

2013

Excerpt from an Untitled Novel

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UNTITLED NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS

By

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B.A., Colorado College, Colorado Springs, CO, 2009

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2013

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Schumacher, Peter, M.F.A, May 2013

Creative Writing

Untitled Novel-in-Progress, Abstract

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A *bildungsroman* about a seventeen-year-old boy living at a chaotic and mismanaged residential treatment center in western Colorado. Originally admitted for treatment of substance abuse, protagonist Steven Pike soon finds himself in a mire of violent and sexual conflicts with peers and treatment center staff.

All characters and situations are entirely fictional.

1.

It was Danny who'd jerked off into my hygiene box. I didn't know how he got hold of my hygiene box. My hygiene box contained my shampoo and my soap and it was all covered in jizz. I washed my shampoo and my soap in the sink but I couldn't tell if all the semen was gone. There was definitely still some semen pooled in the corners of my hygiene box. I'd been at the Langley Center for a year. I was seventeen years old. I left the bathroom with the sink running and found Danny playing videogames in the common area with Skylor. The shampoo bottle was still in my hands. I stepped between Danny and the TV. Danny said move it faggot. I said I know what you did to my hygiene box. I was honestly surprised that the plastic of the shampoo bottle was hard enough to break Danny's nose. I didn't intend to break his nose. Two Living Coordinators restrained me. I writhed under the weight of two grown adults. I cried rape on the floor. Restraints always felt like a violation no matter how much I deserved them. The LCs said calm down, *shhh*, deep breaths. In the periphery of my vision I caught glimpses of Danny's bloody nose, of Skylor rushing back to his friend with a wad of paper towels. I struggled but the LCs were stronger than me. They got my arms and legs under control. They rolled me on to my stomach. They said calm down, stop screaming. But I kept screaming.

2.

The judge sent me to NYC for two weeks. Nothing happened there and I was happier. Then the judge sent me back to Langley. The Judge called me Steve and I called the judge Edward. It seemed like everything was a joke to Edward. I returned to Langley after lunch, during the second half of the school day, thinking about the mind, which was my main problem then. I was trying to inhabit the porous, luminous mind I'd known on acid, which according to Alan Watts was the ultimate reality. I was a walking cliché. I'm not exactly sure how I stumbled upon Alan Watts. In English class I told Mrs. Vasquez I'd rather be back at NYC. Mrs. Vasquez had butt-length dark hair. She smelled like raisins and wet grass and I believed I was in love with her. "If you wanted to stay at NYC, then why didn't you tell the judge?" Mrs. Vasquez said.

"I *did* tell the judge," I said. "I told him there's jizz *everywhere* at Langley. He just told me to watch my language and I was like what the fuck, jizz is not a bad word. I said Edward, please, just don't send me back. And thus he sent me back."

I always used the word *thus* when I spoke to Mrs. Vasquez. She absorbed this newest use of the word with a smile. "You're a silly boy," she said. Love love love. She gave me a copy of *Tom Sawyer* and told me I had some catching up to do. "We'll be discussing chapter six on Friday," she said.

I took a seat and tried to read. The class was smaller than ever— down to just Jason and Skylor and Ricky the cowboy. They were gathered around the TV in the back corner watching *Overboard* with Kurt Russell and Goldie Hawn. Danny was across the hall in Science with the sex offenders. We'd been put into different classes and that was a small victory for me— Danny hated the SOs more than anyone. The first sentence in

Tom Sawyer was: “‘*Tom!*’” The second sentence was: “No answer.” I don’t remember the third sentence, the fourth sentence... I read on into words I can’t recall. Eventually Skylor got up and started reading over my shoulder. In a girl’s voice he said *Tom Tom Tommy-boy*. He laughed like an idiot and said Danny’s gonna fuck you up. “He’s gonna cum on all your stuff and then he’s gonna smash your face with something heavy. He doesn’t know what yet but it’s gonna be something heavy, like a baseball bat.”

I said thanks Skylor for the heads up. I was fairly sure there were no baseball bats on campus.

3.

“Did you learn anything at DYC?” Nicole said. I sat on the couch in her log-cabin-style office in the admin building. Everything was log-cabin-style at Langley. It was rumored that Langley was once a Christian summer camp. The camp closed down when a camper hanged himself in the bathroom of what is now Cubs Lodge. The overhead lights were off, the blinds were drawn, and Lady, Nicole’s purebred Australian Shepherd, was curled up on the floor. Lady’s eyes were blue like a person’s. She was the smartest dog I’d ever known. I liked to pretend that Lady— not Nicole— was my therapist. Nicole took notes when I talked so she could later translate them for Lady. She said are you going to sit on the couch and sulk or are you going to answer my question.

“I can’t remember learning anything,” I said.

“You’re still so angry,” Nicole said.

“But I’m *not*. I just want to go home.”

“Bullshit,” Nicole said. “Home is where you were headed before this. Now it’ll be another six months, and that’s assuming you don’t blow up again.”

“Whatever,” I said.

Nicole mimicked me: “*Whatever, what-ever.*” It seemed unprofessional but I guess she was the kind of shrink with a look-kid-I’m-going-to-level-with-you kind of attitude. I wanted then to go AWOL, to leave Nicole alone in her office. I got up from the couch but the door was locked. Nicole told me to sit down. She went on talking. I stood at the door and tried not to listen to her. “You’ve broken a peer’s *nose* and you’re lucky to still be here and not in jail. There are a lot of people here who *care* about you, but over and over again you take them for granted. Over and over you get on the path,

and then lose it. Now why might that be? Have you ever given it any thought? Have you ever given a moment's thought to how this anger and violence might affect your future?"

Nicole was being melodramatic. The answer was no, I had not thought about how my "anger" and "violence" would affect my "future." These were all ridiculous, conventional concepts. Alan Watts said the future was an illusion. I understood that. He said the past was an illusion too. That I didn't understand; the past was vivid and always there. I could still see my grandfather, for example, who died my first year in treatment. There he was, sitting in his tweed-upholstered lounge chair, drinking a scotch and eating a Hershey's bar. There were Hershey's wrappers at his feet, and issues of *Time* and *National Geographic* scattered on the Persian rug. He was smiling, eating, drinking, watching the news— as if he was there with us in Nicole's office.

I tried to batter down the door but it was designed to withstand this kind of angsty, overdone battering. "He jerked off into my *hygiene box*," I said. "What the fuck was I supposed to do?"

And Nicole said use your words, use your coping skills. She said you need to learn to use your coping skills no matter what the blah blah blah blah. She spoke and she gestured. Her facial expression changed like a river, or like an alpine cloud now glowing white with sunlight, now grey and ready to storm. I wanted to go outside. I wanted to be alive in Langley Canyon with the birds and shit, and with the pinecones scattered everywhere, reminding me of death. I "loved nature" the way I thought I was supposed to. I knew the trees were alive when I looked at them. It was true that I thought of death often, but still there was no real reason for me to be at Langley. A lot of

the boys you could actually see killing themselves. You could understand why they'd do it. Their lives were hard. They'd helped bury murder victims; their parents had burned them with torches. I'd only taken enough acid to lose my head a while. I was a spoiled private school punk. I experienced a thought: the classic image of Tom Sawyer is that of a boy in a straw hat dozing by a stream with a fishing line tied to his toe. So far in my reading I had encountered no such image. Then I thought maybe I mixed up Tom and Huck, maybe it's *Huck* who snoozes in the sun with the fishing line tied around his toe.

“I've added you to the summer backpacking trip,” Nicole said. “Danny will be there too. It'll be an opportunity for the both of you to learn how to deal with your anger and work together.”

4.

I returned to Avalanche Lodge. I sat in the common area where I'd been restrained for hurting Danny. Someone had knocked out the big plexiglass window while I was gone. The LCs had done a poor job replacing it. There were strips of duct tape holding the window in its frame and the mountain air drifted in uninhibited. It was summer, but we were at nine thousand feet— it still got cold at night. Many of the residents were gone: discharged or transferred. Marquis was gone, Kenny was gone, Raul was gone, Trey was gone. Maybe they'd run away, or gone back to foster care, or another facility. There were no new admits. Four discharges and not a single new admit. It weighed on the minds of the two LCs, the same pair of optimistic, youth-group-style Christians who'd restrained me two weeks ago. One of them was named Desmond. The other was named Rain. Desmond was so ordinary it is nearly impossible to recall anything about him. Rain, I remember, had hippy parents she loved to complain about. She believed she could relate to the Denver-area gang kids because she too was raised in an environment of substance abuse. "My parents smoked marijuana *every day*." We were down to just five residents, an all-time low. Neither Desmond nor Rain could explain it. Desmond said pretty soon we'll be out of work. He thought he was funny. Rain said at least there will always be plenty of SOs. "Just today there were two new admits to Hawkeye Lodge." It pleased me to think that Danny must already know all about that. Danny who was hiding in his room. We hadn't seen each other yet and I entertained myself imagining what his nose looked like. I wanted it to heal funny, I wanted Danny to be grotesque. In retrospect, he was; I had no need to invent it. I sat on the couch imagining his nose until Rain announced it was time for chores. She doled out the jobs and of

course, in the interest of therapeutic living, Danny and I were paired together for bathroom duty. “And no semen, and no broken noses,” Desmond said. He gave us each a playful little punch on the shoulder. In the bathroom we didn’t say much. Danny did the shower stall and I worked the sink.

Danny was like this: he was half-Mexican and he insisted that he was from Denver and that his father was shot dead in the street in broad daylight. I’d heard him say it several times in group therapy. I’d seen Nicole roll her eyes. And I’d seen his father come to pick him up for home passes, very much Caucasian and dressed in his hospital scrubs. I spoke to his father once, while the LCs were rounding Danny up from an AWOL saunter in the woods. His father was a surgeon and in that way Danny and I were alike. My father was a surgeon. I asked Danny’s father where he would be taking Danny on home pass. Danny’s father said Canter. Canter was one of those communities of prefab mansions and luxury townhomes between Colorado Springs and Denver, the kind that were like self-contained villages with their own post offices, grocery stores, schools, churches, hospitals— nodes of wealth cloistered from the outside world. We had them in Indiana too. Danny was a liar. He wasn’t from the inner city any more than I was.

“All the SOs were giving me the eyes today,” Danny said. “They all want a taste of my cock.” And to my surprise he laughed, and he sounded genuinely amused. I decided he was probably fucking with me— waiting for me to let my guard down. I wiped down the mirror over and over so as to avoid dealing with the toilet, from which nearly visible sewage fumes wafted upwards. My reflection didn’t surprise me. I had a lot of acne and my hair was getting to be as long as a girl’s. I was pale and obviously

malnourished. I sprayed Windex on my reflection and wiped it clean. I did it again. The mirror was very clean.

“Better keep your butthole squeezed tight,” I said.

5.

In the morning before school Nicole and Hulga dropped by to lead group therapy. It was the same as any cliché TV show. We sat in a circle and talked about our feelings. Hulga asked everyone to report in for the day. She asked us to disclose a safety number.

Everyone disclosed a ten—*I'm feeling very safe*. We knew disclosing a low number was an invitation for Hulga to interrogate us. Nicole and Hulga sat in the circle, “with us.” They had clipboards in their laps. Hulga was older than Nicole. She was a bird-boned woman with bleached hair and skin on her face that stretched tight over her cheekbones like plastic wrap. She asked Danny how he was feeling about having me back on the lodge.

“Shit, I don't give a fuck,” Danny said.

“Language,” Hulga said.

“Get shot,” Danny said. He pounded fists with Skylor.

“That was tight,” Skylor said.

Hulga shifted her gaze to Skylor. Last night before lights out he'd jumped off the second floor loft. “Are you really feeling very safe, Skylor? Jumping off the loft doesn't seem very safe to me. In fact it seems like a suicidal gesture.”

“Fuck that,” Skylor said. “I was bored.”

I was bored too. I tried to read *Tom Sawyer*. Everyone thought Tom was dead. Nicole told me to put my book away. “It's true sometimes people do stupid things when they're bored,” she said.

Hulga looked at her as if she'd said something blasphemous. “The real question,” Hulga said, “is *why* Skylor was feeling so bored when there was plenty of treatment work

to keep him occupied. What about his life narrative, for example? Have you even *begun* to compose your life narrative, Skylor? Typically residents will compose a life narrative within the first six months of treatment, but I have yet to receive anything from you. And furthermore Mr. Tony and Mrs. Vasquez have been complaining to me about your lack of participation in school. There must be plenty of readings and worksheets for you to catch up on. So forgive me if I'm a little confused as to why you might have been so *bored*."

Her legs crossed tight, her gold fountain pen in one hand: Hulga was so out of touch. We laughed at her and someone suggested that maybe life narratives and schoolwork weren't quite the antidote to boredom she imagined them to be. Hulga was unphazed by this assault on her integrity. She smiled without baring teeth and said part of being a well-adjusted member of society is learning to take joy in one's responsibilities.

6.

In my first months of treatment the project of a life narrative appealed to me. I wanted to do a good job on it. I had an interest in writing. I wanted to compose a life narrative that Nicole would read and say, Steven, this is very well written, this resists my analysis. I wanted to show the manuscript to Mrs. Vasquez too (I was obsessed with her from day one of treatment). I wanted her to call me *my Rimbaud*. I wanted her to whisper it in my ear. (I knew who Rimbaud was; I had read his collected works in translation; I didn't understand them but they were good to read; I knew he was young and he believed in the systematic derangement of the senses).

In my first month at Langley I composed chapter one. I wrote about my grandfather and I sitting together in the living room. I wrote about how the living room was usually quite neat, but this time there were towers of *National Geographic* and *Time* on the rug, and half-eaten Hershey's bars scattered around my grandfather's chair. This was a month before my mother woke me at 4 AM and gave me a backpack full of clothes and put me in a stranger's rental car bound for the airport. I could see my grandmother over the counter that separated the living room and the kitchen. She hovered over the island in the middle of the kitchen. She was mixing up a mayonnaise salad. My grandfather sat in his chair and watched the news and sipped on his thirty-year-old scotch. I sat at the table across from him, which was against the kitchen counter and gave me a view of the afternoon woods out the window. Every ten minutes or so my grandpa would offer me a scotch— "just a sip"— and I said OK again and again. I drank the scotch and thought I should be asking him questions. I understood that my grandpa's condition would only get worse. He would be full-on demented soon. (In reality he

would be dead soon, of a stroke.) I felt that I should have brought a tape recorder but at the same time my grandpa only wanted to talk about the news. A politician was exposed in some scandalous affair, a boy disappeared in Evansville and no one had found him. I didn't know anything about these stories. We watched an interview with the missing boy's parents: "*We don't want nobody hurt over this, we just want our boy back.*" Then the news cut to commercials and my grandfather finished off his glass, leaned back in his chair, and said this is the most fun I've had in a long time. He poured us each another scotch and got to talking about a fishing trip to Russia he'd had to cancel, because my grandmother had taken a fall. She wasn't in top shape either. Her voice had become monotonous and empty of affect. Her head shook on her shoulders uncontrollably. I looked at her in the kitchen. She was spooning mayonnaise into a plastic mixing bowl and coughing.

"Well," I said, turning back to my grandfather, "you can always go fishing around here. We could go up to Hummel Park right now."

My grandfather looked at me then like I had zero working knowledge of the world. "I haven't fished for anything but Atlantic salmon in over forty years," he said.

This was simply untrue. We often went to Hummel Park when I was younger to fish for blue gills. I was about to remind him of this, but he ended the discussion before I had a chance. "Besides," he said, "there's a little boy gone missing down in Evansville. Probably kidnapped. It's on the news and I want to see how it turns out."

