There's a Song of Distance

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There's a Song of Distance

by

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for the degree of

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The University of Montana

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Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
Be kind,

for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.

- Philo of Alexandria
And then it was dark, full dark, midnight, and heat like that should have disappeared. Then the bombing started. Those poor souls, the poor fucks of the city, didn’t even know we were watching from the rooftop of the tallest building: six sets of eyes in the night, calling in and correcting any errant rounds from the AC-130 Specters which circled the city. When they fired too close to the city’s edge we’d make a call for them to steer away a little, to move further out into the desert, into the uninhabited. When the firing veered too far out over the desert, and the city couldn’t feel its forced shudders anymore, we made another call. It was the tightrope, the balancing act, a burden we adored.
Fizer and Heath were in the stairwell watching and listening for any sign that someone had entered the building. We were all paired up with what the army called our "battle buddies": Fizer and Heath. Cooper and I, and Santiago and Zeller. The ocean was supposedly out there in front of me, some five miles away, but I couldn't see it. I watched the city to the east, the ocean's side. It was a long way down from the seventeenth floor, and besides the light of the stars there was nothing to illuminate the world below. Night Vision Goggles gave me a headache so I wasn't wearing mine. Cooper was at my right, looking out over the southern part of the city. He kept turning from the planes in the distance back to the darkness in the street below. Lieutenant Santiago watched the west, but for the most part he strode back and forth between all of us. He stayed low, crouched over so that those below wouldn't see his silhouette if they happened to look up. They probably never looked up in such a city. Perhaps Santiago thought that's what leaders do, walk back and forth between positions, overseeing, yet sharing in the sympathy.

Santiago slapped me on the helmet as he passed behind, "Stop thinking so much." Hunched over, he walked away. He was always telling me this. It was a mantra he tried to instill in me.

A car turned down the street that led toward the building. One of its headlights was out, and the road was full of holes, so it winked and bobbed along before finally turning onto a side street. Killers, clans, and armies wouldn't move around at night with their headlights showing the way in front of them. The danger in trying to see was also the danger of being seen. All you had to do was aim at the headlights. No one with any knowledge, or a history, would want an enemy to see them.
"Stantz," Cooper said.

"Yeah." I answered.

"Are you afraid, Josh?" He was trying to be as quiet as possible

"Just a little," I said.

Santiago called over the squad radios for a radio check. We called in from high to low in rank. I was first, then Fizer, Heath, Cooper, and Zeller.

I took out my binoculars and tried to find the ocean in the distance. I couldn’t see anything but buildings. If a cool wind escaped the ocean’s surface, rising up out of the deep, I couldn’t feel it in the midst of all that city just startled out of sleep by the bombing. As far as I knew I’d never seen the ocean before. But there were those early years of childhood that I couldn’t always account for, so maybe I had. What a sight the ocean must be, I thought, chasing itself and the land all day—sea and shore chasing each other to be one. Sitting on that rooftop, with all that heat and dark, the air was anything but fresh. The city smelled like a sarcophagus. With such a scent, if someone told me the world was flat and that monsters slept just over the edges. I would have believed them.

I peered over the edge of the building. I was smart enough to be afraid. I kept my eyes on the darkness below. If anything shifted or turned I’d be prepared. I wasn’t the one that would be caught off guard. I couldn’t make out the old van parked up the street that we’d used to sneak into the city. We were the spotters on the roof, recon on a building in a city controlled by warlords and their clans. We’d rigged the stairwell and the van with warning enough if someone tried to sneak up on us.
At the briefing we'd received just before sneaking into the city with the van, they warned us of what they called all the possible threats. There were still landmines everywhere, they said, hidden in potholes and crevices that other vehicles and pedestrians hadn’t quite explored yet. There was no police force or localized government in the area. Everything was controlled by different clans and the clans were fighting each other and everyone for control of the city. We hadn’t come across any checkpoints on the way in, but intelligence told us that checkpoints were commonplace. At these checkpoints, there was a fee to pay, which offered a source of revenue for the clan members that ran such points. This is why we had Cooper drive in, in disguise as a civilian, because he knew the language and some of the culture so that he could have talked us through any such points. We’d hidden in the back. They told us that most of the inhabitants supported one clan or another because they had to, but as a general rule, they really didn’t have an allegiance to anyone but self and family. The clans were well armed, as far as clans go. We were the desert to scare them into surrendering their weapons and their portions of the city without a fight.

Santiago stepped up behind me. Because he was there I tried to relax for a moment. I closed my eyes. The wind was nauseating and felt as though it were being blown into me through some sort of strange kiss. The smell covered me like a blanket, unwavering, and I couldn’t imagine being allowed to crawl out from under it. It held the thick scent of shit, the sharp odor of piss, scents of the living, and then there was the sweet corruption of death, forcing its way into my body, trying to break my heart and life. I heard Santiago walk toward Cooper, so I opened my eyes again.
We'd arrived just before dawn that morning. During the day I'd watched the school across the street, children went in and out, and a few adults went with them. I don't know if it was really a school, but jovial and jostling, children came and went, so I took it for a school. What could they teach them there that was more important than what they saw when the clans drove by, when people strolled about with swollen bellies? What was more important than the scent of their every day?

"Drink some water," Santiago said, walking up behind me.

We'd brought more than enough water. We'd each brought two canteens, a two-quart canteen, and three or four water bottles which bore Arabic writing and rainbows. None of us could guess where these foreign bottles were from. There was something about their mystery, a touch of the exotic that made the water inside even more delicious. They might have been from some secret oasis. I wanted a drink but I knew it wouldn't stay down.

"How are you doing?" Cooper asked, crawling to the corner between his side of the building and mine.

I moved further toward the corner to meet him. "I'm here."

"Do you need another IV?" he asked.

"Not now," I said. I took a small sip of water as a sign of goodwill and because my mouth was dry. "I need some sleep."

"How long has it been?" he asked.

"Close to two weeks." It was true. I'd been too scared, too nervous, too excited to sleep. I hadn't had a dream in the past two months and I was starting to worry that maybe dreams had something to do with sanity and happiness. And all of this had
something to do with why the world was a thick, sticky mess that I moved through, and why I was lost in the dark suffocation of something akin to burning tires.

“You know you can’t die from lack of sleep,” he said. “You just go until your body shuts down, forcing you to sleep.”

“Sounds gorgeous,” I said. “When your body finally forced you to sleep, it must be a lot like the moment when the square peg finally fit snug into the round hole, home at last.”

“My stomach’s still a mess,” I said.

“It’s the sleep,” Cooper said.

I felt like I was upside down. I couldn’t even keep water down, which was scary because the sun was trying to kill us. It was a hundred and twenty in the shade. I was shitting everywhere, and I was afraid the shits might roll over me without warning. My pants weren’t bloused because I figured why not let it stream down my leg and out of my pants to the ground, than walk around with shit in my boots like a fool.

“If you fall out,” Cooper said, “it’s on me.”

We’d received minimal desert training. We were mainly a cold weather unit, the 10th Mountain Division, out of Fort Drum, New York. And there wasn’t a mountain or a snowflake as far as I could see. People in other platoons were falling out left and right because of the heat. People called out beautiful things as the heat finally forced them to race, face first, to the dirt and sand. Lopez, from first platoon, called out. Where’s the keys, before he went down, a victim to the sun. Nobody carried keys into combat. I asked Lopez. What the hell was that all about, when I visited him at the hospital. Hell I’ll know, Lopez said. But it was a mantra that stuck with me. Where’s the keys?
I wanted to call out something beautiful if the sun chased me out of the day.

The city shook under a heavy barrage of fire. Dogs howled all around us. All of the city's dust was rattled into the air. The sun had baked the scent of death into the city's bricks so that it rose even at night, rose with all that dust. Such bricks longed to be sand again. People stood in the street looking at the sky and into the distance. We'd put dark camouflage on our faces so that they couldn't make out the outline of a face if they looked up at the building top.

"Do you think Santiago's afraid?" Cooper asked.

"I think we all are," I said.

"But he has all of us to worry about." Cooper said.

"We know what we're doing," I said.

Cooper looked up at the sky. "I know," he said. "It's got to be hard on him."

"He'll live," I said. Santiago wasn't known to be the most stable person on earth, but I trusted him. I'd been on guard duty in the barracks back at Fort Drum when the MPs brought him from his house to stay in the barracks because his wife had filed charges of assault and abuse against him. He was trying to live too hard. He'd made decisions in training that most would question, but they always seemed an effective way of dealing with situation.

They'd moved to a larger caliber and the several aircraft were concentrating and timing their fire better. They were striving for a great opening night. They were desperate for the city's submission, and to save as many lives as possible. They were desperate for perfection. The army was out there, gathering on the edge of a distant town. We were to gauge the show of force and tell those higher up whether or not the
city was subdued and awed enough into accepting the UN’s offer of food and help in forming some kind of government.

Santiago stepped up behind us. “Specter Six-Two, Specter Six-Two,” he called on the radio to one of the planes. “Specter Six-Two, Specter Six-Two, adjust fire ten by ten north.” He settled the handset back on the radio’s receiver. He stood behind me for a moment, watching my section of the city. He was careful to stay away from the edge, away from the view of those that might be below looking up. I peeked over the edge just to see. I couldn’t make anyone out in the street below.

“How long do you think we’ll be here?” Cooper asked Santiago.

