I can. How'd you sleep?

--Tony Kafto:
Not real... well... okay. I slept okay.

--Kally:
Better than the night before?

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah, sure. I think so.

--Kally:
Corkin street. In the rain. No pillow...

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah, that was it... it was uhm... Corkin. I was... how...

--Kally:
An open window... light comin' through like snow... fallin' in black and white.

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah. That's right.

--Kally:
A woman was there... same shoes as me... she was uhm, was
singin' church songs... told me...

--Tony Kafto:
How...

(he pulls away in excitement.)

What did she say?

--Kally:
It's gone now.

--Tony Kafto:
But that was... that was mine... my night...

--Kally:
I'm perceptive.

--Tony Kafto:
And it's gone now?

--Kally:
They say I can't find memories, that I'm just makin' it up.
Snakecharmer says I'm a camera.

--Tony Kafto:
How do I... where'd it go?

--Kally:
He says it's just what I do. Take pictures. Develop them. I
did it with the potatoes and they didn't think I could. So they
brought me here. But I'm glad.

--Tony Kafto:
How do I get it back?

--Kally:
Let me.

(Kally reaches out. Kafto waits a moment, moves
closer, Kally touches his skin...)

She's tall, but uhm, but leaning over, on her knees... her
fingers are blisters...
--Tony Kafto:
What did she say?

--Kally:
She stops talking, and she uhm..., she listens... a story about a man who uhm, a wonderful story, a man with thunder in his head. I, I, I tell it well...

--Tony Kafto:
I told her. I did. I just started talking and the words came out. "Alex Guilder has found his thunder," I said, and the words came out so fast, the story told itself and she smiled and I put my head on my arm to sleep and she, she sung of the Love and I...

--Kally:
I decide to find a room, or a place or uhm... to write it down.

--Tony Kafto:
Decided to come here. Made a decision. It was cold, the kinda cold that gets your feet from the inside, and I was lyin' down straight and my arm curled up under my head,

--Kally:
a crooked pillow and the rain is slowing...

--Tony Kafto:
and the lights from the cars...

--Kally:
Mostly taxis.

--Tony Kafto:
and the mist they kicked up as they drove past, kept me awake most of the night...

--Kally:
I hardly sleep at all, dropping into and out of, falling and waking..., a baseball at sea...

--Tony Kafto:
...I tasted salt, felt water in my hair, felt the dirt on the ground even through my clothes, like Braille tellin' me I was ready, ready for help... and I shook the whole night cold... but
I was smiling and... ready... ready for this... and the sun rose...

--Kally:
pink in the east... clouds like a harem...

--Tony Kafto:
and it was too bright. I squinted as I walked, spent my last on the tape recorder. Fit it square into my bag. It swung, swung a heavy pendulum as I walked.

--Kally:
every step is, is uhm..., in time with the laughing...

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah. I didn't mind Greeny laughing, not then. I even let myself hear it, kinda like a farewell gift. Knew I'd get rid of it soon. So I walked with it.

--Kally:
playin' games with the sidewalk, one step per square, my foot never finds crack or puddle... I move fast, twirlin' when the need strikes, when I hear it in the laughter...

--Tony Kafto:
I let it spin me. Took all day but it got me here.

--Kally:
... sun's gone down again, been down a while but I, I, I finally see a uhm, a desk with uhm, like a group home for people paid to smile...

--Tony Kafto:
Paid smiles are different. Those people. Downstairs. Noses didn't wrinkle, their eyes didn't squint.

--Kally:
mouth-smiles only, and they, they listen to me and I tell them that I uhm..., that I can get help this time.

--Tony Kafto:
That I was ready.

(pulls away fascinated. Stands.)
I made it to the uhm, to the, the, the healin' place... and then I..., this, this..., last night was tough and, and then you do
this to me and I, I wasn’t, I’m not scared, not in the same way
but it’s, it’s not... normal, and, and, and I don’t think that,
that the, the, the reason that I, that I came was, was to go
further and deeper and, and I am pretty convinced now that, that
I am delusional or, or, or something fucked up and, and, and
this is, is, is...

--Kally:
Slow down, trumpet. You asked me something. When you woke me.
What was it?

--Tony Kafto:
Can you always do that... I mean, I mean, can... can you find
other... stuff... by..., by uhm...
(sits next to her, touches...)

--Kally:
I don’t... A girl..., calendar says April... probably a dorm
room... in candle light. Drinkin’ wine from a coffee cup.

--Tony Kafto:
Karen.

--Kally:
She is laughing, head up and down with her big, big mouth and
sound is, is, full and, and good, and she... she reaches...

--Tony Kafto:
I reached back.

--Kally:
our skin touches, my cup falls away harmless. Lips touch,
barely, my uhm..., whiskers on my lip scratch at her and, and,
but my..., my tongue finds her mouth cool... my hands move...

--Tony Kafto:
I touched her ribs. And the rough of her legs, light friction.
I was enjoying it. I wanted to touch her.

--Kally:
She bites too hard... lips swell but, but, but I keep kissing...
and my hands keep moving...
--Tony Kafto:
Her. Her heavy arms, tight muscles, tension in bone and skin. Her waist. The bones in her hips. I felt her skin slicken, go wet with sweat.

--Kally:
I bite back..., we move hard and soft and, and I, I squeeze... her wrists and, and tug at the, at the skin of her neck..., pull it flush against her collarbone.

--Tony Kafto:
I wanted to touch her. I wanted...
(pulls away)
I've forgotten... I mean, I, I... don't... think of, of, of that... when I, when I... when I think of her I, I... remember... the bile and lying up nights, sick on my side... blinkin' half-light... blinkin' the moon out... feelin' her, her need... she needed more than..., than I could, could give and I... I don't think of... don't remember how much I... how much I wanted...

--Kally
Cold... the, the uhm, the wind... blows cold. Standin' on a bridge... between two cities. Two states. Nose frozen firm... ears burn cold...

--Tony Kafto:
That's different...

--Kally:
An island below me... I can make it if, if...if I jump full force. Might not land on my feet... but I can, I can jump that far...

--Tony Kafto:
Where'd Karen go?

--Kally:
Snow on the railroad bridge... under my feet loud... as I walk, as I pace..., it crunches down firm...

--Tony Kafto:
Like glass. Like sugar.
--Kally:
The wind is cold without a hat. Water—brown water. It, it uhm... it moves in uhm... it moves inside itself...

--Tony Kafto:
Half-frozen.

--Kally:
...it moves in wrinkles under the bridge, curvin' 'round the island. An island of dark sand...

--Tony Kafto:
January mud. Frozen thick. For the first time, been on the bridge a thousand times, that night I noticed it. A building of stone and cobwebs, a fortress neglected. An island of dark rocks I'd never seen before.

--Kally:
... it, it uhm..., looks like a tower... like..., more like a castle than... than anything that goes in a river...

--Tony Kafto:
I thought it was an outpost. Stuck in cold water...

--Kally:
...hidden in darkness. No searchlight, no movement...

--Tony Kafto:
Hidden to keep track...

--Kally:
It's keepin' watch... I see no lights, no movement, no footprints in the cold sand but... but it's keeping watch, eyes all the way back, rolled up like a good dream... dormant in the dark... reporting in short phrases, reports to the mother brain... people scraping windows with comes, cars not starting, life this far north.

--Tony Kafto:
My life in cold water.
I thought that if I swam or got out there somehow it would show me something, that I would find some explanation.
--Kally:
If I jump in... let the wrinkles take me out, climb up on sharp sand rock... I'll know...

--Tony Kafto:
Everything. I'd understand.

--Kally:
I can make it... I can jump that far, fallin' sideways... land on my feet cat-in-the-sun happy. I can make it past the wind, over water- smooth or rippled thick, bunched up like soggy tissue paper... I can make it...

--Tony Kafto:
I knew I could fly. It had nothin' to do with me. It was the tower. Important enough to fly to. It would have gotten me there, I know it would have.

--Kally:
it, it, it pulls... me up to the wood meant to keep me safe, keep me on the..., on the narrow walkway... pulls me up... slivers into my hands as I climb... creosote, frozen in clumps, sticks to my wrists and clothes... and the tower pulls...

--Tony Kafto:
I made it past the first railing. Knew that I just needed to let go of the last hand hold. It would take care of the rest. I would check in with the mother station or big brother or some shit...

(pulls away again... Kally follows, moving to the edge of her bed or even standing...) I'd be just fine.
(Beat. Beat.)

--Kally:
Why didn't you let go?

--Tony Kafto
Because I uhm..., because I decided I wasn't... ready...

(beat)

--Kally:
You came here?
--Tony Kafto:
...but, but I, I knew it was an excuse, not bein' ready, it, it had nothin' to do with bein' ready... it, it wasn't the answer... wasn't anything in that building... would have let go and fallen into, into the water and that would'a been it... I mean, I, I knew that I was... was... NOT RIGHT IN THE HEAD. So I kept on, I kept on... doin'... whatever it was that I was doin'...

--Kally:
You came here.

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah... I uhm..., I finally let go... haven't hit the water yet...

10-9-96. 7:48 P.M.

Wish you would, you fuck. I'm bored. Really, really bored. This is exposition. This is gimmick gone horribly wrong. Yeesh... I'm getting slow again, mulled that way too hard. I dunno, Kally's getting a tad too super-heroey... she's like that x-man chick Louie used to dig. Rogue was her name, I think. But she had a cop out. I mean, she was actually stealing people's stuff when she touched them. So of course she didn't smooch on anyone because she was a super-hero and stealing people's past is wrong. How dull. The guilt was interesting but there was no temptation. I mean, what she missed was touching; she wasn't driven by her ability to delve deep, she was just alienated, yet another mutant with powers that aren't what they're cracked up to be.

Kally SHOULD be cooler, not sure if she is yet. She has no guilt. Just observes. Probably envies a lot, I mean she is in a position to see so much without doing any of it. Would actually allow her to like what she is and, at the same time, want something else, more. Use her skills in crafty ways, no super-hero conscience going on... hell, most folks don't even need to know she's doing it. Gotta be cool for her. But nasty. Skin pulls away and the memory still belongs to Kafto. Or to the potatoes.

Right on!!! This could be more boring. Spud number three: I was planted. Kally: the mud was mud. Could be worse. Probably not, probably the same damn play. This is pointless. I mean, I know what I want, menkey still movin', but it's wrong. Monkey got asthma or smoker's cough, voice comin' out all
cracked. Grrr. Momentum is gettin' away from me and I even have another bottle open. Breathe, light a
smoke. Keep it goin, baby, keep it goin'.

Still, I am tired, in general, tired as fucky-fuckety-fuck, but especially tired of Kafto’s show and tell. I
needed to know more about both of them, now I do and I know this: they are really dull, ESPECIALLY DULL
FOR CRAZY PEOPLE, not much different than I am. Sheesh. Must bring back the Snakecharmer. But I am
in no mood to write more booka-booka. Shit, why not, I’ll find my way around it. I wonder if there’s a used
gimmick store... I am almost ready to trade this whole thing in, maybe get a good ole story about a white boy
who learns the blues, changes his name to Woo-Woo Goats, takes the world by autobiographical storm; or
Patchey and Louie (names changed to protect the ridiculous) form a hip-hop group, call themselves Tapioca
Puddin’, tour to Hoboken and rural Minnesota--- their opening act is one man ethnic flavor, Marcus Mitchell:
the plain brown rapper. Oh, the tension... but I understand that story too well, planned it at the park in the old
days--- Marcus insisted we’d open for him and Louie was pretty insistent himself, obstinate cuss that buddy o’
mine, that it would go the other way. I just thought we needed to learn to sing first, before booking any
gigs... see, that story’s already been lived. Tapioca Puddin’ the myth the legend. Hardly a celebration of
ignorance. Or at least not the right kind of ignorance. Besides I am in no mood to write documentary, nothing
I know anything about, just what is, what it means, my mantra, my hard-sucky candy melting on the page,
what is, all is, this is.

I am in no mood to write much of anything, my head hurts and my gut feels like something nasty (even
my similes are running out of gas) but it must be better to forge into uncharted waters...

Observation about writin’ Patchey number four: If I don’t do it, it won’t get done.

---Kally:
Snakecharmer says you’re ready.

---Tony Kafto:
I’m not sure I believe he’s sayin’ anything...
--Kally:
Say's your ready to sing, trumpet. I've seen you now. I've seen what it is to be a trumpet. Read your stories. I believe. I've seen.

--Tony Kafto:
You've seen nothing.

--Kally:
Enough, trumpet. Enough.

--Tony Kafto:
Thanks camera.

(beat)
What did he say?

--Kally:
You've got it.

--Tony Kafto:
The Sony?

--Kally:
Yes.

--Tony Kafto:
You'll translate?

--Kally:
No. I'll develop. I'm a camera not a dictionary.

--Tony Kafto:
Right.

(goes to get the Sony. Rewinds while talking...)
I don't even like trumpets... wanted to play the uhm... God what was that... it was uhm... it was big and sounded like a, like a small truck...

--Kally:
A tuba?

--Tony Kafto:
No. I know what a tuba is... I think it would be difficult to forget the word for tuba. I mean it sounds so much like. Too-bah. Too-bah.

--Kally:
Tuba.

--Tony Kafto:
See? Wasn't a tuba... it was uhm... smaller, higher pitched maybe. I mean, I don't know... never actually played it.

--Kally:
A bassoon?

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah... yeah, that's it. Bassoon's got class... trumpet's too... too bold. Bassoon knows when it's not wanted... trumpet doesn't care. It, it just toots... toots right on top of everything...

--Kally:
A trumpet... is... is... listen to Snakecharmer. Then we'll talk instruments.

--Tony Kafto:
You're right...

--Kally:
Turn on the tape.
(beat)

--Tony Kafto:
Fine.
(turns on the tape)
Help me.

--Kally:
Shh.

--THE TAPE:
(Sonsky's voice...)
A thousand trumpets must storm the heart of quiet.
(Tony Kafto shuts off tape.)

--Tony Kafto:
Where did... what happened to the uhm... to my... to what I recorded...

--Kally:
This is what you're looking for.

--Tony Kafto:
But it didn't record my...

--Kally:
Start over.

--Tony Kafto:
I don't... this uhm..., this isn't right.

--Kally:
Hit play.

--Tony Kafto:
I..., I don't... fine.

(Rewinds.)

Though I don't think that it, that it makes much sense to be tellin' me that uhm..., that I uhm... am a, am a trumpet and that my words are magic or somethin' and that I need to sing out and then to uhm... to take them from me...

(A beat. No response. Hits play.)

--THE TAPE:
A thousand trumpets must storm the heart of quiet. Storm in broken notes- sharp breath staccato beaut...

(Tony Kafto shuts off tape.)

--Tony Kafto:
Why didn't it work?

--Kally:
You want to hear his story?

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah, but, but I uhm... I want to... I, I bought the tape to record myself.
--Kally:
Than it worked.

--Tony Kafto:
I don't like this...

--Kally:
Listen.

--Tony Kafto:
Under protest.

--Kally:
Noted. But listen.

--Tony Kafto:
Right.

(rewinds it... turns it on.)

--THE TAPE:
A thousand trumpets must storm the heart of quiet. Storm in broken notes- sharp breath staccato beautiful. Now there is only the heart beating. Loud but stagnant... one sound that isn't really anybody's, vacuum noise, beating wineskin full, beating bloated, beating sour. Heart-song will drown all till trumpets sound sharp needles, meteor fast rocks of beautiful noise. Till then, till the sky opens up a mirror, till the well runs over with memory and story, the hear of quiet is alone, the only noise, deafening, unintelligible, beating fat and purple. We hear it in our factories, in our homes, in our think tanks. We hear it in our leaders, in our parents, in ourselves. Wet and full so that we can't tell when one beat ends and one begins. It beats black and blue and purple, beats like a bruise touched by callused fingers, squeezed and released and squeezed and released so often that the squeezing becomes as welcome as the release. We find comfort in the throb- it forces reaction. We don't remember how to move without it, what to say when the pain is gone. And though the heart of quiet, its beating, its squeezing, its hurting shuts our mouths and breaks us down, we answer it. We must answer it for now, so answer it, the beating calls for an answer my brother, my tired sister, my mother at home with cable television. We must answer my sweethearts, my loves. Join the beating. Rise up sleepers, rise up and be America, rise up and twist and spin and blend and melt like blood and black marker.
We know how to move now.
We need not be alone.
We need not sing a cappella and off pitch.
The beat gives us voice, vindication. Beat together. Beat out
our pain, lubdub, beat out our dreams lubdub, beat purple and
fat with America, loud America, bloated America.
And wait.
For the trumpets, for they are coming down, among us now,
planets of sound to stop the beating.
Sing out oh trumpet. Gold lion trumpet, pierce the din, gold
angel wing trumpet. Rise up, sing out, for you, this one before
me, a little tired-eyed boy with gravel in the throat for too
long, you will be a trumpet, spit the rocks out of your
windpipe, find wind and song and drive and color and bring us
into balance, a great trumpet, among other trumpets, to rip into
the quiet and wake the ones who sleep and still the ones who
know not what they're punching at. You will sing so strong, find
miracle buried inside. Know this, trumpet.
You are a trumpet.

(Beat. Kafto does nothing and the tape spits
out quiet for the rest of the scene.)

--Kally:
Your mission. Should you chose to accept it.

--Tony Kafto:
You're funny. For a camera.
So what uhm... what exactly is my uhm..., my mission.

--Kally:
Not just mission. Prophecy.

--Tony Kafto:
Fated to be a trumpet?
Alright so... so assuming that I buy that much, what is uhm...
what do I... do?

--Kally:
Do?

--Tony Kafto:
Well it uhm... ripping into the heart of quiet is pretty active.
Sounds like he's callin' me to action... so what do I do?
--Kally:  
Not that simple.

--Tony Kafto:  
Of course it isn't. Will I get more?

--Kally:  
From the Snakecharmer?

--Tony Kafto:  
Yeah.

--Kally:  
I'm sure.

--Tony Kafto:  
Where is he now?

--Kally:  
I don't know. The ping pong table, maybe.

--Tony Kafto:  
Playin' ping pong.

--Kally:  
Maybe. Though he usually watches. And does play by play.

--Tony Kafto:  
Great. Booka scores--booka wins. When we will he tell me more?

--Kally:  
I don't know.

--Tony Kafto:  
Right... forgot. Just a camera.  
What do I do till then?  

(Lights out slowly.)

10-9-96. 10:25 PM.  
Sonsky makes sense now. When I started, last night, this morning whatever, I just thought I was yankin'

Louie's chain with this wise man who talks Swedish Chef-a-nes. All bork-bork-bork and stuff. Nuh-uh. I
was speakin' the truth, man. Even the Swedish Chef resemblance is the right one. Nothing to hang us up with specifics, no twentieth century reason gettin' in the way of the seriously funny sounds floppin' out of a muppet dancin' with lobsters and singin' nonsense... the nonsense resounds, echoes in caverns of truth and the truth is funny. So too with Sonsky, but he's more than just borking... he's got more goin' on than that. He's the reminder that it's all-- language, hierarchy, everything-- a sham from the get-go. Telling me, Kafto, Louie, whatever... whoever, tellin' what needs to be done. What it means.

Okay, so I probably sold out with the tape recorder. Don't think it needs translation, maybe undermines the truth. But nothing in there is anything more than didactic moral of the story stuff, fuckin' obvious anyhow, so I might as well say it plain, make sure we know Kafto gets it. Besides it’s another gimmick.

Woo-hoo. And, I swear it'll never happen again, the real stuff is yet to happen, will have to dig in the booka mine again. I think it needs to be like this but what the fuck do I know anymore, my eyes are starting to close and stuff... I am approaching twenty four hours on this and my head knows it..

An experiment to see if this keeps going, test the waters, see if Sonsky is more than just a goofy fella--Louie and I did this with our heads on a skateboard, so maybe you... who the hell is you? Either I'm really wiggin', supa-sketchy, or I'm prepairin' for an audience now. What the hell, let it go Patchey. Gonna let this go lecture style. Listen up you, hypothetical experimenters of Patchey truth... listen up. You need to go get a skateboard. Lay back flat, head on the board, and look at a big sky, any big sky, this truth is not Crookston specific, works all over. Think about gravity. Think about gravity being the right way, pullin' the head down. Keeping your back and butt and whatever else anchored tight to the grass. Hair brushing your ear, shoe laces pointed toward the ground, gravity working. Now flip it. Be afraid to fall. Small you, big sky. A large sky soup of gray and blue, a sky so deep with you so small...

Good.

You need to be afraid to fall upside up or the truth of the universe will pass you by. Too busy obeyin' gravity to pay attention to the full scale arbitrariness of everything. Eleven seconds baby, no distractions. Now we set, this little experiment... this works again and I will have faith, I will finish the dance, I will exhume and
recusitate the dead truth. I will set the world right, correct that little cripple in the walk, get us going... so here it is, the experiment that allows the revealing:

Say fire.

"Fire."

Good your listening. Now say erfi.

"Erfi."

Well done. Say fire a lot.

"Fire a lot."

Oh you're sneaky... not what I meant... what does it mean when I am you and even I, as you, refuse to cooperate? Maybe that's the real truth, everything would be fine if the schizo's could just get along with themselves. Back to the experiment. Say fire. Again and again, without any shananigans.

"Firefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefirefire.

Now do the same with erfi.

"erfierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefierefi.

Hah... no difference in sound, all arbitrary. If you are fast enough you can cause chaos-- describe fire (not the word but the thing) by saying erfi, and everyone knows erfi isn't the same thing as fire... completely harmless and not nearly as detectable. Unless, of coarse you smell mokes...cause where there's mokes there's erfi. Victory is mine.

Louie, shut up, man. I hear your telepathetic-ness again, sayin' itbullsh. That's my line and I am not listening. Sing it, mista snake charma, sing it Patchey, get this fucker right, it's time to find sleep and this is all I got left. This is it. I knew this was coming, wrote toward this I suppose, been waiting and now it is on it's way, my head numb from the booze and the aspirin, floatey from the outside in, and damn impatient. I dunno. I dunno anything. The smoke is so thick in this room. My eyes are burning and tears are coming out, smoke induced, and I wonder if there is anything underneath them, underneath me, underneath all of these witty fucking circles... this is so empty, I am empty, but something was pushing this, Louie and his stupid fucking challenge, but something more and I just need to do it. I don't want to, though. I mean I need to but, but this
--Sonsky:
Repogo. Colono croko sonanda.

--Tony Kafto:
No... no that doesn't mean anything, you have to speak... to ME. Tell ME.

--Sonsky:
Shayka... shayka tonga sta na pasa brey obo... branta shay bolo... shay bolomas ko ta kalaka... sto pa shanta.

--Tony Kafto:
No. Speak to me. Fuck this, look at me. Fuckin' look at me old man. Good, good, good, good. Now we're doin' this, on my fuckin' terms, right? See, the way I'm, I'm, I'm looking at this is that, is that this..., this trumpet thing, it's got a certain weight to it, right? Yeah, you fucking bet it does. You..., you fuckin' owe me this. SPEAK TO ME.

--Kally:
He is. Listen. He sees you're angry- he hears your song. Calls it dragon steam.... he hears you... listen to him...

--Sonsky:
Colo shayka toro peso conchata. Esto mo lobba.

--Tony Kafto:
Translate.

--Kally
I can't.

--Sonsky:
Mae taypo, nee roto, ska-gna-to-mee, isha ronto paya, paya, paya, ooooooh, eeeahhnohhmeeeahhhnohhh, aaasylo, rotambra, ma tino kaga, tino kaga.

--Tony Kafto:
I don't, don't hear anything.

--Kally:
You don't even need him. He knows it. Just listen.
--Sonsky:  
Trobo loka.  