My grandmother woke us up later. It was dark outside. I could barely make out the trees through the window. A smell of rot wafted in from the kitchen. "Dinner's ruined," Grandma said. "We've no ramen."

Dry ramen had always been her secret ingredient. She'd ordered Chinese instead and it had arrived while we were sleeping. Grandpa asked me if I'd like to have a sip of scotch with dinner and we took our drinks into the dining room. We sat down at the dark table at which I'd eaten most of my Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. I was used to seeing it dressed with a white lace tablecloth and silver platters. Now it was crowded on one side with bills and yellow legal pads. On the other side there were three rubber place mats and cartons of noodles and orange chicken and crab Rangoon. The food was good and we ate it quickly. My grandparents asked me how I was doing in school and I lied. The word *school* reminded me of the rest of the sheet I had in my pocket. I didn't know if my parents had told them on the phone what had happened to me or not. I suspected they had, but my grandparents seemed so clueless. Were they waiting for me to come out and say it on my own? It was kind of humiliating. I helped myself to seconds. I fingered the doses in my pocket. I ate seconds and soaked up the juices with Rangoon. At some point I excused myself to the bathroom. I took a leak, I reached into my pocket, I unwrapped the sheet from its foil. It was a print of a cosmic Buddha, but I'd already eaten the head and the torso. Now only the lotus legs remained. I tore off a piece of thigh and put it in my mouth.

After that I was quiet. My grandfather had to ask me to speak up when I commented on the mound of bills.

"So many," I repeated.

"I don't know that we'll ever pay them," my grandfather said, quite drunk now, grinning like a child up to no good. He said they were thinking of moving to a smaller place— to one of the new condos up at Crown Village, maybe.

“I’m staying here until the day I die,” my grandmother said.

“We’ll be needing your help with moving when the time comes,” Grandpa said to me.

“Just you *try* to get me out of here,” Grandma said. “I’m not leaving until I’m a corpse.”

My grandfather sighed, suddenly grumpy. He said that’s probably so but that doesn’t make it right. He took a sip of his whiskey and said to me, “Steven, the whole world is corrupt. Everything is going to hell. A boy has been missing in Evansville for days now. No one can find him.”

Then my grandparents were asleep and I went down into their encyclopedic basement. I turned on the television and put on *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. It was the only film my grandparents owned. I sat down on the ancient exercise bike in front of the TV to watch. I’d done this a thousand times, pedaling lazily on the bike, watching *Temple of Doom*. This particular tape was purchased from a McDonald’s in New York City, and it had an absurdly long preview for the *Young Indiana Jones* TV series. The fast-forward function on the VCR was broken and I had to sit through it. I pedaled lazily on the exercise bike. I looked over at the fly-tying station in the corner of the room: two adjacent work desks with plastic tubs of feathers and furs and spools of string. Beside the fly station was the gun cabinet, with the rifles my grandfather never had the heart to sell. That night the glass door hung wide open. I’d never seen the cabinet unlocked before. I held each of the weapons in turn: four rifles, a shotgun, and a composite bow. They were not so heavy after all. One of the rifles was my favorite. It had a good heft to it, but it was small and easy to handle. *Temple of Doom’s* opening

scene was now under way— Indy was scrambling for the antidote to the poison he'd swallowed, and I took aim at his enemies, covering him. Then (I don't know where it came from or why it came) the word *militia* popped into my head, and I was charmed into a fantasy of revolutionary colonists patrolling New England. I found myself in the backyard, marching back and forth with the rifle propped ceremonially over my shoulder, stars wheeling and each constellation a question mark. It occurred to me to determine if the gun was loaded, but I couldn't figure out how to work the bolt action. It seemed jammed or locked or else I was just too twisted to figure it out. I kept jiggling the knob but the fucker wouldn't open. I looked up at thick and far-off stars, I kept trying. Then I remembered *Temple of Doom*. I hurried inside for the human sacrifice scene and the mine cart chase scene, and that was the first chapter of my life narrative.

The second chapter was about the time I told my parents I wanted to join the Boy Scouts. I was twelve years old. My parents had been pestering me for some months about how I was getting older, how I couldn't just play videogames all the time. They'd signed me up for tennis lessons three times a week. I hated tennis. My instructor was a young guy with earrings and blonde leg hair. He was always telling me to bend my knees when I ran. "*More. Bend them more.*" As if becoming a good tennis player depended on nothing else.

It wasn't a well thought-out decision at all; I only knew that Boy Scouts got to work with pocketknives and build little wooden cars. I figured my parents might let me drop the tennis lessons if I showed interest in something else. So I told my parents I wanted to join the Scouts. We went to school on the appointed evening to sign up. There were tables in the cafeteria covered in pamphlets. My parents went from table to table

and read the pamphlets carefully. They talked to the smiling troop leaders. I followed them and tried to pay attention to what these troop leaders were saying, but all I could focus on were the uniformed scouts walking with such purpose and discipline from one table to another, conveying messages to their superiors (so it seemed). I tried to read the pamphlets but I couldn't. I was distracted by the tidiness of the uniformed scouts.

Eventually the lights dimmed and everyone sat down. There was a flag ceremony. There was an Indiana flag and an American flag, with two lines of boy scouts behind each flag. The leaders of the lines held the flags. The two lines started at either end of the cafeteria. They marched toward each other. I think there might have been some kind of music or chanting. Both lines were moving toward the center of the cafeteria. When the two lines met they set their respective flags into a big wooden stand. Then the scouts took their seats and Mr. Hanson, the pack leader, gave a speech about community, charity, and the spirit of fun.

Afterward, in the parking lot, my mother told me Mr. Hanson was going to be my den leader. So the *pack* leader was also going to be my *den* leader. At first the prospect was appealing. I was pleased. But as I was opening the back door of the Jaguar, I looked up into a streetlight and I saw the snow flurrying there, and it struck me: Mr. Hanson was father of the twin retarded boys from school, Tim and Peter Hanson. Then I didn't want to be in his den anymore. Tim and Peter were technically a grade ahead of me in school but in practice they weren't in any grade at all. They rode the short bus. They arrived an hour later than the normal kids and every year they stayed in the same classroom with the same special-ed teacher. There were a few other retarded kids in there with them, but Tim and Peter were by far the worst off. They walked like toddlers, they spoke in

garbled moans, they were fat, their skin was so pale it was nearly translucent, and it was marbled with veins and patches of redness. They always had their fingers in their mouths; their faces were always smeared and shiny with saliva. And they had tubes coming out of their bellies that you could sometimes see protruding from the bottoms of their shirts. And yet they were not so bad off that they were totally oblivious. Each had his own personality. Tim was very loud, very confrontational, very quick to anger, while Peter was quieter, and instead of temper tantrums he was prone to fits of laughter that went on so long they became kind of scary. At lunch time the special-ed kids joined up with the rest of the students. Tim never ventured away from the special-ed table, but it was not uncommon to see Peter wandering around the cafeteria with his lunch tray in his hands, asking students if he could sit with them. A lot of the kids loved to have Peter at their table. They loved to fuck with him, to ask him questions he didn't understand, to hear him laugh no matter how cruelly he was treated. On the other hand he was turned away from a table just as often as he was invited in. The girls especially were cruel in this way. Their eyes bulged in disgust when he asked if he could sit with them. Often they would laugh at him for even asking the question and, not understanding, or perhaps vaguely half-understanding, Peter would laugh with them until they (the girls) were not laughing anymore, only Peter remained laughing— standing there at the edge of the table with his lunch tray, laughing— and Miss Harp, the special-ed teacher, had to come over and touch him on the shoulder, and guide him back to the special-ed table.

At recess the two brothers played together. They wielded sticks. They wandered through the jungle gym, the soccer field, the tetherball courts. It seemed they were wandering through the same fantasy world. They were both after the same imaginary

thing and they didn't have to talk about it to know it. They moved uncertainly through the schoolyard with their arms outstretched, sticks in hand. I thought *blind man* or *sleepwalking* when I saw them at play. They frightened me. I was younger then. Adults are vain but children are even more so. The twins were especially frightening when they fought, which was common. A particularly brutal fight would break out every month or so. The brothers would wander to a far corner of the schoolyard while Miss Harp was preoccupied with some other special-ed kid. And who knows exactly what sequence of events led up to it, but invariably Peter would scream, and everyone would turn to look, and there, off in the distance, we'd see Tim standing over his brother, wailing on him with a stick. And Miss Harp would have to sprint across the schoolyard to pry Tim off his brother.

This was the extent of my familiarity with the Hanson family before my dad and I showed up for our first den meeting at Mr. Hanson's house. The name of Mr. Hanson's subdivision was Town Hall Square. It was full of generic and smallish vinyl-sided houses. My dad had the address written down but we still had a hard time finding the house—the numbers jumped inexplicably from the hundreds to the thousands, and it was dark, and the addresses were stamped not on the mailboxes but over the front doors of the houses, which were not always lit up. We wound our way into the heart of the subdivision, then found ourselves on the periphery. We turned around at half a dozen cul de sacs before we finally found the house. There was a big wooden cross mounted on the door. We rang the doorbell but no one answered. My dad looked at his watch and wondered aloud if he got the address right. I could tell he was annoyed that I had signed

up for the Boy Scouts. Neither of us wanted to be here. But the door opened, and there stood Mr. Hanson in his khaki uniform, grinning, happy as a yellow lab.

“Steven! Mr. Pulp! Welcome! Welcome! Welcome!” he said. He led us through a hallway into the kitchen. The troop was gathered around the kitchen table: only four boys. Tim and Peter and two others I didn’t recognize from school. There was a pan of brownies on the table. All four of the boys were stuffing themselves with brownies. They grabbed them from the pan and stuffed them into their mouths and reached for more before they were finished chewing. On the wall behind the kitchen table hung a large portrait of a blond, glowing Jesus. Two adults, presumably fathers, stood by the sink drinking soda. Mr. Hanson asked if he could get us anything to drink. “We’ve got pop, milk, juice, you name it.”

I said I’d like a Coke.

My father gave me his skeptical look. “And are you allowed soda past six?” he said.

I said nothing.

“He’ll have a juice,” my father said.

“No,” I said. “Water.”

Mr. Hanson hesitated, looked at both of us. Then he turned toward the sink and said water it is. “And for you, Mr. Pulp?”

“Nothing, thanks.”

Mr. Hanson filled a glass with water and handed it to me. He told me to have a seat and to have a brownie— “or two—or three—or four!”

Tim and Peter erupted with laughter. Their mouths were ringed with chocolate. The other boys were giggling too. Everyone seemed to love Mr. Hanson. But I did not love Mr. Hanson. Neither did my father, I could tell. Once the laughter settled down Mr. Hanson introduced us to the troop. The other two boys were named Brian and Kanyon. They both went to Union, which explained why I didn't recognize them. Brian's dad was named Mr. Nightingale and Kanyon's dad was named Mr. Daniel.

"Let's take a moment to thank the Lord for Steven's and Mr. Pulp's presence with us tonight," Mr. Hanson said.

The kids stood and everyone closed their eyes.

"Dear Lord..." Mr. Hanson said. He said thank you for everything you have given us, thanks for all the blah blah blah. I opened my eyes in the middle of the prayer and looked at my dad. He looked at me. I knew my dad didn't believe in God. I didn't believe in God either, although I hadn't given it much thought at that age. I simply did not believe. I could always tell when my dad was getting angry, though he did a good job not showing it in public.

After the prayer we moved into Mr. Hanson's garage. No one gave me a pocketknife. There was no discussion of pinewood derbies. We stood there talking for an hour or so about installing a bench on the lawn at the nursing home on Lincoln Avenue. Or rather, we stood there for an hour or so while *Mr. Hanson* talked about installing a bench on the lawn at the nursing home on Lincoln Avenue. We were going to do it on Saturday. It was going to be a team effort. We were going to dig the plot, pour the cement, and install the bench as a team. Toward the end of the speech Tim grew

restless and started to whine. Mr. Hanson put a hand on his shoulder to shut him up, and went on talking about the bench.

“There are over a hundred seniors who will benefit from the installation of this bench...”

Peter pointed his finger and laughed at Tim.

“*Daaaaa*,” Tim moaned.

Brian and Kanyon seemed to be trying to ignore it. Their eyes were on Mr. Hanson. Had their fathers taught them to do this? Had their fathers taught them not to pay them any mind when they got into their moods? To just keep their eyes on Mr. Hanson? Or had they discovered it on their own—that it was easier to ignore them, that otherwise it was difficult to have fun. Mr. Hanson tried to talk over Peter’s laughter. My father watched the retarded twins.

“It will improve their quality of life in real, practical ways,” Mr. Hanson said.

And then, of course, Tim, still crying and whining the word, stepped toward Peter and shoved him. Peter fell on his ass. Tim pounded Peter in the face three times real good and Peter was knocked out before Mr. Hanson got Tim off him. He was only gone a minute or so, and when he woke up it seemed like Mr. Hanson was more upset with Peter than with Tim. He sent Tim inside and lectured Peter about treating his brother with respect.

“It’s not good to laugh at the weaknesses of others,” he said. “In fact it’s bad. It’s really, *really* bad.”

After that the meeting was pretty much over. The garage door opened and my father more or less departed, and on the drive home my father said something interesting:

“Isn’t it strange that a man with *two* retarded children would believe so fervently in a benevolent God?”

I considered the question as if I were actually expected to respond. Did it make a difference one or two? Was two retarded children significantly worse than one? Would two make it harder to believe in God? Actually I could see how a person like Mr. Hanson would have such strong faith. It didn’t seem weird to me at all. He needed to be nice and to believe in a kind of ultimate niceness.

“They’ll likely die before they’re thirty,” my father said. It was such a simple, stern declaration, charged with the infallibility of his medical expertise.

And in the end we never went to help with the installation of the bench at the Lincoln Avenue senior center. I decided I didn’t want to be in the Boy Scouts anymore. I pretended my parents and I had never gone to the school to register, that my father and I had never gone to the den meeting at Mr. Hanson’s house. When Saturday came I acted like there was nothing to do. I played videogames in the basement. I played *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. I made no mention of the bench installation, and neither did my father, and neither did my mother. On Sunday I took a lesson from the tennis pro with the earring and he told me to bend my knees.

I showed the first two chapters of my life narrative to Nicole and she told me I was doing it all wrong. She told me I was avoiding the real issues. She said there was no *reflective* component and therefore it lacked therapeutic value. She said you need to write about the landmark events. “Write about the time you were so fucked up you whipped your dick out in public and started beating it,” she said. “Write about how you very well could have wound up on Hawkeye Lodge.”

I said Nicole I'm getting there, it's a *narrative*. But after that I couldn't write anymore. I tried to write but I ended up just looking at the assignment sheet. I was supposed to include at least ten discrete episodes; I was supposed to be honest and I was supposed to include a reflective passage at the end of each episode; I was to first present the memory, and then ask myself: how does this memory make me feel? How do I think it shapes who I am today? Is the influence positive or negative? If positive, how so? If negative, how so? Do I have any control over how this memory affects me?

I had no interest whatsoever in answering these questions. And so like Skylor, and like nearly every other resident at the Langley Center, I came to refuse to write my life narrative.

7.