“Don’t ask me that,” Santiago said. “Forever. Hell, I don’t know the answer. What’s it matter to you anyway? What have you go to go home to,” and he walked away before Cooper could form a response.

“Just wondering,” Cooper said. “Why not, I guess.” Cooper was probably thinking about his virgin life and his virgin girlfriend that he said desired to be his wife. It was such a lonely idea, such a lonely notion on the rooftop.

“Can you imagine so many cities so close together that you won’t be able to see a single star for all the light?” He took his Kevlar helmet off and used the wall around the ledge as a headrest. “I’ve been there. Think about it,” he added, as Santiago walked over, “you won’t be able to go anywhere one day to see the stars.”

Santiago turned to the bombing. “You’d still be able to see it from out on the ocean.” He put his helmet down for a moment.

“If you got enough money to get out there.” Cooper said.
If I could have shared the names of all of the constellations and the names of all
the stars and the warriors, gods and poets that they immortalized, I would have rattled
them away one after the other for their amusement and their benefit. But what are we to
the stars? Where’s the keys?

Cooper and I took over for Heath and Fizer who were pulling guard duty in the
building’s only stairwell. The darkness was such a strain on the eyes that I thought I
might go blind. I was trying to see too much. I was trying to see something where most
likely there was nothing but my imagination waiting. Looking over the railing, staring
down into all seventeen floors of darkness, I tried to see the ground floor. I wanted to
think I could see the front door. Finally, I put on my NVGs. It was a broad, wide
stairwell with enough room that you could see clear to the ground floor. They didn’t
make them like that anymore, I thought. maybe they never did, maybe this one was an
accident.

We’d set up trip flares on the fifth floor and grenade simulators on the eighth and
ninth. Santiago made us repeat this information aloud several times to prove that we
understood exactly where the traps were set. Fifth floor flares was a tongue full. Eight
and nine simulators was easy to repeat and remember.

“Do you believe in ghosts,” Cooper asked.

“I don’t know, why?” I was trying hard to listen to the darkness, but I knew that
Cooper was only trying to lighten the mood, so I let him talk.

“I don’t know,” he said, “just that it’s night. Don’t you think violent places hold
more ghosts?”

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“Maybe,” I said. “I don’t really believe in them. Maybe I haven’t seen enough to convince me otherwise.”

“I just thought I’d ask,” he said. “I’m just scared. I guess I could believe anything right now.”

“Ghosts seem like an insignificant thing to be scared of.” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, sounding like he was further away than the stairwell.

“Cancer,” I said. “That’s something to be scared of. Sitting in this building is something to be scared of.”

“Actually,” he said, “I guess I was trying to be scared of something else other than this.”

“Sure,” I said. But then I was embarrassed for him. I was always letting myself get embarrassed for others. It seemed a worthless admission on his part, but one I knew a friend would only make to another friend. He had a heat rash on his neck which resembled a severe case of acne and which made him look a little younger than he actually was. He was nineteen with dark brown eyes and dreamed of going to college and getting a degree in architecture. When he laughed he was all teeth and slaps on the back. When he laughed he put his hand out to touch those around him, to let them in on the joke. Cooper was the only virgin I knew. Or the only one that admitted to it. He was religious, or at least more so than the rest of us. This had something to do with his virginity. He’d already assured me that I wouldn’t be at his wedding, and that no one outside his religion would be allowed at his wedding. Otherwise, he said I’d be the best man. It was a nice gesture. He had a girlfriend that he was waiting to marry, waiting to be with, and he took his role as a religious man seriously. Cooper told stories about how
he and his friends could get anywhere in New York by going underground. They knew every tunnel, every hidden passage, everything about underground New York. He'd promised to show me what he meant if I came to the city with him one weekend. We were always making plans to go, but then something else came along, something like going to Quebec for the weekend because someone told a story about its women and bars.

Cooper was the oldest in a family of eight. His grandmother had raised them after his mother and father were murdered right before he came to America.

I listened to the night, waiting. Darkness and silence settled in the stairwell when Cooper finally leaned back and was quiet. There was a lull in the bombing. All the dogs of the city were quiet for once. And it was so still that I could hear the hum of my body. There's no such thing as silence, I thought, straining to hear silence, then straining and pretending to hear it. I stood and looked over the edge of the railing, struggling to see a few floors down in all that darkness. I thought of the cave that I wanted to tell Cooper about. The stairwell curled like a tail into the dark and finally out of sight. I felt like the night was being pushed into me. I wondered how much more I could hold. Fear was in my eyes and in my ears. Mosquitoes filled the air. I slapped at them long enough then finally gave it up as futile. Cooper fell asleep—and I let him. He was the only friend I had at the moment. All cities are populated by the sleeping and dreaming at night. I was in a foreign city and wanted to know the thoughts that ran about their heads. Women and children, I thought, step right up and tell me your story. Because I was young, and alone. I wondered whether any of the girls I knew back home were dreaming about me at that precise moment. I was eager to fall in love. I'm always falling in love. Leave me alone for a moment and I'm falling in love with the very idea of a woman. But we love what is
lost to us. I couldn't see anything in the stairwell. I stood and looked over the edge again. I stretched. No matter what I did, there was still the notion that I was buried alive. Finally, I made myself stop and listen to the night. I thought about how our mothers must miss us.

At first, I thought it was the wind, but then I could distinguish voices. Someone was whispering at the bottom of the stairs. I don't know how I knew it, but I knew that they were starting up the stairs. Their steps were like the soft tap of the tongue lightly against the roof of the mouth when involved in a secret. They sounded far away, yet inside of me. They were careful to be quiet. There was more of a threat in their silence than could ever be spoken.

I touched Cooper lightly on the shoulder and he was quickly awake and aware enough not to speak or even make a noise. I didn't have to say anything. He stood and stepped to the door of the roof, opening it only a sliver so that a tiny strike of light appeared across the floor before he knew enough to let it go shut gently. I keyed my squad radio over and over so that they would know outside that something was wrong. They knew enough to say nothing on their end of the radio. Someone keyed their microphone twice.

The stairwell filled with the silver light of the trip flares. Cooper opened the door and motioned the others into the stairwell. Santiago pointed for Cooper to stand where he was, and then Santiago started down the stairs two steps at a time, us rushing behind him. We stopped on the ninth floor, waiting. I pointed out the trip-line for the grenade simulator on our floor. The grenade simulators went off on the floor below us and something red and burning shot past my face. It looked like a melting piece of metal, or
maybe a burning piece of paper. Santiago pointed for Heath and Fizer to stay where they were and then we started down the steps, two, three at a time. We could make out their shapes by now, two of them. I saw the shape of a gun in the darkness and dove to my left down a hall. The figures were retreating down the stairs. Then there was a blast from behind us and Zeller lit into the darkness, his weapon rattling to life. My ears filled with a tremendous ringing. I started down the steps after Santiago who cleared the distance between himself and the figures quickly, firing full mass into their center. It was nothing but the red light of tracers by now, because I couldn’t hear. Rounds ricocheted off walls and I worried I’d get hit by one of our bullets. One of the figures went down and Santiago pointed Zeller to the person’s aid while the two of us moved past it, hunting the other figure. The other one was running fast down the stairs. As we moved past the fallen figure I told myself not to look, to keep going. If you looked at the fallen you paused long enough to join them. I followed Santiago, clearing with him to the next level of stairs. He was pointing crazily at the running figure. Santiago took a knee and aimed. It was a hard shot, the body was moving fast, but he dropped it. As we moved toward the figure he’d shot, Santiago waved me past, pointing for me to clear to the bottom of the stairs in case there were others. My ears were ringing. I could barely hear. There was still a long way to the bottom and I didn’t want to separate myself from the others just yet. I walked down a few flights then stopped and put on my NVGs. There was nothing there. I looked up the stairwell and could see Heath and Fizer moving toward me.

“What the fuck happened,” Heath asked.

“We got to hold the front door,” I said, pointing them down the stairs.
“We got to get out of here.” Heath said. He shook his head and the two of them started off again down the steps.

Then I was looking down at the body. It was small for a man. It was pushing itself across the floor with its feet. Santiago bent over the figure with a compound press opened and unrolled. The loose white ends dangling beside Santiago. He stood and said something that I couldn't hear over the ringing in my ears. Then he was screaming and it came to me in slices, getting louder, then duller, until I finally got it. “They're goddamn kids.”

“I saw a gun,” I said.

“It’s a stick,” Santiago said, pointing at a stick on the floor.

“This one’s dead,” Cooper said over the radio.

Santiago called Cooper down because the one he’d shot was still alive. The kid didn’t even make a noise. He just kept inching toward another exit.

“You and Zeller bring the gear,” Santiago said, pointing toward the roof.

Running up the stairs I slipped in the mess that Zeller had made of the other child. I stood slowly and walked carefully. I told Zeller we were to grab everything.

They were all standing in a circle around the wounded boy when Zeller and I came back with the gear. My hearing had come back enough that I could hear the others breathing heavily.

“Goddamn it,” Santiago said to Heath and Fizer. “You two should have stayed at the front door. I'm not going to lose my squad because you two can't fucking listen.” He pointed them back down the stairs.

The child had a hole in its chest. Cooper applied pressure to the wound.
"We got to go, Cooper." Santiago finally said, grabbing him by the shoulder and lifting him to his feet. The bandage came away with Cooper's hands and blood pumped out of the body with each beat of the heart. One, two, three. I counted because it only seemed natural to want to remember.