(Looks at Kafto... knows he's pissing him off and is content to do that for now... starts to dance, egging him on... moves closer...)  

TROBO LOKA.  

--Kally:  
He wants you to sing.  

--Tony Kafto:  
I, I... don't... I want him to... I, I, want more fucking info, just another story.  

--Kally:  
Then you have to fuckin' tell it.  

--Sonsky:  

(grabs Tony Kafto... to dance... he leads for now... spinning Kafto around... its not a very polished dance.  But it's strong.)  

Sha sto crolo ka sta manapa.  Elo sha para ko stoko tae... stoko talem... ko sta ralta....  

--Tony Kafto:  
This doesn't mean anything.  

--Kally:  
You're right.  

--Tony Kafto:  
I can, I can see... grass?  

--Sonsky:  
Kesto stompo lechu renkata may opo sto, may opo sha pahnda.  Eeko kla randu... eeko staykata... wendu lenta kra poppa...  

--Tony Kafto:  
I can... I can... hear...  
I found my thunder under the third rock I picked up, when I wasn't looking, found my thunder in Walmart next to the condoms and EZ cheese, found my thunder in a meat locker hanging deaf and stiff under a thick layer of dormant frost, I found my thunder in the book I forgot to open, found it smoking killing
myself tomorrow, found it in burned out ghetto housing, in the
swing and grind of a peepshow girl. My thunder watched, guarded
by a man from Big Village, waiting for me to finally show, claim
what was mine.
Me, a ridiculous man, a man with short fingers, a man whose
words come out crooked, a man who looks small even in a thin
mirror, a man made of ash, powder-weak till now, have found my
thunder. Guy from Big Village has seen me poking around, let me
go. He has worn many sweaters, spoken many tongues, been a
thousand genders. Said to me a thousand times, "don’t run,
don’t loose track of infinity, don’t keep count."
I have found it before, the good stink of me, and I have hated
him, this man, his words, looked at the shit on his teeth, the
little eyes, pebbles stuck in bread dough, let my fists get
tight, let my fists burn. I reached for him, fingers burning
into fists, fire from the blood, stomach all sick and heavy but
knowing, every fiber knowing what is, I is. But I haven’t
reached to take what is mine but to strike, and I have struck,
felt my hands and wrists hit, didn’t know but knew and took just
enough to break him down, leave him down, discovering orgasm and
leaving it behind.
But it’s mine.
And I know it’s mine now, old man. I know it’s mine. I am the
trumpet, right? Fuck trumpets. I’m just really fuckin’ good,
right? In plain language, got the skills right? Bigger than
the fuckin’ planes? That’s what this means, is that I’m not a
fuckin’ idiot. That I see shit as shit and that’s like the
right way. Well great. I am the trumpet and you, every time
you have been waiting for me to show and for me to finally get
it, well I get it, and what it is, is here and you have to take
that at face, right? I mean, you been waiting as long as I
have... and so I’m singing now, finally now and every fuckin’
nerve I got, my trumpet gut, says the way is to forget. And I
can. I can break the tape, I can burn this place, never set
foot anywhere that isn’t paved or tiled or high-tech clean,
baby. America won’t die, teachers die old man. You die, old
man. Trumpet says that it is this, this fire, this song that is
the enemy. The real enemy.
So I take it, I take this gift of yours, I am trumpet. I know
exactly what I am, what I can do. And I choose, yes choose, old
man, silence. Yes? Not enough? Ahh, yeah, I choose something
else. To end this. I got it, I am trumpet right? Yes I am, and
I do this, as trumpet. My first act of healing.

(attacks Sonsky, leaves him broken without
resistance.)
Betrayal is the only thing sacred. Owned. Meditate on the words of the trumpet.

(exits. Kally and Sonsky do nothing.)

10-9-96. 11:16 PM.

Not the way I wanted it to go, but it... it is done. I have done what I can, got him there, and it was his choice and I have no control over him. He's just a fucking guy that I started being able to program and I can't now. My head is one big nasal ache, breathing is hard and my eyes are dry and I can't imagine eating but haven't in a damn long time. I need to sleep, to eat, and yet the mind keeps spinning on this, this damn thing that I have done. It is over, I think it is finished. I am calling Louie, see what he thinks. I think I hate it.

(lights fade out.)

10-9-96. 11:51 PM.

I am crying, have been crying for about thirty fucking minutes. This is the only kind of language that tears don't fuck up... you can't fucking talk while sobbing but the fingers still move. Been off the phone for a while. He hated the idea. No he didn't. He didn't hate it at all. I mean, he was just sad about the end, said I should have yelled at Kafto more, would have pushed in other ways if it was his. But he was excited in general, said he wanted to read it. But he had no answers and I, I like yelled a little but not really. We just started talking about something else, girls and what it is to love and he said I sounded like I'd never been healthier and we laughed for about fifteen minutes on that one alone. And I said that I was glad he asked me to do it and he said he wouldn't have asked anyone else. And I started crying then, and he tried to stay on the phone but I said, brother I am tired, I must get to the sleep and he let me go, because I asked him to, and I would have done the same. And I came back here, to the computer, but not to the journal first. W is finished. Been deleted. Completely. The kind of decision you don't regret yet, a single motion that you know has more ramifications than a few keys pressed. But you can't stop it, simply the way it has to go. I am not crying because it is gone, I am crying because I get myself to sing and it wasn't enough. I should have loved it and I didn't.

Fuck it. I am taking my warmest blanket and the rest of my bottle to the edge of the Minnesota and I am sleeping in cool air, let my head finally rest. It is finally over.
(Lights come up to Kally, alone on her bed, carefully holding a cigarette. Puts it down. Returns to her bed. Repeats ritual no less patient though she has been doing this for some time. This time she returns to the bed with the Sony, hits record and puts it under her pillow. Is pondering the cigarette when Tony Kafto enters.)

--Kally:
Do you want this?

--Tony Kafto:
I'm not very sorry.

--Kally:
No reason. Do you want the smoke or not.

--Tony Kafto:
Yes.

--Kally:
Come.

(He joins her, sitting. Takes cigarette.)

--Tony Kafto:
You got fire?

(Kally pulls lighter out of pocket. Lights cigarette, returns lighter to pocket. Relaxes so that her hand finds Kafto's knee. Listens to his memories, not to his words.)

Thanks.
Listen, I uhm... maybe I am sorry about, about all of this. I am going to leave here, Peterson said I could. Committed myself and the old man isn't saying anything and you've kept your mouth shut, which I appreciate. They can't make me stay. I uhm... I'm just gonna grab my bag. I'm gonna go.
You're too quiet. Talk to me.

--Kally:
A fish..., after a few hours of sitting on rotting wood... my uncles dock. It was green and hardly moved at all when I pulled
it out of the water. By the time the hook was out... fish was flat... cardboard still... to small to keep... dead.

--Tony Kafto:
Only fish I ever caught.

--Kally:
So I made my parents cook it, breaded into small pieces.

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah, it wasn't very good. Really stringy and tough.

--Kally:
I was six... in Duluth... my first time on Television.

--Tony Kafto:
Oh yeah, E.T.

--Kally:
I was wearing a purple shirt... sculpted a giant E.T. rising outta the sand... on it's back... I smiled into the camera, used my biggest words... I had dirt on my glasses.

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah I did. My shirt was filthy. My parents made everyone watch the tape, but apologized for me for my appearance. I was upset. I mean, we won. But God I looked stupid.

--Kally:
A girl from Sweden... red hair and small lips... A pizza place... no talking... I barely touched my pasta, sick to my stomach.

--Tony Kafto:
Christina. Language barrier.

--Kally:
Kissed on my friends couch... all tongue... mouths too open... bodies lit by the television, clothes tangled on the floor... kissing but half listening to re-runs... I... uhm... something made me laugh, I laugh like a sneeze before I could... I laughed into her and she... she couldn't understand the joke...

--Tony Kafto:
Yeah. Look. I'm going to go.
(He gets up. Kally follows, touching. They negotiate space for the rest of the scene-- Tony Kafto tries harder as this goes on to get free but Kally doesn't let go, at least not completely.)

--Kally:
Clock says three... three in the mornin'... I taste chicken... fast food chicken... got off work a few hours ago. I vomit on the bathroom tile...; spill out pink and stain my socks. I watch rockets take off. My class stands around. They wait for mine. The 'Foxstar'... a level A, the hardest... I put it on the stand, smile proud at its uhm... at its fins glued on perfect, painted metallic silver. We duck as it flies sideways... It lands before the parachute can open, rips a wing sideways, the glue is pulled in strings, torn spider-web useless. Space invaders. I hardly die at all, playing on Mr. Ranthom's desk, the rest of the class studyin' for a test... first time I felt... I got a 102... big red 'great job'... didn't have to retake it.

--Tony Kafto:
I need my bag.

--Kally:
I blush... feel whiskers even after he pulls away... my lips burn different... he smiles, kisses me again... I fill in small dots... my uhm... my number two pencil grows fat...
I fall backwards, soda runs down my shirt...
I slip into the dirt, the strap of my track uniform falls onto my arm... I lie about how far I went... tell the coach I jammed my knee...
She charges... fists get my face, my ribs... I feel my mouth go hot...
I laugh in a quiet movie... during a death scene...
I drop my watch...
I lose my wallet... a yellow wallet with Velcro...
I drop a fork... tines bounce off tough skin close to my eye...
I watch him... a man with wild hair... reach to me and fall... he
laughs on his back... I eat raisins and peanuts... wipe my eyes
with salty fingers...
I throw my bike into the river.

--Tony Kafto:
I am leaving now. Take care.

--Kally:
I wake up on wet grass... shake cold...
I uhm... I hear music...
Car lights look like spaceships...
I fall into the river... slipped on wet moss... My brother cries
in an elm tree...
Two iron rings swing together... thumbnail turns purple before
it comes off.
Another painting... in the uhm, in the display case... where
mine was...

--Tony Kafto:
Don’t.

(Breaks free, more forceful)

--Kally:
A kiss.

(beat)
I believe the phrase is you fuckin’ owe me.
(Not inviting. Tony Kafto looks sick but
approaches. They touch lips. Kally holds on,
eyes wide... Kafto finally breaks loose, picks
up what he has left, forces a smile and exits.
An anxious but hopeful beat. Kally waits...
moves to her bed, removes tape recorder, looks
at it... lights a cigarette herself, smokes
it... decides to try... rewinds the tape and
hits play. It is her voice on the tape:)

THE TAPE:
I uhm... “Are you willing to stay a while?”
Alright. Here again... prepared this time.

(Lights fade but must not die.)
PARK MEMO RE: MARKETING AND THE PREVENTION OF DISASTER

There is a park on nearly every block, state parks and national parks within a few hours drive. There are live fish to be caught and smoked in the suburb pond. There are obstacles to be climbed, swings to be swung. There is a park on nearly every block and you are sure that all the kids have been taken there. The kids have all seen a park, smelled the way the lawn cuts into air fresh after a mowing. They have seen and played there, gone to sleep a little sore but easier when their beds finally came. There is a park on nearly every block and they should know the soft confines of such a place, have been taken, have seen, have experienced it young, the way you did.

But when you say the word park they don't understand. The kids, even yours, even the best ones, do not think about a park the way you think of it. When you say park they:

- do not think swings
- do not think sand
- do not think easy of summer afternoons and lazy laughter
- do not think of the natural.
- do not think of Yellowstone, Glacier, anything populated by goats and antlered beasts
- do not think a park can be found in an open field with the right blanket
- do not think a park is a place for youth and the world to mingle
- do not think a park should do anything but amuse

The word park, you think, has shifted meanings. Connotation, you say, is corrosion. The park has become a cyber-park already, eroded the natural in favor of something more exotic, more metallic, more immediate and wasteful, more commercial. When you say park the kids do not connect it to a metal spider and their friends and clouds still clutched by a childish sky. They definitely do not think you mean a picnic table some sandwiches and sun tea brought in baskets, buckets, or paper bags. They do not remember, you think, that a park is for family.
When you say park they think of:

- Disneyland
- Disney world
- Epcot
- MGM
- Ocean Park
- WB Movie World
- Space World
- Valley Fair
- Busch Gardens
- Dollywood
- Six Flags Over Anywhere Urban
- Adventureland

A park, for today's kids, includes:

- Kideopolis! Space Station!
- Bigfoot Rapids
- The Cyclone Racer
- Gravity Works
- The Accelcor
- The Excalibor
- Star Tours
- The Desperado

You know. You have done the research, used two search engines to get the statistics, found a web page off of Lycos that gave you specs on the newest, fastest roller coasters, the most fun amusement parks for the money. For the money, you think. A park shouldn't be for the money.
A park shouldn’t amuse, shouldn’t have to be active at all you think. You have the numbers though, know that the top three amusement parks receive more visitors than every national and state park in the U.S. combined. You have the numbers though, have seen the amount spent by Amuseco, by Bounce n’ Dive inc., by Disney’s R&D department, and know that there is simply a demand that is being filled. You regret that you hadn’t seen the trend first, never dreamed that there would ever be so much money in the park. You can’t really blame Disney. Someone else would fill the need. If no one wanted crack, dealers would go broke, you think. You can’t really blame the publicity or the marketing. Your favorite park would advertise if there was any money a bad-rimmed basketball hoop and a twin swing set. Capitalism needs such forces, you think, would be a far worse country if there wasn’t a line ready to take advantage of any need, even one as dangerous and misled as this. The fault, you think, of the empty park you have seen when you remembered to look on your evening commute past it, lies squarely on the children themselves. It is their choice, you think, to seek something less pure than a river and a mountain, less gentile than a pelican on a spring and a rusted out slide. It is their choice, you think, not to learn how to ice skate. Kids, you think, should know better than to be interested, let alone create a market for computer generated films that simply simulate a ride.

Anticipated Film-ride (you saw it on the net) releases include:

- Motion Mania
- Space Warrior
- Dynamite Train
- Gater Chase
- Desperado

Attendance, for your kind of park is dwindling. Simulated copies of amusement parks make more money. That is understandable, you think. You remembered, doing more research on the web, that the Civilian Conservation Corps created to employ young Americans was the force behind most of your state and national parks.
Money, young men with families who didn't have enough, helped to shape and forge the parks you grew up with. The difference, you think, is simply one that is natural, that there is a kind of intelligence in the park, even the local swing park, just a step removed from the wolves you heard in nightcamp as a kid, that is about reclamation. Nature, you think, takes care of itself. Natural parks burn, re-grow, burn again.

But there is reclamation, microcosmic happening, being led, being sought out by the kids you have indicted. Jacob Lewis, you remember him wrestling at state a few years back, told his brother that the metal motorcycle at spider park had broken off at the spring. You do not know that they went to the city council, attempted to get that cycle re-installed, were told that it was worth buying a newer modeled toy. You do not know that William didn't see that as preservation, decided instead to let the bike ride on in his apartment, its spring twisted into a Styrofoam block without new paint so the rust and wear from the road and the wind shows.

Attendance is down at the park, you see from your lap tap plugged into a fiber-optic phone line. You do not see that the parks are still there, need to be taken care of, that your park never existed, that the real park doesn't need attendance, can be taken with, only needs the right kind of visit.
PART IV

SANDBAGGING
(January, 1997 to March, 1997)
CHAPTER 7. SOUTH, UPSTREAM
--Liz Dobbs--

It is sometime in the middle of January this morning though I could not guess by the grass and mud, wet from the night’s rain, that I can see through my Missouri window. It is January though, and William, on a small postcard with a picture of a buffalo grazing, has become the first person from Grand Forks other than my ex-husband to try to contact me. It is January, he says on the card in blue ink, and it has been a while. There is more snow and cold this year than you have ever seen, he says, but I think you should come back. There are no buffalo grazing right now, the card says, because we haven’t seen grass in six months. A week ago it was so cold, his words say, that even through a closed window the plastic casing of my stereo cracked. Still, he says in all caps with the word underlined in dark ink, I think you should come back. That gathering that I planned a year ago is finally happening five weeks from now, it says, and though it is just January, I have sent words to all of the scribes, writers, prophets and good people I know. You are one of them and I, it says, if this book of ours, what it all means, is going to be written, think you need to be here. Patches (you met him once) and I, he says, tried alone and failed—we need to gather en masse. If you can’t, it says, or don’t want to, I understand. Please, it says with underlines, send a contribution regardless. Or you can just write a letter, it says. We miss you, Liz. The note is neater in my name, light strokes with no slant, than the rest of the card where his handwriting curves in sloppy letters around the bottom corner so he could fit every word he wanted to.

I shake my head as I read it again. It is January here too but there is rain and some moss in Aubry and even with Grand Forks on the news these last few days because of its freeze and upcoming thaw, I wasn’t expecting written proof of their January. It was easier for me to keep warm when pictures were just pictures and I wasn’t reading a postcard from eight hundred miles North, the paper puckered, a little ink smeared from snow melted and dried during its trip South. Distance should be warm enough, I think, though when I turn my eyes past my window, I almost expect to see snow blowing, the ground changing into a soft, rising drift and I realize my hand, holding his postcard, isn’t shaking as much as I would have thought.

I have read it a few times before I realize he attached his both his street and electronic address. I can tell from his e-mail account that he is still in school, probably his last semester there. He is still on sixth street which means he hasn’t found a different house since I left town. He is still living close to the river.
Dearest William,
1-15-97
I am unsure of how I should take your note, though the buffalo is very nice and curly. I am sorry to hear that there is no grass this winter. I guess, not that I thought this at the time, that I saw milder Januaries than this one?
I am unsure of how I should react to your offer or to the lack of personal details you have included. Much, as you must know from Trevor (does he even answer to Trevor these days or is he just Candyapple now?), has changed with me. I am going to get my degree here in Missouri, starting with the summer term in a few months. It will not be in theatre this time. I am happier, I guess.
You didn't ask for details really, so I won't give them.
I would be lying if I said it didn't bother me that you thought I would drive back there after everything. Though I appreciate the importance of your gathering, you know I think it is dangerous and that you are going about it in the wrong ways.
So, I am unsure what do with your words, or the ways in which I remember you and Nick Douglas and Trevor and the rest of that city. You are on the news down here a lot and I force myself to watch though it would be easier if I got phone calls to keep me away from the television. It looks tough up there and you must believe that it hurts me to see these pictures and flood forecasts. For whatever it is worth, I am praying about it as often as I can find energy for.
Anyway, I won't be coming. I was tempted not to write you back at all. But I am typing this and will continue to do so in spite of my better judgment. Here is my contribution to your task. Ninety-five thesis because I am Protestant (actually there are a hundred, appreciate my attempt at post-modern sensibilities here, William) pounded with a straight and clean nail into your floating, phenomenological Wittenberg church door. I know you won't agree with them, that all of you will have arguments with the surety of my language, the lack of agnosticism and secular doubt in this list. Your resistance maybe the best reason I have to be writing at all. You have enough enthusiasm and unchecked agreement among you to finish whatever you start. This gesture of antagonism is partly anger on my part and partly to make sure you have a chance to get it right. Mostly it is proof (you were always hung up on that, eh?) that I somehow managed to love you all.
Stay warm for now.
Stay dry when the warmth comes.
Do not worry that my faith would let me dare to compare your city to Noah's. I know, that under all of everything, Grand Forks is not a wicked place. I miss it sometimes. I am no more righteous than anyone. Read this with your best tone of voice and know that I really do mean it to be helpful.
Love, Liz.
Here goes:
1. there is a God
It is January, as I make out the list for William, a warm January after several colder Januarys. This winter, back in my parents' town is an easier fit for me as my winters were not meant to stay cold. There are inevitabilities, I think, at work that have driven me back to the right latitude. Predispositions, William would say to that, nothing more than that. Whatever the explanation, I have pushed against the current of several rivers and can say, back under the less dangerous skies of my January, that I have returned and remembered, that I am still Protestant in every sense of the word. I was Protestant even as a girl digging skinny toes and fingers into rain forest soil in the wettest parts of Missouri. Even at six, my first time reading from Mark in front of the congregation, I was aware that I believed and that my faith had little to do with what my parents put forward. I was aware that my faith was my own, maybe the only thing that was truly mine and that my faith was connected to action, to protest, to a life shaped and honed by fires ignited beyond my control.

If I had stayed completely true to myself at six, not making slight compromises and adjustments as the years went by while everything happened, it would not have taken me as long to leave Grand Forks.

1. It is January, as I write the letter to William, is almost a year since I measured my own wounds and managed to push myself away from that place, those people, and that city. It is January and I have lately been seeing Grand Forks on the news one or two nights a week. Three days ago they showed pictures of a man in a blue ski mask, ice from the water in his breath frozen in clinging sickles around the circle of fabric that covered his mouth. It is January there and three days ago the man they showed on the news, while I could hear rain fall on the roof of my new building, was trying to shovel his car out of an interstate shoulder.

2. God is a proper noun, an entity, a thing
3. the G is capitalized
4. human is with a small h when not an imposed subject, the first word of a sentence
5. human is a noun and an adjective and both uses mean fragile and limited
6. humans need God to become more than fragile and limited
7. humans, because they are fragile and limited, can forget what they know about God
8. humans build cities and talk to people so as to feel less fragile and limited
9. cities, because they are made of fragile and limited humans, can crumble.
10. when a city crumbles, drowns and burns, it is time to reconsider
microwave popcorn, watched the news, saw this man's breath hang like steam in the air, his eyes pulled tight behind goggles for protection from the wind, his hands in thick gloves held separated from the white, white air. I mixed pretzels into my popcorn and hoped that this man on the interstate, his car stuck in drifting snow and lethal temperatures, was heading South.

They said on the news that though it is only January, and it is raining here in Aubry, the University of North Dakota's law school is already pushing the national limit in order to give valid degrees to graduating students. They said on the news that the remaining winter, a likely storm or two, could potentially invalidate the school year and force graduating students to return in the fall for the same classes. I wondered, watching the news from the couch I bought from Goodwill after finding my own apartment here, how one could pretend to invalidate an entire year. A year ago, it was just January in Grand Forks and we had a few patches of brown grass on the ground and were holding our temperatures right around zero. A year ago I didn't believe anyone that it was a mild January. A year ago, I was still there, still one of them, still touring Shakespeare, still with Trevor.

11. there is no denying darkness exists, grows from within if one lets it
12. God needn't remove darkness in order to be benevolent
13. hatred, anger, all of these things, are natural, to be known and resisted
14. resistance is not just about separation and space
15. God does not expect removal or abstinence from anything
16. one cannot renounce and resist what is not experienced
17. habits however, lingering patterns of bad decisions, can become part of self
18. still, there is no part of self that cannot be reversed, overcome, turned into asset
19. what cannot be improved does not exist and must be allowed to fall away dead
20. one must work, in every sense of the word, to negotiate the world
21. one must work, in every sense of the word, to negotiate experience
22. one must work, in every sense of the word, to negotiate darkness
23. negotiation sometimes means starting over, leaving town
24. I was wrong when I thought it was possible to always finish what is started.

Pictures of me as a child are all the same, ribs and teeth that the rest of my flesh would grow to accommodate, sun burnt shoulders lending a skinny frame to be canvassed by an orange or pink tank top. My hair was long enough to split if it wasn't combed out. It had been freshly combed, hung straight in a solid flap of shine past my collarbone, in only some of the pictures; I looked pretty ragged in the rest of them, most of
the ones taken by my father. Regardless, every recorded image of me is conformation that I was an adult beneath those freckles and that baby-toothed grin.