I was anxious to get back to Mrs. Vasquez and tell her what I thought about *Tom Sawyer*. Basically I thought it was a good adventure story but it felt a little light. It didn't come close to *Demian*, to compare it to another *bildungsroman*, or even *The Catcher in the Rye*, which even at that age I wasn't fond of. Certainly it was nowhere near the majesty of *Narcissus and Goldmund*. (I'd come to Hesse via Timothy Leary, who I discovered via Alan Watts). Plus all the adults were unrealistically clueless. I anticipated Mrs. Vasquez saying something like, "Is that really so unrealistic?" Her identity construct had to do with believing in "children" and "the future." She didn't identify with "adults." I didn't consider myself a child but I was happy to be considered a child by Mrs. Vasquez. To be considered by Mrs. Vasquez at all— that was perhaps my sole desire in those days. I don't know why. I fixated on her immediately upon my admission. My dreams were full of sex. Nicole said I should masturbate in the shower stalls, never in bed. The shower stall was therefore like an upright coffin where a phantom Vasquez lived. In my dreams and in my waking life Mrs. Vasquez wore hand-knitted wool socks constantly. She treated me as if I was perfectly capable of thinking about the world.

English class wasn't until after lunch, though, and first I had to sit through breakfast and several hours of Math and Science. So I ate a breakfast burrito and a donut and I watched a documentary about feathered dinosaurs. The documentary was full of shitty CGI sequences in which these feathered dinosaurs were fully imagined. Each one was an exotic tropical thing, brilliantly multi-colored. No dinosaur was covered in monochrome brown feathers. I didn't understand it. The documentary made no mention of any evidence experts may have used in hypothesizing these color schemes. Why

assume the feathers were beautiful? It seemed like a leap to me, and not necessarily a minor one. The experts wielded influence over imaginations— they changed what a dinosaur was in my head. It frightened and amused me that a dinosaur could change like that. The documentary ended with a pterodactyl flying into a sunset and a monologue on the beauty and mystery of nature. Then Mr. Tony sent us to lunch. It was Taco Wednesday. Taco Wednesday was my favorite day of the week. I ate five tacos and a bunch of mini tacos. I ate them quickly and I spent the rest of the lunch period reading *Tom Sawyer*. The townspeople were preparing the funeral for Tom and company but I couldn't really follow it because two of the little guys at the next table were squealing like piglets. They were flinging taco meat with plastic spoons. I resolved myself to read by thinking of Mrs. Vasquez and her green eyes. I thought of her face like sandstone after the rain. I would speak to her soon. I read another sentence: "The villagers begin to converse in whispers about the sad event." But I didn't even make it to English that day, because Kurtis now hovered above me saying hey Steven how's it going. "Staying safe? Staying positive? Hey listen, I'd like to borrow you for a minute."

He took five of us outside to the ropes course: Danny, Skylor, myself, and two SOs from Hawkeye. The white one with the purple cape and the rat-tail was Anthony, but the other one I didn't recognize— a new admit. He was black and he had a big smile with crooked teeth. Kurtis called us the WAT. He waited for us to guess his meaning, barely able to contain his enthusiasm. "Wilderness Adventure *Team!*" Kurtis finally cried, throwing his hands in the air. A hawk circled in the open blue sky between the pine ridges and Kurtis told the new guy to introduce himself.

“My name’s Chance,” the new guy said, and there was something weird about the way he said it, as if he were a mute who’d just begun to speak. He was wearing blue scrubs, which made me think he must have come from a hospital or a psych ward. He was pretending to be happy, or maybe he was trying to convince us that he spoke English fluently when he did not. He was younger than me—couldn’t have been more than fifteen. “I’m going to try my best to be a positive peer out there in the woods,” he said.

“That’s great,” Kurtis said. “Really great to foster optimism.” Kurtis was Chicano and his forehead with shiny with grease. His hair was gelled into a ski-jump hairdo and he wore hipster glasses. He was Langley’s wilderness guy. “Since Chance was brave enough to introduce himself, why don’t you all return the courtesy?” he said.

Anthony went first: “My name’s Anthony and I’m possessed by the goddess Athena.”

“That’s really cool,” Chance said. “I love mythology.”

“This ain’t no mythology, fuck-rag,” Anthony said. He repeated his words slowly, breathing in and out between each word in a smoky whisper that sounded like he was speaking too close to a microphone: “*Ain’t... no... mythology... fuck-rag...*” It was a tic of Anthony’s, to repeat himself like this.

Skylor and Danny laughed at Anthony, Kurtis gave them his not-upset-just-disappointed face. “A little more cooperation would be much appreciated, boys.”

“Who are you calling *boy*?” Danny said. He swung his hips slowly and grabbed his crotch.

Skylor laughed in support of this display. Kurtis raised his eyebrows at him, but Skylor seemed unable to stop himself. When he laughed continuously like this he began to resemble the weasels from *Who Shot Roger Rabbit?*

Kurtis turned to Danny. “You need to get your act together,” he said. “You can start by behaving with some basic human decency.”

Danny took his hands from his crotch and stopped dancing, but he continued to seem pleased with himself. “My name’s Danny,” he said, “and I swear to God if you try anything with me...”

Chance blinked. He didn’t understand. Then it dawned on him—*pervert, threat of violence*. Open went his mouth like a geode with teeth inside. “You got nothing to worry about with me,” he said. “I’m here to get over my underground stuff.”

I didn’t know what he meant.

“Skylor, can you please introduce yourself *politely*, using your *manners?*” Kurtis said.

And after Skylor, it was my turn. I felt compelled to be respectful. I looked Chance in the eyes and I told him my name: Steven Pike. He held eye contact for a moment. I felt like I knew certain things just looking at him. I knew his father was not a surgeon.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Chance said. He smiled like an android. Usually when people have such fucked up teeth they’re more hesitant to smile.

After the introductions Kurtis spoke pseudo-philosophically about climbing and belaying. The virtue of the ropes course, according to Kurtis, was that it fostered

teamwork: one boy attempted the ring challenge or tightrope-walk while his partner kept him safe.

Chance volunteered to go up first, and Anthony volunteered to belay him. They fitted themselves with harnesses and Chance said belay on. Anthony confirmed belay on. Chance began climbing the staple-studded log pole. He paused halfway up and looked down at us. He said I don't think I can do it.

"Do you want us to cheer for you?" Kurtis said. "Would that help you find the courage?"

"I— I think so," Chance said.

Kurtis cheered: "Go Chance! You can do it! One staple at a time until you're at the top!" He gestured for the rest of us to join him. Danny shouted don't be a pussy. Kurtis said language. Actually it seemed to work—Chance resumed his climb. He reached the top of the pole, stopped again, sized up his next challenge: a cable suspended between his pole and the next, with rings hanging down from the cable. Chance's task was to swing himself from ring to ring until he reached the other pole.

"You can do it!," Anthony shouted. He gazed up at his partner with rapt attention. "Do it!" I don't think he was being sarcastic.

Chance grabbed hold of the first ring with both hands, let himself off the pole, and hung there in the sky. He let go with one hand, grabbed the second ring, swung on to the third ring, the fourth, the fifth. Then he stopped and began moaning: "Oh God oh God oh mother oh God." He hung from the sixth ring for a minute or two. All of us were cheering him on—a rare moment. "Do it! Do it! Do it!" But he let go. He fell a little before Anthony's counterweight stopped him. Anthony rose a few feet off the ground

and seemed exhilarated by the lift-off. Chance screamed let me down let me down let me down, I can't do it let me down. And as Kurtis helped Anthony to slowly feed out the rope and lower Chance to the ground, Danny grabbed a handful of dirt from the ground and smeared it into my hair. He grabbed my head from behind and stuffed my mouth with dirt and pebbles.

8.

Nicole said I should press charges but I decided not to. I hated Danny but I didn't want to bother with going to court. "I haven't even gone to court for *my* assault on *him* yet," I said. Nicole said it wouldn't be that much more court. She said look Steven if he presses charges on you then you press against him. "This is totally assault. I'm asking you to have some self-respect. They need to learn where their anger takes them."

I didn't know why it mattered to her. We were walking from her office up the winding gravel drive to Avalanche Lodge. Lady walked a few feet ahead of us. A sliver of sun remained above the ridge, then it dropped and the quality of the light changed. As we passed the dumpsters we saw a black bear rummaging through the trash. I said nah I'd rather read a book.

"You're going to do something stupid," Nicole said.

When we got to Avalanche we found Jason and Ricky the cowboy smoking cigarettes out front. Ricky was twirling his lasso. He took aim at Nicole and let the lasso go. He missed. Jason smiled at us and waved. They were giddy more with rebellion than nicotine.

"Boys boys boys..." Nicole said.

They giggled and scurried off into the woods. Lady dove into the brush after them. The smoke lingered in the air where they'd stood. I heard Danny and Skylor coming up the drive behind us, kicking up gravel. The front door burst open and Rain came jogging out. She looked around for the AWOL boys and muttered into her radio. Nicole pointed Rain in the right direction and Rain headed uphill into the woods behind the lodge.

“Maybe I should help her,” Nicole said. What she meant was: I’m leaving now.

I asked her to wait. “Do I really have to go on this stupid fucking trip?” I said. I couldn’t imagine being alone with Kurtis and Danny that long.

Nicole turned around and tried to look like she respected me as a basically decent human being. “Maybe we can make a compromise,” she said. “You press charges against Danny and I’ll consider pulling you from the WAT.” Then she marched off after Rain and the others.

I could see Skylor and Danny and Hulga cresting the hill now— Skylor cracking up and Danny smiling calmly in the bath of his friend’s reverential laughter, and Hulga expressionless and remarkably well-postured, careful not to indulge or endorse a single moment of their proud and oblivious behavior. I knew we’d go on hurting each other for a while still. Really it made no difference who had more charges or who spent more time in NYC or who was scolded more severely by his judge or whatever. Really the question was which would I rather do less: go backpacking with Danny in the mountains, or subject myself to another two or three hours in court? The answer wasn’t hard to find. I had spent enough time in courtrooms to last me the rest of my life, and not one of my cases was yet resolved—you could never have just one date with Edward. Nicole said it wouldn’t be that much more court but she was wrong. There were always follow-up dates. Edward would want to check up on things. And there would be some idiot LC accompanying me—some Rain or Desmond— sitting in a bench at the rear of the courtroom reading a magazine or dicking around on an iPhone, not even necessarily clued in as to what the fuck this court date was all about, which was the most humiliating part. It was humiliating to have the judge sit up there and talk about all the fucked up shit

you've done while some anonymous college grad who just wants to "give back to society" tries to piece together the specifics of your case, tries to form an idea of your life from scattered, decontextualized statements and references. "Indecent exposure." "Public masturbation." Well yes fine true. But if you barely know me, or if you don't know me at all— if you know nothing about me and you take me to court and this is all you hear the judge say— then you're going to form an idea of me and you're going to say oh Steven, poor crazy thing. And you're going to feel good about yourself because you're a recent college graduate and you're giving back to society. But actually you know nothing. Because actually my father is a surgeon and I have a movie theatre in my house and an underground basketball court. And I was high out of my mind on LSD at the time of the incident. But all you see is a kid been living on French fries for a year, and all you hear is this garbage about masturbating in an Osco pharmacy. So you make up a story in your head.

9.

That night I dreamed about Danny. It's irrelevant—I won't contemplate my dreams—but when we lined up for school in the morning and the staff told us to turn out our pockets and take off our shoes, Danny appeared as he had in my dream: afraid. He didn't know if I was going to press charges or not. He was afraid he'd finally get his two years at NYC. I figured the longer I could keep him guessing, the better. I sat through breakfast and science without any interference from Kurtis, and after lunch I finally made it to English.

Mrs. Vasquez was wearing a long turquoise skirt with sequins that day. She said happy Thursday everyone. Her smile was radiant and real. She told us to get out *Tom Sawyer*, but I was the only one who'd brought the book to class. Ricky the cowboy and Skylor were looking at an old *Maxim* magazine that Ricky had found in the woods. Jason was drawing on a paper napkin from the cafeteria. Mrs. Vasquez was not particularly gifted at disciplining her students; she only said I hope you haven't lost your books, because they aren't free. "If you lost your books, how are future students going to read them?" She tried to snatch Ricky's magazine away from him. Ricky yanked it back. Then he stood up, gave Mrs. Vasquez the finger, and walked out the door.

"Shit," Mrs. Vasquez said. She scurried over to her desk and drew her radio out of its drawer and called for assistance. Within seconds an LC was running down the hall and out the doors after Ricky. Skylor and Jason huddled at the window in the back of the classroom to watch him run down the hill toward the creek. Mrs. Vasquez tried to get their attention and it was all very much like the Sunday School scene from chapter four, in which Mr. Walters struggles for the attention of Tom and friends, who don't give a

fuck about their Bible verses. I brought this parallel to the attention of Mrs. Vasquez. “Is that why you had us read this?” I said. “So we can see how unoriginal we are?”

Mrs. Vasquez met me with her green eyes. “Is that what you think?” she said. She cast another look at Skylor and Jason, then left them to their idiocy. She put her hand on my desk. I could see her wedding ring and I thought of her husband and her together in bed, Mrs. Vasquez saying *fuck me fuck me fuck me*. What can I say? I was seventeen.

“You’re an insightful reader,” Mrs. Vasquez said. “You see into things.”

This moment was all I’d wanted.

“Certain things repeat,” Mrs. Vasquez said. “Such as boys who can’t control themselves.” She raised her chin at Skylor and Jason.

“But this book feels like a pretty light representation of that,” I said. “I’m not just talking about chapter six. I mean I don’t think this compares at all to a book like *Demian*, or even *The Catcher in the Rye*, which is a shitty book. And what’s the deal with *murderous* Injun Joe? Does Mark Twain want us to hate Indians?”

“It was a different time,” Mrs. Vasquez said. “But you’re very perceptive Steven. The book is full of problems.”

“The biggest of which,” I said, proud of my sentence construction, “is that Tom’s just the same in the end as in the beginning. He’s just as stupid as ever.”

“But now he’s rich, at least. That’s a change, isn’t it? And Huck too—he was homeless and dressed in rags and now he’s rich and living with Mary. And Tom has gone through love and he’s faced death. Do you remember when we talked about the hero’s journey?”

I did remember. Mrs. Vasquez had drawn up a map of the hero's journey on a long sheet of butcher paper that stretched from one end of the wall to the other. She turned off the lights and explained each stage of the journey with a flashlight and some kind of Enya shit playing from the boom box on her desk. But I didn't know what money had to do with the hero's journey. The hero's journey was metaphysical, was it not? I did not know the meaning of the word *metaphysical* but I still believed the hero's journey was metaphysical and furthermore I believed money had nothing to do with metaphysics. In my view it was simply a cop-out ending.

"It's not realistic," I said. "Look at Skylor. Look at Jason. How are *they* ever going to get rich, or fall in love?" Skylor's father was serving a life sentence in Florence for killing a cop; Jason's mother made him swallow bleach. If Langley had taught me anything it was that people were fated to live with what they were born into. I knew I'd be rich my whole life. It was a simple fact. When I left this place I would go to college. Jason and Skylor would go on guffawing at windows until they did something stupid enough to land them in jail for a long time.

"They might find their way," Mrs. Vasquez said.

We watched them together. They were leaning over the windowsill, butt cracks exposed. Ricky was on the other side of the window now. He was giving them a show. He'd gotten a hold of his lasso somehow. He twirled it over his head. A male LC stood behind him. He wasn't allowed to restrain unless Ricky threatened himself or others. I was conscious of my feeling of superiority and of the irony therein— after all, I was in treatment just like everyone else. I told myself I was different because I was in simply for substance abuse while most of the others were there because of horrible traumatic

events that had wrecked their lives, but suddenly it struck me as absurd that I should be theorizing about the fate of Skylor or Jason or Ricky the cowboy. It didn't stop me from continuing to theorize, however. Ricky smiled and tapped on the plexiglass and I thought, *Your life is fucked. You were raped by your older brother every week for five years, and now you have this weird complex about being a cowboy.* He was beckoning Jason and Skylor outside with one hand and working his lasso with the other. He turned around and let the lasso go toward the LC. It would have been a perfect throw but the LC jumped out of the way. That was all Jason and Skylor needed. They ran out the door, out the school, cheering for Ricky. They followed him down the hill toward the creek and thus Mrs. Vasquez and I were alone in the English room. She picked up her radio again and reported the AWOLs. I said it's not a *bildungsroman* at all, if Tom doesn't change.