Then we were down the stairs and out in the street. Standing in the street, in all that open air, it was like we'd set off a chain reaction. Machine guns echoed in the night in answer to the shots we'd fired. It was like they were dogs calling out to us, finally let loose of their chains and able to forget that they were ever muzzled. People seemed to be firing at the sky, down alleys, and all around us like we'd given the signal. The van was gone.

"I can't believe this," Santiago said.

People were standing about in doorways. They watched us lazily as we moved by at a jog. They weren't in a clan, and they didn't own a gun, so they didn't really care about us. They were just like the inhabitants of all big cities when something disastrous seems ready to strike: some were eager to stand on the porch and watch their neighbors suspiciously; others anxious to bear witness to that which might happen next. In a city like this they'd seen everything before. In a nation where people were hacked apart daily with machetes, shot in the streets by clan members, or dying of famine and disease, we might as well have been elephants on parade. We would have received only a little less attention, but far more love, I imagine. People with Kalashnikovs passed by us, moving in the direction where we'd just been. They didn't even seem to notice us. We might as well have been ghosts to them, haunting the wrong time and place. We could have been Ponce de Leon in search of the fountain of youth for all they cared. When we heard
vehicles moving toward us we hid in doorways or tucked ourselves deeper into alleys. Once we hid in the front yard of what must have once been a great mansion. We stood where a beautiful garden must have thrived in the midst of that desert and that city.

We stopped near a fountain, the only decoration in a massive plaza. The youth of the city mulled about, doing laps with lovers and friends. The fountain was empty. It was still hot in the city, still unbearable, yet I shivered from the wind. The plaza was packed. Mixed with the teenagers were hundreds of children. Turn over a rock and you'd probably find a child underneath. Why did they keep bringing them here? It was a city for desolate and abandoned children. I longed to be their leader. What an army they'd make. Third world dogs roamed hungrily into the plaza, three, four at a time. For the most part, people ignored them, but a few kicked them in the ribs to hurry them aside. There were vendors everywhere in the plaza. Santiago walked over and bought a beer from one. We each walked over and bought a few more, putting them in our rucksacks. I felt like a tourist in a forgiving land.

Leaving the plaza, we hid in a doorway when an old truck with a Russian anti-aircraft gun rattled past. It was ludicrous, a junker of a truck with a giant gun attached. Another truck followed with about fifty people packed in its back, hanging from its sides and roof, waving weapons and their arms—there was even someone perched acrobatically on the driver's side mirror. They were prodding the city for something they could not have known. We waited for discovery or disguise.

We hid in the interior of the stadium. We sat silently in seats about halfway up, watching an imaginary game unfold. The roar of the city behind us was the dissident fan.
the approving fan, the approaching goal, the passing shot. It was the last of offense and defense united.

"Give me the radio," Santiago said.

He tried the radio and there was nothing. It didn’t make a noise.

"Is it broke?" Zeller asked. He already knew the answer. We all knew the answer.

"You mean we only have our squad radios," I said. We were the only ones who could hear us. We were well on our way to ruining the world.

We sat back in our seats. I put my legs up on the chair in front of me. Santiago took his Kevlar off and lit a cigarette. You could see a burning cigarette at night from miles away, I wanted to tell him. It was a lesson Santiago taught us before we left, illustrating one night in an open field the luminescent nature of the world. "I am the light of this world," he’d screamed in sing-song at us from across a field, a cigarette held out in front of him to make the point. "This little light of mine," he sang. "I’m gonna let it shine," and he waved the cigarette around. Everyone was stupid in Santiago’s world. I am Ponce De Leon, I wanted to scream at the empty stadium. I wanted to whisper it in one direction and have it echo all the way around and back to our link in the circle. It was time to start believing in superstitions and ghosts.

"When they can’t get us on the radio," I said. "they’ll come looking. They know to find us here." Which was true. This was where we were to gather if anything went wrong. If we got separated, lost, or disillusioned, we were to meet back at the stadium, and the UN, with all its might, would come looking for us.

"We smoked the fuck out of those kids," Cooper said, staring at the field.
“Yeah,” I said. He said smoke as though it held implications of the spirit world, as though it was an offering or atonement. What can we do but endure affliction and anticipate affection in this world. Yeah, we smoked the fuck out of some kids. It made it sound like a light show, or a magic act, a matter of smoke and mirrors. It had connotations of an illusion, a trick that you could pull the curtains on.

Two dead children. I tried to picture their faces, but I couldn’t. It was the same with love, I’d once been told. When you are away from the person you love, the girl who took my virginity told me, if you can’t see her face, that means it is love. I thought of the indifference of such thoughts as absence makes the heart grow fonder. I wondered if the world might grow fond in our absence. We’d need to keep busy for a long time to keep these thoughts out of our heads.

The bombing stopped. I wondered whether or not it would really work. Maybe you could scare a city into submission. We’ll just wait here, I thought, and they’ll be in town soon enough. The army will be here soon enough and we’ll see.
TWO

The city never returned to sleep. It seemed to pace until dawn like a watchful dog whose claws you could hear scratching and hissing on across a wood floor. The bombing had stopped hours ago. We'd made our last radio check at midnight and we were wondering whether or not they would ever miss us.

As dawn approached, we moved up into a press box below the announcer's booth. The door was gone and the room had been gutted. Looking out over the field and the stands I felt like a man at the controls of a machine or a beast that broke down and fell behind the pack. I remembered hearing in a briefing that they'd once held the Goodwill
Games in this city. There were the remains of a track and a soccer field below us.

Football, I thought, they must have called it football.

The soccer field was in miserable condition. Of course, who was there to take care of it? I’d hate to be the groundskeeper with an oncoming war. With two warlords, the desert, and an approaching army, it didn’t seem the most desirable job. It was probably hard enough to get grass to grow in such a place. When the sun came out there wasn’t any shade to be had. Maybe the UN could stage a match for the city, Italy versus Germany, or America versus no one because we were never any good at soccer the way the average youth of Italy or Germany would be. They’d pass around and between us they’d kill us in all that open space, using it against us.

“Why aren’t they here, yet?” Heath asked.

We were spread out on the floor. Our rucksacks piled about us. I sat in the corner. I wanted to fall asleep. It could have been a wonderful place to take a nap. The windows had been broken and a cool morning wind filled the booth. It cooled down for maybe five minutes a day, just as the sun broke the surface, the earth cooled for a moment before giving itself over to the desperate heat again.

“Maybe they’re waiting on the light.” Fizer said, turning to Santiago for confirmation.

Santiago nodded. “Probably.”

Santiago called for an ammunition and food check. Each of us still had at least seven full magazines of M-16 ammunition. Fizer had four belts of SAW ammo. Cooper, Santiago, Zeller, and I each had two MREs left. Heath had one, and Fizer didn’t have any because he’d eaten all three of his on the rooftop.
“Think they’re looking for us?” I asked.

“Two dead kids,” Santiago said, “they’re looking for somebody.”

“Maybe they won’t figure it out,” Heath said.

I tried to think of the parents begging forgiveness on our behalf. But I knew that wasn’t the way the world worked. If you killed children, I thought, they came looking for you. The two boys’ parents had probably never gotten along before. Your child is a bad influence. Things like that always went back and forth as the parents battled for control of their children’s life—battled to guide them somewhere, to get them across childhood safely to a point where they could make their own decisions, that moment of longing to go forward to adulthood, but haunted at the thought of leaving the dream of childhood behind. I could see the faces of the parents ugly and gnarled with anger and grief. Wailing and keening would make up their next few days. They were probably moving through the streets, two litters with dead children, a rally, a call. It was the last thing this country needed. It was the only thing that a country that never really got along with itself needed. It was the alcoholic’s illusion, it was the necessary justification, and the necessary sabotage.

The slap of a UH-60 Blackhawk rotor beat in the distance. I’d been in the cavalry long enough to distinguish the sounds of different helicopters. The UH-60, it was heaven and it was hell, life and death, depending on who you were. It was calling to us, talking to us, begging a dialogue. We held our breath. The city stopped, intent, interested in the low hum, the loud slap. It turned and flew away in another direction. Receding, its slap and thump followed in its wake, a retreating wave. I thought my heart was going to beat
its way out of my body, tired of the chains of my flesh, perhaps longing to take its show on the road.

There was another one now, a lone Cobra. They were gathering. Then there were several of them circling and moving toward us. We all stood in the tower. Santiago called to put our rucksacks on, and to get ready to run the steps to the field below. We could see them from the booth. They were rooftop high, cutting fast through the city. It was gorgeous, it was beautiful, it was everything we longed for.

It unfolded like a sad ballet. The helicopters turned, then the opening of an antiaircraft gun, an RPG sailed past the first UH-60 and it turned sharply, clumsily—it hadn’t expected that. Another Blackhawk tried to bring itself into the stadium and we started down the steps. From one of the long corridors that led to the field, which the home team might pour out of, another RPG sailed. The Blackhawk settled into the middle of the field. Santiago sent Fizer and Heath, the quickest, first. We laid down their covering fire.

They had the ground between us and the helicopter covered, but we had to make a run for it. Cooper moved out first and I followed. A spray of blood came from his chest and he doubled over to the ground. I picked him up and drug him back to where Santiago and Zeller were. The stadium was filling with smoke. Whichever clan we were fighting had lit something dark and noxious on fire.