Even in the most unkempt of my pictures, I am looking to the sky or measuring the wind, taking note of the most ephemeral of things confidently, not in a musing way but in a fashion that shows I am sizing things up, taking note. "You never contemplated anything," Mom has said since, "You used yes and no more firmly than anyone I have ever spoken to." There are pictures of me at Lake Panchatrain, me on the porch on a comet night, me standing in a Las Vegas wading pool. I was not overwhelmed by new surroundings or a body of ice moving through space that only was visible every seventy years. The pictures, even out of context, show a young adult, moving from frame to frame in absolutes, like or dislike, need or don't need. If there was sound to go with images of me at that age it would be as sharp, no softer than the pretty child, cheek bones with long, straight nose in the pictures.

A snapshot at the dinner table shows I didn't like Cauliflower, no matter how much salad dressing was on it. Picture after picture showed I like the air outside, smiled more acutely with a few strands of hair stuck to my forehead than in any amount of comfort brought in by the air conditioner. Halloween photos, taken after a movie night instead of trick or treating, show I wasn't afraid of monsters. And I knew, standing next to the quarter operated view machines in the shadow of Mount Rushmore, that nothing built could stay built, that the sky would cloud again, that God existed separate but aware of our struggles, perhaps the only one to notice how truly crooked my teeth were.

25. I was wrong to that think knowing God could keep me the same person
26. actions, patterns of thought, habits, all of these things change people
27. knowing God makes it easier to understand when I have become something else
28. I was wrong to think I would never have to work to change myself back into me
29. the possibility for missteps does not mean I never knew God
30. knowledge and faith do not insure the right choices
31. the wrong choices are not indicative of anything but confusion
32. one can know God, know Truth, and still be confused
33. one can know God, know Truth, and still be misled
34. one can know God, know Truth, and still make the wrong decisions
35. intellectuals and artists often confuse confusion with doubt
36. intellectuals and artists often confuse confusion with proof of disbelief
I found God as early as six or seven. I had already found life measured in the green leaves on the bean plants I sprouted upside down on wet paper towels in first grade. I had already known living in the hot blush on my white cheeks when Mother made me tell Mr. Dirks who ran the Ben Franklin downtown that I hadn’t paid for the Baby Ruth in my pocket. I had already connected life to the hopeful smell of wind blowing from the north, carrying hints that we might cool down enough to unplug the air conditioner and leave the windows open before I fell asleep to see the moon swim its way out of thinning clouds.

I had already witnessed death in a few weeks of troubled sleep, closing my eyes to a planet of darkness, a sun that had gone black and cold, gotten bigger like they said it might on Mr. Wizard, swallowed the earth in fire before it collapsed, sucked itself back, and left endless an void spilling into infinity. I had in dreams felt the cold end, the possibility that what it was to be human on this planet with this way of seeing could disappear completely and go dead, all the way dead. I had already seen enough to know that this void I couldn’t help but see, a complete lack of heat or color or light, was perhaps inevitable but to be escaped at all cost.

I decided on my own, without talking to my parents, that trust in God and hard work for simple improvement were the only answers. I have never imagined such answers to be easy but they remain the only investments in the future that have ever made sense to me. Everything I heard from my family and from the people at church simply resonated with what I already suspected, spun into a netting stronger than anything I have known since, stronger than any relationship I have ever managed. I was confirmed two years earlier than the rest of my Sunday School class, yes’s as confident as wedding vows given to every question before my parents had started to speak. I finished the Bible before Judy Bloom, puzzled through the longest words enough to say them aloud, let the sound fill my Father’s den. I took a pillow with me, read on my back holding the Book above me until my arms ached and I fell into quiet peace and slept. My father said nothing but was pleased to trade his desk, reading lights, and drafting tools for my bed when I told him I wanted the room.

My father was a tall man without glasses or freckles whose tan went from cheek to belt, covering shoulders sturdy enough to carry his end of a railroad tie. He did plenty of that, returning to work hard as a foreman after he finished seminary and married my mother, but he continued to find words and ways to be a good preacher, giving the sermon at the First United Methodist church on Walnut in Aubry every third Sunday. He was more comfortable those mornings and afternoons, speaking strongly without the help of an altar mic, holding his weight centered and upright as he shook three or four hundred hands in the church yard.
while the Sunday school kids brought eggs and cinnamon rolls and orange juice from the church kitchen onto
the big lawn where our parents were waiting. Speaking the word of God, I decided, wasn't supposed to be a job
for him but an honor, something to be honed in his spare time, even more precious to him than the snippets of
architectural drafting, mainly additions and porches, that he drew up for members of the congregation. Labor
was work for him, service was a hobby. I didn't need to speak to my father to understand the way he moved; I
didn't need to debate with him in order to separate strands of parent and child, to know exactly what I believed
in.

Protestant is more than simply a list of ninety five thesis in Luther's hand, nailed into churchwood
long ago rotted out and fallen. It is a more personal form of protest, asking God to help you sift through the
world, seek out what fits, what can be made better, finding, writing up and adhering to the right ninety-five
items. It is not open rebellion, not just about tearing down what is broken. It is not even a confederacy of like-
mined individuals. It is a relationship honed strictly between an individual and God, fallible and Divine,
limited and Infinite. My parents have loved like no other people I have known, lived purely and almost
perfectly, believed with certainty and trust, a beautiful and living example of love and faith and what is
Protestant at heart. But the nature of the world and God's love is such that they could teach me nothing
without God's blessing and the right amount of spiritual birthing pain.

37. struggle is not indicative of anything but fallibility
38. struggle is not indicative of a lack of a faith
39. struggle is indicates fallibility but also that one believes enough to struggle

It is January and I am trying not to hear reports of my old city suffering. It is January as I write the
list for William, as I try to get what I know to line up on the computer screen. It is January and I know more
than ever how much has happened to me in the last six years. It is January, a year after the last January that I
couldn't possibly believe was mild, and I have forgiven myself for not being immutable. Much has happened
to me in the six years and some of it has changed me. But, less than a year later, it is another January and I can
speak with certainty that those changes can be undone or at least put back to work for the better.

It is the January after my worst January and I am finally sure again that I am the same woman, happy
with my teeth and cheek bones, that I was when I married Trevor. I sometimes have to reverse my utterances
but I still speak in yes's and no's. I am the same as always in terms of matters of faith, though I am not
finished struggling to iron out the details of how exactly I am supposed to live with any of this. My skeletal
system is still intact, a network bone structure of hard-line beliefs, a faith I choose to support me. I chose this faith, had no choice the way I see it now, and I adhere to it with as much joy as I have left, find nothing but honey in these bones, this support structure.

It is January and we have sparrows outside, can hear watch them building and moving when the sun comes out. It is January, warm and smelling like salt and rain in Aubry, Missouri. It is January as I write this list for William, prepare to send it over a white eight hundred miles north, proof, both in the list and the act of sending it, that nothing in the last six years has led me to doubt what I have holding me up, sapped any of the glory of knowing marrow deep what God is.

40. struggle takes faith and strength

I spent the hardest months, that last middle of January, those ninety miles from Canada, waking to watch the sunrise from our porch, orange and pink fingers spearing shafts of light through crystal cold air. I watched the sun come up with no promise of warmth, just a light show that is unrivaled—more sky in Grand Forks than anywhere. I got up ahead of my alarm, the coldest mornings after the longest nights, to sit on the step and squeeze breath from my stinging lungs to breathe East, into the morning, see color and promise play inside my rising steam. I found what I was looking for in everyone of those sunrises and put the morning coffee on with confidence that I wanted to finish waking up. Even a mild January, a year ago, when I was there, was ten degrees below zero more often than it was not and I knew exactly Who I had to thank for the brief respites of sanity and reprieve that survived the freeze, exactly what kind of God provided those colors, hidden in North Dakota where no one is looking for beauty but only to see how they can get their car from the snow bank, get it started, scrape the window clean, get to class or work on time.

I had not forgotten what to look for, but I would not have been truly Protestant if had figured out, in specific every-day ways, how I was to live with that January, how my skeleton of faith should have supported the flesh and muscle of that particular, secular life, the tendons and ligaments of connection with people who love, with people who hurt. Growing up, I watched my Father wake without alarm, heard his shower going before six in the morning, heard the phone wake him to tend to a middle-of-the-night derailment, the door close behind him. I heard the over-head garage door open patiently for him to drive to work in darkness. I learned
that money was to be made, that one could be filled by the Spirit but the world was to be entered on its own terms.

I have never doubted that I was of the world, supposed to move within it, take it at face value. I, those Januaries in Grand Forks, worked part time in a meat market, filled Styrofoam with blood klube, cut gristle from pork, mopped the smell of rot away from the black and white checkered tile, used the sausage maker in the back room even though I haven’t eaten meat other than chicken, turkey, and fish since I was twelve. I have never doubted that I would have sex, negotiate and cross visible boundaries between self and other. I tried to learn, those Januaries of my old life, how to really interact, how to trust such real and secular things, my life with Trevor, enjoy his fingers and mouth, be patient when childhood expectation didn’t leave room for what is needed between two adult bodies seeking connection. I have always been of this world, had been of that Grand Forks, even in contradiction, when secular fat and tired flesh hung strange upon my bones. I had committed to my life, moved in that frozen city, taken the bus out past the mall to my butcher’s job, walked to the theater with a scarf wrapped tight to my chin if Trevor couldn’t come get me with the car.

But, that last January I became unsure that I had ever really wanted to be an actor. I don’t think there is anything inherently wrong or un-Godly with what I had been doing. My work with theatre and the rest of my life with Trev still feel like they could have been right for me. I had no trouble remembering why I moved with him to North Dakota and was pretty sure I knew what I was doing every time I auditioned for a role or signed up for a project. But things were not as simple as they once had been. He had grown differently than I anticipated and I found myself able to bend more behaviors, shift more characters I played into things that my bone structure was expected to support. It became harder to stay filled with any kind of spirit while being of that city. Most of me knew, had known those last weeks, that my life there was over, that I was too far North, that I was not built for that long a winter.

41. love is possible in the midst of struggle
42. love is everything
43. love is beautiful but no different than darkness or anything else, must be negotiated
44. love needs work
45. love is everything

It is January as I write the list for William, a warm January like the Januaries Trevor and I lived with when we were dating. It occurs to me that Trevor didn’t really propose to me, not in any formal sense, not in a
singular moment that seemed irreversible or momentous. We made the decision together, the way we would choose a brand of spaghetti sauce or shop for a VCR or choose a movie to go to after the built the Multiplex East of the Pleasant Hills shopping center. The topic came up and we voiced our opinions, perhaps in different ways but in a common dialect of pragmatics that could be spoken through until a consensus was reached. The results of our decision, little different than the two hours we spent watching a movie or the meal we cooked with the sauce we settled on, were committed to, worked for by both of us. We planned the service together, chose a color scheme for the reception, asked my sister and his mother to sing a duet. The wedding, held outside, closer to Aubry's only river than the church, went off as perfectly as any other single event that could be debated, spoken about, broken into a larger number of smaller decisions for the sake of efficiency and clear mindedness. My mother was fine, after watching Trevor and I work together, with being left out of the planning process. “You would be great business partners,” she said.

He often walked me around his parents’ property. We often traded appropriate compliments and watched the sun rise and set together, in silence, making sure that a certain amount of skin was touching skin. We skied together, slept until noon when we were on vacation, held hands in every movie theatre we sat in, were together but not exclusive in social circles. We made sure we were honest. We were envied.

46. I loved my husband
47. I still love Trevor Dobbs, wherever he is now, more than my father
48. Love doesn’t die or fail but sometimes succumbs to motion

Though we were both able to ritualize and figure out what it meant to be in love, Trevor occasionally had a different way of speaking about it. Usually he would just trade appropriate compliments and observations, take his turn with dishes and make sure that the caulking around the tub wasn't pealing. But occasionally, he found a different energy. “We make sense,” he said. “Loving you is the easiest thing I do.”

I usually smiled, squeezed his hand once or twice, maybe brought my lips to the corner of his mouth. If the wind was right I would fling hair from my face and kiss him until we couldn’t breathe and let go at the same moment. I only responded with words when I thought that he needed me to and then I never lied to him, always told him that what he said was not completely true, that nothing between two people, two limited and fallible people, could be easy. He, that last January and the few remaining months we had together after the snow melted completely, finally agreed with me though he didn’t say it and loving me was still easier than
giving up on the only real relationship either of us had enjoyed. If I hadn’t taken the keys to the car, planned our trip with William to the source of the Mississippi, we, despite our transgressions against each other, would still be living there.

49. though motion can be confusing, spin you like a top, one can work to understand it
50. all motion that is understood is forward

The beginning of my trip out of Grand Forks, the April after that last January, found me driving in silence, aware that I had been honest but quiet too long. I was also aware that words had limits. I was certain that things had to happen in a specific order, that I had to leave Grand Forks in a certain way in order to actually leave anything. I was certain as I drove, even if I couldn’t find words to say to Trevor or William that I thought could crack into their conversation, that I had figured out the right way to leave. It was perhaps unfair, but necessary, that I had to hold my tongue for a few more hours.

51. art is a means of understanding motion
52. art does not invent or create truth
53. art reifies what is known

The only men I had slept next to other than relatives were both in the car. They were aware, must have been aware, that it could have been strange to share this vehicle, that the camping trip we planned before that January, before things had finally been broken, could be uneasy. They must have known, even as optimistic and experience oriented as they were, that three people who have forged uneasy alliances with weak flesh, broken vows said in all earnestly, moved and counter moved, aided and abetted a dying marriage, should not enjoy confines such as those seats and windows, that plastic and metal, that took our bodies East and South to the beginnings of America’s greatest river. Conversation should not have even be possible between the three of us at that point. We should have been only able to speak to comment on how the wind was pushing the car strong toward the shoulder or to point out mileage signs and make sure that we didn’t miss our turns. We, if stupid enough to be following through on plans made before our relationships changed, should have been only able to speak in short sentences, do our best to complete the trip mechanically, get to Bemidji, throw the tent less than a mile from Lake Itasca and the Mississippi, comment briefly on two sunsets and find the right
highways back home to Grand Forks. But William and Trevor were talking more freely, their arms and jaws relaxed, than I had seen them in some time.

I was not sure if their exchange, a great outpouring of non-specific words exploring love and loss and art's connection to all of that, was making me upset or amused. I smiled several times, listening to them, and also, sometimes immediately after, nearly screamed at them to be quiet and to let me drive in peace. But I, for the most part, was not tempted to join the debate, to help them solve the burgeoning crisis in the American Theatre and the general state of affairs of art and life as we know it.

I knew that I care about both of them, hoped that they would eventually find the words or silence to articulate exactly what they thought, wherever they ended up, so they could recoil peacefully to enjoy and conquer whatever they would deem their appropriate task at hand. But I knew more clearly, believed more fully, that my connection to those words, to their appraisal of how the world is constructed and what they must do within it, had come to an end.

I was driving quietly, listening to them. I was not holding my tongue because I didn't know what to say.

54. acting is only art when it is not really acting
55. acting is only art when it finds and works to understand what is already inside

It is January almost a year after I started my trip South with both of them in the car Trevor and I bought together, almost a year after I left them at the campground before their tent had been pounded into the ground. It is the middle of the next January and instance and time should give me perspective, allow me to understand more acutely what happened on that trip, why I had decided it was necessary. I am no more sure of anything other than that I made the right choices to leave, to do it the way that I did. And I have figured out why I was silent in the car with them, why, even after I left them there, I drove without the radio or the CD player.

Actors pretend that improvisational skills are inborn and can be applied to one's waking life. I once said that I could find a character buried in me and move that character outside of the script, to any banal or mundane moment, buying groceries or filling the tank with gas, with accuracy. It is January now, almost a year since I finished my work with the Shakespeare tour, almost a year since I last acted and I have no doubt that I was wrong. The truth is there are moments when one can not possibly be a good enough actor to figure
out what needs to come next, when the art of word is clearly divided from that of action, when skills of body and voice, no matter how deeply believed, do not fill the space of a moment. It is January now and I can admit that I simply wasn’t good enough at getting inside of myself to know what to say. The trip home was a moment where what needed to happen was already written. It is January a year later and I am not sure I was the only one who understood that things were written the way they were, that Trevor and even William may have understood the way those final scenes were to go. It is January, a year after their words hung in that car like cigarette smoke, and I think I understand that, without knowing it at the time, it was because I had given up on acting that I didn’t let myself even try and that I drove without speaking or even changing facial expression because some part of me understood that when a scene is scripted but unrehearsed, performance will leave no room for anything but silence.

56. one should be careful with what roles one takes on

The last trip, the beginning of my trip to Missouri, was not the first time Trevor and William and I had driven East on highway two through Bemidji. In January, a year ago January, a mild January, the locals said, with more snow than I had seen in every January I had lived through combined but much less than the January they are shoveling their way out from under this year, the three of us had been to Bemidji to perform excerpts of *A Comedy of Errors* for high school students. I was not silent for that trip, for that January, for any of those trips to high schools with William and Trevor and Nicholas Douglas. I was still an actor, sitting in the back seat during that tour, a year ago in that mild January. I was still finding words and beats and objectives, thinking about my characters and my life in terms of immediate needs and goals and desires. Though I wasn’t silent on those touring highways the way I was when I was driving my own way home, highway two from Grand Forks, East through Crookston, to Bemidji was the same road I would drive in April.

Hints of the final scenes that I wouldn’t try to find words for were hidden, not too deeply I don’t think, in the way we drove when we were touring, hidden in all of our words, hidden in the way Trevor wrinkled his nose when he drove into sunlight, hidden in the way William and Nick watched us to see if Trevor and I were touching, even hidden in the way our hands finally forced themselves together when Trevor joined me in the back seat and someone else had, for a while, taken the wheel.
But most of the tour, Trevor used both of his hands to drive and William rode in front so he could reach over easily to touch Trevor’s shoulder or to say things like, “where we be headin’, brother-Debbs?”

Even when I was part of it, sometimes even laughing as we talked our way over most of North Dakota and the northern half of Minnesota, I spent every trip for all sixty shows thinking that the car moved too slowly.

57. acting, when it is an art, is about finding what is inside
58. acting is not pretense

It is January when I compile the list for William and my memories have been aided by the year of distance and reflection, a year of meditation and prayer. It is the warmest January I have known, I can hear a lark somewhere outside by the open water creek that flows into Aubry’s only river, as I try to reconstruct and remember enough to give William the list he wants, the list I need to give him. It is a mild January that for the first time in six years is actually mild, and I am no longer sure how much of that last January has survived my recovery without being corroded into things I can manage and cope with.

I was the same woman there that I am now but I had taken things in too deeply and have, in the right winter, regained parts of myself I had left in Missouri when I followed the river North with Trevor. I am not sure how much I trust my memories of those touring trips. I know I was bored and impatient when conversation tipped in certain directions but I have started to doubt that I, the way I thought I did at the time, actually wanted the tour to end as soon as possible. I think, a year later in this temperate January, that I would have gladly spent another two or three years with those words and those people in those vehicles, that I knew that as long as we had that small, shared space for the duration of those sixty shows and that particular run of Shakespeare, I wouldn’t leave town.

59. playing a role who is in love, one embraces the parts of one’s self capable of love
60. playing a role who commits murder, one embraces the parts of one’s self capable
61. playing a role who commits rape, one embraces the parts of one’s self capable
62. such roles are not to be avoided at all cost but negotiated
63. such roles must be taken on, understood, and resisted when one knows enough
64. one must be careful when choosing what roles will surface when one leaves the stage

It is January and I am not an actor anymore so I can remember things differently than I would have at the time maybe just because I have less ego invested. During that last Shakespeare run, I was salt-water on
stage, our director said; my Adriana could curdle milk. Trevor played Antipholus, one of the twins, the one from Syracuse who is reborn single, finding himself in a strange place with a too-thin woman claiming him as husband. He was taffy, molded himself to the audience so that my punches sunk in but left no lasting marks. “How comes it now, my husband, that thou art then estranged from thyself?” We cut the other role, the Antipholus who was actually in love with Adriana, for the sake of time. Adriana’s happy ending, the union of Trevor’s face with the inner stuff of her husband, was rumored but not seen.

We found all of this inside of us, with or without pentameter, my fists raining finding Trevor’s head when he didn’t recognize me, William’s Dromio running misconstrued messages between the two of us. It is a new kind of January for me and I understand now that even as I watched Trevor grow, evolve and change, he and William scouting out new lives on their strange island, the changes were limited, at the beginning, to the touring vehicle. As long as we, after every performance, were returning to those vehicles and that tour, the changes in all of us were held and suspended. It is a good January for me and I understand that I waited to leave Grand Forks until the tour had ended because we all waited until the tour ended to fully become the characters we had been practicing.

65. acting, when it is art, is not about scene but about people
66. a scene is just a limited moment, only skin deep
67. a bad actor will walk away from a perfect scene without learning anything

One of the other times William and Trevor and I were in a car in Bemidji, Minnesota, Nicholas Douglas was with us. It was January, their mild January, and we stopped at an M&H to get gas and a few snacks for the trip back to Grand Forks.

“My parents met here,” William said.

“This gas station?”

“Yeah brother,” William said. “Dad was a wiper boy, Mom was a coffee maiden. No. At school, the college over there.” He pointed into snow and wind. “Or somewhere near here. I think I’ve been there but no idea where it really is.”

“How’d they meet?” I asked.

“You really want to know?”

“Yes.”
“It’s shmaltzy good, a love story,” William said.

“Then don’t tell it,” Nick said. “We no need no stinkin’ love stories.”

“Who asked you,” I said. “William, spit it out.”

“Well shit,” he said. “Dad came over and mom liked him. End of schmaltz. It’s been spit out. They’re still married, love done good. Kids are gone, they’re learning what to say in the morning with only two cereal bowls and less milk in the fridge.”

“Not what I meant,” I said.

“Oh.”

“Get on with it.”

“Without abridgment?”

“Yes.”

“Dangerous request,” Trevor said. William and I smiled.

“Well it started in the Sixteenth Century, in Quebec. My father’s people are French, ya know,” William stopped so Trevor could finish laughing. William looked at me, winked tacky and started again, a lower voice that was more earnest. “Dad had a roommate, Mom had a roommate. I don’t know if they were cool people or not, they’re never really in the story. I know that the roommates were dating, gettin’ down and all that. And that they broke up real soon, but whatever. I want to say that Dad’s roommate came over to watch movies but this was pre-VCR, so I must be fabricating something. But it’s a love story right, so that’s okay. I’m gonna tell it how I remember it, which obviously is not the same as the truth anyhow, right?

So yeah. Dad tags along, with his roomie. They’re gonna watch some action movies and whatever, eat some microwave popcorn and see this girl. Mom of course is there, too. Roommates as matchmakers. The movies were bad but conversation was good. Mom was kind of diggin’ on Pops so when the movie ended and they were about to leave she wasn’t about to let that happen. Dad was gettin’ his coat on, Roommates had already kissed good-bye and the night was over. But Dad couldn’t find his shoes. They looked all over, laughing, really confused. Dad was making jokes, blaming elves or something. He liked the way Mom was laughing, the gentle curly shape of her mouth. A seventies kind of beautiful. Her long straight hair, the way her glasses slid down her nose when she smiled. He decided to ask her out, like a real date. She says she’d love to and suddenly sees his shoes. On the top of the fridge. He wonders how the hell they got there and she
savs she hid them, just until he asked her out. He was mad, felt tricked I'm sure. But they met again, on Tuesday. He picked her up, eight o'clock sharp, never looked back, never needed to find his shoes again."

"That's really strange," I said.

"Yeah," William said.

"Kind of awful," Nick said.

"Yeah." William said.

"I think its pretty cool," Trevor said.

"I do to," William said. "Where I get my stunnin' charm from."

"Pretty pathetic," Nick said.

"Well yah," he said, "but in the best, super-smarm way. Gonna smarm it up even more. Write an opera about it. You hid my shoes but not your heart."

"Now that's pathetic," I said.

"Sheesh," William said. "Can't win with you guys."