“Well,” Mrs. Vasquez said, “is that really so unrealistic?”

And no, perhaps it wasn't. Hadn't I just now been thinking how hard it was to change? “So the genre itself is full of shit,” I said.

“Correct,” Mrs. Vasquez said. “There's always something that doesn't change.” She crouched beside my desk so that our eyes were level. She put her hand on top of my hand.

10.

Nicole said what are you going to do. “Definitely nothing,” I said. Nicole said fine then, have fun on the backpacking trip. I said what do you want from me. “They need to learn where their anger leads them,” Nicole said. I could never tell if she was being sincere. We sat in her log-cabin-style office. Everywhere I went shit was log-cabin-style. I gave Lady a pat on the head. Then I wandered through the weekend with Mrs. Vasquez in my head. I moved on to the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. On Monday I’d touch her hand again; that was all I cared about. Danny seemed to have forgotten his fear, or else he’d decided to let go of it. During movie night he made farting noises with his hands and mouth. Skylor and Rain thought it was hilarious. Jason told him to shut the fuck up. Rain told Jason to have a sense of humor. We slept, we woke, we wandered to the cafeteria. We ate pancakes. We emptied our yogurt cups. We hit the soda button when we were supposed to hit the juice button. Kurtis assembled the WAT for more teambuilding. He took us to the horse pastures at the edge of the property, at the mouth of Langley canyon. The sky was vast and clear and the ranchland with its pronghorn and mesas opened up in the great valley beyond the county road. Hundreds of miles away, at the far end of the valley, the granite peaks were covered in snow. “A bluebird day,” Kurtis said. “We start our adventure in two weeks.” Chance, the new kid, no longer wore scrubs. He wore a *No Fear* t-shirt. Mrs. Vasquez says there’s a part of us that doesn’t change. She puts her hand on mine, in the present tense. Kurtis worked a halter around a horse’s face. He clipped a lead to the halter and paraded the animal in front of us. “Do you know which one this is?”

“Zeus,” Anthony said.

“Very good,” Kurtis said.

Each of us fed Zeus a little hay. Then Leon showed up with Penelope and Frisco. There was something about the horses and the SOs—they got along naturally. Penelope and Frisco took easily to Anthony and Chance; they seemed skeptical of me. Frisco was especially fidgety. He wouldn’t let me touch him. “I just want to touch your nose,” I said. Kurtis said you should be more fluid with your motions, and slower, and less jerky, because horses are easily startled. He said one of them will come with us on our trip. And Leon too. Leon was the campus maintenance guy and horseman. I admired Leon. He didn’t shave and he cut his hair once a year and he obviously smoked weed. He was not at all the typical Langley hire, but without Leon this place wouldn’t have had an equine therapy program. The horses belonged to Leon; he lived half a mile down the county road on a plot of land with no house.

At lunch the cafeteria was alive with rumors about one of the little guys. Apparently his caseworker had stopped by to give him a letter from his father. While she was there she inspected his room on Cubs Lodge and found a week’s worth of shit piled up beneath his bed. The rumor hopped from table to table; evidently the caseworker made a huge scene. She called the LC a stupid cunt and threatened to sue.

But Chance just sat there alone at the end of the SO table. He didn’t gossip; it seemed he didn’t even hear the gossip. He looked like his shepherd’s pie was the most incredible thing he’d ever tasted. He brought the meat and the potatoes to his mouth in tiny forkfuls. I watched him. I tried to listen to the story of the caseworker but I found my attention wandering back and back to Chance, then to Mrs. Vasquez... Was the unchanging thing she’d referred to the soul? Was she going to give me the come-to-

God? Could I continue to love her if she gave me the come-to-God? If she sat down in the desk next to mine and told me some story about lost and found souls? I thought of the story about the guy who walked on the beach and knew he was with God because he saw a second pair of footprints next to his own. Then later in his life the beach walking became more difficult for whatever reason, the second pair of footprints disappeared, and the guy came to believe that God had abandoned him. But years later the beach walking became easy again, and the second pair of footprints reappeared, and the guy had the requisite heart-to-heart with God. "I thought you left me," the guy said. "Nah," God said. "I was *carrying* you." It seemed like Christians had been hammering me with that story my whole life. I didn't want Mrs. Vasquez to become one of them. If I lost her... The beach story quite frankly made me want to kill myself. Rain was the last person to tell it to me. If Mrs. Vasquez touched my hand on Monday and said Steven, there once was a man walking on the beach... I don't know. I counted the heads in the cafeteria. There were nineteen boys. A year ago there were over a hundred. The nineteen of us wandered out of the cafeteria and into our lodges. We lingered, we read, we vacuumed the floors and masturbated in the shower stalls. We formed pairs and lines and wandered back to the cafeteria. We wandered to the gym for a dodge ball tournament. I was there and Chance was there and Danny was there. The others were more or less there too. I got hit in the head and it didn't count. I read a sentence from *Huck Finn*: "I'uz hungry but I warn't afeard." Eventually I was bored enough to call my parents. I heard her voice while the phone rang: "You're very perceptive." My mom picked up and put it on speakerphone. She said the dog learned a new trick. The dog was an agility master. My dad said how's this Danny boy doing. He said how's his nose. I said Danny's fine.

“And he’s not causing you any trouble?”

“None at all.”

“And you’re going to keep your hands to yourselves from now on? You’re going to stay away from each other?”

Etc. etc. Our first conversation since DYC. It was hard to tolerate being on the phone with my dad for more than a few minutes. He was the one who’d sent me here in the first place. I could have done a six-month detox in Indianapolis but he thought the wilderness therapy would be good for me.

“I’m reading *Huck Finn*,” I said. “Huck’s dad locks him in a shed for days while he goes out on a bender.”

My father said nothing. Part of me wanted to apologize for being a fuck up. I didn’t. I never did. My mom began to say something but then she didn’t say it.

“Don’t be awkward,” my dad said.

“I’m not being awkward,” my mom said.

“Mrs. Vasquez says there’s a part of us that never changes,” I said.

“Your mother and I are getting a divorce,” my father said.

“Do you have anything you want to say,” my mom said.

I said yeah it’s time for breakfast I have to go. The fake Christmas tree was still standing in the corner of the cafeteria. It was clearly a joke among the staff and it was getting to be annoying. The cafeteria was a sea of noise and rumors. “We know there have been stories going around,” the LCs said. “We want to be as transparent as possible: yes, there’s going to be a lawsuit, but it won’t change anything. In fact we get sued all the time.”

I went AWOL to the creek in the evening light. I threw rocks in the water. Desmond said Steven why don't you come on back now. I said do you know if Mrs. Vasquez is Christian. Desmond said I don't know. "But you're Christian," I said. "Can't another Christian tell?" Desmond said no I don't think it works that way. I hopped over the creek and made Desmond follow me up the ridge. At the top of the ridge I said Desmond do you like to get fucked up. He pretended he didn't know what I meant. "Come on," I said. "Everyone likes to get fucked up."

"Some people like to be sober," Desmond said.

I let that one sit a while.

Monday turned out to be some kind of teacher's day. No school, no English, no Mrs. Vasquez. I went on walking around in the woods like a dumbass. Rain shadowed me for the first half of the day. Eventually she was sent home and one of the LCs from Hawkeye took her place. Chance accompanied the LC as her official positive peer. He helped her shadow me. He offered me helpful advice like, "Chin up!" and "Take charge of your attitude!" He handled the LC's radio for her. The voice from the admin building called for an update and the LC told Chance what to say. "Still AWOL. We're up by the old lodges now." The voice said Roger Roger. I looked for a way to break in. The windows were boarded up but the boards looked flimsy. I threw a rock at one, it bounced off. I went from window to window, abandoned lodge to abandoned lodge. I tried to tear the boards off. Then I discovered a back door with no knob and no deadbolt. There was a chain lock but that broke easy. I went inside. The back door led in to the lower floor: a bunch of bedrooms with weird stains on the mattresses. Upstairs the carpet was ripped up and there were empty paint cans everywhere. Chance and the LC trailed close behind.

They said why don't you come on back outside now. There was a stacked washer/dryer standing unplugged in the common area. There was a table, and laminated maps scattered over the tabletop: a map of Europe in the Middle Ages, a map of colonial Williamsburg, a map of Colorado. There was a nail gun underneath the maps. I pointed it at Chance. He said whoa bro, whoa, that's super negative. I wanted to see his façade crack. The LC grabbed the radio from him and called for backup. "I'm just fucking with you," I said. I threw the nail gun on the table. "Why do you wear that *No Fear* shirt every day?"

"It's my lucky shirt," Chance said.

"You came from Pueblo, didn't you?"

"You don't have to answer that," the LC said. But it was clear: he came from the state mental hospital in Pueblo. And anyway he answered me.

"I've been to Pueblo more times than I like to admit," he said. He lifted his shirt. I closed my eyes. I wouldn't look at the cliché of his scars. We were common losers. I went into the kitchen and looked through the cupboards. There was a can of Crisco and a few boxes of macaroni and cheese. I heard feet stomping on the stairs. Some freshly hired LC came running up looking pissed.

"Are you OK?" he said to the Hawkeye LC.

She nodded.

"Restrain?" he asked.

She nodded again.

They both looked at me for a second before they came at me. I could tell she was going to hurt me. She did. She took me down hard. I bit a finger. I could hear Chance

saying calm down bro, you need to calm down bro. His words found a rhythm with the flailing of my limbs. I bit a finger, “you need to calm down bro.”

11.

Finally it was Tuesday afternoon. Mrs. Vasquez said what's the difference between *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn*. I said *Huck Finn* is more political, but Mrs. Vasquez didn't touch my hand. The other students were there. I told myself it was *because* the others were there that she didn't touch my hand. Mrs. Vasquez played a documentary about the real identity of Shakespeare. The narrator talked about the very limited biographical information we have. I got depressed and went to the bathroom. LCs were supposed to supervise bathroom breaks but they were all tied up with AWOLs, so Mrs. Vasquez sent me on my own. She trusted me. The bathroom reeked of shit. There wasn't a proper sewage system at Langley— everything flowed to an underground cesspool near the ropes course. It had to be suctioned empty once a month and hauled away in a big truck. It'd been at least two months since the last truck came, and for some reason the sinks stunk worse than the toilets. I went into a stall, I took a shit. There was a swastika etched into the door of the stall, the word HATE etched beneath the swastika. I sat there for a long time, looking at the swastika. I remembered seeing it there my first day of treatment. It may have been there for years. Eventually I flushed, I got up, I washed my hands. And when I opened the door to leave I was startled, quite startled, though maybe I should have been expecting it: Mrs. Vasquez stood right there, her hand resting on the doorframe. She looked both ways down the hall. Then she came in, closed the door quietly behind her and locked it with a key. "There you are," she said. "You're there." So I was. She touched my shoulder. She touched my stringy hair. I said don't, I look like a girl... but she brushed a bit of hair behind my ear. She drew me into her arms.

"Smells like shit in here," she said. And she laughed. And she kissed me.

12.

“You look awfully chipper for someone who just yesterday threatened a peer with a *nail gun*,” Nicole said in group therapy. She told me how I act when I’m up and how I act when I’m down. She was somewhat insightful when she said I act out toward others when I’m up, but toward myself when I’m down. Then Hulga took over the discussion. “You’re a lot worse off than you know,” she said at one point.

13.

We began meeting in this one utility closet every other day, at 3 PM, shift change, when Mrs. Vasquez turned her students over to the LCs. I'd request a bathroom pass from Desmond or Rain before we transitioned back to Avalanche. I could count on them to be too burned out or lazy to accompany me. There was a lot of paperwork they had to complete with the daytime LCs before we transitioned, which left Mrs. Vasquez and I plenty of time. If the coast was clear I'd go to the cafeteria and check the lock on the never-used utility closet behind the Christmas tree. If the closet was unlocked it meant Mrs. Vasquez was inside. It was a bold arrangement, of course. We both recognized it. The danger was part of what she liked, I think. I liked it because I believed I was finally in love. She said she was in love too. She had her theories on love. "The universe," she said, "is *made* of love. It's the reason anything exists at all; it's the unchanging principle." And so she didn't give me the come-to-God, but a dose of John Lennon-style mysticism. A relief. "I was afraid you were going to talk about souls," I said. Her body was like this: neck, hair, teeth, nails, eyes. The utility closet was like this: cement, light bulb, dust, clutter. Mrs. Vasquez nibbled on my ear and said God doesn't exist. We stayed in the utility closet for years and years. I thought I would learn everything about her past. I thought I would learn what had brought her to Langley. Some long, sad story. I wanted to know her as a real person, but in fact I learned almost nothing about her life in the outside world. We didn't talk much and every time I asked her for a story she just laughed and called me a silly boy and pulled my jeans down to my ankles. But one day I caught her hand and I said no, tell me something real. And Mrs. Vasquez stood up, and she made a kind of snorting sound, and she did, she did tell me something real, and it was

the only thing of any significance she ever told me—a story about her sick husband, Victor. “I found a little 35mm camera at a garage sale,” she said. “It was only fifteen dollars and it came with a case and two lenses and three rolls of film. I bought it and started taking pictures of everything: our furniture, our dog, and of course, many, many pictures of Victor. Victor taking a shit, Victor watching TV, Victor making eggs and making coffee. On our refrigerator there’s a photo of Victor’s grandmother, who interprets dreams and loves Hafiz. Hafiz says *all a sane man can ever care about is giving love*. I took that picture too: the refrigerator with the image of Victor’s grandmother and the implied images of Hafiz. I took pictures of our grocery cart in the supermarket. I took pictures of bell peppers and frozen pizzas. In the hardware store I took pictures of the popcorn and in the dog park I took pictures of the pugs. But I noticed that even the pictures of other things were actually pictures of Victor. He was in each of them somehow—here a tip of his shoe, there his shadow. I realized: I’m documenting the death of my husband. At that point I stopped taking photographs. Victor and I pretended there was nothing wrong, and weeks got away from us like nothing. We watched TV, we made love, we went out to dinner. But he was still sick, you know, it wasn’t like anything had changed. So I thought, why *not* document it? I decided it wasn’t morbid. I also decided it wasn’t enough simply to photograph our usual routine. I wanted an image of Victor somewhere *unusual*, so that it would stick out in my mind: *that is Victor*. I said to him I want to drive east, over the Divide. I want to drive past Denver until you can’t see the mountains anymore. I want to go where all you see is farmland. Victor wasn’t into the idea. He said why do you want to do that. I said I want to take a picture of you in a field with cows, I don’t know why, don’t ask me to explain it.