An RPG flashed past the tail of the Blackhawk and into the stands behind. The explosion sounded small and weak. It tore a seat out of place, but other than that, there was nothing, just a little puff of black smoke. As if to join the small amount of smoke in the seats, a puff of black kicked out of the engine of the UH-60, it seemed to cough and
shudder, and it pulled back up, out of the stadium, the door gunner firing the minigun. Heath and Fizer were in the helicopter next to him, firing their weapons as well. The helicopter had to get out of the stadium, it was shaking violently. There was a hole in the tail of the aircraft, and dark smoke coughed out of the engine. There was a large caliber gun ripping at the helicopters now. It was firing from out of the tunnel. They were there. They were in the stadium. They'd backed one of their trucks in quickly. A Cobra set its nose at the target, fired, and a rocket crashed into the corridor. That part of the stadium sagged under the weight of the explosion. I could feel the dull chop of the helicopters as they turned and tried to come into the stadium again. The air was full of smoke and the taste of burning metal. The stadium was filling with dark black smoke. The three of us grabbed Cooper and made our way toward an exit. It was easy to move and hide in the smoke. We passed within inches of others.

I could feel the chant of people over the rotors of the helicopters. The helicopters turned away. I could feel their fading. They'd left us there. There was nothing they could do. I felt the thud of their rotors, they were in the distance, hovering over something. People were still coming out to find us. The stadium looked like the world must have looked after the flood. Dead bodies everywhere, in every position imaginable and unimaginable. Some of them looked to be playing cards, others looked as though they were making love: discreet, shy, demure in the presence of others. A woman that had been firing at us dragged herself along, her intestines folding out behind her like a long puzzle that no one could remember enough about to ever fix her back together. I wondered who she loved. We should have shot her. Never leave the dying alone long enough to remember what they'll become.
THREE

The first hotel we carried Cooper to the man told us that it wasn’t a hotel we’d found. The proprietor didn’t speak English, but one of the other guests did. We looked about at all the doors with numbers on them and people looking out at us. We looked at the desk and the bell, but the man kept insisting that it wasn’t a hotel. It was something else, he claimed, but what, we couldn’t understand without a conscious Cooper. We looked at what appeared to be the bellboy, perhaps the proprietor’s own son, lounging in the corner, staring out at us from a set of mirrored sunglasses. The sun was up and it was unbearable again. “Not a hotel.” Santiago said. “Fair enough,” and there was hate in his voice. I don’t know if he felt it, but I could feel the world slipping away from us. So we nodded at the man and we nodded at the would-be son, and we went away.
At the next hotel we had to wake the owner with lots of pounding and shouting then suffer his impatience when he finally appeared. At first he treated us as though we were figments of his imagination, or perhaps scraps of his sleep, that could be shouted back into the street or some receptacle of sleep. Armed, and wearing our desert BDUs with the American flags sewn on the right shoulder, we were the ultimate clowns. The proprietor assured us that he spoke English. He said that he d gone to Berkeley. Then his mood changed. He stopped and looked us over, then demanded to know how we planned to pay.

"Maybe he has a phone that works," I said, my weapon trained on the front door Cooper was getting heavier by the minute, as though every that was draining out of him was being replaced by something a little more solid, a little weightier.

Santiago leaned on the counter and stared at the man. The man stared back at him without blinking. The whites of the hotel keeper’s eyes were yellow.

"A room," Santiago said.

The man nodded. "American?" he asked.

"But of course," Santiago said, pointing to a few of his patches. He looked tired, horrible and defeated. "The American Army will reimburse you."

The man looked us over. He was looking for something that he could use, that he wanted, that would serve a purpose, or waste a day.

"Cash," the man said.

We’d spent all our money on the beer in the plaza.

"Fuck me for not bringing my wallet," I said, but nobody laughed.
"We carry our dog-tags and our identification cards," Santiago said. "I'll be glad to give you either one to hold for reimbursement."

"Those are nice and all but I'd rather have some cash," the man said. "Everyone knows about you by now. I'm taking a risk by even talking to you."

"What do you mean everyone knows about us?" Santiago asked.

"Everyone knows you killed all those children," he said.

Santiago stepped behind Zeller and opened Zeller's rucksack. He took out Zeller's Walkman and pulled out a few cassettes after it.

"Gift?" the man asked, stretching his hands eagerly toward Santiago.

"Gift," Santiago said.

"What kind of music is this?" the man asked.


"Country," the man said, sounding like he was trying to remember.

"Country," Santiago said. "Is there any other kind?"

We asked for a room on the top floor and he gave us a key. He didn't tell us anything so we left for the top floor. The numbers on all the doors were missing, perhaps they'd been torn off, stolen, or maybe just blew away. We started at one end of the balcony, trying the key in every door. Children crowded the hall. They were playing hide and seek and didn't mind us in the least. They used us as shelter, disguise, and blocker. They reached around us to tag at their friend before they made it to home. They worked through several games while we were searching for our room. There really wasn't anywhere to hide. One of the rooms was wide open and the children were using it as a place to hide. Santiago tried the key in the lock, and sure enough, it was our room. I
was happy to be inside the hotel room. Nobody dies in hotels. Santiago pulled a child from the closest. I found a young girl with an especially long face next to the bed. She wore a shirt that was far too small and barely covered her nakedness. It only took a moment before she was in love with me. She might have been two or three. She started climbing on me and it was all I could do to force a smile. She smelled like piss and onions.

There was a mattress in the middle of the room which was covered in dark stains. Someone had a magnificent weekend with somebody they loved on that mattress. Someone had done some damage on that mattress. Someone had spent their honeymoon, the first days of their love on that mattress. Someone had murdered their wife in the last days of love on that mattress. Someone had ass-raped their only child on that mattress. Someone had given birth on that mattress. It went on and on in my head. We put Cooper on the bed. I gently put my gear down in a corner of the room. I noticed that we all did out best to keep our gear as far from the next person’s as possible.

"Can you get rabies from these things?" Zeller said, poking a child away from the door. They were laughing and pointing at me.

"They like you, Stantz," Santiago said to me.

They were barking at me like dogs. I was another dog. Children disguise themselves in funny games. I told the girl to tell me if anyone else with guns appeared. I told her to scream. She practiced screaming for me in between laughs. "That's nice," I told her. She didn't understand, but she had an audience.
We left the door to the room open. Zeller sat in the doorway pulling guard.

Children stood around in the hall outside looking into our room. They'll always be there, just outside the room.

There was a bathroom, or at least a room with a pipe in the floor and shit on the walls. It smelled like the end of the world, so we closed the door on it.

Cooper asked if we'd open a window for him. I tried but the only one in the room was stuck. Zeller pushed me angrily aside. He struggled with the window before it finally shook loose and opened.

We were lucky Cooper got shot. He showed us where the enemy was hiding, where the enemy was waiting. The press on Cooper's chest was black with blood and dirt. He looked like someone he loved was whispering to him, the look on his face one of satisfaction. He looked smitten.

Blood came out from under the edges of the compound press on his chest. Blood rolled down his arm as well, in thick balls that collected the dirt as it moved toward the mattress. I was reminded of the dams that my brother and I used to create in our dirt driveway growing up. We'd turn the hose on at one end of the drive and build stream beds and dams to contain the flood. I remember most the way the water balled up with the dirt, the dry edges curving, and the balls of dirt looked like mercury. We couldn't build a damn to keep Cooper's flood at bay. He was seeping slowly into the mattress.

Zeller watched the hall. Santiago paced the room while I sat in a corner on my rucksack. We took our helmets off. They were so heavy. The band in mine was stained a dark brown from all the sweat.
"What do we do now?" Zeller asked.

Santiago shook his head. "You got me."

All the windows were open, but all of the light seemed to fall on the ceiling, so that no matter where you moved you weren't sitting in the light, you were still sitting in the darkness. I found the rules of engagement inside my Kevlar. I wanted to read over them again. I wanted to see what it said about shooting children. I wanted to know if I might hang as an accomplice. I couldn't think of anyone in history that had died at the end of the rope. Still, I knew they were there. All I could thing about was Pinocchio in the book that's nothing like the movie—Pinocchio at the end of a rope.

I hadn't shot either one of the children.

Poor Cooper, I'd heard of gangrene. I'd heard you could follow the path of an infection from the wound to the heart by looking at the veins which turned a dark, horror-movie red under the press of an infection. I thought I could smell the wound as well, although it was hard to tell over the scent of the city. Poor Cooper wasn't responding.
The poor tall fuck needed to get better so he could fuck his virgin wife all around the world.

"I don't know," Zeller said, he was looking at Cooper's fingers. They were swollen and purple like grapes yearning for the winepress.

"Fuck this," Santiago said, turning from us to look out the window.

The room was becoming unbearable. I begged for a wind to blow, to smell the ocean that I could see in the distance. But the wind was coming in from the desert and it didn't promise any relief. I imagined our future was one of famine and fire, trapped in a
country that held us tight, unwilling to let us escape. Dogs were barking all over the city. They were never quiet.

I checked the bolt in my M-16. The oiled weapon had attracted all of the sand in the city as far as I could tell. So I broke it down and took out my cleaning kit. I imagined my luck, the weapon locking up at the moment I needed it most. There were all kinds of stories to support such moments.