68. a scene can be amazing
69. a scene can be horrible
70. a scene can make it seem as though truth is understood clearly

It is January as I think about the cars I have ridden in, the car I drove through Bemidji with William and Trevor last April, the same car I took further East to Minneapolis before taking the interstate South to Missouri. It is a warm January when I think about times with them before winter had blown in from the West and from the North, from the mountains and from Canada where the Red River of the North, one of only two rivers in the hemisphere that way, takes its water. The first time we, the three of us and Nick, went through Bemidji on Highway Two it was October or so and I was riding in back while Trevor drove. From what I know of physics, thinking back on that October from this thawed out January, I have understood that whatever I saw through the window on those trips, that first drive through Bemidji, had already been seen by Trevor and William when it got back to me. Sure it was only a tiny delay, a millisecond or some minute increment, seemingly meaningless, but I am aware now that in the back seat I was seeing slow, with second-hand kinds of observation.
Through Bemidji the first time, we were still laughing and talking. Nicholas was still riding around in his costume, full drag, and letting the small town gas station employees roll their eyes. He and I let William and Trevor ride in the front. “Let the boys go first,” Nicholas said and they didn’t decline. It is January now and I have reconsidered their eagerness to be in front, what I thought was just about comfort and leg room, to be some kind of desire to be first to pioneer and explore the wild unknown edges of space and time and art and even the flat geography North Dakota and Northwestern Minnesota.

That first trip on Highway Two, Trevor hadn’t done anything yet, hadn’t betrayed me in some other bedroom, hadn’t betrayed himself by feeling a strange non-guilt, turning philosophical cartwheels around the subject, convincing himself that the act, the sex, the fucking, the love-making, wasn’t any of that but something else, some kind of desperate attempt to make peace with his libido and his place in the world, or sex and it’s place in a relationship, or love and it’s role in what he thought was a non-existent sex drive. He hadn’t yet, the way he would with William’s help, come to think that his action transcended betrayal and became therapy for both of us, inevitable and tragic but nobody’s fault. His transformation wasn’t complete yet but driving, he saw things before I did.

William explained it like this: light reflects, carries a report of what is reflected, becomes stimuli, visual experience, the basis of phenomenology, how we know the world, a cluster of observations that is self with no real contact with an objective world. Light finds the right cells in the eye, hands off its message so that from the back, my messengers are tardy, and the world and the truth gets delayed. I explain it now, in this January, as just a trick of light, nothing to do with truth or even self but I am aware that physics dictates that, the first time on Highway Two back from Bemidji that October before my worst January, I saw the sign saying we were sixty-eight miles from home a fraction of a second later than William or Trevor did, that I realized my life there was over after they had already been shown, had time to compare phenomenological notes, figure out what had happened, form alliances, protect what needed protecting. I was slow, found out after Trevor, as Candyapple, had told William, set up a safety net, landed on his feet different.

I decided, as soon as I figured out what needed to happen, that it was important to me that I drove myself home.

71. as artists and as human beings, we are taught to live in the moment
72. God does not care about every moment
73. God cares about the composite

But there were trips before I understood how the script was written that I tried to improvise, tried to rewrite, tried to win battles in smaller scenes. There were trips through North Dakota and Minnesota where Trevor and William received light and images first, understood more than I did. In that part of the country, the roadside dies early, late September. The later in October we stopped on tour, the more vibrant the dying was, to the point that, the first time we drove to Bemidji, we could see indigo, light green, violet, and some kind of pink, all of it in the grasses, rising and swirling up the banks of the ditch, blowing in soft wind.

"Amazing," Trevor said where he was driving.

"Hand of God," William said, "come down with a can of spray paint." I must have breathed through my nose or something because he turned around, looked apologetic, said, "Sorry."

"Don't be," I said.

"Pagans got as mucha right to the hand of God as any of us," Trevor said.

"I don't think so."

"I said I was sorry," William said.

"Sure," I said. "Apology accepted. Understood. You were confused when you invoked my God. A little slip up, never happen again."

"It's not like I was callin' Him a bastard," he said. "I was giving credit."

"Sure," I said.

Snow fell before the month was finished.

74. a scene, one moment lived fully, isn't proof of important acting
75. a scene, words and actions, doesn't prove anything is understood
76. a good actor will carry a scene with them

It is just January but, here in Missouri, the weather is closer to the April I left William and Trevor by the biggest river in North America. It is just January here and there are rabbits who live in my yard and sometimes come close enough to see through the window. I have found words again, moved past that last script. When, I left them there with a camp stove and a few cans of stew, I had given up on knowing how to speak without really knowing why. I held the keys up, moved to the door and smiled at them as I walked to the car. I can remember the way my feet dragged at the dirt, rocks and beaten down grass of their campsite as I
got in the car. I moved slowly so they could try to stop me though I didn’t know what I would say if they did. I remember trying to speak, trying to explain, maybe even trying to apologize or accuse them of something. I had expected there would be some screaming and that all three of us would cry as I made my way to the car and left them stranded more than two hours from town. It is January now, almost a year later, and I understand why I said nothing, why they let me go.

I didn’t speak, not because I had no power or because I didn’t know what I needed to say, but because words had come to nothing. Even by myself, as I drove south of Bemidji alone, I drove with my face blank and listened to the sounds of the highway, ruts and cracks from heat-swell loosing ground to the cold months, the constant bump of a tire against scar tissue and though I had long since tired of listening to the rhythms of disrepair, I did not trust myself with my own utterance.

77. acting, good acting, is not deception
78. much of life, habits and acquired behaviors, is about deception
79. acting should be about stripping away and revealing
80. acting as an art, should be about getting to the truth of one’s self
81. acting as an art, should be about getting to the truth of one’s relationships

It is January as I write the list for William and myself, take stock of why I left town, what I had to return to here. It is a January very different than the one William and Trevor are waiting out up north as I contemplate and remember. I have a life here, relationships old and new that I would protect with all of the vigor that I see Trevor and William’s city preparing to fight the river when I watch the news. I am lingering on those old places, vehicles, wounds and even the good things, only because William brought it up, brought it back with his post card. I am not writing back to re-enter that city, though I wish it no harm, but to prove, to them, maybe to myself, that I am willing to match them sandbag for sandbag to protect what is mine. If I could not write back to William, or if I wanted nothing but to show him how happy I was, list the names of men I have dated, the one I am dating as I write William, since moving back here, I would be showing myself
that I was afraid of him, of that place, of those memories. I would, with silence or with too many words to him about my new January, prove that I really have nothing.

82. acting, selective presentation of buried selves, is part of all human relationships
83. when one talks about how happy they are without the past, one is faking it
84. when one can refer to the past without breaking, only then have they left town
85. we are all sorry

It is January, writing the list for William and Trevor, as I know he will see it, and I have enough here in Aubry that is good and warm and safe enough from rising water, that I let myself remember one of the first basements, here in Missouri with Trevor, that I was naked in. My ribs were tight shadows, breasts and nipples. I remember cold air, drinking soda water and rolling on the carpet was beige. I had blood in my mouth, had bit too hard, taken a piece of skin from his lip. Trevor looked scared, had been looking scared since I had opened reached and unzipped him. He pulled away but said nothing when I reached through, let the zipper scratch my wrists, touched him through his boxers.

"Your hands are cold," he said.

I smiled, removing his belt, and jeans and struggled with my own while we were rolling and biting, rug burn on my knees, scratches on his back.

"We're trying to hard," he said. I stopped, reached for a beverage. Laid still on my back, let cold air move over my skin, watched my chest and tight stomach jerk and swell as I breathed. He fell asleep, his breathe on my shoulder. I watched the ceiling of his parents basement, followed the arc of light from passing cars, wondered how many of them were trying to go this direction, intended to be there at that exact moment, wondered how many were lost. Trevor was breathing through his nose, and I could feel on my hard shoulder, two distinct air flows, slightly warm, fast, and separate.

I rolled over and removed his shorts, thought I would wake him with my mouth. Looking at him, that close, the hair on his stomach, the curls around his genitals, the birthmark on his upper hip, I could smell him. I was fascinated I remember, and a little proud of his body as I watched him sleep, but I had no interest in really moving against him. I wanted to know what felt good, figure out the equation, let him wake comfortable, feel loved and good. I kissed the inside of his leg, warm skin, ran my tongue over his birth mark, but he didn’t move. I put my head on his chest, curled up against his side, put one had on his stomach and let it slide down, slowly. I bit his neck to wake him, gently show him we were completely naked, that we could
figure this out. He woke and I kept moving my hand, kissed him slowly, mouths open just wide enough. We were gentle and he moved calmly, let me touch him so my cold fingers grew warmer. We rolled, kept kissing and he touched back. I remember that I stopped that it wasn't supposed to be about me. I took his hand from my legs, sucked on his fingers and he touched my back, followed my spine, running fingers over bumps of vertebrae. I took his hand, moved it to my shoulder and he moved it back, let it linger along my hip bones, pulled the skin gently against the bone. I bit him again, softly I thought. He let go.

86. we are all accountable
87. relativism is a dead, dead end.
88. truth, objective and right, exists.
89. truth needs not be welcomed to be true.

It is January as I finish the list up for William, try to finally tell him, for his party and book and quest, what I believe about the world. It is tempting to be didactic, tempting to try to tell him exactly what happened between Trevor and I, William and myself, to do so to try to hurt them. But I am something close to truly happy with this warmer January and I suspect, writing this while I can see brown dirt and a soft breeze through my window while I am sure they feel the sharp edge of wind-chill every time they step out of doors, that William understands anyway. I suspect that he and Trevor ate their stew and spent the night at their campsite trying to stay dry while I drove South through rain. I suspect that they called Nick or someone else to get back to Grand Forks and that, between the two of them they were able to figure out exactly what they needed to. But, even after I left them there, William sent me a post card and didn’t let my role be written out completely so I must assume, as I re-read William’s card, that he sent it because there are things about me that he hasn’t figured out.

And so, with his help, my new January, so different from their frozen and soon-to-be-flooding January, finds me still part of the plot, writing my way back into the story, just for a moment, with this list. William’s post card, its sad little buffalo, invited me so I let myself keep writing, let myself re-enter the wind chill and watch the Red River of the North rise as it moves North through town because real distance is the ability to revisit without staying and to stay away without memory loss, avoidance, or denial.

When I called him, in that mild January in Grand Forks, one of the nights after Trevor had started spending his nights with Allison and I had grown tired of looking at my small body in the mirror, William
came by. He said he understood and that I was good enough of a person not to be alone. He said that he
wanted to be with me, even just to talk. He came by when I called him.

I had been spending most of those January days in the bathroom, the bathroom Trevor and I talked in
while one of us shaved or used the toilet. Trevor and I had no intimacy issues with the bathroom, could plan
an evening while one of us was sitting on the pot or taking a shower but, a year after that January, I can’t
remember if we looked at each other while we were talking. The last few days in that January, the mornings
and afternoons around the time when he was sleeping with her, I watched myself in that bathroom mirror. I am
small, I thought, as I got dressed, brought my hair up in a clip. I remember trying to look larger, letting a few
pieces fall loose from the clip, putting clear gloss on, even chewing my lip a little. I blinked and put on eye-
liner, gave my self lashes and my face, I remember, had a few small shadows, shadows like there was no fat
between skin and bone. It is January and I am happy with my teeth and cheekbones but I remember those
January days in that mirror when my face seemed reduced to a miniature face, too tight, like the skull we were
using as a prop on the Shakespeare tour. I spent hours trying to keep myself from looking plastic, deflated,
hollow, and painted. I put makeup on, took the makeup off, scrubbed the moisturizing remover on and off with
a sponge. I always looked scraped, a little reddened, no larger, no more fleshed out.

The mirror should have told me that my face was too pale, that my body was too far North. My faith
in God, my faith in myself, should have let me know right then that it was time to return South. I, in January
as I write the list for William and try to make him understand why I called him instead of just leaving,
remember the mirror simply showing me that I was alone, that I had lost the possibilities, never realized but
open during the six years with Trevor, of us figuring out how to truly touch each other. I scrubbed and applied
and scrubbed and reapplied but could never figure out a way without Trevor to get his hand to show up in the
mirror, retrace paths that I hadn’t been ready to understand when he had been there, let his hand show up in the
empty mirror linger against the bones in my shoulder and ribs, seek out my softest places. I didn’t understand,
yet, that I couldn’t give the news that I was ready to be touched to who I was when I met Trevor without
starting over, without leaving. It would take a different kind of scrubbing to bring that awareness, an eager and
ready search for Trevor’s hands and soft lips in William that had to fail. He had to, if only for one night, come
over and want me and I had to be ready to want him. I knew that much. I didn’t know until this January in
Aubry, that I had to be the one to discover that it was impossible for me to be truly touched in that city, that I
had to let him teach me to pull away. He came when I called him.
humans, being fallible and limited, try stupid things to escape the truth
humans forget that God is not fallible and limited
humans forget that the Truth is the Truth
no one has faith enough for Truth that is painful or unwanted
humans need to do stupid things to understand
moments of failure are expected and do not damage God

William came by when it was snowing and said something corny, let his hair stick to cheek and glasses. He said that post-modern men still know how to look pathetic. I had called him, made tea, and decided I didn’t want lights on, so I lit a candle before I filled two mugs and sat down. We talked but said nothing while we looked at each other. His shirt was hanging our and wet, pulled tight on his chest and stomach, his sideburns were wild and his nose may have been running. His hands were folded around his cup, he would have said look a Foldger’s moment if we had been using words. I smiled and he did. He didn’t drink from his tea unless I did and even then he took a slow sip with no breathing to cool it down. He tried to be inconspicuous, tried not to make noise. His hands jerked the mug self-consciously, he looked up, made eye contact with the ceiling as he swallowed. His ear rings were wet, a few drops of water onto my carpet, and I could tell, from across the room, that he smelled like snow and wind and cologne. He was looking at me, at my legs. I was wearing shorts and no socks. I crossed my feet underneath me and he looked up, made a face. I put them back down. He got off of his chair, touched my skin, rough from a few days of cold weather and no company, ran wet fingers up the stubble, eyes closed.

“I need this,” I said when I touched his face, pulled his hair, ran fingernails along his cheek. He winced but didn’t pull away, unbuttoned my shirt, touched ribs and navel. I laughed a little, pulled away from his cold fingers but he kissed me anyway, wet lips to dry lips. His mouth was warm. We moved to the bedroom and towed him off, still in silence and we began kissing again. He didn’t complaining when I removed my shirt and his pants. He didn’t complain when I eventually pulled away before everything had been removed. He said nothing when I pulled away while there will still fabrics and barriers between us, kissed his eyelids, one kiss above each closed eye, and fell asleep close to him.

It is January, a year after that January and I really don’t know if he slept very well. I know that it was important for me to fall asleep first. It is a different January and I want him to know that even though I stopped him short, even though I took him with to leave him at the river a few months later, that I needed him to come over that night, to try to write his own ending to that mild but uninhabitable January.
96. forgiveness for such failures is mandatory
97. resentment for such failures is mandatory
98. I am human and God is not
99. protest is a necessity for improvement
00. self-improvement must happen before anything else can

It is a better January as I finish the list for William, more like the April when I left him and Trevor to fend for themselves by the beginning of a different river than the river that moves North and is threatening their January this year in Grand Forks. It is January and I have been here and alive for almost a year since I drove myself home when I finish the letter and send it those eight hundred miles North over a phone line to William and my own city. It is January and as I see the message sent box appear on my computer screen, part of myself sent back to that city, I know that my hands are still on the wheel and that my response to a post card with a buffalo and some grass on it, words from a man who was hoping last January would end with love for all of us enough to answer my empty phone call that night, is really the last few miles to a place where I can see myself again in the old pictures, in my new mirrors, in the way my hands fold over in prayer or even the way I remove clothing with my lover, reach to touch and be touched, reach as myself to close distance between fingertips and scarred, waiting skin.

It is January and I, after I see that me letter has been sent and have thrown William’s card in the garbage, shut down my computer and turn the television off before the news comes on to go outside without a jacket.
"I bet he wishes he could leave a tape runnin'," Patches says as soon as William has left.

"Yeah," I say looking at Patches in the rear view. He is still in the back where he was riding before the ditch. He chews sunflower seed and spits into an empty orange juice bottle because he won't ask if it's alright to smoke in my car. He is dumber looking than William will admit, with an invasive forehead and a thick nose, his face looks undercooked. He shrugs, clicks his tongue, and raises an eyebrow before he looks outside. Watching him stare into the snow and wind, horizontal pushes and drifts that already, less than a minute out of the car, block William from sight, I think it must be his eyes that William was talking about when he said that Patches looks like he doesn't need to sleep or eat to know more than you do. Patches doesn't blink as he spits another seed, keeps his eyes trained against the layers and layers of white that move outside of the car.

"I bet he wishes he had some snow dogs," Patches says.

"He's gonna be fine," I say, "be back with some help in no time."

"No time?" he asks. "We're talkin' the same William Lewis?"

"Yeah," I say, "I trust him."

"Oh," Patches says, "I trust him too. Got nothin' to do with trust. Just that weird shit happens to that boy. Probably run into a sandstorm, get hit by a random hippo or somethin'."

"Lots of both of those out here tonight," I say.

"My point, Candy," he says, "weird shit."

"We shouldn't have sent him," I say.

"Why not," he says, "he'll come back with a story."

"Even if nothing happens," I say.

"You know him well," he says. "Uh... guys, I uh... ran into this amazing patch of ice and snow on the side of the road and it got me thinking about..."

"...about blame and my claim on it," I say and Patches laughs hard enough to choke on his seeds.
"Blame indeed," he says.

"Maybe we shouldn’t have sent him," I say.

"Maybe," he says. "Seeds?"

"Sure," I say. I take a small handful, remove the shell with my fingers before I put a seed in my mouth. We’re about two and a half miles outside of Crookston, wrapped under emergency blankets with three candles lit in Foldgers cans and one window cracked for enough oxygen. I can hear the wind buzz outside, a slow needle on a fast record. Patches has some frostbite around his eyes and fingers from trying to push us out before William started walking, some blood on his large forehead and dried in his chin’ length hair from when we hit the ditch. He puts the seed bottle down to rub his hands together above a candle. We are two and a half miles past the town he and William Lewis grew up in, a half hour from the town where William Lewis and I live. Patches’ oldest friend, my newest, is walking the shoulder back into town with two candy bars, my gloves, six cigarettes and the full kick of the wind.

"Patches has gotta be here," William told me three weeks ago, a ground hog’s day with no shadow. "He’s gotta be here, but his truck is wasted. We gotta get him."

William’s car, a rusted-out and soon to be river-drunk brown Buick, hadn’t left his sixth street back yard since a few months before MacArthur hitched his way to Grand Forks from the cities, hadn’t driven much more than a few emergency trips to get William to campus faster than the busses since before April of last year when Elizabeth left town. We knew the Buick wouldn’t make it the three hundred miles of snowbound highway to get Patches, or at least that it wouldn’t get us all back to North Dakota.

"Patches needs to be gotten," MacArthur said when we asked him to come with. "Patches is the key. But I am done with leaving town for a while," he said. "Patchey’s going to have to navigate the tundra without me," he said. "This black nomad is staying put in G.F. ‘till we get our asses kicked out."

"May not take that long," Winchester said.

"May not," William said.

"I’ll wait for the cops and the river, thanks," Mac said.
"I'll do it," I said that afternoon, three weeks and two blizzards ago. "This Patches gentleman's gotta be some cat."

"Patches is a swell man," Mac said. "You won't regret it."

"He doesn't regret anything," William said.

"I don't know about that," I said.

Even after the three weeks we had to plan and pack safety blankets and emergency rations for the trip to St. Peter, I wasn't sure about taking the new Escort I bought with loans six months after Elizabeth took our Honda back to Missouri. I wasn't sure, even as I wound our way through downtown Grand Forks, stopping for my coffee and cigarettes for William. I have always been a good driver, spent time with bumper to bumper in Denver and Minneapolis, have always gotten around without incident, but this winter there have been eight storms that closed I-29 South to Fargo and nine that have shut down the northbound to Canada, there have been cars and semis lining the ditches backwards or flipped over every time I have taken Highway Two with Grace to spend a weekend in Bemidji at her parents, and there have been the three students from the university left dead on icy pavement for so long, the Herald has told us, their blood was frozen solid in the time, a few days, it took for snow and cold wind to subside enough so that our plows, the best plows in the country, could do their work and rescue and clean up crews could finally get to the scene and remove stiff, frozen bodies from the roadside. This winter, the best driver is the worst driver. This winter, even with the Herald predicting flood in less than a month, even with all of us sick of the city, even for William's first brother not bound by blood, I wasn't sure we should be going anywhere.

"The car's not paid for," I said when William got into the car, a smoke and a few minutes later than I did, outside of Big Cigs. His eyes were bloodshot from wind-sting and I could barely smell the stink in his brown, blown hair. His skin was pink and tight, the bones in his face showing through as if a camera lens had been twisted into too sharp a focus, made him look brittle and near death. "If something happens," I said, "my insurance goes crazy."

"I know, brother," he said slowly, ghost-like with his skin so cold and tight, "but it's gotta get done."
"I know, Will," I said. "The book is important, your experiment is important, and the book needs your man. I'm just saying."

"Book's not important enough for this," William said before he started coughing and wiped snot from his thawing nose with a sweatshirt sleeve. "I'm not making you drive for the book."

"What?"

"You've met him but you haven't talked. I just want you to know him, vice versa. Crookston brother meets Grand Forks brother. We'll make a mean triangle," he said, "and I don't know how much longer I'll be in Grand Forks. Or you will. The book is an excuse for this meeting," he said as he rubbed his eyes from the passengers seat. "If my goal of the book is to figure this place and these years out, what all this means, then this meeting has gotta happen," he said. "And I'm runnin' out of time."

"Say no more," I said.

"Besides," he said, scratching his chin. He let out a quick, amputated laugh. "The weather's clear. Right?"

"Go-go weather channel," I said as I took a left onto Demers and headed to the highway. "If cable TV says we're alright, we're alright."

"Exactly," he said. "Technology will protect us."

"Yeah, I said. "Would Patches buy that?"

"No," William said, "but he'd be driving me anyway, just like you, your Graciousness."

"What I thought," I said. "Besides, my brother, if we want to talk technicalities..."

"We no need technicalities..."

"Weather channel said a storm'll blow in day after tomorrow at the latest."

"How like technology," he said, "your savior today..."

"Your Spartacus later on."

"Way it goes."

"Poetic and sad," I said.

"Look at this way," William said, "we crash you can get another color."
"Super," I said.

"Probably should throw ourselves into a tree right now."

"That's the spirit," I said as I hit the last forty-mile-an-hour curve before the highway, a slippery but gentle arc past Cash's honey, the beet plant, the potato plant, and other business that smell enough to be kept out of town, before picking up speed as I got on Two and the road went to four lanes. I told William when he asked me to drive that I got to pick the route and he consented though everybody knows this road is not the fastest way to St. Peter.

"This is my fault," I say as Patches looks outside. I turn the engine back on and roll another window down a few inches though we should be okay since we kicked snow away from the tailpipe before William left.

"No it's not," he says. "It's a blizzard, man. I'd have gone ditchbound in Bemidji. We'd be stuck next to that Paul Bunyan statue," he says.

"Not what I meant," I say. "We shouldn't have taken this road."

"Any road up here is gonna suck as much weenie today," he says.

"Yeah," I say, rotating so I can see him in the back seat. "Still, me and this road have a strange relationship."

"We talkin' karma?"

"History," I say. "I think."

"Your girlfriend lives in Bemidji, right?"

"Yeah."

"Doesn't sound like much of a curse."

"Her parents live in Bemidji."

"I take it all back," he says, "gotta be a long, long highway for ya, my friend."