Victor said I feel like shit and that's a five-hour drive. He said you're being selfish. I said Victor, please, you're not the only one who's suffering here. Don't ask me to explain why I need a picture of you standing in a field with cows. I don't know why it needs to be a field or why it needs to be cows. He saw that I was serious. We got in the car and drove, reluctant and ill as Victor was. We crossed the Divide and Victor looked like he was doing better. When we got to Denver, though—when we were crossing I-25 and heading into the plains—Victor said something strange. He said life is an endless competition. He said I'm no longer interested. I'm tired of coming up short. He was looking out the window and there was a big farm sprinkler thing parked in the middle of the field. I tried to understand where he was coming from. I said to myself: he's making peace with death. The landscape leveled out and we headed into the snow-dusted fields. We got off I-70 and took a county road. Half an hour passed and the road turned to gravel and we got a flat tire. I could tell Victor was pissed, but he held it together long enough to help me get the spare on. I said okay okay Victor, we don't have to drive any further. This is far enough. Just hop this fence and I'll take your picture. It doesn't matter if there aren't any cows. It doesn't matter that we can still see an inch of mountains on the blue haze of the horizon. Victor hiked out into the field and I went into the car to get the camera. And of course: there was only one shot left on the roll. I didn't have any extra rolls. God, I felt like an idiot. I had planned to take many shots, to spend twenty or thirty minutes trying out different angles, different exposures. But in the end I only got to take one picture of Victor, my love. We've been happily married for twelve years, but he looks miserable standing there in that field. He's looking at the camera like

he has no idea who I am. And worst of all, the project was a success: the image sticks out. I see him standing alone in the middle of that field. I see him all the time.”

And that was the only real thing Mrs. Vasquez ever said to me. By the end of it she was speaking quite loudly and I was afraid someone would hear us. I thought I heard footsteps in the cafeteria outside. We waited in the relative silence of the utility closet for the footsteps to repeat, or for the closet door to suddenly open. Nothing happened though. I tried to picture the wasting Victor. I tried to see him. I couldn't. Mrs. Vasquez had failed to describe him.

“Is he still alive?” I said.

“Yes,” Mrs. Vasquez said.

I put my hand on her head and tried to push her down. She resisted. She took off her pants and said this time you do me. It was a new experience. The taste was bizarre. Afterward she reached into her purse and pulled out a little book. “I want you to read this out there in the woods,” she said. It was an ex-library pocket edition of Plato's *Symposium*.

14.

I don't know where we went. Kurtis told us the name of the place and I didn't listen. Basically it was a postcard: craggy peaks, sweeping valleys, snaking rivers. Wildflowers. Kurtis seemed disappointed that it was not quite the *sea* of wildflowers he'd expected. There were only patches of purple and red and gold flowers here and there. We hiked all day, we had group in the morning and evening. At night in the tent I read the *Symposium*. I used a headlamp and I wanted to get drunk. These Greeks—they were so hungover they thought they couldn't drink any more. But they were wrong. They confused pleasure and beauty, and I saw in vivid beige and ringworm red the grotesque figures of Aristophanes' imagination—chubby, rounded beings with one head and two faces, a dick and a vagina, and four ears and four arms and four legs. I tried to picture the exact movements of these beings. I saw them cart wheeling. By day when the WAT hiked, I pictured us all fat and round and cart wheeling toward our destination. I didn't know what our destination was, exactly. I didn't know if we were headed in a line or in a circle. It was impossible for me to know without asking Kurtis. I didn't want to ask Kurtis. I was adamant that I would never find myself *needing* anything from Kurtis. "The word *androgynous* really meant something then," Aristophanes said. I tried my hand at cartwheeling. It proved difficult with a backpack. I could only do a few consecutive cartwheels before I was exhausted. I was not meant to be an androgynous, physically-emotionally complete cartwheeler. I was more like a boy vying for a lover, lingering on the steps of the baths, flaunting myself (though I was not a boy). "I cannot say what greater good there is for a young boy than a gentle lover, or for a lover than a boy to love," Eryximachus said. I wasn't clueless. I knew that in some sense my

relationship with Mrs. Vasquez conformed to the Greek paradigm. I was a bit old I guess, and Mrs. Vasquez was a woman, but still she was my teacher and my lover— my lover who was now several hundred miles away, for we were not in the vicinity of Langley. We were south of Langley, or north. It's possible we were west of Langley. I have stayed away from Colorado for multiple decades at this point. My geographical knowledge of the area is vague and simplified: there's the front range— Denver, Colorado Springs, Boulder, Fort Collins—and then there's everything west of the Divide. Langley is there and many mountains are there. I spent two years roaming this region after my discharge. I took pictures of waterfalls, I rode a bicycle, I hitchhiked, I joined a bowling league, I walked. I climbed a fourteener. I toured Anasazi ruins. I sat in a cliff dwelling and spoke to a guy a few years older than me. He told me he'd been expelled from a fancy liberal arts college for “stalking” a girl he loved. He used air-quotes. I sought the American Dream until I realized I was a cliché. Then I rode home to Indiana on a motorcycle, across the plains of Nebraska and Iowa. I left Colorado for Indiana University. I took out loans when my parents wouldn't help me. My father wouldn't; my mother said she couldn't. I haven't returned to Colorado since.

But I'm distracted. The WAT adventure. The weather was unseasonably cold. Above tree line there was still a few feet of granular half-melted snow. Even below tree line there was some snow. The air was even drier than Langley's air. We walked in the cold sun. A river snaked through a valley. We followed it. Kurtis passed out beads at the beginning of every group. They were supposed to have therapeutic value. There was something vaguely tribal or native about this practice. I think Kurtis meant for us to feel vaguely like Indians, like we were living naturally or primitively or something. In reality

he was simply co-opting and further trivializing the popular idea of Native American culture. Not that I know anything about Native American culture; my point is simply that neither did Kurtis. He gave out beads when we complied with his expectations. We hiked maybe seven miles a day; not a great distance really, but enough to push the WAT to its limits. It took us forever to do five miles. We were soft boys, sustained as we were on French fries and corn syrup. We couldn't carry a pack long without whining for a break. By the sixth mile we were miserable, with the exception of Chance, who was tired but still enthusiastic. His hair got natty fast and it had little twigs and burs in it. Zeus carried a lot of weight but not all of it. We killed the hiking time pondering the fate of Jennifer, and the various possible outcomes of the caseworker's lawsuit. We posed each other questions: would the Langley Center shut down? If so, where would we be sent? Would our cases simply be dropped? Would we wake up one morning and be told to get off the property? Would there be some strange man there—the new owner wielding a shotgun—telling everyone to get the fuck off his land? This was Danny's hope, Skylor's hope. They wanted to thumb it back to Denver. Leon said Langley had been through hundreds of lawsuits in the past. "In a couple months no one will even remember this poop fiasco," he said. Chance and Anthony both thought the term *poop fiasco* was hilarious—they muttered it continuously throughout the days, cracking each other up. But Kurtis didn't like all this talk of Langley. He tried his best to curb our discussions. He said one of the things about being in the wilderness is that you don't have to worry about all the little affairs of the world. I had no idea what that meant, since the wilderness seemed only to amplify my worries, and plus all my worries had to do, after all, with a wilderness treatment center. We were on a wilderness retreat from a

wilderness retreat. My main anxiety was Mrs. Vasquez, of course. The most horrific accidents become plausible when lovers are separated: *car crash, bear attack, murder at the hand of jealous Victor*. At night I awoke from nightmares in which a half-decayed Victor tortured Mrs. Vasquez with a waffle iron. At first it seemed like he was doing a nice thing for her, making her breakfast, but then he flung the batter in her face, and flew at her with the waffle iron. Coyotes woke me from the dream. Anthony and Chance and Leon were there. Kurtis slept with Danny and Skylor in the other tent. I was pissed to be sleeping with the SOs, but Nicole had given strict orders not to have Danny and me in the same tent. At least Anthony and Chance snored less than Danny.

I listened to the coyotes hunt. It sounded like a dog was lost out there. Its barking moved all over the valley. The dog sounded distinctly domestic and lost. Eventually the coyotes got it. The dog screamed like a person. After the kill the coyotes began to sing. Very late in the night, near dawn, they approached the periphery of our camp, and they almost sounded like birds or ghosts. By the second night they were familiar enough with us to walk right into the campsite. They scrounged around the fire pit for bits of food. I was afraid, wild animals were close. I had my headlamp on and Socrates was saying something about fucking as many people as possible. I thought: maybe not only love keeps the universe in motion, but also hunger. Or hunger is actually the root of it all, and love is only a form of hunger. Decades later I found this idea expressed beautifully in Rabelais. I was relieved when Anthony and Chance finally woke up. They were afraid. Two of the coyotes seemed to be disputing something. They growled and snapped at each other. Leon rolled over and told us in a haze of half-sleep not to worry about it. "...don't hurt people..." he muttered. I trusted Leon. If he wasn't afraid of the coyotes,

then I wouldn't be either. I let go of my fear. In the morning, though, it was clear that Danny and Skylor were not so easily appeased. At breakfast they were visibly terrified. They wouldn't speak. We were eating oatmeal around the still-hot coals of the previous night's fire. Danny and Skylor looked like a couple of corpses staring into the shifting colors of the coals—the blacks, oranges, reds. Chance said just think of them like dogs. “Dogs don't hurt people, do they?” Danny said shut the fuck up nigger. He didn't look away from the coals to say it. Kurtis took three beads from Danny for the inappropriate language. That was all he did. I told Kurtis Danny doesn't fucking care if you take a bead from him, then Kurtis took a bead from me. “Language,” he said. We washed our oatmeal bowls with river water and hiked along the river. Anthony and Chance said *poop fiasco* thirty or forty times, Danny and Skylor lagged behind a few yards, expressionless, dumb. Around noon we took a break and ate peanut butter sandwiches in the shade of an aspen grove. A group of white-haired couples walked by with hiking poles and a couple dogs. One of the women said have you all seen a dog by chance, it's this one's brother. She pointed to a yellow lab. Anthony looked up with his dusty purple cape draped over one shoulder and his rat-tail over the other. “Poop fiasco!” he shouted. Peanut butter and bits of chewed up bread sprayed from his mouth. The couples hiked away. We hiked on in the opposite direction. In the evening we set up camp, made a fire, sat in a circle for group. We tossed around words like *negativity, positivity, cycles, manipulation*. Kurtis said Anthony what's with your poop fixation. Anthony just sat there picking his nose. He seemed fascinated by a patch of snow at his feet. He watched it with intense concentration. Kurtis started to say something about the poop fiasco thing earlier, but Chance interrupted him. “I'd like to talk about something if that's okay,” he said. “I've

got some stuff to process.” Then he lapsed into a monologue that seemed like it must have been pre-prepared. He talked at length about a San Diego scene of goth kids he called the underground. Somehow, though, he didn’t communicate much. Where this underground was, or what exactly it was, or what these goth kids did— he told us nothing. He talked for fifteen or twenty minutes and managed to communicate nearly nothing. He showed us the scars on his torso but he never said anything outright about cutting himself. Kurtis said that’s OK, put your shirt down. Chance said I have pictures of my dreams and all of my underground dreams. He reached into the brain of his pack and took out a few drawings in crayon and colored pencil. He passed them around for us to see. “What do you think?” he said. “I’m trying to get that really *dreamy* feeling about dreams.” In each drawing the same images recurred in new combinations: bleeding hearts chained and padlocked, golden keys, girls with cat ears and cat eyes and tails, and large theatres full of people. Some of the pictures included semi-literate captions: *Wen can I see u ugin, wen can I feel u ugin*. “My mom says when we’re dreaming we’re seeing a higher reality,” Chance said. “My mom says that’s why people keep dream journals and draw pictures of their dreams. So they can get in touch with their higher reality.”

“Tell me about your mom,” Kurtis said. Chance was his ideal kiddo.

“She’s huge,” Chance said. “And she’s nice. But she’s also way strict.” At this statement Chance burst into laughter. “She has money and she sends me clothes. She forgives me and she says forgiveness is the most important thing. She combs my hair and braids it when I see her. She’s the opposite of my dad. He drives trucks and he’s

skinny as a rail and he's white and he sings Christian songs, and I only lived with him once.”

There was a fat, horn-peaked mountain behind Chance's head. I watched the clouds rush over it toward our camp, until there were no clouds and the sky was clear again, though slightly darker than before.

“Overall, mom was right when she said the underground was the wrong crowd,” Chance said. “You wouldn't believe what I've seen.”

“All this little faggot's seen,” Anthony said, “is his foster cat's *butthole*.” He was staring at the fire now; he'd moved on from the snow. A smile was beginning to crack on his lips, the white pimples on his forehead were ready to burst. “*Foster cat's... butthole...*” he whispered.

Kurtis took a bead from Anthony. “We're here to support each other, not bring each other down.”

Then Danny broke his day-long silence and began to speak. I think fear of the coyotes, and of being isolated in the wilderness, had finally backed him into a corner, but his moment of catharsis was hijacked by his propensity for lying. He appeared to be emotional and sincere, but the actual content of his speech was again the death of his father, who was shot, Danny insisted, in broad daylight, in a Cryps v. Bloods shootout. “I was only four- or five-years-old,” Danny said. “I didn't know what was going on. My dad and a bunch of his homies ran outside screamin' and cussin', and a few seconds later the gunshots started. Ever since then I feel like God's been fucking me over every chance he gets.”

I was annoyed. Even Skylor looked annoyed. He had his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, and he was shaking his head.

“We all know you’re a liar,” I said. “Be real man, your dad’s a fucking surgeon. I’ve talked to him. He drives a fucking BMW.”

“You don’t know shit,” Danny said.

“Nah man,” Skylor said. “He’s right. You gotta stop lying about this shit. It’s weird bro.”

“What the fuck?” Danny said. He didn’t expect this dissent from Skylor. “You’re sayin I’m *weird*?”

“I’m not saying you’re weird,” Skylor said. “I’m sayin’ it’s weird to keep lying about your dad being dead.” He still had his head in his hands. He was looking at the dirt.

“Bro, I can’t help it if my dad’s—“

“Look,” Skylor said. “I’ve never met my dad. You get me? I’ve talked to him five times in my life. He’s been locked up for thirteen years.”

“Is that something you’d like to talk about?” Kurtis said.

“*Hell* no,” Skylor said. “I’m just saying it pisses me off when Danny talks this bullshit about not having a dad. Because he doesn’t know shit about that. His dad takes him on home pass like once a month and all Danny does is pretend he’s dead.”

All this made me think of my dad, of my home. I wondered which of my parents would keep the house.

Skylor said: “Sorry bro, but it’s weird. I don’t know why you gotta lie. It’s something you should probably ask yourself.”

“Fine,” Danny said. “I’m a fucking liar. Is that what you guys want to hear? That I’m a fucking piece of shit *liar?*”

“No one called you a piece of shit,” Kurtis said.

“Might as well have,” Danny said.

“Nah man,” Skylor said. “Actually you’re my best friend—“

“Fuck you,” Danny said. “You’re right. I’m a fucking piece of shit liar. I can’t handle the truth and every day of my life I’m a big fucking fraud. I act like a ganster because in real life I’m a fucking pussy. And that’s the truth. But so long as we’re getting the truth out in the air, maybe we should all know something else.” He looked at me with genuine hate then and said: “Steven hooked up with Mrs. Vasquez.”

For a moment there was silence. Everyone looked at me. Then Anthony started laughing his ass off. “No fucking way!” he said. “That is fucking *badass!*”

“Is this true, Steven?” Kurtis said.

“Whoa,” I said. “Where the fuck did you hear that?”

“Uh, right outside the *closet* in the cafeteria,” Danny said. “Heard you stuffin her in there. And I fucking saw both of you come out. Guess you didn’t see me behind the trashcan though.”

“*So* badass,” Anthony said. He slapped me on the shoulder and tried to give me a high five.

“Steven,” Kurtis said. “Do you have anything to say about this?”

“Yeah. This bitch is a fucking pathological liar.”

Kurtis took two beads from each of us for some reason. He closed the discussion of Mrs. Vasquez. He said I'll be looking into the matter when we return to Langley. "For now, just relax. Get in touch with the rhythms of the universe," he said.