"I'm going to go ask the owner about a car," Santiago said. "We've got to get out of the city. It'll get worse before it gets better, and I don't think Cooper can wait. He's going to die any minute now. You two stay here."

When Santiago left, Zeller asked, "Where would we go?"

"Anywhere but here," I said.

"How far away do you think the army is?" Zeller asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"We could get some disguises," Zeller said.

As I cleaned my weapon, I looked up every now and then at Zeller. He was staring at the ceiling. Because he was black I imagined he had a better chance of making it alone in the city. I was white, Santiago was Hispanic, and Cooper was dying.

I finished cleaning my M-16 and put a light coat of oil on the bolt and assembly before closing it up. When I locked it back together, I made sure the safety was on before chambering a round.

Zeller was still staring at the ceiling. I wondered whether he was as tired as I was.

"You can sleep for a little bit," I said.
“Too tired to even sleep,” he said. Zeller was from Tupelo, Mississippi. He dreamed of Southern Belles and Ole Miss. He'd been recruited to play football at most of the big time schools, Nebraska, Miami, Arkansas, and Ole Miss. But Zeller had the misfortune of being from a family that viewed military service as a requirement before college. His family had some money—not a lot, but enough—and to stay in his grandfather’s will he needed an honorable discharge from the army. He was almost as big as Santiago. Unlike Santiago, he hated to work. He loved to smoke cigarettes. When we went to the field at Fort Drum, New York, I would often see him wake up in the middle of the night and smoke a cigarette. Of course, I don’t even know if he was really awake.


“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Zeller said. “That’s what James at HQ told me.” He took out a cigarette and lit it. “I kind of wanted to ask one of them when I got the chance.”

Zeller threw me a cigarette after a minute.

“Probably just a rumor,” I said. “We’re always saying things like that about something we don’t know about. How the fuck would James know?”

Zeller laughed a little. “The mother land,” he said, smiling. “That’s what Cooper said when we left for this place. He said Africa’s the mother land and we’d have a grand old time. Said we’re going back to the mother land. Motherfucker.” He stared at the floor. Maybe he was thinking about that as his own little piece of the motherland, about how it always seemed like we owned more than we really did. It hadn’t turned out like we thought. We’d killed children and the army hadn’t been able to extract us. A
welcome parade seemed like the last thing that might happen anytime soon. We were a long ways from out of there. We were a long ways from reflection, but we found ourselves drowning in it. Maybe Zeller was really trying to figure out who he was, and how he fit in this place. Hell, I know I was. Maybe he wanted to know who we all were, and why it mattered. “You heard him talking about it, didn’t you,” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. But I hadn’t. I just knew that he wanted to talk, and that he wanted me to listen. If we were going to tell stories about Cooper, I thought that I had one to share. I wanted to tell Zeller about the time Cooper went to a cave as a child and when they were at the bottom of the cave, with a flick of a switch, they were in total darkness. And Cooper said when they turned the lights back on the guide told them to notice how they didn’t see any spots before their eyes. Total darkness did that Cooper said. He’d told me the story our first night on guard duty in Somalia.

Cooper was dead by the time Santiago came back. We hadn’t even noticed when he died. He was already too far gone for this world when we checked into the hotel. Santiago spread a T-shirt over Cooper’s face. Cooper and his laugh, I thought. The way he had to touch someone when he laughed to let them know that they could be in on the secret as well. As Santiago spread out the T-shirt, I tried not to recognize the room in which I found myself. I didn’t want this moment, or any items to remember. I never wanted to be there again.

Zeller watched from the floor in front of the door. He lifted his head for a moment then let it back to the floor and rolled it just enough so that he could keep an eye on the hallway.
"I don't know anything about this," Santiago said, leaning over Cooper. "I don't know anything about this."

Say it again, I thought, and maybe it'll all go away. Say it again.

The heat was growing worse, surrounding us in that room. Strangely enough I felt better than I'd felt on the rooftop. I'd forgotten about my minor ailment. I felt like I could sleep for a week. Still, the atmosphere, the everyday air of the place felt thick, and as demanding to move through as water. I tried to feel bad for Cooper, but instead I felt embarrassed for him again, as embarrassed as I felt for him in the stairwell. I always felt embarrassed for people when they did the wrong thing or when the wrong thing happened to them. I could see the two children. I didn't know whether to feel worse for Cooper or the children. Cooper had been, for the most part, a slack soldier and prick. The children had been nothing to me. But still, they were children. But Cooper was here. Cooper and his fat purple fingers begging to burst. Cooper and that cave he'd seen in his youth.

"Okay," Santiago said. "He doesn't have a car, but he said that there are busses, trucks that come by and pick people up for a charge. He said that we can give him something and he'll give us enough money to ride to the end of the city." He started looking through his bag. "We got to have something for him."

He looked at me and then my bag. "I'm sorry," he said, and he started walking toward it. I only had a few books in there, the man wouldn't want books. I thought.

Santiago stood above my bag. Then he turned and looked at Cooper's bag. "I guess we could take something out of his bag." He waited. "I'm really sorry Coop. Do you know what he has in here," he asked me.
“Same as everybody,” I said. “Walkman. maybe a magazine. I think he has a watch.”

Santiago found Cooper’s watch in the front pocket. It was a normal army watch, the one with the hands that glow in the dark. Santiago gathered Cooper’s tapes. “This should work,” he said. “Jesus Christ, look at all this shit music.” He laughed a little. “How could one man listen to such crap?”

It was true. Cooper had horrible taste in music. He’d spent too much time with his grandmother and he listened to grandmother music. It was something that I’d always bothered him about. He’d tried to listen to music that I and a few others copied for him, but he could never get into it.

I looked out the window and a man in the building next to us waved. I ducked quickly back behind the wall. “There’s somebody over there. He waved at me.” I looked again, he was still waving.

“Are you sure he’s looking at us,” Santiago asked.

“He’s fucking waving at me,” I said.

“Bullshit,” Santiago said. He stepped to the window and looked out. He saw the man. “I guess you better wave back.”

When I looked out the window and waved, the man held up a sign that read. I’m with you.

“Apparently he’s with us,” I said. He motioned for me to come across the street.

“Guess you’re our man,” Santiago said. “We’ll keep an eye on you from here.”
I walked into the courtyard with my 9mm. Nobody was out. It was the hottest part of the day. The man was standing in the doorway. He nodded as I walked into the room with him. He had an army issue Colt 45.

"Come on up," he said. He had a southern accent. I followed him toward the stairs where he stopped and pointed a few steps up, "Fishing line." he said. "The sound of someone falling is more than enough to wake you up." He turned and smiled at me. He must have known about the trip flares and the grenade simulators.

We walked to his room which was across the street from ours. A .50 caliber sniper rifle and an AK-47 were on the floor. He was probably with Delta Force. One of those men they didn't acknowledge or recognize if they went missing or dead. He wore a pair of dirty old khakis and a blue short sleeve cotton button up, probably to match the dress of the city. "Ruin travels fast," he said.

I didn't know what to say to this so I just nodded. He motioned for me to sit so I did. "Do you have a radio?" I asked.

"Don't need one," he said. "Do you know that you could literally shoot anybody in this place except for the kids," he said. "I could have shot you in the window. I could have killed everyone in that room."

"Yeah," I said.

"I'm just fucking with you," he said. "I wouldn't have shot you."

"Your friend is dead, right?" he asked.

"He's dead," I said.

"He must have been hit by that big anti-aircraft gun," he said. "An AK-47 won't go through Kevlar."
"I know," I said. I always say things like that, even if I'm unsure of the truth. I wouldn't want appear as though I didn't know the truth or get the joke. The way he looked at me I was afraid to move or nod.

"You've had a hard time of it." He picked up his sniper rifle and placed it in the window so that it pointed up the street. Someone was walking up the street. I could hear the sound of their footfalls on the stone. "You just can't catch a break. There's no luck to be had in this place." He led the target down the street. Everybody needs a hobby. I thought. He probably needed to feel like he had a hand in everything. He needed to believe that there were choices to be made by him and him alone. He held his finger firmly against the trigger and his breathing seemed to come to a standstill.

"Are you following us," I asked.

"I'm here for someone else," he said. He took his eye from the scope and turned his attention to digging under his thumbnail with a pocketknife. There was blood under the nail. He'd smashed it somehow. "I just wanted to tell you to get out while you can. The army's not coming for you. Do you have a safety pin?"

"No," I said.

"Not even across the street?" he asked.

"Sorry," I said.

"The army and the UN won't be back into the city anytime soon. It's going to rain. It's going to rain a lot for a long time. And you boys don't have what it takes to live out the rain."

Rain. I wasn't afraid of the rain. What kind of person was afraid of the rain?

"Did you shoot either one of those kids?" he asked.
"No," I said.

"Good," he said. "That’s good for you."

He was done talking. He ignored me and led a vehicle up the street. I walked down the stairs, careful about the fishing line, and out into the street. I imagined the way he must have led me back across the street. I could feel the weapon trained on my head, the weight of his finger against the trigger.

"Who was that," Santiago asked, when I walked back into the room.

"A sniper," I said.

"I thought I saw him following us," Santiago said.

"I bet," I said.

"If I said I saw him," Santiago said, "then I saw him."

"Check," I said, but I wanted to tell him that he was full of shit. That he’d never seen anyone behind us. That you never knew what was following you. "He said we need to leave before it starts raining."