"And there's more," I say. He looks at me without moving his mouth and I stop talking. William never waits for me to say anything. I look away, play with my dangling key chain, only use the mirror to watch him. "I don't know what William's told you about my marriage."
"That it didn't work out."

"A fair description," I say.

"That he was bothered by the whole thing," he says, "involved somehow."

"You want to know more?"

"I don't know," he says, "will Louie be pissed that we didn't just bullshit while he was gone?"

"She left me in Bemidji."

"Left you?"

"Me and Will," I say. "With no way back to Grand Forks."

"You and Louie?"

"Yeah."

"Stranded?"

"Yeah."

"Alone and together?"

"Yeah."

"You poor, poor man," he says and smiles. "Why Bemidji?"

"Camping."

"Itasca?"

"Yeah," I say.

"Itasca's beautiful," he says.

"Yeah," I say. "She left us there right after we set the tent up."

"Irony," Patches says looking at me squarely. His jaw is sharp and his eyes are tight and focused. He has some blood on his cheek but his hands are not shaking as he looks at me. "That's gotta mess with you," he says.

"Yeah," I say.

"Gotta make it tough," he says, "to visit your new honey's hometown. Friends' hometowns are tough enough without somethin' like that," he says.
"How do you mean?"

"You can never," he says, "no matter how much you have in common with someone, love or hate their hometown as much as they do."

"I don't know," I say, "I've never really had much of a hometown."

"My experience," Patches says. "Go to someone else's high school and you don't see ghosts, remember who shut what locker doors, see the old faces in the mirror in the second floor bathroom. You just smell disinfectant. Did Louie take you around Crookston?"

"A little," I say. "We spent a few afternoons in town a few months ago, the week his parents were moving to K.C."

"He took you places, right?"

"A park," I say, "near his house. The dam and a bridge. A few other places."

"And they were just places for you," he says, "and you're an empathetic guy, right?"

"Sure," I say. "And they were just places."

"And they were just places," he says, "the park had a spider made of metal, there was a cool mist blowing off of the dam, you had never followed a construction ladder below a bridge before. But things were just things. Places filled with or constructed from materials. The sun was the same as anywhere else."

"I guess."

"Not for Louie," he says. "When you look at something in your hometown, you don't see it as a thing, not just a thing, not until it changes and they put up a new drug store or something. New buildings are just buildings. Louie was tryin' to show you ghosts. You saw things, buildings, materials, some bricks and metal, a lot of sky like any other sky. That's the thing about a hometown. Even I don't see the same ghosts as Louie, not after enough time, 'specially not after we been away for a while. Long enough and we end up with essentially different hometowns."

"Makes sense," I say.

"Really?"

"Yeah," I say.
"Yer an easier crowd than Louie," he says.

"Just distracted." I say and the wind picks up a bit and rattles the window in its casing. I can see our breath in the air, even as we are loosing daylight. I can see Patches in the back seat with his candle is starting to shake a little. His face is loosing color.

"So anyway," he says, "Bemidji's gotta be rough for ya."

"Yeah," I say.

"You got ghosts of yer own," he says, "can't see hers, she's probably got friends there too... maybe this is an awkward time to talk about obligatory friend of a friend conversations..."

"Nah," I say.

"Plus her parents live there," he says. "I wouldn't go. Though Itasca's beautiful."

"Yeah," I say. "I still think so. Even with Elizabeth's ghost, if you want to call it that."

I wait for him to say I'm sorry, to say that sucks or something, have been waiting the whole time for him to show sympathy but I realize he isn't going to. He waits for me to say more and his eyes, even with just a candle, even with his jaw shaking, are exactly as William, before we left town, described them.

"So anyway," I say, "this road and I have some history."

"I guess," he says. He shrugs when I turn back to look at him. "though surely she'd already left before you went camping."

I don't say anything for a while, stick the last few seeds in my hand into my mouth, chew them in their shells. He shrugs again.

"Somethin' like that," I say.

"So Two," he says, "even Bemidji isn't like an impetus for that stuff. The place didn't bring the change, just hosted it. Bemidji, this road," he says, "they just hold a lot of important ghost for you. The road's got no malevolence for ya. It's not a curse."

He is making full eye contact, using a soft voice and I am confused. I am loosing the feeling in my left foot. I watch his face, a small smile, flicker.

"This ditch is not your fault," he says.
This winter I have taken Two to Bemidji from Grand Forks and back in as bad weather without sliding off. This winter I have seen that Grace’s parents own a big wooden house just outside of Bemidji, a dog and some horses. This winter I have been inside her parents well-heated house and made conversation with her mom and dad, good stubborn northerners with warm blood and thick skin on their fingertips. This winter, Grace and I have been on this road, driven to her parents, as many times as possible because they are squeamish about my divorce. This winter, for her parents, I learned how to ski and spent six hours at Buena Vista, a small hill of a mountain, taking the easiest ways down and struggling to use the snowplow Grace showed me to keep my speed in check. This winter, it has been hard to keep from moving too fast. This winter Grace has helped, no questions about Elizabeth until I am ready, she said, and I have started to be able to talk without guilty nausea. Still when I have talked to her I have been snowplowing, words splayed out like skis wedged to reduce inertia, to fight gravity, to keep a body in control. It is easier to let go, I said to her parents, when they took us to Buena Vista. It is easier to let my body fall down the mountain in one smooth, trusting rush. It is easier to pray than meditate, I said.

This winter when I read about the Edgar Clearwater, a sophomore in occupational therapy from a res. near Bemidji, who tried to make it across Grand Forks on foot after a party and took shelter in an abandoned van before falling asleep freezing to death, I tried to write a monologue about freezing to death. I didn’t write a play because there is something solitary and isolated about the cold and a monologue without a play is like that. This winter, I have always been out of context. This winter, even with Grace, I have given a lot of thought to the strange ropes that break when everything falls apart. This winter, storm after storm that probably, even when we hit sixteen feet of accumulated snow and three full months of sub-zero, won’t do as much damage as the warmer sun when April comes, I have thought about the way the thaw that brings blood back to the skin also brings pain. This winter, I have assumed, even as cold as its been on mornings my car sputters to life, was less painful than the melt will be. This winter, in my monologue, in these first few months of a new life with Grace, I have thought that it hurts more to come back alive than it does to die. This winter, I have thought,
even when I had to walk against the wind between buildings on campus without subterranean tunnels, would be better than whatever lay behind it, would serve us well to last as long as possible. This winter, I have thought, written down in my monologue, that frozen is better than live flesh, the quick, that can throb with the gentlest of scrapes.

This winter has not prepared me for the thirty minutes, alone in this winter-stuck car with Patches, that William has been gone. My teeth are starting a slow rattle and I have made the choice to risk it with the windows closed for a while. We are saving the chocolate bars. My face, especially the bones in my ears, hurt dentist-drill deep. My teeth ache, my body hurts like the week after surgery. I rub my hands and they seem made of clean, cold glass, no meat at all. I watch Patches shake behind me, even with the blanket wrapped up to his neck. I quick step my boots against the carpet floor of my car, try to stomp the blood going in my legs. It worked a while ago, but blood has slowed and every time my feet touch down now the act of restarting the blood rhythm seems to knock a few toes loose to rattle in my shoe like discarded baby teeth. The car has been off again for ten minutes and I can't really remember how much gas we have left. My wrists hurt like fever cramps but drier, a harsh grind, every time I move my hands. My scalp is pulled too tight so even the roots of my hair hurt. It is getting hard to swallow and our plastic bottles of water, even after we taped them to the heat vents, are getting too cold to drink without coughing. This winter, I have thought that freezing was a sterile kind of pain, easy and slow like dreaming. We have been alone for less than an hour, have candles and blankets, the occasional heat from the engine, conversation and shelter from the wind, and I hurt like hell.

I am hoping William found somebody before he had to walk all the way back to the gas station we should have filled up at. I am hoping the Super Pumper is still open, that William won't have to go even a few more blocks to the Americana Inn where we should have stayed. I am hoping William is getting into a well heated van, maybe the driver has some coffee for him in a thermos, to return for us.

I look at Patches. He is no less worried than me, a little more contemplative perhaps. Certainly no warmer. I try to think of something to say, get my mouth to move to see if my vocal chords will snap, try to find something to talk about that has nothing to do with snowfall or wind-chill or the two and a half miles back
to a hometown that isn't mine that William is walking, a hometown that Patches has driven safely past a
thousand times in gentler days. But freeze is deeper than skin and the mind gets stuck in frozen circles, can't
push too fast away from a growing kind of cognition. Florida is a myth, I think. I decide I to talk, no matter
what I say.

"Did you ever meet Elizabeth?"

"I think so," Patches says, his voice bending a little in the vowels, "like a year ago when some of us
were playing Chinese Checkers at the coffee shop."

"Right," I say. "You met most of William's Grand Forks friends?"

"In passing," Patches says. "I warned y'all away from that man but nobody listened."

"You warned me?"

"Sure did," he says. He shudders as he laughs. "I said he was pretty harmless but only if you don't
listen to a word he says."

"Oh no," I say. "Can't say I've resisted."

"Me neither," Patches says laughing. "Reason we're in a ditch."

"Maybe," I say.

"How else would it happen?" he asks. "You and me. we seem to be fine, upstanding citizens, hardly
know each other. How else we end up in forty below date with a snow bank tuxedo?"

"William thinks we're linked," I say though I am laughing the same breath-spurt laughter as Patches.

"Yeah," Patches says, "through him."

"He says more than that," I say. "He says Dharma."

"Dharma," Patches says. "What the hell. His latest phase is Dharma?"

"Yeah," I say.

"What a flake," Patches says.

"Yeah," I say.

"I can see him saying it," Patches says, "he'd like squint one eye to show that he knows he's a little
whacked, for the sake of credibility, and then say it in a low voice. Dharma. God."
“You know him well,” I say.

“Yeah,” Patches says, “he did the same thing growing up. I never let him realize we were making the words up then.”

“What a flake,” I say.

“What do you think he’s at?”

“I don’t know, brother,” I say. The word is warm. “Any ideas, Brother?”

“If he picked tonight to finally hitch a ride with the aliens,” he says, “I’m gonna be pissed.”

“Yeah,” I say. I turn the car back on, check the candles again, count the ones I put on William’s seat after he left. We still have two new candles, and one of the ones burning is pretty fresh. With the heater on, as soon as we feel warm air come out of the vent, Patches and I know the rhythm and have been blowing the lit candles out. I stop him before he blows them out this time. “Only the big one goes out. Let’s spend the two that are almost dead.”

“We’ll spoil ourselves,” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. He is laughing in sputters, a dry wheeze that coughs up in an uneven rhythm and I am smiling with the warmest corner of my mouth, letting my hands burrow deep in my coat pockets, to laugh with him. “Already spoiled, I think.”

“Sure are, brother,” he says.

“Think I’ll take a dip in the Jacuzzi later,” I say.

This winter we have made up jokes about the flood that is coming. What you gonna do for spring break? Swimming lessons. What did they tell you when you graduated from college? They told me to get out of town. What is the speed limit on Demers avenue? You’re not allowed to go faster than you can row. What is the best use for a blow up sex doll? It floats. What is the worst thing about a blow up sex doll? It doesn’t float very well. What is the worst thing about an ice cube? It melts. Not all of them were funny and none of them were funny enough to find a nerve deeper than reflex but we, on more than one occasion this winter, have
stayed at the bar an extra hour to make them up, to tell them, to laugh so hard the muscles around our eyes stung from fighting the snow-glare of the next morning’s drive back to campus.

“So, Candy,” Patches asks when his face has gone flat again, we have shut the car off and the laughter has been pulled out of the air. “You believe in God.”

“Segue,” I say.

“You do,” he says blowing on his hands. “I know you do.”

“What?” I say, “Some kind of halo or something?”

“Somethin’ like that,” he says.

“Made of ice no doubt,” I say.

“I was always freaked out by sun halos,” he says.

“Sun halos?”

“Southerner,” he says.

“I don’t know sun halos,” I say.

“Like a rainbow that surrounds the sun,” he says, “sometimes called sun dogs. Whatever.”

“Why freaked out?”

“’Cuz,” he says, “a rainbow’s made of water, left over rain. Rainbow’s make sense, are about getting through something. A sun halo happens without clouds, the clearest days. Seems divine,” he says, “a sign from God or something.”

“Why freaked out?”

“’Cuz,” he says, “Sun halo’s made of ice crystals. Means it’s really cold.”

“You like irony,” I say.

“I do now,” he says. “I was eight years old and seeing God while freezing my ass off. Didn’t see it anything other than a big old PS to the bible: don’t fuck with me, love God.”

“Bleak,” I say.
"What I thought," he says opening the last chocolate bar, snapping off a jagged chunk for me. "That's why it freaked me out."

"Understandable," I said. "No sun halos in Missouri."

"Yeah," he says, "Probably why you believe in God."

"What's with all the God talk?"

"Reason William gathered us," he says, "was to write the book about God. Seems appropriate, since we don't know where he is that we start without him."

"He's not really askin' us for a book about God."

"Yeah he is," Patches says. "Not technically, I mean he just wants to figure out what it all means, what we've been given up here in the North Western corner of Minnesota, what we've got left. But it all comes back to God."

"You're an Atheist," I say.

"Doesn't matter," he says. "Then it just all comes back to there is no God. Same thing really, same questions at least. I'm sure he told you about 'W'."

"Your play?"

"Yeah."

"He said it was cool."

"He didn't read it," Patches says. "It wasn't good at all. The first attempt at his little project and it... it just didn't work. I tried to ignore the God issue, to focus on self, or people, relationships and sanity, the mystical in the mundane. And it just didn't work."

"Not what he says."

"Louie didn't read it," he says. "I erased it. So if only by the logic that the truth would have lasted long enough for him to read, it didn't work. Gotta start with the God issue, I think."

"Reasonable," I say.

"So," he says, "from what I have gathered this trip, you believe."

"What have you gathered?"
“Well,” he says, “every time the subject comes up, or kind of comes up, you hedge and avoid it, change it before William gets going too deep. I mean William hedges too, but he hedges differently. He hedges like an Agnostic, is totally willing to bring it up but never commits to anything. You avoid. Means you believe in something and have some faith and confidence to back it up. But you hedge enough to avoid so I figure you can’t be an Atheist because I have no reason to avoid saying anything since no one is listening.”

“You’ve gathered a lot, brother.”

“Yeah.”

“So what am I?”


“How do you figure?”

“If you were down with organized religion,” he says, “William probably wouldn’t like you so much.”


“Am I right?”

“I kind of um...,” I say, “think about God the way you think about hometowns.”

“No use showing me?”

“No, there’s a use,” I say, “but you’ll see your own ghosts, right?”


“So,” he says, “how do you resolve the Christ thing?”

“The Christ thing.”

“The Jesus thing.”

“I figured.”

“How do you resolve it?”

“What do you mean resolve?”

“The Jesus thing has always been the sticking point for me,” he says. “I can’t buy God in a body.”
“That’s key for me,” I say. “Jesus, for me, is just about proof that there can be a merging of flesh and spirit.”

“That died for your sins.”

“Sure,” I say, “I guess. Sin for me is different than you might think. Sin isn’t about transgression.”

“No?”

“No.”

“What then?”

“Sloth,” I say. “On like an intellectual, thoughtful, very human plane. Not working to be better than you are.”

“Got backup?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Some scripture. I can quote?”

“I’ll pass.”

“Figured,” I say. “Mostly it just feels right, strikes a chord.”

“So sin is a lack of thought.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Or a lack of thoughtfulness.”

“So the church,” I say, “and organization sometimes is in the business of bringing about sin.”

“Sure,” I say. “Some churches at least, where the same handful of scriptures are read the same way every Sunday and quoted from memory to the point that they are no longer considered.”

“How does Jesus work in?”

“Well,” I say, “if sin is about not trying to, on every level, let the spirit of what is good get into you, Jesus is the only example of something without sin.”

“Man and the spirit attached at the hip.”

“Exactly,” I say. “And our reaction to Him is about how painful it is to let go of sloth, to let go of the comfort we get into with old beliefs.”

“Your Jesus is a liberal.”

“Sure,” I say.
"This seems pretty thought out."

"It is," I say. "Very well considered."

"So," he says and I see he is lighting all three of our remaining candles. "You're not scared right now."

"Not really," I say. "More pain than fear, and even that's going numb. Yourself?"

"Scared as hell."

"Of death?"

"I dunno."

"I mean," I say. "Atheism would prevent fear too, right?"

"Sure," he says. "In theory. Death is the end, death is inevitable. Shouldn't be scary."

"Maybe you're not an Atheist."

"Maybe not," he says, "but I don't think I believe in people enough to believe in God."

"Right," I say.

"I mean," he says, "ya know?"

"Sure," I say as I see headlights in the rear view. I know Patches hasn't seen them. "But you believe in some people, that a handful of people are good and in that there is some proof of something greater. A way out."

"I dunno," he says.

"You do," I say. "I've seen it in the way you laugh."

"You trying to save my ass?"

"No," I say. "William would get really mad at me."

"Good," he says.

"I just don't believe that you don't believe in people," I say as the lights are getting closer. "That you don't believe there is something in people worth saving." I watch him, he says nothing, chews on his tongue.

"Some people."
“I probably do,” he says. “Some people.” I smile at him in the mirror and as soon as he starts to smile back at me the headlights roll over his shoulders and William gets out of a truck and taps my window with a mean grin on his face and even if Patches knows that I rigged the last part for the sake of drama, I can see he has started crying every tear his frozen ducts can muster.

This winter we have seen ice wrapped in see-through sheaths around thin branches and saplings so that trees light up with sunshine and rattle when the wind blows. I asked William if it was hoarfrost and he said no, that hoarfrost was just frost, just a quick temperature change around the dew point, that hoarfrost looked fuzzy and old, that our winter was just ice that covered every inch of bark and left trees looking translucent and made of glass, like something to be snapped and broken just above the root, like an omea. I found out later that it is also caused by rapid changes of temperature, but it takes snow instead of moisture, and a lower low, less heat than old frost. Snow needs to melt enough for water to run from the top down, coat the bark before it re-freezes. This winter I watched the trees, branches connected by ice created from sudden rising and falling of air temperatures, speeding up and slowing down of distant molecules that happened one of the first few weeks we had snow and lasted until the end of February. This winter, William snapped a twig twisted in a spun layer of clean ice off of a tree in one smooth break. I watched him rub the broken joint with glove-less hands, use friction and patience to melt enough ice so that when he stopped rubbing the cold reconnected twig to branch. The cold wielded more beautifully than any open fire, than any arc of the sharpest voltage.
Lights up to a skinny man who doesn’t have to be me even though I wrote this with myself in mind for the role. Give me, or the guy who plays me, a pack of cigarettes and some nice lighting but not a stool because I, whoever I am, am not a comedian. Hide the mic if the place is too big for whatever voice I have so I am not obviously different than anybody in the seats. And don’t do anything stupid with the backdrop like showing film footage of slow moving cars on it or painting the set to look like my old, crappy apartment because this is not a play either. If I wanted it to be a play I would have written more than one role because, as you will see, there is dialogue. Make sure, whoever I am, that I can do voices really, really well. A good monologue is never mono. But it can’t look like a play. It can look like a green room or some empty rehearsal space and I can have a costume that looks like I was in a play, once part of a cast, like I have the wrong address and should really be doing Our Town at the Richmond Center. But the lights come up to just me, confused and skinny old me. Make sure, if you cast some other Joe, that his facial hair is really cool.

Ya ask me, the books, they’re wrong. Maybe even all of ‘em. Even if they’re right, you know? Maybe it’s just me, some kind of fear of the written word or something, the reason I am saying this, you know, out loud. But I mean it. If you write it down it’ll be there a long time, long enough for some shmuck, maybe even a tall, skinny, kind of devilish looking guy to come along...

(beat)

You write it down some one’ll come along and say you got it wrong, say yer full of crap. Rule one, never write it down. The books are wrong.

(beat)

The books, started in newspaper stories, stories written in books... texts, texts that became history, a history that will be memorized by gap-toothed North Dakotan children with thermal gloves they have to hook together to keep from leaving in the coatroom-- they will loose their gloves, hats
even, in the middle of a forty below winter, but they will not forget their history because it, it is written down. The books say that Grand Forks started flooding in April. Children, even before their teeth get straightened out by braces and rubber bands, they will remember April. Because it makes sense. Ice melts, even in North Dakota, in April. At least most of it. William, one of my roommates when I lived there, his senior prom had snow on the ground first week of May, so not always. But most times the winter ends in April. And it's true that year, you can look it up, that it was April when water shut down every bridge over the Red. So the books say the flood started in April. The books are wrong.

The flood, as I remember it, started in February, on a Friday. William, no timing that man, was hosting a gathering, gonna write it all down, he said, what it all means up here, what Crookston, he went to high school in Crookston, and Grand Forks mean. He said that last word with about nineteen syllables, what my cities mean, like the word had gravity or something. His first mistake was trying to get everybody together in February. He had to drive across Minnesota to get Patches, one of his friends, he called us scribes. He and Candy Apple Dobbs had to- for the record, Winchester is my real name, for a hunting rifle my Mom says. Want to be clear that unlike most of them, Willy didn't name me.

Anyway, he and Dobbs had to drive through some shit weather cuz Willy had to get every voice that could help, decipher, he said, the north. Decipher the north. Unearth, he said, excavate and write it all down he said. Another mistake. He was gonna try to write it down.

But it sounded alright, there'd be weed and drink he said so I decided to be nice, since we had people coming over, I decided I'd clean the place up while he and Dobbsy were gone, that I would rearrange the furniture and clean out the fridge. Simple enough, I thought. But we, that winter, my god, we had enough power outages that that fridge... that
fridge was ugly. The inside. The outside was fine, a nice beige. It was
the inside I was afraid of and for good reason, not just the stink and
normal fridgey nastiness. There was this, William or Mac, my other
roommate, another Crookston guy, one of them must have left a knife in this
plate, this plate of green... green turkey from Thanksgiving.

(beat)

In February, when I was getting the place ready for William's little party,
just being nice I thought, rearrange the furniture, clean out the fridge, I
cut myself open from this knife on a plate of green turkey. I called
Michelle cuz I knew she was home, probably as stoned as I was, figured
she'd think it was funny and she did, you know. I mean, a knife poking me
deadly from the fridge. Who leaves a knife in the fridge? So we were
laughing over the phone and I tried stop the blood, tried to wash all the
rot away cuz it stunk and I didn't want barf with my thumb ripped open like
that. So I was standing there, there at the sink, with Mic on the phone
and I was getting light headed and trying to dab green strings of turkey
out of this gash in my thumb. Turkey, at least green turkey, it doesn't
really dab per se, kind of clings and sticks. I mean I was still laughing
but yeah, yeah it was nasty. And Mic, Mic was laughing too but she was,
she was pretty grossed about the turkey, she said I'd die if I didn't wash
the demon bird out, that's what she said, she says yah, she was from Tolna,
they see it with a really long o, they say To-lna Nortdikota. Ya, she
says, you better wash that demon bird out there. She told me to run it
under water, which, let me tell you, I know now it's a bad idea to run
water on ripped up thumb like that. Moving water fucks up the clot, right?

(beat)

Motion leaves no time to heal. I mean I thought about it before I
did it. But I was stoned, figured no motion equals no blood. So I ran
water cuz I figured shit, we're in North Dakota, no motion, even molecules,
molecules are slow, slow animals in North Dakota, 'specially in February. So I ran water on it cuz I figured nothing moved fast enough to bleed to death in North Dakota.