We ate hot dogs and marshmallows around the fire. In the night sky I saw a constellation like the bulging forehead of Socrates. It was a dream. In the morning Kurtis told us to strike camp. He watched us with hands on his hips. He said only a fool wouldn't cherish a morning like this. The hiking that day was tougher for a couple reasons. Not two hours after setting out we found ourselves cresting a pass where the snow was waist deep and the trail was buried. Kurtis said we needed to cross this mountain and get down to the valley on the other side in order to reach the end. One more day. I said can't we just go around the mountain. Kurtis looked at me like I was insane. Leon said I'll scout things out with Zeus; a half hour later he returned and said the path's buried clear down the other side of the hill, but she pokes out near the creek at the bottom. Kurtis and Leon went and had a chat behind some pine trees, glancing back at the four of us standing there with our packs in the snow. Then they came back and said we were going to blaze ahead. "Like pioneers!" Kurtis said. "Trail or no trail!" So we trudged up toward the peak for an hour and a half. The going was very slow. The snow soaked through my jeans and got under my waistband and melted on my crotch. We climbed through the sharp air. I was sweating and red-faced when we came upon an elk carcass lying on its side, the belly and ribs well gotten into, but the rest of the body untouched. I had never seen an elk. We stared at the body. Kurtis didn't want to stop but there was nothing he could do. Even Leon stopped and admired. The elk's mouth was fixed agape. There were no antlers and, it seemed, no blood. The snow was up to

my waist, but the carcass sat atop the snow as if it were weightless, and there were no footprints anywhere near it. “The end of the trail is close,” Kurtis said, but we didn’t move. There was not even a bird feeding on the elk. It was a giant without a belly. A cloud passed over the sun. “The end is close,” Kurtis repeated. We kept walking. Late in the afternoon we made it over the peak and down the other side of the mountain. We arrived at the winding creek where, finally, the trail remerged. We were drenched, sweating and cold, and we quietly basked in the sun, hoping to dry. Leon uncoiled a length of rope from Zeus’s saddle and tied it up between two trees as a clothesline. He stripped down to his boxers and hung up his clothes. I was surprised how skinny and pale he was. Danny took Leon’s lead, started to undress, but he was cut short by Kurtis, who told him no as soon as his shirt was off. Danny gave Kurtis a look like what-the-fuck, but he put his shirt back on and again, he called Chance a nigger, for no apparent reason. Chance pretended not to hear the slur, or maybe he really didn’t hear. Anthony spread his cape out over the dried grass and lay down on it. An hour later we resumed hiking. It was evening now and we were all ready to quit. Kurtis kept us going. The trail continued along the creek. The mountains loomed larger and larger to the north, or the south, I don’t know. Kurtis had us walking in a straight line, with himself in the lead and Leon and Zeus in the rear. He’d given me a bead for being line leader. Behind me were Chance, Anthony, and then Danny. I wanted to say something to Chance about yesterday, about how terrible Danny was treating him. I don’t know why but for some reason I wanted to be gentle with Chance. He seemed to deserve it, because his head was fucked. Clouds rolled in again. They hovered over the mountains, then charged south into the valley. They glowed orangeish the way clouds can in the winter when it’s about

to snow. But it wasn't winter. They hung low and congealed until all the sky was one vast rusty cloud. "It's going to snow," Chance said. Kurtis kept walking and said I don't think so, it's August. Ten minutes later a single snowflake came dancing down in front of my face. The wind picked up. A storm quickly developed; we made camp. We got the tents up quickly and crammed into Kurtis' tent and ate apples and peanut butter and summer sausage for dinner. Coyotes cried continually across the valley. Tomorrow we still had ten miles to go. We stayed in the tent for hours doing group. We were all basically sitting on top of each other while Kurtis droned on—*accountability, unaccountability*. I busied myself calculating tomorrow's journey in my head, trying to determine for sure that as long as we went at least a mile an hour we wouldn't have to spend another night in this wilderness. I wished for Victor to die soon. I wanted his cancer to eat him up. The coyotes howled and Zeus made a panicked sound. At some point in group Anthony told a story about the state mental hospital in Pueblo, the same one Chance came from. Anthony said the first time I went to the hospital was the day I was kicked out of my wife's house. "We lived with her family," he said. "They treated me like a king. They did whatever I told them. I slept with all of them: her mother and her sisters and her sisters' daughters. They kept a good secret but my wife found out. She went mad. She chased me around the living room with a fucking butcher knife and sliced my shoulder as I escaped through the back door. After that I walked straight to the mental hospital." Obviously this was a lie, like Danny's story. The difference was that Anthony didn't expect anyone to believe him. Chance said I agree the mental hospital is scary. Anthony said I didn't say that. Kurtis pulled out his string of beads. "Who do you think today's positive peer might be?" he said, looking around and holding his gaze for a

second on each of us. He untied the knot at the end of the string, pulled off a bead, and reached his hand out to me. “Steven!” he said. “Good work today, buddy!” So that made two beads for me in one day. They were both glass, black with swirling oranges and golds. They were probably identical. I don’t know what happened to them. Leon and Chance and Anthony and I went to our tent. I lay on my back and looked at the mesh ceiling of the tent. I slept, I woke. I heard the faint sound of the snow falling. The storm had died down. Then more coyotes, this time different. It was so unlike what I’d heard from them before—distant, and almost electronic, like an arpeggio on a synthesizer. They sounded happy, full, festive, intoxicated. I imagined they must have dragged a carcass from the kill site to the feeding site, and now were blissfully feeding on the fresh body of a deer or an antelope, blood splattering the fresh snow. I don’t know if that’s how coyotes work. I didn’t know that Chance was awake. He was lying beside me but hadn’t moved in a while, and as I was picturing the blood on the snow and the coyotes shaking their heads to tear the meat from the bones, he turned over and said hello, and held out his hands and said give me your hands. I didn’t think, I held out my hands and Chance cupped his hands around mine, hovering near them but not touching.

“Do you feel anything?” he whispered.

“It feels cold,” I said.

“Exactly,” he said. “I have powers.”

In the morning it was cold and there was a lot of snow, but the sun was out. We got out of the tent quietly, slowly, exhausted. Even Kurtis had little to say, as if even he were calculating the logistics—how many hours till this would all be over? We followed the river. There were no wildflowers and no one cared. The snow melted throughout the

morning until the trail reemerged, right beneath our feet, beside the river. Eventually it veered away from the river and headed uphill. We entered groves of aspen trees. We passed through burn areas where the remains of the pine trees looked like charred telephone poles. Chance started to sing, Danny said shut it, Chance complied. We walked for miles in silence. After a while it got to be a lot of work. Our clothes were wet, we were tired. I thought Anthony might die, he was breathing so hard. The snow melted in the sun. We were gaining elevation as the trail switched back and forth up a little peak. The going got steeper—steeper than any of the previous days. Anthony started to cry. He begged Leon to let him ride Zeus, but Kurtis said it wasn't a possibility. "You can *do* this," Kurtis said. I turned around and looked down the valley. The river was such a cartoon river—a perfect snake in the dead grass. It seemed to stretch away from me perpetually, as did the ridge we'd crossed yesterday. The entire landscape moved constantly away without going anywhere. I knew I was going to faint. Fuzzy darkness crept in from the periphery of my vision until all I could see was one brief turn in the river, and I felt as if I was floating, or maybe drifting, until my body crashed softly into the rocks. I woke up and Anthony was still crying. He was standing over me and bawling and clawing at his purple cape and chewing on his bottom lip, saliva dripping down the corners of his mouth, snot clinging to his nostrils. "You went away," he said, rocking his torso. "You went away away." The rest of the climb through those switchbacks was difficult, excruciating, but uneventful. Time disappeared. We saw a lot of marmots once we crossed the tree line. They were everywhere, these fat weasels scrambling over the boulders and the scree, completely unafraid of humans. The peak was flatter than I'd imagined it would be, and it was very windy up there. On one

side the valley and the snaking river, and on the other side a sea of clouds. Below that, presumably, was the end of the trail, where a company van would be waiting for us. Chance seemed to enjoy the view. Everyone else looked like they just wanted to get the fuck down. Zeus's eyes were red. He jerked his head around as if searching for more oxygen-rich air. Kurtis yelled over the wind we're at fourteen thousand feet. He yelled this several times. We ate peanut butter and honey sandwiches, huddled behind a semi-circle of rocks built to ease the barrage of wind. I was chewing on my peanut butter sandwich when Chance stood up, walked over to me, crouched beside me and yelled into my ear. I couldn't hear everything but he definitely said the words "Vasquez" and "you'll be fine." Anthony sprained his ankle on the way down from the summit. We still had three miles to go. Kurtis sent Leon by horseback to let the pick-up staff know we wouldn't be there until morning. Danny was furious at Kurtis for not just sending Anthony with Leon on the horse and letting the rest of us finish the hike. But Kurtis said Anthony needs to keep the ankle elevated, on ice. He said I'm not going to compromise anyone's safety. So we made camp just two miles from the end of the trail, in a field dotted with enormous boulders. The sun was going down. Danny said I want to go home god damnit. *Home* is the word he always used in reference to Langley. There were tears trembling in his eyes that he would not allow to fall. He tore off his shirt and said, "Let's go, Steven. Let's go you fucking pussy."

"What the fuck did I do?" I said.

"You think I'm a fucking liar well then *fuck you* motherfucker. Let's go bitch."

Kurtis tried to intervene. "I know you're angry."

"You don't know shit about shit pussy."

“You’re very angry, I know. I know.”

“Just send the freak down the trail on the goddamned horse!”

“Anthony is on horse restriction,” Kurtis said.

This new information dawned on Danny slowly. “Anthony’s... Anthony’s a *horse-fucker?*” he said.

“I didn’t say that,” Kurtis said. “I said he’s on horse restriction.”

Anthony sat against a boulder in the twilight. He wound his rat-tail around his forefinger, he listened. His leg was propped up on a log and an instant cold pack was draped over his ankle. Danny looked past Kurtis, at Anthony, and then he was off, t-shirt in-hand, stamping away from us down the trail. Kurtis called after him, received no response. He passed his eyes quickly over the rest of us: Anthony, Chance, Skylor, me. We made eye contact for half a second and in that half-second he communicated a complete dissatisfaction with his life. He went jogging after Danny. Then Skylor rose from his depressed stupor and jogged after Kurtis and Danny. They disappeared one after another like this, as if they were crossing a starting line at pre-determined times. As soon as they were out of sight, Anthony leapt up and grabbed a lighter Kurtis had left near the fire pit. He crouched on the ground and flicked the flame on repeatedly, inches from his eyes. Chance and I were standing in a patch of dirt, neither of us, I think, very much surprised at what had just happened. Chance told Anthony to be careful with the lighter, but Anthony was already absorbed in Anthony land. Soon he began to collect kindling. I was relieved that Danny and Skylor and Kurtis were gone. They were annoying. I felt my body relax as I stood there in the dirt. A wonderful wave passed through my body, starting at the crown of my skull and shuddering down through my

skeleton. My shoulders fell slack and my knees gave way. Then it occurred to me that I hadn't taken a shit in all these nights in the mountains. I darted toward a cluster of boulders, all that peanut butter and summer sausage barreling down my intestines. I dropped my jeans to my ankles and squatted down in one fluid motion. I didn't have time to dig the hole Kurtis had stressed was so important. I steadied myself with a hand against one of the boulders. Nothing happened. The urgency faded. I sat there for several minutes. After a while I had to stand because my knees and thighs were burning hot with exhaustion. I stood there thinking I'd never shit again. Then I made another attempt at squatting. I dug a hole between my knees. I pushed to a point where I was certain my intestines would burst. A distinctly human noise came out of the bushes. At first it was just a giggle. The stars were beginning to appear. The air was very cold, as if it was not early evening but late at night. I didn't know who I was. Something happened. I don't know exactly how it happened, but it happened soon after I finally took that shit and wiped myself with pine needles and buried the turds and needles in the dirt. I must have been the one who approached him, because it happened in the bushes, not the boulders. I followed the giggling voice from bush to bush, up a little hill. With me it was maybe still up for debate, but Chance was definitely not right in the head. There was no doubt about it: I could do anything to him. I didn't allow him to touch me but I did let him cast his spell on me again. I lay down in the pine needles and he scanned me with his hands, keeping them a few inches from my body. His hands hovered above my face, my chest, my belly, my groin, my legs...

“Colder?” he said.

I just lay there and let him do his thing, and yeah, actually I did feel colder. I pictured us in white robes, drinking wine, making speeches. And I felt extremely focused, as if my entire life were receding under the stars, as if everything about me were condensing into a single point of awareness, the stars not only above us but around us, infinitely in all directions. Colder and colder, receding and receding, until I do let him touch me, and there's a smear of fire in the corner of my eye, and I look down the hill and I see wild Anthony down there at the camp, laughing his ass off. (And this is a tableau I would keep wandering into, later, again and again, dozens of times at least. After the Colorado wandering, for example, it would repeat itself: the man and the cape and the fire and the perhaps psychotic laughter. It's a long story but I feel it is important: I was in college, it was 2012, I didn't believe in the apocalypse. I didn't think we were all going to ascend, or transcend. I didn't believe it but I was interested in those who did. I don't know why, I thought I'd try to write a book about it. I had a dog named Azreal. I don't know why. I took Azreal on walks every day. One day I ran into my old friend Peter. He was a big part of why I went to Langley in the first place. Now he had two dogs. I hadn't seen him since the night of the Osco incident. The Osco incident was the chapter Nicole wanted me to write in my life narrative. I never did. Peter was a friend of mine in middle school. Initially our friendship revolved around *Magic: The Gathering*. Then in eighth grade and ninth grade it was music. I'd like to say we were listening to Nirvana and Sonic Youth and Pavement, but in those early days we were all about the Smashing Pumpkins. We had no idea what a joke Billy Corgan would turn out to be. I was older than most of my peers. My mother had sent me to pre-kindergarten when I was a child. Later I asked her why. She said maturity issues. The result was that I was sixteen at the

beginning of ninth grade. I drove Peter to school every day. It was a private school in Indianapolis. We drove in from the suburbs. We didn't know anyone else. We had only each other, and money. Every week I'd snake a hundred dollar bill from my mom's purse and we'd buy an ounce of schwag from a twenty-something Kinkos employee who told us to call him Omega. We caught on pretty quick that he was ripping us off. We lived in our own little world of cannabis haze. We showed up baked to school and we were baked until we got out. We were both on the JV tennis team. We convinced our parents that practice was four hours long. After our two-hour practice we'd drive out to the country roads beyond the city, beyond suburbs, out to a seldom-used footbridge that spanned a little creek. We'd climb down to the creek and smoke several bowls and listen to *Siamese Dream* or *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness* on my boom box. The music echoed under the stone arch of the bridge. We threw rocks into the creek and listened to the echoing splashes on top of the music. Then I'd drop Peter off at his house and I'd go home and avoid my parents and masturbate in my bedroom. That was what things were like for a while. Then at the end of our first semester there was a convocation held in the gymnasium in honor of our school's patron saint. The patron saint was one of the nine North American Martyrs. It's commonly held that there are only eight North American Martyrs, but this is false. The students were encouraged to dress up for the convo. The boys wore khakis with ties and the girls wore dresses with these long sweater/cape/robe things that seemed to be in fashion at the time. I wore my black ZERO t-shirt with painted black nails, and Peter wore a tie-dye shirt with a print of the hookah-smoking caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*. He beat me to the hippy identity. Two clichés sitting in the bleachers. The student body filled the bleachers on