"Before it rains," Santiago said. "That’s a bit cryptic."

"What do we do with Cooper," Zeller asked.

"What do you want us to do," Santiago asked. "Take turns carrying him on our back."

"We take him with us," Zeller said.

"Like we’re not in enough shit and you want to go dragging a body around," Santiago said.
“Maybe we can get some clothes to wear.” Zeller continued, like he hadn’t heard.
Santiago, “we can pretend we’re reporters or something. We can pretend like we lost one
of our own in the city.”

“Without any kind of reporter gear,” Santiago said. “And what’ll we do with our
weapons.”

“I don’t know,” Zeller said. “Hide it with Cooper.”

“We’re leaving Cooper here,” Santiago said. “You get into a whole different set
of rules governing war when you start going about in disguise.”

“We’re not in a war,” I said. “And as long as we get out alive, what does it matter
what we wear?”

Santiago walked over to the doorway and looked up the hall. He was shaking his
head. Zeller walked over and sat on the bed next to Cooper, he was brave.

“What about never leaving anyone behind,” Zeller said, putting his head in his
hands.

“Somebody else can come back and get him.” Santiago said. “Somebody can
come for him when the army finally gets here. We’ll pay so that they don’t let anyone
else have the room.”

“Look—.” Zeller said.

“We leave him here,” Santiago said. “We’ll get him later.”

“Okay,” Zeller said. “We leave him here. But what about this. what if we say he
shot the kids.”

Things were turning away from us. You didn’t make deals with the lions while
you were still lost in the lion’s den.
“What do you mean?” Santiago asked.

“I mean he shot those kids.” Zeller said. “You don’t think they’re not going to look into this. Somebody’s going to want our world if they find out. I mean, we all killed those kids.”

“I didn’t fire a shot.” I said. “This is crazy, let’s just worry about getting out of here.”

“The fuck it matters if you fired a shot.” Zeller said. “You were with us.”

“It was an accident,” Santiago said. “What about Heath and Fizer.”

“We’ll say they must have gotten it wrong.” Zeller said. “They crucify people for mistakes like this.”

“They’ll look into it,” Santiago said. “You start lying and it gets messy.”

“They don’t jail you for mistakes like this.” I said.

“How do you know?” Zeller asked.

I could tell by the way that Santiago walked to the window and looked out that either Zeller was winning him over, or at the most, he’d planted the idea in his head. Zeller’s face was as empty as the next day looked like it might be.

Santiago shook his head. We’d never been friends. I couldn’t stand him or the rest of the people in charge of me. I was constantly thinking they were ignorant and unavoidably plagued by bad luck and poor life decisions.

“I’m still in charge here.” Santiago said. “We tell them what happened.”

“We need to fix this.” Zeller said. “We need to get our story straight.”

“There is no story.” I said. “Just two dead kids and Cooper.”

“We tell them what happened.” Santiago said.
I didn't believe what Santiago said. They seemed like they were past listening. They were making alliances and grand plans in their minds. So I didn't say anything else. I didn't want any part in their mistakes and errors. They were isolating themselves on an island. It was like they were talking about burning the ship that brought us to shore. Santiago was aiming to keep control. Zeller thought he was trying to save his life.

It was the wrong time to start making deals with yourself. It was the wrong place to try and make assurances. It was the last room in the world where you'd want to search out the center of your soul and the tiny dot that kept your body alive and your memory from storming into the rest of you.

I stared at Cooper all that night. I couldn't turn away from him. The moment I closed my eyes I imagined him springing to life and giving me a good jolt. I'm a stupid man. Afraid of stupid things. I endure superstitions because I know that those around me endure them as well. I let this life get the best of me most days, and spend the nights awake and angry with myself for not being kinder to my brother and others as a child, for not doing more to save others as they went down into the swell only to get lost under the waves.
FOUR

As a group we only had one MRE left. We found it in Cooper's bag. He also had a canteen of water. He wasn't going to be contributing anymore. It was worthless to think about him then and there, but there was nothing else to do with him. His body turned toward the wall. Cooper couldn't write home anymore, couldn't walk in the front door of the house he grew up in and kiss his mother anymore, hug his father, or enter into a room where he'd first played with toys, discovered puberty, and probably even love. I felt guilty when I thought about drinking his water. I felt embarrassed for him because he
couldn’t say anything anymore. Santiago said he’d ask the man about water before we left. We had several chlorine tablets between us.

The MRE was a number 11, a ham slice with *au gratin* potatoes, crackers, peanut butter, and a bag of M&Ms. Fuck M&Ms, I thought. I could hardly stomach my third of the meal. We had nothing else to do, so we pulled out a pack of cards and played a game of spades for the M&Ms. Santiago won. A jet flew over the city. Relatively low but incredibly fast. The air cracked behind it. It did nothing for our spirits because what could it do for us? Santiago told us to get a few hours of sleep. When one of us woke, he’d take a nap, he said. Soon, Zeller was breathing easier. Then Santiago fell asleep as well. Cooper had more room than any of us, and he didn’t even need it anymore. I told myself that a convoy was on the way. That they were gathering to ride into the city and rescue us. The cavalry was on the charge. But I knew it wasn’t true. I knew they were waiting on the border. I knew that they weren’t coming into the city for at least two weeks. They’d wait until sufficient forces had gathered. They expected us to help ourselves, to make our own way out. I tried to think of something happy, the way you’re told to think of Hawaii and puppies if you’re dying of hypothermia. I remembered an eyelash on every page. When I was in basic training, and when I first arrived at Fort Drum, Lura used to send me letters, and I swear that every time I opened one of her letters there was always an eyelash hidden inside the folds. Such things might not be true through. You never know when you’re in out of love whether you’re remembering it correctly.

It was too hot to sleep. And I was too scared and hungry. But I forced my eyes closed anyway.
Zeller punched me back to life. He was on top of me, kneeling on my arms, hitting me in the face and neck. I couldn’t roll him off. He slapped me once, open handed. It was worse than any punch. Finally Santiago lifted him off. My face felt like it was on fire. I was sure that my nose, my cheek, and my eyes were all broken. I rolled toward Cooper for protection.

“What the fuck is wrong with you,” Santiago asked Zeller. But Zeller didn’t know. He couldn’t remember what had happened. Then he told me I’d been tearing at the waking world again in my sleep. I had a tendency to throw my body about when I slept like a man tossed on an ocean or someone in the grips of an epileptic fit. Christ would have hurled my soul into a pig’s body if he’d have witnessed my suffering in sleep.

“Fucking asshole,” I said to Zeller. My face felt like it was on fire. my head hummed like a hive of bees.

“Fuck you,” Zeller said.

“I’ll tell them you shot the kid,” I said. angry.

Zeller jumped for me but Santiago had him by the neck. “Don’t touch him.” Santiago said. He shoved Zeller hard into the wall. Zeller tried to move, but Santiago was fast. He had Zeller in a hold quick, and Zeller couldn’t breathe. Santiago held him there, letting him suffer.

There was a knock at the door. Santiago pushed Zeller away and went for his 9mm that was still on the floor. I took up my M-16 and Zeller took up his and we trained them on the door.
“Maybe you kill yourselves in there?” the man from the front desk asked through the door. Santiago pushed the door open for him. He walked in and looked around the room. Santiago shut the door behind him. He sat on the bed next to Cooper, with his back to Cooper’s body. Another plane, or the same one, flew overhead in the distance.

“You know all it takes is for one of these people to go tell one of the warlords that you’re here,” he said. He looked at me for awhile. I could tell that he liked me. “You don’t look so good,” he finally said.

“My head hurts,” I said.

He told us that his adopted American name was Michael and that he’d wanted to be a great banker. That he’d wanted to make money in this world.

“Who doesn’t,” Zeller said.

He told us that he liked Americans and that he’d help us as much he could. He promised us water and a little bit of food. “I’ll help you as much as I can,” Michael said. “But things are so difficult and expensive over here.” He looked around the room at our bags and the few items we had spread out: blankets, coats, and the radio. “A weapon might be easy to get rid of. The monsoons are coming,” he leaned forward onto his knees. “Soon it’ll rain for a month.”

“What do you mean,” I said. “It hasn’t rained here in Years. That’s why we’re here. Because there’s a famine.”

“It rains here every year,” he said.

“No way,” Santiago said.

“It rains for a month. We always get the monsoon.” The man looked horribly tired, bored by our presence. In all of our briefings they never said it rained. They talked
of fire and famine. They said this was the future of the world unless we took steps to stop it now. I was learning that their briefings were as trustworthy as the evening news.

"You need to be gone by tonight," Michael said. "Somebody will tell the warlord you're here for the reward."

"How much are they offering for us," Santiago asked.

"Enough," Michael said.

"When does the sun set," Santiago asked.

He gave us an approximation of time. He said it wasn't important. "People don't get happier here at night. They'll kill you if they find you. They know you killed the children. And if they find out you didn't make it out of the city they'll find you. The warlords will know tonight that you're still in the city."

"What did they do with the kids," I asked.

The man looked at me for a moment, "I don't know." He stood up and stretched, he was a man waiting for something to come to him as payment. "The warlords carried them through the city to get people against America when it comes." He stopped looking at us and just rocked back and forth on his heels. I thought about telling him that there was a sniper next door that seemed a little unpredictable and that Michael might want to stay low. He said, "This used to be a good city. Now you're robbed everywhere you go. Will you make it so much better?"