(beat)

I bled. I bled a lot. Should have taken it out of the tap but there was still green turkey it, like clinging to the meat of my thumb you know, I couldn't leave turkey, green turkey, in my thumb so I kept washing it and I bled. I passed out. Ended up in the emergency room. I mean it wasn't that serious, just my thumb, but we had gotten dumped on again and the roads were slick and the temperature was low enough that the clinic was closed so Mic had to take my high, skinny ass to the emergency room. We didn't tell them about running water on it. They gave me stitches. And aspirin. Taped me up so I wouldn't move it, left me with a bandage on my thumb for the party, this big swab of cotton wrap you know, the clumsy hit man bandage from TV. But they let me go home so I could finish cleaning the place up. Mic did the fridge, left me with the furniture.

You ever try to move a couch without being able to bend your thumb? Of course I, I didn't have to move the couch but we had company coming and my god, my god the place, we hadn't had a party in while so it was, it was a mess. So I dragged that sorry ass love seat, William liked the love seat, dragged that thing around corner from to corner. I swear to god that room has thirty seven corners. Every time I got the couch to look okay, keep the room's sense of flow, unity, the texture of the room to feel alright, every time the couch was okay, the entertainment center looked all wrong, awkward and exposed as hell. Like it was the room's naked balls. So I had to move the couch again. Eventually I gave up on the couch and had to move, pain in the ass, the entertainment center which meant that, my god the boy did some stupid shit, I had to deal with his tangled ass wiring. That's tangled-ass wiring, not tangled ass-wiring. Bit by bit I
took and untwisted and moved, all of this with my thumb about five inches around throbbing like a ripe kiwi, every electronic device we had in the house. Then I had to climb up on the entertainment center, it wasn't sturdy so I had to move the couch again, over so I could get on top of it to get all of our crap down. Yeah, we probably shouldn't have put so much crap on the top of the entertainment center but, you know, boys. Flat space, William said when we decorated, let's put stuff up there. Stupid. His Star Wars toys mainly. A couple of doll heads, yeah doll heads.

(beat)

My mom used to work at this mail order place where you'd send like a Polaroid of your kid's head, a couple different angles, one smiling, one not, one with eyes opened, one closed, they had a list of poses that you would take pictures of. And they would custom make and mold out of plastic these, these doll heads. She, I guess, had a couple of parents never picked up their order so she gave 'em to me. Willy and Mac and me, we had three doll heads, my god the eyes on those things were so clear, scary, three severed heads that matched, somewhere in Denver probably, three kids that had grown into teenagers, had no idea I decorated the living room with their heads. Two on the entertainment center and one impaled on a lamp so it lit up from the inside. Crazy to think about, you know? I mean, same logic, any of you, any of anyone, could have my head hanging from a piece of string in your parlor.

Connection is weird like that. You never know who's selling you, who's buying. You hang out, have a beer or two with someone, suddenly they have a story. You have enough beers, live with someone during something like a flood, make them cut their thumb up and drag your furniture around so you can host a party where people are, my god, coming from all over to help you write, and someone ends up with a lot of stories. Yer head. Weighed out so it sits right and proper on the plastic doll neck. Your
head that they can hang up, show to other folks while they're taking their
next measurements. I have William's head in my trunk, could show you every
blemish, every pock mark if I wanted to.

(beat)
Rule number two, you write it down you can't deny. William says I told
you, showed you his head, and I say no I didn't. A book, 'sides being
wrong, a book will get you in trouble. Because it's wrong, because their
head and how they see their head..., two different heads. You write it down
you can't deny. They can cite page numbers, say this freckle, this
freckle's wrong. Books are always wrong.

(beat)
So I got the Star Wars toys, doll heads and this wind up sex thing that,
that thrusted, some other stuff, got like five thumb-less armfuls off of
the entertainment center so I could finally move it around and I, well
first I nearly tipped it over, dropped it, I mean I only had one thumb.
Nearly squashed myself. Then, I finally got it to drag on the carpet with
only a little bit of a wobble, and I got this huge sliver. About three
quarters of inch. Jammed into my other thumb. I tried to pull it out and
it snapped, left like a log under the skin. I asked Mic to bring a knife
in from the kitchen for surgery. She asks if I want one without green
turkey on it. So we wrap that thumb too. After that she, she finally
helped with the furniture.

(beat)
We smoked some more grass and waited. Got done cleaning around four or
five. And waited. They didn't get there till Saturday morning. Got stuck
somewhere between Crookston and Grand Forks, forty below and wind and shit.
Almost died, they said. Smoke some grass, I said and they did. Willy
didn't say anything about the furniture. Ah, he says, d'ja do something to
your thumbs?
The flood, when we gonna get to the flood. I said flood, said that the flood started on Friday and I been talking about my thumbs. Not that you can prove it. Ya ask me and I'll say I been talkin' flood the whole time.

You didn't live in Grand Forks, saw the flood on the news, you think a flood is about water swimming up to the roads, getting in the shop windows, carrying the steps to our house four blocks down sixth street. No. A flood is about moving furniture. Cleaning a fridge. Green turkey and blood that don't clot. A flood is about preparation. Sandbagging. The actual flood is pretty short, water rises and it goes away. Some stuff is ruined. Some stuff is not. Some stuff that is ruined lies on top of some stuff that is not and you have to dig. But the water part is short. The real flood is preparation, preparation and what comes after. You get snow, you suffer for a while and you know its gonna melt so you start draggin' sand out to the river. And it floods anyway. I talk about the way, that Friday, Mic smoked her weed with a crackle and pop from her pipe and eventually I can't help but tell ya that she lost the pipe, that it floated away, probably in the Hudson Bay now, that she left it somewhere and lost it when we were forced out of town. The flood started when she used it, not just when it was lost.

Even I'm wrong. The flood, for me, started when I decided to move to Grand Forks, decided, sitting in Denver, to go to UND. The flood started when they poured concrete next to a river, my god a river that flows north, flows up to like ice chunks and frozen shit. Of course it's gonna flood.

But Willy, he'd tell ya that it started when everyone he cared about up there came together and tried to figure it out, parse sentences, write it
down. He’d tell ya that getting us all together, seeing his two cities at the same time, that that started it, that you can’t loose something until you get a good look at it. And he gotta a good look at his two cities that night, all of us, scribes he called us, were there. Accept for Liz, Dobbs’ ex-wife, she was in Missouri and had sent an E-mail, this list of things about God, to help us, to protect us. She and God, they’re tight.

So she didn’t come. And Jake, William’s brother the cave man, I met him a few times, much cooler than Willy, really tall, six-six, six-seven. Tall. Orange hair. Cute. He couldn’t come either, was in the middle of North Dakota, William said, went to see a girl. Book of God, Patches said, or see a girl. Jake, Dobbs said, Jake chose wisely.

(beat)

But the rest of us, yeah, the rest of us made it there. And the place was clean, a new roll of toilet paper. Patches, my god that kid has a thick nose, and Dobbs. Dobbs was as calm as ever, had brought Grace with him. Andy Vincent, Somebody Robbins, and Bob Something, guys I didn’t know from Crookston. MacArthur, Michelle, Allison Jenson, The Czar, Griswell, they all came over. So there were a lot of us. William had ten blank tapes, ten of them, so we wouldn’t loose anything to bad stenography. And we had weed, two bongs, some Vodka, some squirt if we were too drunk to get work done, a lot of pretzels. I had condoms if it was boring. We were prepared. What I’m talkin’ about. A flood is preparation, expectation. We were all expecting it, trying to take notes before it hit.

(beat)

So Willy, how can I explain this if you don’t know a William Lewis. I mean, I’m not a stupid guy, was in the first year of my master’s degree at UND when the flood hit. I’m not dumb. I think a lot, sure. But Willy, most of his friends, they think weird. Not smarter, hell no. But its a lot like listening to a sermon in Latin. Not even about big words, they’re
not that smart. I mean, if you sit and focus on a syllable, on a couple of sounds at a time, you hear words and you know them. But words have nothing to do with it. Sounds, incantations, rhythms. Listening to them argue, which my god I had done enough of and so why, why did agree to clean for this party, listening to them argue was like watching a ritual, something rehearsed. They all seemed to know when to moan and writhe, even in intellectual dictions it was moaning and writhing, like the whole thing was in some dead, holy language and you weren’t even sure if they understood exactly what was being said, only that Patches knew when to roll his eyes, when to speak in tongues, that the Czar and Dobbs knew when to let their voices roll around in thick liquid vowels. I mean, most of the time I was okay with it, could let myself watch and occasionally my mouth would move possessed and they would snake dance for me. But most of the time it was Latin and my words, all consonants, seemed labored and too short to bother with. So I had seen it before. But we had never done it with everybody. (beat)

After we said hi and chatted a little, a couple of us ate some bagels. We had a chance to drink and smoke enough to start before Willy put the first tape in and hit record. One of us, I think it was Robbins, says so what exactly are we doing and Willy stopped the tape, rewound, said that we knew what we had to do, that it needed to start right. He hit record again and Robbins asks so how do we start, and Willy reached for the stop button again but Patches stopped him. Start with God, he says and Mac says we don’t believe in God and Dobbs and Grace, a couple of others, they says speak for yourself Mac. So Mac says well Patches doesn’t and Patches says yeah, probably not, so fine, start with no God and I say in the beginning Nogod looked around and somebody says hey Winch ain’t you Mormon and I says nah, my Mom’s Mormon and they laugh and I says that I probably bought a hot bus ticket with that and Patches says that’s it, we’re damned,
we know everything. So I asked what it meant that our city was going to flood and they all, at least three of them in unison said that we had been wicked. And we laughed like hell.

(beat)

It went like that for a while. A long while, my god, not what Willy wanted but I had enough to drink and smoke that it was, it was amusing. Willy got impatient so he finally says alright, I got the first line. Earthlings are feeble, he says, and Kobbins says who you callin' feeble and Willy says fine, I'm feeble. We agreed to that. Not much more before Willy had to change tapes. Ninety minutes and we agreed that he was feeble. Still, he held his hands in the air to shush us while he was changing tapes, to get us to save our words, like we had been on the verge.

(beat)

It was the third tape, I think, before we got on a roll. Patches got us started by bringing up stop signs in Europe. He said they didn't have words, that they were just colors and shapes and I think most of us didn't believe him but we hadn't been there and it was interesting. He said that if you just have a shape, a sign means whatever the majority of people do with it. If more people speed up and mow down peds, he says, then the sign means speed up. Shifts with time. I had smoked enough weed that I thought that was pretty trippy, I was like yeah, that's alright. Willy's eyes lit up and Dobbs says that's great but how do you control and Patchey says you don't, you trust that you think with good judgment, trust that everyone else who sees a blue square will do the same and Dobbs says that's way too random and Patches says at least it admits it and Willy says that's what happens with words anyway, even written down, he says, they shift, they morph. Dobbs, he hit the bong for the first time I had ever seen him then, said no, that even when words shift, you still have more control, more
consensus, that if chicken means toaster you will figure it out soon enough. And we nodded, said hmm.

(beat)

Stuff like that but longer, a couple of arguments about semantics, Patches occasionally yelling I'm right and giving somebody five. I don't know, Willy's probably got the tapes still. Ask him.

(beat)

But it did, it started to work and I was proud of Willy for getting it all together and he was proud of us, you could see it the way he smoked a cigarette without talking for a few minutes, which is rare, a lot of words in that Willy, and he would just, a few minutes a time, smoke and listen, nodding.

(beat)

It was probably tape six, seven maybe, when the phone rang. Willy took the cordless into our clean kitchen and Patches said something about signs being the key again and Kobbins says you and signs and Dobbs said that Patches was right, even if his stop signs were a stupid idea, that math functioned on signs, greater than, less than, whatever, and Patches says yeah, that's what I mean, and Grace said so like by signs you mean proof or an indication, and Dobbs said no, just something to tell you what do with meaning and Patches yeah, but still about interpretation, just like the stop signs, that majority rules, decides if you add or subtract, or even divide and I was really confused. But a few of them were celebrating our first victory, the ones who knew Latin doubt.

(beat)

So, some of were cheering and jumping about like idiot monkeys when Willy came back in without the phone, we asked him what he thought and he said my brother's dead.

(beat)
What do you say to that. Jesus, I mean, Jesus. The tape was rolling and everybody was there and he was serious. Jesus, we said. I mean Jesus. William said he was told you never hit a character with a bus to advance the plot. We didn’t say anything. He said, never hit a character with a bus and we didn’t know what he was talking about. He said car wreck and ice. He said he was going to go upstairs, that he was really confused, needed sober air. And we didn’t say anything. The tape, I’m sure, caught the sounds of him going.

(beat)

If you ask him, that was when the flood hit, that was when his city was lost, that in many ways he didn’t come back down. He would talk to us later, tell us that Jake had been driving a friend’s truck and that when he hit a semi the back hatch popped open and Jake’s body, six foot six or something, a big body, was sucked out of the back and he landed, lengthwise, under a semi tire, that it was quick, that it split his big wrestler’s body lengthwise. That when his brother landed lengthwise that the river swelled and he was swallowed and taken out of his two cities.

I say the truth is on the tape, that when he went upstairs we left it on, that the tape that was meant to record the truth got everything it needed, our silence, before it shut off. That the tape didn’t get the sounds of us going home, some of us alone, some of us with another person, didn’t get that Mac and Me were already home. That the truth ran out before we split. That the truth was that William should have stayed downstairs, with the rest of us, to fill each and every Goddamn tape with all the fucking noise he could. The tape says the truth is that the only one of us who left the room was him.

(beat)

I don’t know.

(beat)
I mean, I probably stayed too long, almost two years in Grand Forks after the water had drained. But it did, it went back to being just a river. And even when it wasn't just a river, it still was my city, ya know. It was my city. I was the guy on the news.

(beat)

William's window went onto the roof and we, when he lived there, we would smoke cigarettes and lie on the shingles so that the grit and friction seemed to hold us there, like all the gravity in the world couldn't rip my away from those brown and black tiles. I took a bottle of Vodka up there when the house was surrounded with water. I took a bottle up there and there is footage of a helicopter coming in to pick me up, of them having to force my skinny, drunk ass up a swaying rope ladder to leave, to give the city over to the river. And they only kept me out eleven days. I was in Tolna with mic. Only gone eleven days. It was our city.

(beat)

But the fucker left. Patches, a few hours after the phone call coaxed him to go back to Crookston and though it was to more months he was living with me before the flood, most of Willy didn't come back. He left me there.

(beat)

This isn't written down.

(beat)

You say I loved him, that I would have gone with him if he had asked, that I would have followed him anywhere, and I'll say that wasn't me, not my head decorating your little story. That I never said that. But yeah.

(beat)

He didn't ask me to come, though, and the flood, the actual underwater part, it didn't last so long. Stuff floats back up pretty quick, be surprised, you kick hard enough, you stay put, get your feet back on
familiar ground, our house on sixth street, soon enough. Willy didn't kick at all. That's what the tape says. Proof. Willy didn't kick.

(beat)

If it had been my brother, I'd have found his body lying lengthwise and cold, somewhere in the deepest echoes of that phone line. And I would have beat CPR on that enormous chest of his until I broke his sternum and couldn't feel my hands.

(don't turn the lights off or close a curtain, don't even let me leave the stage. There is no way to stage an ending without it being abrupt and that's not how it works, not jarring enough. Let me, whoever I am, be strong enough to just stand there and blink at the audience until they figure it out, either leave or don't leave.)
I know this one by heart, dear reader, have faith. Have faith for I have told this one before, been practicing it since the night the Caveman landed, twisted and broken, under a semi. You knew the Caveman, I know, so you have doubts, want the story told right. His famous orange hair. Trust me, I know. You haven't seen a kid as tall, as wiry, as strong. Everybody loved the Caveman, everybody frothed like mad fools when he stuck Johnson in the second to take State as a sophomore. Everybody remembers the Caveman, tried to count the freckles above his lips, on his shoulders. But I have felt his long span from thumb to little finger, the purpose in his hands even in a joking squeeze around my then young neck. I have been thrown by those hands, can assure you that no one tells the story better.

I was with the caveman's brother when it happened. You remember the Caveman's brother too, his less famous pout and nicotine teeth. Remember a picture the old town paper ran of them together, the Caveman towering over his brother. You remember his brother looked like you could trust him, his glasses smudged and uneven. You remember seeing them together, orange hair and brown hair, the Caveman's efficient muscles, his brother's nervous breathing.

You don't remember me. You can run my last name over your lips again and again but it's a shadow act of memory, an empty incantation. You shake your head, can't remember seeing me with either one of them. I am the nineteenth century narrator, a stranger blown into your parlor who smells like pipe smoke and anise. I am the nineteenth century narrator, a stranger who isn't really a stranger, who swears I knew your Caveman sure enough, knew your Caveman's brother better than anybody. And you let me sit, dear reader, even though my overcoat is wet from the night's rain. You let me sit in your best chair, put coffee on the wood stove, have the hired hand shut the curtains so you can listen by candle light alone.

After the Caveman died, his brother made me promise him we would take our time to get to the park where we swung swings when we were just children and ideas, just ghosts. He agreed to go but made me promise we wouldn't go straight to there before he let me take him the twenty two miles back to the old town.

"Jake is at the park," he said. "I need some time."
Trust me, dear reader, that is what he said. I knew the Caveman wasn’t at the park, that his long body was caught and dragged a few hundred miles West of the bars and slide, scuffed and half-busted since last we climbed together. His brother knew geography too.

“His legs were strong,” his brother said. “Fast,” he said. “And he’ll go to the park.”

So we started back, drove through wind and ice like the wind and ice that must have taken hold somewhere to our West, must have spun the Caveman’s truck, taken his long body under the tire of the semi he had been passing. We drove in the same wind and ice, the same slow molecule cold.

I, dear reader, have proof, even wearing my rain-wet narrator’s clothes, that I have lived among you— one can defy death by driving a blizzard home. The Caveman had been lost on blacktop— his brother and I, a day earlier, had been stuck in a ditch so tight we had to wait it out, long enough for the dead toenail I watched blacken and begin to pull away from the quick the day the Caveman bounced and lurched, his long body sucked from the back of his truck to slide on a snow wet road— and we set out for those twenty two wind slicked highway miles on the same day, knew the danger well. All travel in our coldest months was an act of war, but that drive— twenty two miles of offensive and counter offensive, twenty two miles of resistance— on that road, a high speed, ice-glazed road, our hearts, mine and the Caveman’s brother, were louder than even the heater.

“This stretch of road,” his brother said, “is my Samsara.”

On any other day, on any other drive, even with the wind blowing like that, our tires pushing loose purchase and slick, forward motion, I would have laughed at him for saying that. I would have accused him of one too many religion classes, one too many loose terms winding its way, a car kicked by wind and hassled by ground drift, through the poor man’s mind, to come out un-bound, out of context, emphasis on the Western syllable. But the day the Caveman died, dear reader, Samsara left his brother’s mouth with an earnest glide, a low throated tone, and I did nothing but lower my chin and tighten my eyes to better drive the twenty two miles that he and I had always driven together.

The old town was shut down for the night when we got there. The emergency lights above the pumps at the gas station were on, but the interior brooded in darkness. By that time of the year, his parents had already left town for a warmer winter and mine had been gone for almost three. Downtown, too, was long closed when
we found a mostly shoveled spot just off one of the old town’s one ways, in front of the barber’s habitually swirling pole, and left the car on foot.

“Too many one-ways,” the Caveman’s brother said, “and you have a tired circle.” He looked at me, that night before we went to the park, and in the wind his chin length hair, the same as mine, snapped and blocked his eyes from me. His lips were chapped, his hands, pushing strands away from his face, were rougher than when we, as children, had left the park to walk the old town at night. But, even with a dead brother lying somewhere to the West, the words were the same as when we had junior high spiky hair cuts and snuck out under street-lamp to begin on the first of four one-ways.

It is the skin that doesn’t lie. He had aged. A body records. The Caveman’s brother pulled at his nose before we started walking, and though we hadn’t seen the Caveman’s body, his stuttering scars after being dragged under a tire, his brother’s hands had toughened. In the low yellow light, moving with the swing and pass of loose blown snow, I could see scabs from cold weather, maybe even places he had bitten off scraps of skin, blood marks around his nail beds. Cold, enough cold, effects the body in every way, brings phlegm to the throat, dries the eyes and makes nerves grate pain with every careful step up an icy walk. But no part of the body marks temperature like the tips of one’s fingers and toes. I could feel my own cold scraped fingers, raw to the wind, as I lit cigarettes for me and the Caveman’s brother.

“This cold,” he said, “and the smoke catches in yer nose like Dharma.”

“Like Dharma?” I said. I had been quiet for the drive, was still determined to let him do most of the talking, let his voice sound alone against the swirl of wind as it whirled and moaned through the old town, but the way he said Dharma, open eaded, a parabola, called for a response.

“As if no other motion is possible,” he said, “is if it were intended.”

“Cold changes Dharma?”

“The cold changes everything,” he said and exhaled a leafy cloud of heavy smoke that hung for only a moment, fell before being blown with the snow. Trust me, dear reader, that as you squeeze your eyes with these words, so too did I. I had read Kerouac, considered the Buddha, even Zen, and I knew that Dharma, every time the Caveman’s brother said it with cigarette in pulled cold hand, lost something in translation. But, as I
straighten my shirt in your best chair and drink your coffee black to move deeper into the story and that night, believe me that words always loose something in translation. And as well as you knew the Caveman’s brother, I knew him better, and when he said Dharma, even if he was not speaking of the enlightened path, the true way, or the truth of the walk, he was saying something and I listened, looked for my way in.

When we walked the circle of one ways the night the Caveman had been pulled from the safe metal frame of his truck, the Caveman’s brother said, “what is the worst thing that could happen to you?”

“The worst thing?”

“Yes,” he said, “that is Dharma. For smoke, it is to be held back.”

“That’s not exactly Dharma,” I said.

“Yes it is,” he said. “Because it is the worst thing, the obstacle, that reveals what is intended.”

“How,” I asked, “is that different than a mysterious God?”

We took a left, the night the Caveman dead, took another left. Broadway and Main, same as anywhere our old town, except they were one-ways pointed in different directions and that they were connect by more one-ways. The snow was picking up again, flakes get softer and larger, more like feathers and the wind had slowed so that the snow fell from up high and we could see the sky in three dimensions, falling against a backdrop of cloud shining orange with the glow of the old town’s lights. He stopped and I saw that the cigarette that he was trying to light was damp and slightly bent, that he was crying in slow shudders. He exhaled smoke and it floated.

“A mysterious God,” he said, “cloaked in the secular, works in the finite. You only endure once, get molded and tested to be good, truly good, and then live with bounty and reward. Mysterious God is about making you earn it, about salvation, a test. Dharma is about earning anything, no about salvation.”

“What then?”

“Simply,” he said as we took another left on to Robert to get to Main to get to Knoll to get back to Broadway, “about what is appropriate.”

“I don’t know Louie,” I said and the Caveman’s brother stopped for a second, again and looked at me.

“How do you mean appropriate?”
"The truth," he said, "the truth this time, this body, this individual. Dharma is slower," he said, "one life at a time. And relative. Not about mysterious ways or seeking grace to get through tragedy. No such thing as grace or tragedy with Dharma."

"What then?"

"Just stimuli and shaping, cause and effect," he said and somewhere to the West of us the snow had passed and the Caveman's long and split open body, scars that could be read like Braille, was wrapped in tarp and being loaded for transfer back to the old town. His parents, their parents, were somewhere deciding when they would need to fly to the old town for the funeral, when the ground would be soft enough for a burial. The Caveman's brother was with me, in the old town's empty downtown, a few cars with scraped clean windshields driving past at careful speeds, me with my hair finally hanging straight down with the wind gone.

"Dharma is relative," I said and though we weren't really talking Dharma, some other word the Caveman's brother would have found new consonants for when we were on younger walks around that same circle of one-ways, past those same shut down businesses, he smiled for the first time since we had found out about the Caveman as if I understood and should keep talking. I walked on, took another left onto Robert.