either side of the basketball court. Beneath one of the baskets there was a podium from which the head Jesuit guy told the story of our patron saint's martyrdom. Beside him stood a white screen on to which a projector looped footage of Indians and white men canoeing around in a huge lake, surrounded by dense forest and light fog. The noise of paddles gliding through water accompanied the Jesuit's story, which was about the Huron tribe and the French missionaries and the friendship they'd developed over twenty-some years living in the wilderness together. He spoke to us about the culture of mutual respect they'd established, and about how our patron saint never pushed his religion on anyone. Any conversions that occurred in the years between 1620 and 1650 were the result of individual choices, never force. Our patron saint learned the Huron language, and the Huron in turn accepted him almost as one of their own. He ate with them and bathed with them in the water of the great lake. He gave them medicine when they were sick, and they in turn educated him about life in the wilderness. At night their encampment was dotted with fires, around which the tribal people gathered for warmth and storytelling. Our patron saint wandered from one fire to another, listening to the tribe's creation myths, destruction myths... Actually in the Huron stories it was difficult to separate the two. For example: in the beginning there was only Parusha, the universe in the form of a man, a sort of giant, cosmic king, who lived an eternity before one day exploding into the myriad phenomena of reality (though years later I would discover this same myth in the Penguin Classics edition of the *Rig Veda*; was the head Jesuit simply an idiot who got his Indians mixed up, or was he consciously manipulating the truth?). "From Parusha's feet," the Jesuit said, "the hunters and gatherers and farmers exploded into being. From the body came the warriors. From the arms came the artisans and the

merchants, from the head, the clergy and the royalty. Parusha's eyes exploded and produced a hundred thousand artists, and his burst heart bore a legion of bloody shamans, sages, seers and oracles." In time, our patron saint reciprocated with stories of his own. But again, it was never a matter of force. The Huron loved our Patron Saint. They wanted to know where he came from. The Iroquois, though, were not such a fan of our patron saint. After several decades in the wilderness, he was captured in a raid and tortured for over twenty-four hours before he finally expired. The Iroquois tied him to a stake and poured boiling water over his head in mock-baptism. They tore out his tongue and disemboweled him alive. They fed on his intestines while he writhed in pain, but our patron saint uttered not a sound. Finally they cut out his heart and ate it. He died. To conclude the head Jesuit invited the student body to consider how the strength and courage of our patron saint might serve as a moral compass in our own lives. In dealing with others and with social injustice, how might we use our patron saint as a model? At the end of the speech Peter yelled the dude should have kept some ganja on him, to chill those Iroquois out. The dean rose from his seat at the bottom of the bleachers and looked up into the crowd, but Peter was a short kid and we were well hidden in the middle of the student body. A lot of the students were laughing, and afterward when we were invited into the old gym for juice and cookies Peter was making a lot of new friends. By sophomore year there were a lot of us and we were getting into mushrooms and acid. I found myself wearing Birkenstocks and a hemp necklace, and what could I say? Pink Floyd was simply *better* than the Pumpkins. Everyone agreed on this. We believed we were ceremonial drug users. The first time we took mushrooms Peter and I both thought we'd died. I learned before I ever read it in a book that everything is energy and that

stillness is impossible to find in the universe. I paid for everything. It was clear that many of my friends were simply using me. Even Peter was beginning to treat me like money, despite his rebirth. I was taking more money from my mother at this point, a hundred and fifty or sometimes two hundred dollars a week. She was an idiot with money but she must have been getting suspicious around this time. I knew things wouldn't go on like this forever. I took to drinking more, and reading. I read *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who you Are*, by Alan Watts. I read *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse. I read *Demian* and *Steppenwolf*, I read all of Hesse, because Timothy Leary told me to in *The Psychedelic Experience*. I mixed my father's vodka with ice blue Gatorade. I got hammered in school. I asked my Chemistry teacher, in the middle of her lecture, "What are you doing after school?" I asked her can I have a high five. I asked my history teacher if he voted for George Bush when he was trying to talk about the Great Reformation. This went on for the majority of sophomore year. I was never reported though, probably because my father was a significant donor. He was on the Board. So I was free to go down that road. I got an early taste of addiction. People say it's impossible to be addicted to mushrooms or LSD. These substances are supposedly self-regulating. But I got my hands on a sheet of high quality LSD and I took to it just fine. The print was a celestial Buddha sitting on a lotus blossom made of stars. It was strong. One hit did you just fine. It reduced things to shapes and colors. It dissolved your self. I developed a tolerance. Peter developed a tolerance too. We stayed up all night in my basement, we wandered to the little stretch of woods that divided my subdivision from the next. We communed with nature, we read *Visions of Cody* aloud. The sheet had cost me four hundred bucks. My mom thought she'd been robbed. One

night I put on disc one of *Mellon Collie* and Peter said I can't believe we ever listened to this shit. I said I don't know I still think this is pretty sick, maybe not as good as *Dark Side* but pretty good still. Then Peter went off on a rant about how everything and everyone was fake and it was sick and it made him want to die. I think he'd recently read *The Catcher in the Rye*. And one morning before school Peter and I drank a good bit of vodka and ate maybe four hits of acid each, nothing big as we'd become accustomed to ten. The effects nevertheless came on stronger than I'd anticipated toward the end of second period, in computer science. Just as language was beginning to fall apart my teacher asked me to demonstrate something on the computer hooked up to the projector at the front of the classroom. I walked up to the computer station and wiggled the mouse cursor across the screen, but all I could see were these inky, bleeding tracers; I couldn't find the cursor itself. Mr. Broker said go ahead and open up the start menu. I started laughing because I *knew* I knew where the start menu was, but for the life of me I couldn't find the little fucker. Pretty soon I was just clicking random images and buttons and starting to feel myself tipping over the edge. I knew the laughter would soon be unstoppable. I tried to compose myself. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and was treated to a beautiful flash of sacred geometry that breathed as I breathed. When I opened my eyes the first thing I saw was Mr. Broker beginning to look concerned. I said I'm sorry Mr. Broker I'm not much of a techno buff. Then I heard more laughter, some of which was probably my own. I managed to find the start menu and click on it just as the bell rang. It looked like Mr. Broker wanted to talk but I left the classroom immediately. I failed a geometry test in third period and watched that awful Drew Barrymore version of *Cinderella* in fourth period. At lunch I met up with Peter and a few

others on LSD. We drank more vodka, Peter rambled on about the *Lord of the Rings*. After a while his words stopped making sense. His speech was just a string of random words and phrases punctuated here and there with the phrase *ring of power*. Then he stopped talking altogether and stared at the label on his Gatorade bottle. After school four of us piled into my Infiniti. Travis, a rigorously sober friend, drove us around on the country roads. Another friend named Max had a bong in his backpack and we boxed out my car and listened to *Europe 72*. Peter and Max and I ate more acid. Then we were at a hockey game. It seemed like a lot of the other students were on acid too. There was a lot of it going around. Everyone had the same jittery smile plastered on like a mask. Peter was glowing and making people laugh, flirting with girls. Afterwards, our friend Anton from the hockey team wanted to come with us, and Peter wanted to take along two of the girls he'd been talking to. We already had a full car, so everyone but Travis ate some acid in the parking lot and contemplated the problem. We managed to squeeze the girls in the back of the car but there wasn't room for Anton. So I got out of the car and volunteered to ride in the trunk, and from here on things become unreliable, because one moment I'm riding in the trunk, and the next moment the darkness of the trunk becomes a sky littered with stars and constellations, and each constellation is a radiant question mark until the question marks are so bright that actually I am inside, staring at fluorescent lights that seem to be condensed manifestation of orgasmic energy, and all I can hear is the moaning of some kind of goddess or celestial being on the brink of orgasm. "Just don't stop," she says. "Don't fucking stop." And I've got my hand in my pants and it's outside my pants. My dick is just hanging out there. It feels amazing but it won't get hard. Nevertheless I cum on nasal decongestants. I'm arrested and I don't see Peter

again until years later, after Langley, after the Colorado wandering, during college, in the dog park. Peter in the dog park who in some ways was responsible for my going into the trunk of the Infiniti. He'd wanted to bring two girls along. And if I'd never gone into the trunk, would I have found myself in the Osco pharmacy? "It doesn't help anyone to ask these kinds of questions," Nicole used to say. In any case it was 2012. There was an apocalypse coming. Actually I'd been seeing him at the dog park for close to a year before I recognized him as my old friend. I don't know why I didn't recognize him, and I think in fact that he did recognize me. I think he didn't want to talk to me; he could see that I had changed and he had not. Or maybe it was the other way around. But when one of his dogs went after Azreal it was no longer possible to avoid contact. Peter screamed at the dog: "No humping no humping! BEAN! No humping!" But Bean continued to hump Azreal until I interceded. I plucked Bean off Azreal and the little fucker bit me. "Fucking *mutt!*" I shouted. I flung the dog away from me. Then I was face to face with him. He said is your hand okay. I saw him for who he was: Peter fucking Schumacher. He saw that I recognized him, I know it. He pretended to only now recognize me. "Holy shit!" he said. "It's been a long fucking time." He said wow man this is really a trip. He invited me over to his apartment for dinner. He gave me directions but I ended up just following him in my grey Civic. His apartment was on the shitty side of town, near the interstate and the gas stations and the fast food joints. We stopped at one of the gas stations on the way there. Peter bought a six-pack of beer and I bought a four pack of Monster. Peter said I can't handle that shit, makes me geek out. He looked like he hadn't aged since high school. The little mole on his nose was just as I remembered. There was not a trace of hair on his face. When we got to his apartment he gave me a

tour. It was a studio apartment. “This is the kitchen,” he said. “And there’s the bed, and there’s the couch. That’s the record player.” We stepped out to his balcony, where several beautiful plants were flourishing in pots. “I couldn’t tell you what they are,” Peter said. “They’re my girlfriend’s.” He let me smoke a cigarette. I sucked it down and looked at a Burger King. I felt suddenly angry. I wanted to ask Peter about the trunk; about how exactly that had happened. Because I had gotten into the trunk, hadn’t I? Therefore someone must have let me out. Someone must have left me in the Osco parking lot. But I said nothing. It was on him to bring it up. He knew nothing about Danny or Mrs. Vasquez or Chance or any of the others. He had no idea what the Langley Center was. It was on him to bring up the trunk. I said how long you been in Bloomington. Peter said about five or six years, I graduated in 2009.

“What major?” I said.

“Philosophy.”

“Still reading Alan Watts huh?”

“I guess so,” Peter said. “And fucking Heidegger. How about you? What are you up to these days?”

“Majoring in communications and technology,” I said.

“Oh yeah? I hear they’ve got a great program for that here...”

“It’s whatever. I just finished my first year.

“Nice, congrats.”

“It’s whatever,” I said. I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing in college. I was going to join the marines after anyway. It would have made more sense to do the marines first. I sucked down my cigarette and flicked it over the railing. Back inside the

apartment Peter grabbed a beer and I opened a Monster. I drank my Monster faster than he drank his beer. The three dogs lay on the carpet panting in the summer heat. We sat down on the couch and watched reruns of *The Simpsons* until Peter's girlfriend came in with a baguette and a bottle of wine. She said guess who got a \$50 tip from professor Crowley today. She was beautiful. I can't describe her beauty: brown hair, big green eyes. The description does nothing. Peter introduced us. Her name was Rebecca. I said hi Rebecca, I'm an old friend of Peter's. We shook hands. "I didn't know Peter *had* any of those." Rebecca joked. For dinner she and Peter made linguini with pesto and a Caesar salad. We ate the baguette with oil and vinegar while the pasta cooked. I was drinking more Monster than usual. Usually I limited myself to just one a day. It was my substitute for alcohol. Also it helped me study. I downed all four that night. I think I was nervous. I got to talking a lot. Rebecca was good at keeping a conversation going. She asked me what I'd been doing prior to starting my communications degree. I said wandering, and also writing.

"Writing what?" Rebecca asked.

"A novel," I said. "About 2012." I told her a little about my book, such as I conceived of it then. What I wanted to write about was the instinct of apocalypse, the perennial belief in imminent catastrophe. I never finished it. In some sense this is it, even though it's not really about 2012 anymore. Rebecca was offended by the sarcasm. She herself was really into the "Mayan theories." She told me about her work with the Amazonian vision medicine *ayahuasca*. I'd read the *Yage Letters* of Burroughs and Ginsberg, but this was the first person I'd met with any direct ayahuasca experience. Personally I was done with hallucinogens, I knew they didn't agree with me.

Nonetheless I was fascinated with what Rebecca had to say. She ordered the semi-legal vines and leaves from a Peruvian vendor online, and once a month she'd draw the blinds, light a candle, and spend the afternoon writhing on the floor and purging into a bucket. "People are afraid of the purge," Rebecca said, "but actually that is the most healing part of the ceremony. You get rid of all your toxins, so that your mind-body is completely pure, completely free to absorb the wisdom from the plant teachers." It was the plant teachers who'd told her about the changes coming soon, on December 21st. Peter rolled his eyes when she got to talking about aliens. He said yeah Steven, have you seen all of the completely legitimate and convincing videos on YouTube, from Moscow, Taipei, Jerusalem? "They're here, man. They're here." Rebecca was quiet then and drank her wine. Peter and I went on talking and eventually he got around to asking me about Colorado. I told him a little bit, not much. Enough to satisfy him. "I was almost convicted as a sex offender," I said. "The judge dropped the indecent exposure because of the acid. I went into treatment for substance abuse at a Christian summer camp." Peter was pretty drunk at this point. He'd had three beers and half a bottle of wine. I could tell he was thinking about the trunk. If he explained to me what happened then I would tell him more about Langley. But all he said was fuck man, that's a raw deal. I went home angry. A week or two passed. BOVINE CITY was in town. Rebecca called me and said Peter and I are going to the show. She said do you want to come with. I showed up at their apartment a couple hours before the show. Rebecca was on the couch rolling joints. There was a bottle of wine on the coffee table. It was half-full. I sat down on the couch next to Rebecca. Peter stood, taunting his dogs with bits of bologna just out of reach. Rebecca finished rolling the last one, sparked it, and told us a story about a man

she'd run into downtown, walking the dogs. It was a pretty standard mystical homeless guy story: the guy believed he could see the past and future incarnations of all sentient beings he came in contact with. He was petting Bean and Sally. He said Sally is on the verge of taking human form. He said beyond that I can't see anything, which means one of two things: either Sally will reach full realization and discontinue the chain of becoming within her human life, or else she will simply go somewhere else, be something else. I told Rebecca I don't believe in reincarnation. "People who believe in reincarnation are only deluding themselves into thinking they have an eternity to figure shit out. They're lazy."

Peter agreed. "Not that there's anything to figure out," he said.

"I can appreciate that perspective," Rebecca said, nodding thoughtfully. She offered me the joint. I just stood there. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're not down with weed."

"It's not that," I said. "It just doesn't agree with me." As soon as I said this Rebecca's attitude toward me changed. I thought, what are we in high school? I have to prove I'm cool? But I wasn't going to smoke. In those days I observed strict sobriety. I believed sobriety offered certain advantages. Keep in mind this was after Langley. I think it's important. We arrived at the club halfway through the opening act's set. I'm pretty sure it was the Jimjams but I might be mixing that up with another BC show. I got to be quite into them, later. This was my first BC experience. The crowd was of standard college hipster stock: designer jeans, blazers, propeller caps... They were drinking PBR and standing in little pods, nodding their heads politely to the violence of the Jimjams or whoever. We went straight to the bar. Rebecca ordered a gin and tonic.