"Why haven't you turned us in," Santiago asked.

"Why would I," Michael said.

"Because you said you like Americans," I said.

"It's all talk," he said, "I really don't care I just don't like to see people dead."
Santiago walked over to Cooper's gear and took out his 9mm. He pushed the magazine release and the magazine fell out. Then he dislodged the chambered round and checked to make sure the weapon was empty. He handed it to Michael. Michael held it indifferently, as though it were nothing more than a radio. It was probably cool to the touch, the way metal is when it hasn't been touched or used in awhile. Michael nodded. It was an act that he'd probably been a part of before. You paid with whatever you could give in such a city. Sometimes you paid with whatever could be taken away. I looked at the stains on the mattress. Michael rose and left the room. He hadn't looked at him the whole time. He probably thought he was asleep. How embarrassing.

Santiago didn't know what else to do in a hotel so he went looking for somebody to fuck before we left the city. He didn't say this, but when he stepped out into the hall, I could tell. It wasn't even really a hotel anymore, but still, he went out and walked along the balcony. I was smoking a cigarette in the doorway when Santiago walked back from his adventure. The children were all hidden away. Perhaps it was nap time. Santiago said he traded a woman the pack of M&Ms for a blowjob.

"It's too bad that we all don't have a pack," I said.

"That was the smartest thing I've done all day," he said.

"Nice," I said. "If we only had a truckload we could fuck the whole city."

"You want some," Santiago asked. "I'm sure she's game. You probably don't even need to offer her anything."
"No," I said, sickened at the thought of putting my dick where his had been. sickened to hear the same hushed whispers and moans that he had heard, sickened to arrive at the same end, sickened that I might find the same delight. "Zeller?" he asked.

"Why not," Zeller said. "You only live once," he picked up his 9mm. "so you might as well fuck a few of 'em."

"Sure enough," I said. "It's not like there's a fifty-percent aids rate here."

Santiago stepped out into the hall and pointed Zeller to her room

"You feel alright?" I asked when he walked back into the room.

He leaned back against the bathroom door. He looked about fifteen years older than he had when he'd walked back into the room. Age was quickly overtaking him. "I think I'll be alright if we can just make it out of here. If I can just figure out what went wrong."

"It happened so fast," I said. "What could you do?"

"Keep it under control," he said. "And now it's all going away. We're so far gone I can't feel myself anymore. Michael's right we've got to get out of here, nobody's coming for us. What am I doing?"

"Don't start that," I said. "You don't know where you'll end up or what you'll come up with."

"We've got to get ourselves gone," he said.
Standing over Cooper's body I decided that we were lucky Cooper died, because he showed us where the enemy was, and that they had the ground between us and them covered. I was fatigued by all the rumors of death I'd ever heard. Everything I'd ever read or heard about death visited me again. I wanted to stay and find out whether Cooper's body would give off a quickened scent of death in the heat. But we had to get going. With the lifting of some of the heat, I felt like the decisions were ours to be made and to manipulate. I shouldered my pack and thought of all the choices that it contained. Every item in there was an item I could leave behind. I hadn't brought a raincoat, and I was hoping that Santiago wouldn't ask about it if it started to rain. Who'd ever heard of
rain in the desert? I was a rat on the sinking ship. Show me a sign to the exit. Say a prayer for the passage. I was excited that we would make choices that took us out of the city and that they wouldn’t be made by the sun or the city, the inhabitants, or Cooper’s needs. I gave myself up to Santiago’s decisions to show that I had all the faith in him that there was possible to muster in this world.

Santiago tore off Cooper’s nametag and the patches that designated him as a member of the United States Army. He tore off his patch that designated him as a member of the 10th Mountain Division and he tore off the American flag on his left shoulder. He handed all these scraps to me and I didn’t have a clue as to what he expected me to do with such things. I held the patches for a moment, looking at the threads that hung from their edges where they’d been sown onto Cooper’s uniform. I stowed them in my rucksack because I knew that I wasn’t supposed to throw them away or lose them when nobody was looking.

“What religion was he?” I asked. “I mean he was really religious.”

“I don’t know,” Santiago said.

“Look at his dog-tags.” I said. “I know he was a virgin.”

Santiago looked from Cooper to Zeller then to me. “You want to touch him?”

“You just did,” I said.

“I touched his sleeve,” Santiago said. “I’m not putting my hand down his shirt.”

I looked blankly at the floor. “Alright,” Santiago whispered. He gingerly lifted the T-shirt under Cooper’s BDU’s and pulled the chain out. “Lutheran,” Santiago read off the dog-tag. “What are you?” he asked me.

“Catholic,” I said.
"You?" he asked Zeller.

"Southern Baptist," Zeller said.

"What about you?" I said to Santiago.

"Unaffiliated," he said.

"What?" Zeller asked.

"Means I don't have a religious preference," Santiago said.

"I guess somebody else will pray for him," I said. I didn't feel like we had the right.


Still, we stood around the body for awhile, because I think we really wanted to say something. Finally, Santiago said that maybe we should borrow some other clothes for him. Maybe the owner of the hotel would get in trouble if they found a dead American soldier in one of the rooms. Maybe they'd desecrate the body. But maybe by taking him out of uniform, I said, we'd void his will or his life insurance or something ludicrous along those lines. There were rules of engagement, rules that governed the way we lived, and I told them there were probably rules that could forfeit the legitimacy of our death. They didn't argue with me because we heard rumors and stories like that all the time. The government was always looking for a way out of its obligations.

Santiago changed his mind about us going in disguise as well and said that most likely we should just stay in uniform. History was full of examples that supported his decision. I told him, wanting to instill in him a sense of hope and meaning for what was ahead. If he was calling the shots I wanted him to know that, even if I didn't, I had all the faith and respect in the world for him. It couldn't hurt.
We walked downstairs to talk with Michael. He told us that it probably wasn’t the smartest idea in the world to try and steal a car in this city. He said the bus was guaranteed to bring us better luck. “Do you know how to get out of here?” he asked. “Out of the city?” When we shook our heads, he waved us toward the front door with a flick of his wrist like he was tossing something into the trash. All aside, I think he genuinely liked us. We didn’t tell him about Cooper.

“We need your car.” Santiago said, again.

“You mean you’re taking my car,” Michael said. He twisted his hands, folding them together, where they seemed to tear at each other. They were covered in short gray hairs. He kept turning them, rubbing them violently together. “I could have turned you over for the reward. You killed children and others. It’s all over the city. They’re looking for you everywhere. They’ll find you, even if it’s not here, even if you go home. They’ll learn your names somehow and find you out there. It’s a sick city.” He wasn’t threatening us. He was only making an observation. We’d heard the story before, trouble always followed you home. It was getting old. So was the story of our infamy. “They know you’re still here because they watched the helicopters turn back. They shot one of them down and killed those that were still alive.” He didn’t look up at us. The way his fingers twisted, I thought he was going to knot them together.

I wondered who was on that helicopter. It might have been Heath and Fizer.

I wanted to tell him that there were only two children and that it was all an accident and that I had nothing to do with it. Tell your friends, I wanted to say, that I had nothing to do with it.
He told us we'd never make it in a car. There were checkpoints all over the city where the warlords stopped any vehicle and forced it to pay a toll. He said we'd be dead as soon as they saw us. He said we could put on other clothes but when they spoke to us and we didn't answer they'd shoot us. "You'd have better luck taking the bus," he said. "People leave you alone when you ride on the trucks and busses here. Besides," he looked up from the hands he was tormenting, "I sent it with a friend because I knew you'd ask."

"Which one of your neighbors has a car," Santiago asked.

"Do you know which way to drive?" Michael asked. "There are mines in most of the potholes that lead to the outside of the city. You don't just drive west in a town like this."

"I've got a map," Santiago said to Michael. Then he turned and looked at me, shaking his head as if he wanted me to know that we weren't, despite appearances and the situation, amateurs. And because of all of that who did this guy think he was. I'd seen the look before, when Santiago was drunk and trying to pick up a woman to take home from the bars. He never made it to closing time. He never got the girl.

"Your army's moved," Michael said. "They're moving to a small city north of here to wait out the monsoon."

"What's the name of it," Santiago asked.

"Hobyo." It sounded exotic, exciting. The kind of place where they had resorts that served a magnificent brunch with link sausages in the morning. Wonderful things happened in Hobyo. Adventures unfolded and everyone made love. Our fellow soldiers, our fellow citizens, everyone we loved met in Hobyo and had an orgy of biblical
proportions. People ate and drank and waited out the rain in Hobyo. Everyone we hated
was guaranteed a good time. Everyone we loved suffered the injustice of others. Every
woman I ever desired was giving and enjoying my enemies. I was young, so it was easy
to think of the world in such terms. To see the world divided into portions of love and
fucking.

"I don’t have a map of the whole country," Santiago whispered to me as we
walked out the front door.