"A solipsistic's God, sure," he said. "Exactly. Where salvation is just self-actualization, not attached to any faith, just knowing the truth this time."

"The truth?"

He was disappointed that I asked, and when he finally turned to walk with me his pace had quickened slightly and his words took longer to form, his mouth squeezed together.

"Of self," he said, "a Polaroid that doesn't fade, that can be breast pocket ready, easily accessed."

"And Dharma uses bad things, the worst things to get to that?"

"Maybe," he said. "I think I was wrong," he said and we without deciding out loud took a right onto Main and left the car in the old town's downtown and went further East, towards the houses and the park we lived in when the old town was our town. "Not the worst," he said, "the most ironic."

"Ironic?"
"Yes," he said. "Nothing sinks in like irony." I thought about that, about irony being irony because it seems true somehow, a deep chord, a resonant frequency. We walked the only hill in the old town. The last large flake, from an entire sky made of large snowflakes, fell and landed when we reached the top. It was sudden, with no wind to replace it and the air, for the first time in two days, was clear. Believe me, as I finish my story-teller's coffee and wait for you to bring another cup, wind my nineteenth century pocket watch and light another pipe for the rest of the story, I know you are skeptical but you must trust me. The snow stopped as we neared the park. Weather systems work like that. Clouds retreat quickly. The only irony was that the Caveman's brother didn't try mention the snow, the clouds, the lack of wind, our first hint of our winter stars.

"Irony," I said, "is cruel though. Inherently cruel."

"Not at all," he said. "Example. What is the most ironic thing that could happen to Marcus, Marcus when he was seventeen and smoking camel straights."

"Lung cancer?"

"He will find Jesus," he said and kept walking. Don't get me wrong, dear reader, he was not easy to talk to that night, wide eyed and hard, maybe even self-righteous. The snow was deeper when we left the old town's circle of one way's, moved on unplowed, hyper familiar streets to the park. Dead brother, I kept saying to myself. Dead brother, I said to remind myself of what we weren't talking about as we had to slide our feet that had been dry through caked down snow and dirt that would have been brown in the daylight.

"So his Dharma is Jesus?"

"No," the Caveman's brother said as we entered the old, small park. "His Dharma is to realize he is capable of finding Jesus, as scared as anybody." He climbed the metal spider, used his coat to cover his hands so he wouldn't need to touch metal with skin. He rested his weight, much less than the Caveman's, on two of the spider's legs.

"So what's my Dharma?" I asked.

"You will return," he said without much thought. "Always return. Discover how bound you are."

"To place?"
“Sure,” he said and had it been any other night I would have argued with. On any other night he was did not remain as wise, I not nearly as ignorant.

“Yours?”

“Still working on it,” he said. “Something to do with loosing my brother.” He shrugged and smiled.

“Maybe that I will never return,” he said. “That I am not bound to anything.”

“Jake would not agree,” I said.

“And Jake would never have,” he said, “never have been the one of us to die. Never. And he’s dead,” he said.

“You said he’d be here,” I said, climbing the spider to sit next to the Caveman’s brother. I swear, this is where you have to trust, that as I said it we saw green light rise up, green light creep in from the north like a high, glowing fog. The northern lights are really dust particles, magnetized and drawn by the poles. Not really lights at all. The northern lights were not common in the old town, but we had seen them before and you have to believe they crept into sky recently clouded as soon as I said it. My jaw dropped and I expected the Caveman’s brother to cry, to leap around, to do something. But he smiled.

“They said on the news,” he said, “that we would have them if the snow blew through. I had planned on them, a surprise. And then the phone rang and my brother was dead.”

“Let’s go,” I said and for the first time since the phone call he looked surprised again. He knew they would come if we waited long enough, but we followed them, followed them like a flickering hand beckoning out, beckoning North, further from my car and the old town’s lights and though the snow had stopped and there was no wind, old frostbite came back with the walking and the snow got knee deep, a hard trudge and our feet were unsteady and cold. We walked without talking and I held his hand for a while, when every step was a large hurdle, a deep and cold plunge. We walked until we finally came to a place, the snow high and soft, up to his thighs, where it was obvious the lights were exhausted and receding and we stopped and tried to figure out what we could give back, whatever the lights were about, what we could leave as an offering, as a return on something given to us. We had nothing, not even words, so we, without talking about it, urinated and left. Do
not look, dear patient reader, for symbolism here. See my nineteenth century cheeks blush with embarrassment as the last tobacco smolders and fades in my pipe. But I will not lie. We urinated as the lights died.

The sky went back to being blank and dark, a few stars, and maybe the clouds, I thought, would return and it might even snow again as we walked what must have been four miles back to my car. My hands were cold. The Caveman was dead and his brother, still holding my hand as we returned, would be force himself South forever when the snow melted in a few months. I, even if I only drop by the old town in the summer when a story-teller’s rain moves in from the West and the fills with nineteenth century thunder and great licks of fork-tongued lightning, I became all you have left of either of them.
A park, defined here simply as a place for those who are still growing, is not a park without a conversation. A park needs a running dialogue, saved in the safest files, under:

- grass landed on, kicked back into sand a few feet past the slide
- orange moon, a grin beyond coincidence
- cloud thin and fast, makes what is distant swim behind
- experience, wet burn of first smoke in the lungs
- discovery, from the high bar I can see your house
- exploration, these railroad tracks'll take us West and home again

A park needs a great, sprawling, all encompassing conversation that floats in wait. A park is added to, not just by words but a whole volume of sound: all the squealing, laughing, and talking, held like a low fog hanging unseen until you get back in it, with or without those you found it with, and find it is still there. A park is not just a space, not just a physical place, not just a backboard but a girl thinking about hitting a bank-shot while she is sitting in sixth period. A park is a collection of ideas, not things. A park is remembering the wind loud as you pushed around a skating pond, hearing it when you should be answering your e-mail. A park remembers, gives the hope of reaching new ground, finding new sounds, a new way to move and breathe. A park is learning how to swim, swing, scream, giggle, jump, speak. A park is remembering how. A park can be returned to, heard when. A park is putting this page down to listen.
This park has a memory, a metal spider that your voice bounces tinny off of. paint your knife scratches phone numbers and names and hearts, who + who into, and joints that welds that your joints, trouble bending over these days, have ways of rusting. This park is not just a spider:

- Patchey has found it pouring copper into a mold, watching the sun set through a window in an apartment with no money for electric lights, even drinking a new glass of water in the morning.
- Caveman Grogg knows, better than anyone, that almost anything can be a road map, get him back here.
- Molly Lott doesn’t know that she dreams here before waking up, trying to get a new machine to spin juice from an orange.
- Andy hasn’t been in a while, the right laugh will find something deep, bring number six back bovine and proud.
- This park fits in William’s pocket.
PART V

MY DIASPORA
(April, 1997)
Boats with heavy lights, thirty feet or more of chain, and a man smoking from the shore with nervous eyes looking out to tepid water; these are signs of a river search. Words, I think, too. I used to think that it was always and only a dead body they were looking for, a fourteen year old without a life jacket, a jet skier who had too much to drink, a person simply disappeared. A body, stripped from the rituals and haunts known to them alive, reduced to swollen blue flesh, more river than human. I will decide, when I reach my first warm January, that there are other things that get swept into the current, pulled under, pushed through a river system, imbedded into lake bottom. Not just the dead, but entire lives are in those waters. This, when I finally get the words to stick to the page, will be my trip back to the river to submerge myself to listen for voices I recognize.

1. flood memory will be strange, strange water
2. I will remember my friends as gods, small g
3. I will remember-- memory means my gods will be lost, obscured

When you finally read this, I will know what the others have told you.

I am the river.

I know there is always a picture of me hanging on my mother's refrigerator door, in a magnetic frame with no glass. "William, age six" in pencil on the white edge of the circular picture. I am smiling, my hair is longer than it usually was at that age, messy. I have sand on my face, my glasses are slid down, no glare on the lenses. I have crooked teeth. Lake Superior, broad, cold, vast, lies behind me. Black and white William smiling, standing on sand, so much sand, smiling proud in a purple shirt that looks dark but not purple, black maybe, ominous, imperial. Napoleon at play, my Mother says of the photograph. A little Hamlet my father says. Youth on
sand, big sand box. Unknown conquests, undiscovered sorrows or tragedies. No idea who Ophelia is or what really happens at a nunnery. Just a child caught in a good, good moment, caught with some of the few hot rays of sun all summer, stolen into black and white with sand and wide, flat water.

My first beach, a cold sand beach on the Western shore of the largest fresh water lake on the continent. I wasn’t self important then, would have asked “who’s Hamlet?”

I smile a different way when my father says that now, smile like maybe he’s right, smile like you can see genius in the way my glasses are falling down my six year old nose, like the bright sky and dark hair, me in focus, are the natural order of things, like I was that child, like that child has grown without hating himself.

4. first person is lonely, never gets it right, always withholds evidence
5. first person never gets it right, always withholds evidence since the I is always the hero

It was June, the photo day. I lived in Duluth at the time, had gone to the Point because someone I lived next to had read about a sand sculpting contest. I hadn’t met Patches yet, hadn’t moved to Crookston, but he would hear about the sculpting a lot eventually. The neighborhood kids decided we would do it, formed a team, all wore purple. I carried buckets of water, used a plastic shovel or my hands, to scrape and push and create a giant ET on his back. We won second place. Someone else’s mother took the snapshot. I was on the news for the first time, two different networks, pushing my glasses up, smudging the lenses, talking about the sculpture and something else. How much fun it was to get dirty, to get sand on me, to sweat in Northern Minnesota. We swam in the cold lake to get clean, worked without shoes. Drank water out of thermoses we had cooled the night before. Organization executed. Us working with sand. Sand and water respecting the boundary between them. The news coverage, my face, my face smiling.

Sand molds itself differently inside of a canvas bag, no shaping, no plastic beach tool reparations and amendments. Gravity and a few whacks from a garden shovel put it in place. I don’t get interviewed even though all the networks are here this time and I have decided I finally
have something to say. No one is judging, no prizes. No one rinses mud from their bodies; a river with ice floating is no place to clean one’s body. The water, both the river and the tap, has e. coli and shit in it. No one has a thermos, whiskey is as easy to get as safe water. We wear three pairs of socks, have bought the hardware stores out of work gloves. I have longer hair, different glasses. The braces worked years ago, my teeth are straight. I still look good, I think, a little sweaty with a few days of growth on my chin. I have found my self importance now. I have found a me to brag about. But there will be no pictures of me during the flood; no proof that black and white William, age six from Duluth, moved further North and finally found his injustice, finally lost his love to water and madness.

I am the river. I am wordless. I kick off my shoes with some difficulty, first time in thirty hours my feet have been without them. Skin is beginning to blister, swell into fleshy bulbs that sting a little, even on carpet. Conditioned, used to standing in formation, handing bags of sand off and down the line, I find it hard to be still without being part of something. Solitary, free to move where I please, disconnected, I with no greater purpose use what must be the last of my energy to pace. Listless but regular steps, back and forth. Exploration by way of repetition: to a counter top, back to the east window, over to a wall of framed pictures, to the counter top. Another cigarette. Rhythms of waiting.

4. a flood is boring

all day now every channel shows the news and every channel seems to have the same camera crew because every channel shows the news that shows the same stories and the same water rising here and there and all day now every channel repeats the clips of the guard patrolling in those army
rigs and helicopters and all day now every channel shows the news that shows the same pictures of
the first road closed and every channel shows the news that shows the same gray Dotson trying to
push its way through the washed out intersection and all day now there is a television on in at
least one corner of every room and all day now in every room on every channel the gray Dotson
doesn’t make it

I hear Mac unzip jeans from our sixth street bathroom, probably in favor of sweat pants.
He’s humming. I envy his inertia. The long muscles in my feet are strained, my ankles tired.
Headache. I fall into an over-sized, over-stuffed leather chair— I don’t remember this chair being
comfortable but I sink in deep and put my feet on a coffee table. My socks are wet or sweaty, mud
and blue runoff from my shoes soaked into white cotton.
“Hey MacArthur,” I say, “Me socks are tie-dye.”
“Cool,” he says. “This black man loves tie-dye.”
my fingers into each other and into my hair. I hear her move into the kitchen. Smell candles he’s
lit. I, my own inertias, see or half-see water. Moving. In the carpet. In the plaster dots on the
ceiling. In the grain of wood paneling. Water where there is not water. Cold, calm water rising.

6. a river, before it floods, looks like the river you know, just like it

“O.J.?” he says, “Since I’m up and all.”
“Oh yeah,” I say, “You know it, baby. Bring it on.”
“Glass or cup?”
“Keg?” I ask.
“Fresh outta kegs, there. Gotta wash one yerself, you wanna keg a’O.J.”
“Grumble, grumble,” I say, “I’ll grumble, take a glass then, grumble, grumble.”
“White people are picky,” he says, poking her head out, under our row of suspended, dark wood cabinets. We smile at each other. He goes back to the fridge. “I bring you the juice of the orange,” he says, approaching with two glasses. “It will bring you fortune.” The sirens are going off again, third or fourth time in the last hour.

“Sweet juice, this,” I say.

“Nah,” he says, “yer just tired.”

“Still. It’s... it’s real good.”

“Juice o’ the orange, man,” he says and cocks an ear, tilts his head to the side. He opens his eyes extra wide and begins to hum along with the siren.

“Turn it up?”

“Yeah,” he says and I open the window again so Mac can pound a good rhythm on the counter top and we can sing along with it, join the siren for a three part harmony.

get into your safest room with your favorite carpet and chair and maybe a coke or a drink you like to drink and wait for a neighbor to throw a rock through your window with a note on it that says leave and at first every time the rock comes through you read the note turn on the television to see what is happening and put batteries in the old radio just in case and nothing happens to your safest room and when you look outside it looks like the outside and you can see a cloud that looks like a dolphin so get back into your safest room that would be perfect and intact if it wasn’t for the broken glass so you better clean up the glass from that rock through your window better get it off the carpet with a shop vac and sit back down on your good good chair in your safest room and wait for another neighbor to throw another rock through another window and clean it up and return to your same safest room still the same and wait for a third rock and a fourth and every neighbor you know comes by with a rock and a note and soon you have no windows left and the rock no longer breaks glass no longer leaves a bruise
The siren stops.

"Rent a movie before we go back out there?"

"Sure,"

You go to the video store to rent movies. To rent movies to bring somewhere comfortable. To save money on popcorn. To get a tape to put into a VCR that has paid for itself a hundred times over in movie money saved. To watch an hour and a half, maybe more, of time pass in interesting ways. To get excited about other people's lives. To unite a group of friends. To entertain with newness or familiarity, saying lines out-loud. To feel like three bucks has never been more valuable. Or to be alone but not alone, watching in a favorite chair or spread out on a soft couch. Or lying on the floor, covered in an afghan your grandma crocheted. To control your environment. To turn the lights off and fill that dark space, to make it more than just yours. To bring something home. Home.

The movies we rent will stay on my futon. The Red will continue to rise. Water in the streets, in basements, in living rooms. Up to the mattress the video tapes are sitting on, its mark made in discoloration. We will have left them there, un-watched. Given up.

Listen to the radio, turned up for flood info. Mostly the same announcements. Riverside is evacuated. Dike near Lincoln Park has broken. "Evacuation means 'leave now'", the DJ says, "'get a couple of shirts and go', not 'start packing up your truck now.'" I doubt Mac is listening. Bad news only affects him once. I suffer every time. Calmly, he holds up a couple of boxes. We shrug at each other. He is getting impatient, I think, but he tries not to rush me.

"Why is there a preacher on the radio?"
"I don't know," he says the way one says I don't know in the middle of a joke. "Tell me," he says.

"Listen."

"... there comes times like these times," the voice on the radio says. He leads our whole city, everyone listening, "no matter what God you worship, Christian or Jewish," he says, in a prayer. For strength in these dark times.

"Fucker's writin' us off," Mac says.

7. group prayer scares me

When you read this, the others will have already told you that I will leave. The ending has been spoiled. No surprises.

A news station from the cities will talk about how quickly the water rose. Its live flood reports will show before-and-after couplets, footage taken twenty four hours apart. The first dry, open, alive. Cars moving. People able to carry out half-packed boxes. The second, from helicopter or inflatable raft, will show water up to rooftops, touching the clock outside of the bank, floating furniture through a shop window of a store downtown. How quickly the city was taken. Evacuated. Destroyed. The footage will be hard to watch. Vivid. Convincing. Before and after. Before alive, after dead. How quickly the city was lost.

The pictures will be lying. It wasn't quick at all. Griswell moved from his apartment by the river into a building on campus, washing himself in the concrete shower below the theater, two weeks before water use was rationed and the sirens started. We knew. We were ready. My city wasn't lost it was beaten.
Impatience chooses our movies for us. Right after the prayer ends. Mac takes the two boxes in his hands, throws them on the counter. Restless. To get back out there. To get mud on his shoes. To "stare that river down," she says, "show it who's boss." I go, slower, behind him. Stand mostly still, playing with my hair instead of pacing, while the guy behind the counter fiddles with my computer information. I have to give him my social security number three times. My telephone twice. He calls my house, talks to Winch to verify I live there. "You sure do," he says after he hangs up. I pay with a check. Mac is out the door.

"Black man loves the sand."

I have a hard time responding. I get in his parents car, rolling the window down for a cigarette.

"You're gonna die, smoker!" he says.

"Vocal shrug," I say and light one for each of us. I think about the voice on the radio. Gray hair. Wrinkles when he laughs. A preference for candle light and violin music. A man who went to the opera when it came to that farm in Red Lake Falls a few summers ago. A man who likes his steak dry. An expert with the grill. Lived here since '59. Has been sandbagging till his back, old but strong, has given out. Drank a glass of bottled water, no ice. Had a turkey sandwich on wheat. No mayo. No cheese. Chewed slowly, thought out loud. Prayed. Decided to call the radio station. Hung up only when he had been assured that there was nothing he could do for us.

"I wonder if it's over?"

"Bring it on!" Mac says. He's driving too fast. Standing water on Washington St., sewer back-up I guess, splashes in wide arks as she rounds a corner. I see the glowing sign. "Sandbag Central." The hotel across the street has a sign up, "welcome sandbaggers." Four school buses are parked. No drivers. No one waiting for deployment.

Mac parks the car, puts on his boots. I clean my glasses and follow him, up dry steps to the convention center. The door is locked. A sign, red marker on poster board. "Thanks for coming out! Please return to your home and begin packing. Evacuation, for the moment, is voluntary. Stay dry."
7. First person lies

If one of the other had written this section, they would tell you I only tried to sandbag that last night, that Mac was the only one of us who road the sandbag bus more than once.

Mac knocks with one hand, wearing a muddy work glove with black beads glued on for grip. He says nothing. Knocks harder, kicks the door twice. The glass rattles and the sign falls down.

Three guys I recognize come down the stairs. One of them, Jim might be his name, opens the door. He says nothing, offers me a drink from a bottle that smells like rum. I swallow some and cough. “What’s goin’ on?” we ask.

“We’re lookin’ for food,” Jim says.

“It over?”

“I dunno,” Jim says. “But we’re hungry.”

“Right,” I say. “You got any?”

“We’re looking,” says a guy in a stocking cap.

“Follow us,” Mac says. “We’ll cook. ‘Bout six blocks from here.”

“It’s on uhm... the corner of sixth and sixth,” I say, “Just in case you lose us.”

The door is open when we get there. We toast bagels. I check my machine. The Czar has called. My father has called. Stottle has called. Griswell has called. Candy Apple Dobbs has called. Love and checking up on me. “Call me. Stay dry.” Every message the same.

8. the phone rings faster than water moves

try to hitch a ride over the phone from a man from Mars and know you gotta use his language to make him understand you gotta use the alien alphabet those glottals and telepathic vowels cuz
Martians have no use for yours and since there’s a bomb in your building and you can’t find your keys
the sounds all pile up somewhere between your nose and throat to somehow clog your pores
and when you spit them out you speak something close to a loud popping silence

9. movies make an emergency phone call an easy, easy thing

I call Candy first. He says he’s on his way, we’re gettin’ out now and even before the phone
is in the hook I am shaking and Mac is smoking more grass and Winch is pouring more vodka into
little plastic cups and is vowing that the flood is not gonna get him “they gonna have to pull me off
the muthafuckin’ roof, muthafuckin shit,” he says and the Vodka he passes me burns and Mac goes
into the streets to look for someone and the boys who came home with us are eating hard. My socks
and underwear and the nice shirts I own are in a basket. My computer is on high ground.

“Why you gotta go, baby?” Winch says, “Stay. Drink. Get drunk. We be fine, brutha.”

“Fuck you.” I say. I smile, like Marcus Mitchell, before he was Mac, before he lived with
us. I am all my friends and I am running.

I am the river. I am escaping
to my dead brother, little Jakey, sittin’ on the tree while I fall in blood and water. Hey
there dead man, Cave Man Grogg on the wrestlin’ mat, your big hands and Orange hair and that
pin, that pinning thing you do, twist and drop and control. Hey dead brother, I’m running now. I’m
running on empty, Vodka and Whiskey and all the booze in world, I taste like smoke and liquor and
I can move so fuckin’ smooth, like you finally, in those tights and head gear, pulling the bastards
down and pulling and that pin thing. That victory noise, “chuck-a-chuck-a-chuck” you yelled with
your arms up, flailing. I am running like that, little man, little dead man, little dry in the tree
watching me sink in mud brother and I can run so smooth on this shit. I’m running now little big dead man.

I sit in my porch. A red vinyl chair rests on sloping wood covered here and there by chipping paint. The frame is stapled with blue-gray Christmas lights that blink. Light runs from one bulb to the next, around the frame to the door, down to the slanting, rotting floor, across to the wall and back up again. I smoke the way old men smoke, proud through the nose. Winch is peeling an orange, letting rind fall into a can without a liner. Candy is coming for me. The river is rising. My brother is dead.

I have just gotten of the phone with my father.

The magazines, in his desk, had letters written by men and women. They used the word come differently than I had seen it anywhere else. A noun, a verb. Pleasure. I figured it out eventually. Washed my hands and flushed three times. Swallowed a lot of water out of a paper cup as my hands could no longer be trusted. But there was a sense of pride, too. I was old enough to father something, to give life and that meant old enough to govern it in some way; I could feel, for a few guilty seconds, alive in every part of me. Expansive. Overflowing what I thought I was.

"The river is coming."

"Yeah," Winch says. "I know."


"Great," he says. "Explains all the damn water."

"Not just talkin’ about that," I say. "Think of the pride. The darkness. The excess. This is what it exists for, it works for this, collecting, waiting. Rising. This is short lived, it will go down again. But for a while it is..."

"Feelin’ real good." Mac says.
Winch smiles. We share the orange, Winch and Mac and me. E.coli in the tap water we washed with will make them vomit in a few hours. I will be seventy miles East, then. Will know they’re as sick as I am. I will sleep on hard motel carpet in the town of an x-girlfriend, her town, a comfortable guest bed empty, two miles away but the phone will stay in it’s cradle until the morning. Candy and Grace will hold each other in the wide bed and I will try to sleep on the floor next to them. I will get up with my arms abraded, hours turned remembering the bridge to Minnesota, crowded with cars, all going East.

This bridge. Four A.M. Water touches the concrete supports and struts Patches and I climbed around on growing up. I saw ice here less than a week ago. It has melted since, into blackness and deep water. Military vehicles are abundant, more traffic than I’ve ever seen here just before sunrise. The last flourish of red tail lights, a sharp inhale and quick exit. A city breathing out, letting us go.