Peter ordered a Stella. I asked the bartender do you have any Monster. She said I only have Red Bull. I ordered two of those. Then the two guitarists stepped off the stage and left the vocalist to scamper around on the floor and knob-twiddle the noise down to a dissonant droning hum. The hipsters looked around and tried to register the consensus—was it art? Peter and Rebecca were smiling but their smiles looked fake. I realized then that they were hipsters too. They had put on little propeller caps. Peter, I saw it now, was wearing a V-neck. Rebecca wore high-waisted jeans. I couldn't believe it. They were smiling but they looked miserable. I stood there with them for what must have been fifteen or twenty minutes as the high-pitch drone insinuated itself through the ears and into the skulls of the audience. I downed my Red Bulls and put the cans at my feet. The drone settled into a kind of silence. No sound but the ringing in my ears. The house lights came up. I said that was some weird shit. Rebecca said that was *sick*. I went outside for a smoke with the droves of hipsters. Peter and Rebecca stayed inside. When I came back inside I caught them in an argument. "*There* you are," Rebecca said. "I was just saying to *Peter*, that we should hang out with *Steve* all the time! But *Peter* said sometimes I just want to be alone—"

"I didn't say that," Peter said.

"Ha!" Rebecca spilled a little gin on herself. BC took the stage. I had a transcendent experience. The songs were unlike anything I'd heard before (I was not familiar with noise then). I had some serious déjà vu. Peter and I had seen The Smashing Pumpkins together in 8th grade. It was the first show either of us had been to. I think Peter must have been feeling nostalgic too. We got into the noise. We threw our arms out in every direction while shaking our heads violently from side to side. I yelled

into Peter's ear at one point: "THIS IS THE BEST GODDAMN MUSIC I'VE EVER HEARD IN MY ENTIRE LIFE." But Rebecca was clearly not enjoying herself. She and Peter smoked three joints during the course of the show, and she kept going back to the bar for more gin as well. She was clearly an addict. She didn't dance. When BC disappeared from the stage everyone screamed for an encore. Rebecca was swaying now. She kept bumping into Peter and me. She took a fourth joint from her purse and sparked it. Peter said put that away, security's right there. Rebecca called Peter a Boy Scout. She went ahead and smoked. Almost immediately, a big bald guy in a black t-shirt tapped her on the shoulder and told her to leave. Rebecca refused. She said I paid to see this show. "It doesn't matter how many pounds of muscle you have in your neck. I'm not going to move until the encore is finished." Peter rolled his eyes. He said why don't you just listen to the man, I don't think you have much choice. "Just wait for us outside," he said. "Please?" Rebecca took a long drag from the joint and held the smoke in for a theatrical five or ten seconds, then blew the smoke out in Peter's face.

"You don't love me," she said.

The security guard pinched the joint from her hand and ground it out with his boot on the cement floor. "Ma'am, I'm going to have to insist that you leave," he said. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her off in the direction of the door.

"Don't touch me! Don't you *dare* fucking touch me you *fuck!*" Rebecca screamed. She was becoming a spectacle—many hipsters turning their propeller-capped heads and taking in Rebecca's volume with tipsy indifference. The bouncer got her out soon enough though. Peter didn't follow her, he stayed with me. We listened to the encore. Later I would come to understand that the songs they played for the encore were

very seldom-played songs from their oddball ambient-psych album, *TONGUE TACOS*. They played “LETTUCE IS CHEAP,” “TONGUE IS CHEAP,” and “SAUCE = CHEAP.” Sauce in particular was really great—totally spaced out and hauntingly beautiful. No screaming, no drums. It was a short encore and the house lights went up as soon as the front man uttered a thank you from his reverb-drenched mic. I noticed then that Peter had disappeared. I took a leak and then went outside. I lit a cigarette and pushed my way through the crowd. I made it to the end of the block. I looked around and finally I found Rebecca across the street, in an alley. No Peter though. Rebecca was crying. I said why are you crying. Rebecca said I’m not happy. “Fucking muscle-headed motherfucker,” she said. Then Peter showed up and said there you are. He called a cab for him and Rebecca. I rode my bike home. After that I started spending more time with Rebecca. We went on outings with the dogs. We met in the morning for coffee and pastries at a café near my apartment downtown. Eventually, after two or three weeks, we fucked. I took her to my apartment after a hike one afternoon. She wanted to see my manuscript. I told her I wasn’t proud of it. But I showed it to her. She read it. She said you’re a good writer, but frankly you don’t know shit about the spiritual realm. And I thought of Mrs. Vasquez, and I thought I might say *there is only love*, but I didn’t say it. Instead I fucked Rebecca on the floor. Then we fucked everywhere else in the apartment, and talked about the meaning of the word apocalypse, and of the lightning storm in Taipei that may very well have been a portal opening from an alien dimension. I said I don’t know about that, that’s going a little bit far for me, but really I was already beginning to delude myself, for the sake of having her. The following week we sat down with Peter in his apartment. We opened a bottle of wine and all three of us had ourselves

a glass and a chat. Rebecca said we both know this is pretty much over. I said I'm sorry Peter, I didn't intend for this happen, it just happened, the heart and its tendencies etc. Then Rebecca started sleeping over at my place. She brought her cielo vine and her chaliponga leaves. She brewed them over the stove for a day straight, smudging the big pot with a bundle of burning sage once an hour. And when the brew was ready I didn't hesitate to accept it. "This is medicine," she said. We drank the brew out of mason jars. It took me nearly thirty minutes to choke the stuff down. It lingered in my stomach for half an hour before I purged. That was long enough. My body was uncoordinated as if drunk, and also I could feel the familiar tryptamine buzz coming on. I tried to stand, I couldn't. Rebecca seemed to be more in control of herself. She guided me to the bedroom. She lay me down on the bed. Suddenly there were little candles burning, and music. Perhaps some kind of chanting. I became aware of just how crowded my body was. There was me, of course, but there were others too. Malignant others. In a word: Chance and Danny and Mrs. Vasquez and all the rest from the Langley Center. They were their usual size and yet somehow they all fit inside me. I puked them up one by one, so that I was empty. I was a free vessel. Then I had a visit from mother Aya. She interviewed me forever. She was made of leaves and she had no arms. She showed me what was coming in the future: a trans-dimensional luminosity I cannot put into words. The music stopped, I opened my eyes. We were deep in the night. I was covered in vomit. Rebecca was already down. She said welcome back. I said there's something I haven't told you, I'm sorry. "I'm a sex offender," I confessed. "It's a long story." It's the story I'm writing now, at least partially. I hope this isn't too much of a spoiler. Rebecca looked frightened for a moment. She stood up from the bed and said Jesus.

“Did you have a traumatic experience?” she said.

I didn't know exactly what she meant. I said no not exactly. Then I told her how I became a sex offender. I started with the Osco incident and worked my way forward from there. I kept things strictly linear. I explained how I was lucky not to be an SO and then became an SO anyway. It took a long time to explain. I'll spare the details. They're coming anyway. “Perhaps it was my fate,” I said, at the end of the explanation. Rebecca was understanding. She sat back down on the bed. She said Peter told me he let you out of the trunk, because you were screaming. “He told me they didn't know what to do with you, you were out of control. But he regrets leaving you in the parking lot.” She stroked my face. I said the apocalypse can't come soon enough. I thought I was lying but I wasn't. The ayahuasca had shown me things. It *was* medicine. We decided then to fly to Peru and wait out the end of time in Iquitos. I found a sub-letter and sold all my possessions. Rebecca contacted her massage clients and told them she'd be out of town indefinitely. Then we flew. We spent a week in Iquitos looking for a bona fide shaman to work with. There were hundreds of them. Ayahuasca tourism was big. But we weren't looking for a tourist experience, we wanted to find a *teacher*, someone who could guide us in a sustained exploration of the spirit world. We visited several retreat centers before settling on *Casa Huasca*. In retrospect this was a relapse. Even now I'm relapsing. It doesn't seem to matter. But I loved Rebecca, I did. I loved her for leaving Peter, who'd unleashed me upon the Osco and thus initiated my journey toward registration. I'm not displacing blame here; I know it was ultimately my fault. But Langley never would have happened without Peter. I loved Rebecca for not hating me. *Casa Huasca* was run by a gringo named Scott. We stayed there for a long time. We

drank ayahuasca five days a week. Scott worked with us. We drank in the evenings in a big hut. Scott hired Peruvian curandos to play the icaros. The journeys lasted for the exact duration of the icaros. As soon as the singing stopped, so did the experience. But as long as the icaros kept up, Scott hopped from guest to guest and helped them exorcise demons, or puke into a bucket, or face the fear that was swallowing them, and just accept it, and let go, and see where mother Aya might take them. For months I thought he was a powerful wizard. He put me in contact with a pantheon of entities. I believed Scott was preparing my soul for the moment when it would dissolve into the light. Rebecca and I would dissolve into light together, on December 21st. Obviously I was frying. There is no limit to what I have believed. Entire months flew in a flash of visions. In November I came to my senses, partially. I came to see that Scott was full of shit. One night he gave us an extra strong brew. It floored all of us. About halfway through the ceremony he picked up one of the women and carried her away. He left his curando in charge of the ceremony and disappeared for the night. In the morning the woman left in a hurry. It happened two or three times in the month of November, and each time the women left abruptly in the morning without explanation. They wouldn't speak with anyone; they just packed their bags and left. I mentioned my concern to Rebecca. She thought I was being paranoid. She said sometimes Scott likes to work one-on-one with his students. But I watched him lose himself. He took to drinking cane sugar booze at all hours. His hut was littered with empty bottles. Often he didn't show up for ceremony at all. Still Rebecca retained her faith in him. She said he has a lot of responsibility on his shoulders. She said he's doing very important work at a very important time and it's only natural he should get a little stressed out. She took it upon herself to ease his stress. She became an

assistant of sorts. She spent the days cleaning up the grounds, hauling the trash down the mountain on a little cart. Scott allowed her to keep the books. One night she didn't return to our hut after ceremony. I got up early in the morning and sat on the bench outside Scott's cabin. I waited until noon. At noon Rebecca came out of the hut. She looked like shit. She shielded her eyes from the sun. "I've got an energy blockage," she said. "This is something that can't be worked out in ceremony." But at night I heard them fucking. And unlike the others, Rebecca didn't leave. In December she took to his cane juice. I called her out on it. I said look what you're doing to your mind-body. "You think this is going to help with your energy block?" Rebecca said actually that issue's been resolved, thanks. "My energy is free-moving now."

She never loved me. It was just that she didn't hate me. It made sense. I tried to use the skills I'd learned in ceremony—I tried to let her go. I waited out the apocalypse. Nothing happened on December 21st however. I drank a strong brew. There was a big bonfire in the middle of the grounds. The ceremony that night took place around the fire. Somehow I managed to stand and walk toward my hut. I was wired and going through some shit. There was a knock on my door, I managed to open it. It was Scott and Rebecca. "We're just checking in on you," Scott said. He was wearing a red cape now. It may have only been a blanket but to me it looked like a cape. "Just making sure you're okay." I told them to leave me the fuck alone. "But it's all happening," Scott said. "Don't you feel it?"

"Nothing is happening," I said. "I'm leaving in the morning." I told Rebecca you're free to do what you want, you can stay or you can leave with me. Rebecca started giggling. She covered her mouth. She grabbed Scott's cape and covered her face with it.

Scott said I hope you find your way, Steven, I really do. Then they left my hut and went back to the fire. And my mind continued to race with visions of snakes and panthers and memories from what seemed like other's people's lives. I lay down on the bed but I felt like I was sinking down into the earth. The familiar sensation of dying overcame me. I decided to fight it. I'd had enough letting go. I got up from the bed and left my hut. I went down the winding steps, toward the road. It was clear now that I'd wasted several months of my life here. Nothing had come of this. I was not in love, there was no apocalypse, I was a fucking idiot. Things would perhaps go on unending forever. Or not, but it wouldn't end in apocalypse. No revelation I mean. Just ending. I had no idea who Rebecca was. It had all been revenge. I'd fucked Peter, not Rebecca. And as I was passing by the bonfire on my way out of Casa Huasca, I saw them there: Scott and Rebecca, cackling at the fire. Everyone else was blacked out— inert bodies hallucinating in the dirt. But Scott and Rebecca sat on a log together, lucid enough, staring into the fire, laughing, Scott's cape covering both of them. And I never saw either of them again. And this is only one of many examples. The cape and the fire and the laughter have recurred dozens of times.) But this first time— with Anthony down below, and the fire— it was also my first homosexual experience. Chance unzipped my pants and took me in his mouth. I watched the fires grow bigger and bigger. I stepped to the precipice of orgasm. I unloaded in his mouth and immediately after I was horrified with myself. I was not attracted to Chance. Chance swallowed. He stood up and said God it's been too long. I said let's be clear on one thing: I'm *not* a fag. Chance looked at me as if I'd gotten him all wrong. "Me neither," he said. Somehow this was relieving to hear. I adamantly did *not* want to think of myself as gay. I don't know why. Now it seems silly;

fuck a man, fuck a woman. I thought of Socrates. I was already following his advice. What I really loved was beauty.

“There’s fires,” Chance said. He pointed down the hill.

“What should we do?” I said.

“I don’t know,” Chance said. “I don’t think there’s anything we can do.” He seemed in no hurry to go anywhere, as if he was content to stay in these bushes for the rest of his life. But his reasoning was sound—we had only a couple gallons of water at the camp, and this was the first site of the WAT trip that wasn’t next to the river. I rose from the dirt. I ran back down the hill toward the camp. Anthony was no longer cackling—the severity of the situation seemed to have dawned on him. He had his cape in his hands and he beat one of the flaming bushes with it. I said Anthony what the fuck are you doing. Anthony said I’m trying to put a fucking *fire out* what does it look like I’m doing. He beat the bush once more with his cape. Sparks and embers sprayed. The cape was set ablaze. Anthony dropped the cape on the ground and stomped it out. I didn’t know exactly what I was doing. I just started running. Then I understood I was running toward the river, though that must have been a mile away, and fuck, I had nothing to collect the water with. I turned around and ransacked the campsite for a vessel. I found a few gallon jugs clipped to the outside of Kurtis’ backpack. Two of them were full of water, the third was empty. I poured the two gallons on to the fire and they did very little. Then I took all three and dashed again toward the river. This was a stupid idea. It took me fifteen or twenty minutes to get to the river. I was a terrible runner. It was surprisingly difficult to fill the gallon jugs in the river. The mouths were too narrow, the jugs filled slowly. I stood when I got them filled. It was noticeably

darker. I turned and I ran. I ran too long and too far without thinking. I was on a trail but after a while it became clear that it was the wrong trail. I should have been back at the camp by now. I turned around, started running back toward the river. But it was dark, I lost the trail. I must have run right off it. I couldn't find the fucking trail. The sky was riddled with stars. The trail was gone, there was no trail. It was cold. A coyote cried somewhere off in the distance. I turned around and ran back toward the river, but I guess I didn't turn around. There was no river. I listened for the river. I listened for the fire. I listened for Anthony. All I heard was more coyotes. I bent over, hands on my knees. I caught my breath. I don't know what I did. I looked at the Milky Way. I listened to the coyotes converging in the dark. I made circles in the dark, starting and stopping, running and walking. And yes: for the first time since I was admitted into treatment I just wanted to be home, in my bed, or in the underground movie theatre. Why was I lost in the wilderness? Why dark, why cold? What life brought me here? I was far from home and I always would be. My parents had sent me away, cast me out. I'm not trying to sound melodramatic. I know that I do. I thought, how is it possible we don't talk on the phone every week? Then on to other things, in my head— Vasquez and Chance. And I started shouting for help as loud as I could.