Candy rolls the window down. “You win,” he says to the river. I join him, say it again. “You win.”

Four A.M. Grand Forks leaving; one bridge left open, it will close twenty minutes after we use it, from Fargo to the Canadian border. My city on one last bridge, running.

walk down your oldest hallway the one you walked to get cookies and television when you were nine and when you get to the kitchen from your bedroom remember you left the lights on and the radio playing and your baby is in there asleep on a soft comforter and turn to go back only to find your hallways is blocked by an old rusted gate and none of your keys work

The sleep I will get on the floor will show me a man with no mouth, gray clay in his face, his eyebrows look ripped into, sculpted. He walks with other clay men and woman. A few gray children, also mouth-less, cry. Make no noise. They walk, steps soft, malleable, like the clay
figures Patches made from mud at Eagles Canyon, the same optimism in their features, no mouths, no need for words, these people, clay melds into clay, communication made easy and shared. They would be beautiful if I didn’t know why they were leaving.

I am the river

people. The others. Were me. All me. I have no more good words in me.

I am escaping my own

Patches doesn’t get to see this, not even on the news. He lacks cable, at college. He knows it is happening, sculpts a bronze pitcher pouring, overflowing the bowl beneath it, metal water splashing, leaving its restraints.

Candy and I will eventually see the piece and not say anything.

They will touch my shoulder and I will pull away.

Hey dead people. Love you all. Dead love.

10. My words are worthless.

Shoot this one with MacArhur’s favorite film, a long pan of any city, could be Crookston could be Grand Forks. Get a slow turn shot of the down town, its buildings reaching up in school house brick. A white person, could be Winch or Molly Lott Candy or Patches or anyone walks on the streets and dances with mailboxes and banal things. Could be anyone. Get a close up of their nondescriptness, their shoulders the same as anyone’s shoulders. It is okay if you see glasses because everyone wears glasses. It is only me, get a close up of how dirty my lenses are, the cleft in my chin, my thin and patchy facial hair, it is only me when you tilt the camera and shoot the street, flattest main street in America going vertical and steep and the white man, it is a white
man now, stumbles and slides, scrapes dirt and hard top into his knees. See me, it is definitely me then, rolling.

I should call Mac or Winch, let ‘em know we made it. Have someone come get us. As if we have drunk too much wine, as if it were just too cold to walk home, as if a single sober person could undo everything—safety nets used for four years snap. Or are no longer just below my falling body. I have landed here, hard carpet and the smell of pipe smoke years ago. A man laughing in an old suit, drinking a high ball with a woman in her mother’s evening gown. She has watched him play billiards all night. They have made love, he has talked to her then, their breathing easier without the clothes that have never fit them right. Equals, naked. Their laughter, her happy noises his coarse chuckle, is here, lost to them. He is in Reno, probably. She answers phones at a law firm. They dream of this room, the bed where Candy lies. He is asleep. Grace next to him breathes in soft whispers, high pitched against the flat bass of his snoring. I hope they are touching, fingers wrapped into fingers, arm resting against arm, a head on shoulder or the same pillow, a dreaming place shared. I stand up to see but it’s too dark to know for sure.

When you finally read this, I will still hear the river’s full silence, the sounds of deep water moving. The way light reflects objects stationary even in heavy current. Images of myself broken, fleeting in a river moving from warm to cold. I will hear its silent rising in the phone’s ring and dial tones I will find in Iowa—empty possibilities.

“The corn looks like ocean water,” new people will say. The ones I will drink imported beer with, smoke too many cigarettes with. “The wind is the tide,” they will say. “Ebbing.” But I will only see the corn getting taller, see green rising. I will move all I have left to my highest ground.
I am in Minnesota, still. Bemidji. A few days after evac. We call it evac. Yell at people on the phone, to show the gravity. "It’s all bad," we say. "Water in the shop windows, peoples homes gone wet and maddy. You wouldn’t believe." We say to the Red Cross folks who are trying to help, asking us, as lucky ones who landed somewhere to spearhead something. We, the three of us and Grace's mother become swat team vigilant and there is never enough coffee and I wake up here, to the sound of Monty barking.

I watch the news and play Monopoly. We sell flood insurance, Grace and Candy and I, and drop water balloons on the game board. Last night Winch, my god it was great, he would say, was forced up a helicopter ladder, taken from our roof with a bottle in his hand. Grace's mother didn't stand when the rest of us stood and applauded. I was crying and she said he should have come here with us.

"No way," I said. "He did good to last that long."

Hang on to a metal bar five feet above the ground at the park you swung swings at when you were just a child an idea a ghost and hang on the way you always hung on just until the skin blistered up with a soft pucker of sting and the ground seemed closer than it had when you started your dangle and the only option is down and your hands uncoil except this time you know that no matter how close and safe and on the ground the dirt you landed in when you were a child is you know that as soon as you touch down the bar will be replaced by a brittle piece of ice that no longer supports your weight so hang on longer than you did as an idea and feel your hands go numb from the rub and the squeeze but keep swinging and use your mind and stories of the good times to forget about the weight because every second after you land that you could have stayed up there in the air with the swing and hang you knew as a child will only come in dreams and you will let go faster every time.

Monty's a big dog. I tell him that, "you're a big dog, aren't you." And he looks at me stupid but understanding. I think he smells what I am thinking. We lie in the sun together, on a picnic
table and I smoke into a coffee can and he looks at me sad like, like I am dying too fast for an old, shedding sheep dog. Like there will be no sun on the table when I drive somewhere more permanent.

I will find out, a few weeks from now after Candy drives me to my parents in K.C. that Winch was not the winner. Mac, who hated the valley when he was Marcus Mitchell, beat everyone. He, after I left, according to the interview I will hear in K.C. on Dateline while they show a few pictures of him as a child, had a fight with Winch and went back to sandbag central. They will say his name is MacArthur. His voice on the television will be low and smooth and though the bones in his face will catch every glare of light, he will look good. He will say he broke the glass door with a pair of left handed scissors and his hand wrapped in an empty sandbag, that he hid in a janitors closet until the building was empty. There were donuts and cold coffee, a small cot. He got pretty sick and skinnier than before. But, he will say, he saw every sunrise reflect in the water on the street outside of his window, was there to see buildings a few blocks away burn, firefighters dive to find hydrants, that he didn’t miss a thing. You white people, he will say with a deep laugh, you’re always running.

Monty wakes me up barking like a mad fool, silent the rest of the day, barking through the thin garage wall because he has to pee and in my dreams he is not Monty because the sound gets fed through the big ear we sleep with open and he is a very wet, grotesque beast who still knows me, who still loves me. He is loud and his teeth are sharp.

When you finally read this, so will the others.

I am the river
11. words are a betrayal and I got to them first

It is noon somewhere, in some train station. People in Europe are doing something lazy, I am certain. The sun there has set and they are still warm in their thin coats, drinking coffee under a sky that doesn’t need to be light to let you see perfectly. I am still in Bemidji.

We call it evac here and the mother tries to become all of our mothers, cooking turkey and taking us to Grandma’s to listen to stories about when we were little and I smile and try to make her think I am sad she doesn’t let me do the dishes. And we function, have been functioning for ten days or so. And I do no work here, smoke the cheapest cigarettes, the mother gives me a pack now and then and we smoke together because non of my other surrogates smoke. And she smiles with all of her face and we talk of art in words like shit and fuck and she seems to know less of me than Monty does. But she is a sweet woman and she wants to believe that I will find a home somewhere, why not on that gravel road, on that picnic table. I smile and say maybe, but I am thinking of Europe and people with hot breathing and a sky that never keeps you from seeing.

Or I am thinking of Grand forks. I am thinking of how it will be to go back. To see the few people left there. Mic. Mac. Molly. Winch. Griswell. The Czar, his immovable Queerness.

We watch the Czar’s apartment burn on day four. Someone was hiding, like Marcus. Someone started a small fire, in one building. Wind spread it. We watch it hit the Czar’s apartment, the flames red and yellow reflecting in the water below, the water that hides the hydrants, the water that lets the fire take most of the old buildings.

I think of, will think of, will remember Grand Forks as a ghost town. Like a town in a television western, seen so many times you know everyone’s routines and start to recognize their clothing and you know Griswell will be drunk every Thursday and Winch will be complaining about his health on Wednesday and you know the jokes and the people. You like some of them a lot. But
there is this awareness that they are scripted, only characters and that their is really some other
name behind them, some other world they go off to and none of the things you have seen, have
shared, are remembered. A ghost town with people, where the rot is accepted, where the dead are
still walking because it's only drama or a program anyway and these are just characters. And the
tumbleweed blows in the streets and people nod when they see it, the only thing to come in and
leave intact. Other folks, new lovers and wonders are written into the show, written out. The
dying is there but it isn't real. And I will go back to this place, to the blowing wind to the snow
where there should be restless dessert weeds. And I will drink dark whiskey from a dirty glass.
Share it with Winch. Buy a beer for the Czar. Kiss everyone hello and the laughter will ring out
onto the gravel and the sky will be that Europe Sky, that no light all vision I ain't gonna sleep soon
sky. And I will talk to these characters, surprised that they know my jokes, that they talk about
the old times, wonder if I am no longer watching, remembering, if I have somehow finally been
written into the script. And the sleep will come in thick bursts and leave the head hurting and the
whiskey won't be dark enough.

The sky will never be as bright as the first few swallows back home but I will still say I'm
home and they will say welcome home pard and pour the booze and we will laugh and nothing will
be right. Snow comes.

name the parts of your body your hands your feet each finger and toe each digit and let them all
talk to you in your voice but with their own words in a language you consider shared and good and
hear about the trip your left leg you call Henry wants to take through the woods at night and listen
as your right hand you know as Bob complains that the last time you went to the park he spent
hours because Isaac your stubborn left was unwilling to remove burs from you clothing and the hair
on Henry and Allison and listen as your body argues about how to spend the afternoon and watch
helpless as Bob and Isaac decide with a hack saw to settle the issue

I am the river

I am escaping my own borders
before receding, the Red crested at fifty five and kept a burned out city under water for fourteen days.

My first few weeks away from the North are tired and empty, even when I get to Kansas City. Candy is with and pretending he doesn’t miss Grace, that my parents’ interest in his divorce is no trouble, that he hasn’t grown sick of me. He will go back as soon as they have drained and dried the university, salvaged the summer semester.

I watch Sportscenter on cable that my parents bought as a city-warming gift. All three editions of Sportscenter. All three editions every morning. The same hi-lights and jokes. I let myself get sick of seeing great catches and reverse dunks but keep watching. I don’t shower very often.

By the time you read this, I will finally have given myself a name of my choosing.

Words can seem real, I can believe I have a past, can know where I came from. The roads go nowhere, at least not home, but words, even these words of self-pity, can find a place on sixth street, a prom picture I had hanging on the wall, a futon I left videos on when the phone rang and Candy said he was coming for me and that we were leaving. Words know what color the carpet was. Words can remind me. This is not art, this is not bullshit. This is the final height of a neutral force, a restless river. No more, no less. It will flood with or without being read. It will descend only when it does.

I am alone here. Candy has gone and my parents have the television on. I still won’t smoke in front of them so I go the Seven Eleven. The guy who sells me cigarettes has hair that looked like mine before I shaved it off upon arriving in a warmer state. He checks my ID when I buy cigarettes. He has to look at me a few times before he will give them to me. I smoke by the side of the building
in case my father runs out of Diet Coke. I decide to leave for Iowa, graduate school in a town I have never visited, before the summer is over.

I will drive my parents’ truck, loaded down with all that I have salvaged from my cities, a stereo that crackles and snaps when you plug it in, a bean bag I traded my contaminated futon for, a few plastic bags full of clothing and bedding I will bleach but still get a rash from. I will listen to public radio and there will be voices, my age, twenty two when I drive there, and they will be asked what our biggest problem, as a generation, is. They will not question the wording, as a generation. Three different voices, one with God and two without, they will come to agreement on this question alone. We are afraid, they will say, that no one will love us. And I will stop to call in and tell them. That it is more than that, that we have been told our love means nothing, that we don’t trust ourselves, that we assume we will run away from anything if we get the chance. But I will have no change for the pay phone and will not find anyone who can break a dollar. I will keep driving.

The air is warm and heavy and my brother is dead. Smoke burns the hard palate in this kind of dry heat. I still have a stuffed nose from the flood and see motion when I close my eyes. Smoking, tucked all the way against the wall so you can’t see me from the street, I plan a novel where only one out of twenty words are mine and Jake is finally allowed to be my favorite character, a novel I will finish in my dead brother’s font on a Good Friday that seems like any other Friday while my new dog wants to go outside because she has eaten something she shouldn’t have, a novel that will give me an easier way back into my city than streets and bridges that fail.

I rub the cigarette out and return to my parents’ house without washing my hands.
"Spider lives in..."

"Got a name? Or just Spider?"

"Shpeedra."

"Shpeedra?"

"Yeah. Is good for you?"

"Always, baby. Shpeedra 'tis."

"Hark that. Shpeedra lives."

"Sure does, baby. Now we gotta find a where."

"Shpeedra lives above a brothel, no?"

"No."

"No."

"Shpeedra lives in this..."

"Lives? Can mythos start in present tense?"

"Yeah, yeah. Or no, no as the case more likely is."

"Huh?"

"I suppose not, if a mythos needs a linear track of presentation."

"Do we believe in that?"

"I dunno. Is the question though, is it not."

"Shit of the sham."

"Right. We don't buy linear, right?"

"Never."

"But Mythos might need that, that sense of past made not so past."

"Cause and effect."

"Evolution. And we are lookin' for evolution in our little mythos, ain't we."

"Yeah. So, with or without or past dogma, we go linear."

"Amen then."

"Are we, here and now, ere we are, my brother planning a strategy? Un-burying the past groovings on of Shpeedra according to a plan?"
"Yeah."

"We ever plan?"

"Nah. But this is important. We need such a strategy."

"Such a stratagem."

"Such a welcome mat for misinterpretations."

"Such as the one we are givin' it at this very moment?"

"You know it."

"You dig it."

"You dig it more."

"Fine."

"So we proceed. In the linear, distant past first, past second, poignant stuff in present, moral o' the mythos in future perfect?"

"Only if it wants...."

"It? The mythos?"

"Right, Shpeedra's story. If it needs to function as instructional. As a beacon for higher understanding."

"Yeah. An' if we be doin' it, you know it wants for that, baby. So Shpeedra lived in...where'd Shpeedra live?"

"Allentown, PA."

"What happened to too urban."

"The twentieth century removed it as a logical description. No longer exists as a condition."

"Ten-four good brutha."

"Allentown too specific?"

"Maybe. A factory town, though. Like the ring O that."

"Shpeedra lived in factory town, PA."

"You know it. Making bonnets on the assembly line, working with all eight arms."

"Made righteous good bonnets, Shpeedra did. Gave 'em personal touch, fancy stitching and stuff."

"Eight legs O magic."
"Right. Eight legs doin' the good work."

"Righteous good work."

"Do bonnets have stitching?"

"Shpeedra's did."

"Right. Shpeedra worked hard, man, worked real hard with improper lighting, no worker's comp."

"Union spider? We come all this way for a union mythos?"

"Fine. I ditch that. Shpeedra worked hard, conditions irrelevant, only to see the patrons of sed bonnet factory take them into the sun, into the swamp land a few blocks away, get bees and swamp water all messed up in the fabric."

"Better brother, I hear that. Tragedy in those words. Hard worked stitches got wet, the fancy magic goodness washed away, wore off."

"Smelled like bee piss."

"Yeah."

"So Shpeedra said, you know, there's gotta be better groovin' then seeing this happen to my fancy bonnets, every one comes back with a bee done stuck in it. Gotta be a way to be appreciated."

"Yeah, yeah, baby. Shpeedra done got fed up with factory life."

"And our attempt at bluesy language."

"And overbearing self consciousness."

"No, Shpeedra done dig on the meta."

"Meta-ist spider in the barrel."

"Factory."

"Sing it baby. Lo-down spiders and chipmunks working along side her don't give..."

"Her?"

"Mythos needs a matriarch."

"Dig it."

"Wooo!"

"You're right brutha, her co-workers don't give a damn about the meta."

"Don't give two damns."
"No they don't."

"Didn't"

"Right."

"Don't care at all that them fancy bonnets gettin' sabotaged and womped on by the pessimists with the bucks it takes to get themselves bonneted up..."

"Not the respect."

"Right, not the respect. Go and get a bee all stuck up in a brand new bonnet."

"Stitched by eight legs."

"The Nerve!"

"And than, pile on the apathy!"

"The apathy from her coworkers was too much."

"Final straw."

"Straw that broke the spiders back."

"So she done got on the bus and..."

"Naw, brutha, she' gotta pack up first."

"Yeah, you're right. Put a photo album in her backpack, a box of crunch and munch."

"Does a spider good."

"Shooah does. So she packs up all her junk, not much to carry really."

"Photos and caramel corn, a spider need more than that?"

"Not Shpeedra."

"Not Shpeedra."

"So Shpeedra got on the bus."

"Nah brutha, not the bus."

"Skateboard."

"With eight legs?"

"Roller skates."

"Diggin' it even more now, brutha. Puts on her roller skates, not blades, because she wasn't a suburb kind of spider. Put on her skates and took off down the black top..."

"Goin' west."
“Not too far. Far enough to find the meta-livin', the second level.”

“Not far enough to find Los Angeles.”

“Too urban.”

“Goin’ midwest.”

“Yeah. To a place.”

“This place?”

“Not yet, this is a mythos not a fable, needs more than one change. You dig?”

“Sure. How ‘bout a coffee shop.”

“Yeah. A bistro. Lates, mochas.”

“Mochas that would make Husserl happy.”

“Drank by those conscious of being conscious. Patrons of the meta. Aware of aware.”

“The meta-life.”

“No more swamps no more bees, no more intentions messed up because of sloppy actions made by sloppy, thoughtless consumers.”

“Hell, no more actions at all. She found the meta-livin’, baby. Sick of action.”

“Shpeedra the Buddhist.”

“Shpeedra the thoughtfully lazy.”

“Mythos for us.”

“Diggin’ it brutha.”

“Sick of action, karma accumulation and all that jazz.”

“But not sick enough to stick out the coffee shop.”

“Right, Shpeedra needed another shift in locale. But why leave that Bistro, Brutha. You n’ I would have drunk it down, woke up late, drunk it down again.”

“Shpeedra was better than that, better than us. It was good to be there, good to plot and think and be aware of the road but they weren’t going anywhere. She knew they would plot with or without her.”

“Our good spider.”

“And she had a feeling she was meant for more than that, meant to inspire?”

“Right, Shpeedra needed to light the path, not sit on her spider butt.”
"Right. So, though she loved those mocha drinkers, and even the cappuccino junkies with their hair all a mess..."

"and their lovely Marxist rantings..."

"and the girl that came in with the glasses and a book under her arm, you know the one I'm talkin'?"

"Read aloud Thursday night, speaking truth?"

"Yeah. Shpeedra loved that girl."

"Loved her sure enough. Loved them all."

"The guy who drank soda, walnut syrup stuff, and went on about the metaphysics of love...."

"and the guys that just drank water, looking all spent and lived out, tired."

"All of them, she loved all of them, talked away a few years with them...."

"Planning the revolution."

"Never got it done."

"Right. But she loved them, their words and messy hair..."

"sour breath."

"Loved 'em good."

"That's our matriarch, brutha."

"Righteous good matriarch. But she had to give it up, the comfort..."

"the coffee."

"Something made her hit the road again."

"Something made her pack up first."

"Right, more pictures in the book this time."

"Right, and she got back on her skates and went on down the road a piece."

"With pictures and faith, only that brutha."

"She skates on, not finished yet. Comes here, to this place."

"Finds a bison, sweaty Henry, who owned the land."

"Right. Restless bison, sweaty Henry, but at peace with the place. They made friends fast."

"Benevolent souls, gave up everything, his land, her life."

"Sad stuff, brutha. But they did it together."
“Shpeedra asked him for a park bench and swings.”

“Sweaty Henry insisted on a sculpture.”

“THE IMAGE OF SHPEEDRA!”

“Eight legs of insight sculpted into ladders to climb on, to sit on.”

“To make kids happy kids.”

“To spread the good lovin’. To become good lovin’.”

“Wise Shpeedra.”

“Ohm Shpeedra.”

“Ohm.”

“Sweaty Henry gives Shpeedra the metal he had stashed away for decades...”

“Shpeedra makes those bars, that slide.”

“Eight legs crafty.”

“Wise Shpeedra.”

“Set down in legend,”

“These very pens?”

“These very morons.”

“Scribes, thank you.”

“Scribes thank you, brutha.”

“Set down by these scribes.”

“And ones before them.”

“To tell the story.”

“Of a spider finding her way.”

“The real way to give souls a bonnet.”

“And a coffee, now and then.”

“Of a spider on the path.”

“A path.”

“A mythos.”

“Not yet. One final detail needed.”

“Yeah?”
"Who named the park, put it down before us, captured Shpeedra's gracious beauty?"

"Sweaty Henry did it. One night after mixing up some stew for good eats."

"Big ole nah on that one."

"I hear ya, I think. Sweaty Henry didn't have to?"

"No he didn't."

"Who named it, then?"

"Shpeedra herself."

"Pompous Shpeedra?"

"Nah. No pomposity, brutha. Simply the way it needed to go down. A name to do what the trip was for in the first place. A name that meant little in name alone but upon further investigation...."

"...or upon further invention."

"Trial's still pending."

"You know it."

"So anyway, I was sayin', before your interruption, that she did it, gave the place a name, her name because...."

"Because she knew she deserved to be loved. Spider park"

"Uh-huh. And the name would get that lovin' the right way."

"Yeah, setting a story, her story, just below the surface, for us to get to."

"Righteous good lovin'."

"Meta-lovin'?"

"You bet."

"Why she need our lovin'? Got eight hands O' magic."

"Yuck, now, brutha."

"Shpeedra don't need that kind of lovin'?"

"Not in this mythos. Save the tacky stuff for the sequel."

"Gotta sell tickets."

"Right as always. Shit of the sham. Eight legs O lovin', it is."

"'Tis the gravity of our situation that no mythos stays smut free."
“Yeah, I hear. Nother smokie?”

“Sure. So why she need our lovin’.”

“I thought we covered that.”

“Yeah, we know her motive, the love she was banking on, I guess. But why us.”

“Because no one else was looking. She bet on someone, not us in particular.”

“I get it.”

“Sides, I s’pose we’re as permanent as the next guy.”

“Probably not. We’ll keep movin’, find new ditches to dig.”

“Right. New people to cry about, new phone numbers to remember, new answering machines to lay down our lovin’ on.”

“New villas.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe as good as the one we’ve built these past bygones, brutha.”

“Maybe.”

“Big sloppy kiss.”

“Real sloppy.”

“Yuck now, brutha, you got smoke on your breath. I ain’t kissin’ that stuff.”

“Oh that’s showin’ me the love.”

“I am.”

“Doubt that.”

“Don’t doubt it tonight. Not on Shpeedra’s birthday.”

“Birthday? Tonight?”

“When else?”

“I s’pose it is. Damn. Her birthday and we got nothin’ to give.”

“We could give ourselves.”

“Yuck yourself.”

“Nothin’ suicidal, not like that, not even bloody.”

“Good. Still, I gotta feelin’ Shpeedra just wants the good lovin’, no need for two strapping young lads.”
“Right. So, what do we give a spider who has nothing?”

“New paint.”

“Not enough lovin’ in that.”

“Yeah, and we’re paint-less anyhow.”

“Empty handed.”

But with a story, William. A park with soft grass and a few people to sit under whatever shadows a story can cast.

“Not empty handed,” I say to William, writing all of this down, “we got the smoke from your mouth.”

“And yours,” he says.