We found an old car hidden in a back alley. Packs of dogs dashed about.
roaming, controlling that part of the city. They all looked the same. All the dogs in this
city looked the same: eager, anxious, sick, and sly in their movement and menace. They
exuded the same passion. There was a chain through the steering wheel that ran through
a large hole in the dash to another large hole in floor of the car. Santiago looked at it for
a long time like it would fall away to his will power. This was something that the army
did as well, chain up there vehicles, which is why it was unusual and unnerving.
Santiago was a large man. A hunter of large game. A killer. He looked at the car with
menace. I’d once seen a buck that he’d called with a knife. He hid in a tree and waited
for the animal to move under him. It sounds absurd, yes, but I saw that the only mark on
the animal was where its throat had been opened by his knife and his hand. Santiago was
uncontrollable. To be feared. I couldn’t bear thinking about the wide-eyed animal’s
fright at that moment. I couldn’t help but feel for the animal, the absurdity of the
situation, the unbelievable nature of its killing: a man in a tree with a knife. You could
laugh yourself to death in such a world. It was the worst looking car in the world. The
inside was all tore up, like it had been stolen five hundred times before. Perhaps it was
the communal car. It existed for the honor system. The chain was held together by one of the largest padlocks I’d ever seen. It looked like something that Houdini would have used. It should have been in a museum with a note underneath about how this was the one lock that the American iconoclast, the true American hero, couldn’t break because it was a lock that he himself had pieced together out of all the locks of his failures. People loved stories like that. Santiago told us to turn around and watch the alley. To cover him. Like he needed to tell us anything. I was so scared that at any moment I thought I’d be able to see through walls and people alike. Santiago shot the lock. Zeller and I turned to see what he’d done. There was a dent in the lock and a hole in the transmission where the bullet had exited after ricocheting off the lock. He fired another shot, blindly. I leapt away, not knowing where this one would end up. He fired four more. The city was taking note. I caught site of the chain and lock flying through the air. They’d taught us to hotwire cars in survival school, so it should have been easy. Santiago reached into the mess of dash and into the steering wheel and pulled out a tangle of wires. It looked like someone had stuffed the car with extra wiring to ward off thieves.

A man came running up to the car. None of us could understand him. He pulled at Santiago, trying to get him from the car. Santiago kicked him in the knee. The man struggled to stand, tugging at Santiago and calling out. He was warning the neighborhood. He was screaming into the night about whom and where we were. Santiago swung and hit the man in the chest with his M-16. The man grabbed onto Santiago’s arm so Santiago kicked him in the midsection. The man fell backwards. The man stood and grabbed at Santiago’s M-16, trying to wrestle it away. Santiago pushed at the man and then shot him. The man looked at us like we’d just offended him. He fell
into Santiago. He wasn't going to let us take his car. Some things were just too important.

"Just give us the fucking car you idiot," Santiago said. "You stupid fuck."

Santiago kicked the man off of him. We ran past people gathering in the alley. A few of them threw rocks at us. We ran until we didn't know where we were or how we'd ended up there.

"I didn't mean to shoot him," Santiago said. "I was trying to aim away, just to scare him, but he kept jerking the gun around."

Some people didn't know when to leave well-enough alone, I wanted to tell him as we started to run again. Some people couldn't avoid the tragedy that was coming. We are all addicted to the tragedy. I'll see someone, and I'll know that they're the worst thing that could ever happen to me, but I'll chase them until they devour me. I thought about the fool in the alley. I thought about the insignificance of a car, and now his life. The man was stupid to try and tangle with us. We were desperate. I tried to tell myself that the man didn't have any emotions. Some people were too stupid, too deprived and void of religion and spirituality to enjoy their emotions. Some people were animals.

The city was massive and dark but finally we found an old hospital that appeared empty. My face and head were on fire. I was sure that I was going to die from the heat. All the hospital beds were gone, but Santiago made me lie on the floor. He made me drink an entire canteen of water. He told me to drink another, handing me one of his, but I couldn't hold anymore and vomited up nothing but water.

"You look like shit," he said. "You're dehydrated again. If you get heat exhaustion we're through."
There was an upside down stainless steel bathtub in a corner of the room and Santiago and Zeller flipped it over. Santiago said that it was cool. He took all of my gear, except my 9mm, and helped me into the bathtub. He set my M-16 on my chest, like I was preparing to float ashore somewhere. Keep it high and dry, I thought, trying to imagine the ocean cold around me. The metal was cool against my skin. I thought of a dog I'd once owned, George, who liked to sleep on the tiled floor of the bathroom, or in the bathtub itself during the summer heat. My parents had to put Mitch to sleep because he couldn't walk anymore. He was a large dog, part Doberman, part German Shepard, and weighed close to a hundred pounds. So he wasn't the kind of dog you could carry out to the backyard when he needed to relieve himself. But, by god, that dog loved to sleep in the bathtub. Everything in the hospital was covered with sand. It wasn't the kind of hospital you'd want to come to with a health problem. There were sandbags in the windows where the former occupants had tried to protect themselves and, perhaps, their patients. Glass crunched underfoot as Santiago and Zeller walked around the room opening cabinets and drawers. What had those of us who'd come here before complained of, stayed for, and forgotten to leave because of? I speculated everything horrible and indifferent. Cancer and broken bones. Parasites and infectious diseases. The possibilities were endless. Just ask Cooper, I thought. Just look out over the city and ask the wind. I couldn't see over the lip of the bathtub. I felt like a tortoise safe in his shell. I was low in the bathtub, my eyes closed, listening to Santiago and Zeller talking about what to try next to get out of the city. They were laughing about the complexity and absurdity of every escape we'd tried to make so far.

"I don't think we're supposed to leave," Zeller said.
But we knew we couldn’t stay.

Then it wasn’t either one of them talking, it was someone else. I couldn’t understand the language.

“Easy,” Santiago said. “Stay down Stantz.”

And then it was like the world itself broke open and there was always violence and chaos shuttering under the hospital floor. Everything the hospital had tried to protect its inhabitants from tore into the room. And just as quickly it stopped.

“Goddamn this,” Santiago yelled. All we knew to do was cuss at the likelihood of existence in an uninhabitable and betrayed city. Santiago was leaning over the bathtub. He held a hand over his neck and blood leaked out, striking me beside the eye. It spread out and dripped down from his fingers. “We got to move.” He put his other hand over the wound as well, like that would hold it back. Zeller and I helped him to a table where Zeller applied our last compound press.

There were two bodies on the floor. One of them was still breathing, blinking hard to see us in the night. I kicked his weapon further away than it had landed in case he suddenly came up with an idea that could save him. He’d been shot in the side. I took a T-shirt out of my rucksack and tore and balled it up on top of the man’s wound. He was, perhaps, as old as my father. He kept shaking his head and muttering. It’s a waste. I wanted to tell him, but I didn’t know how. It was horrible not to be understood at the moment you died. Santiago walked over and leaned over the man.

“I wouldn’t get their blood on you,” he said.
He was right, so many of the citizens had aids or hepatitis or other diseases in their blood. I took my hand away from the wound and the balled-up shirt fell to the floor. Heat rose from the man like he was going to go up in flames at any moment.

"We got to get out of here." Santiago said, choking out the words. He pounded the table with his fists. The entire room shook. He was yelling, choking, brightening the bandage. He walked out of the room, leaving his pack, everything but the weapon that he clung to behind. His helmet, everything in a pile on the floor. I didn’t want to carry it either. If I were a larger man, I would have been able to carry all the weight in the world. It was clumsy to leave it behind. They could look through it and find out who we were. Maybe he had addresses in there. They could send somebody to America to kill his family and friends. We’d heard rumors of such things in other wars. My name had to be in there somewhere. And I didn’t want them to know who I was. Michael had warned us about such things. I looked at the bag for a long time but then I heard them leave the stairwell for the street and hurried after them.

We knew the sea was in the distance so we started toward it. It was dark by now. People sat in doorways and gathered around fires that they’d started in the streets. I couldn’t understand why they’d start fires, because it was still so hot. We came out onto a long boulevard, bushes and trees had sprouted out of the middle of it. Everything was the color of sand, the color of desert, even at night. A woman emptied a bowl of what might have been piss and shit into the middle of the street. She watched us vacantly as we passed.
We stepped over a sand dune and there was the sea, solitary and murmuring before us. We stopped on the other side of the dune, the ocean side, and looked back to make sure that we hadn't been followed. We were too tired to care, but still it was important. We watched for God only knows what. People hustling from building to building, I guess. Personally, I watched for headlights. But there was nothing. It was too dark to care anymore. The moon was a slit in the night. Stars were everywhere. I'd never known the world was full of so many stars. I thought for poor Cooper dead in the hotel—each one shining like an army's campfire on a mountainside.
We collapsed into the sand. We were officially out of food and water. Santiago and Zeller were on their last magazine of ammunition. We divided up what was left of the ammunition so that we each had three full magazines of M-16 ammunition.

The wind was cool coming in off the ocean. But I was so hot. I had goose bumps all over my body, but I was still on fire.

"I guess we should just follow the beach north," Santiago said. "Out of the city, we'll have to come to something. All those pilots like to fly along the edge of the ocean."

Which was true, they did. I'd learned to fire the .50 caliber a few weeks before from a helicopter as it flew along the edge of the ocean. The crew chief had tapped me on the back as a signal and I fired into the oncoming waves. When we had turned to fly back, following the same course, poor Cooper fired out the opposite window.

We followed the ocean's edge—sometimes walking in the sand, sometimes in the foam left by the retreating surf, and at others moving far up shore when rocks or reef interrupted our travel. There was a wall around part of the city. As we walked under it I imagined it was full of eyes staring down at us, preparing to call out its discovery. Then we came to an abandoned industrialized portion of the city. We found an old shipping yard. It was huge. There were old military airplanes of Russian make decaying in the dark. One airplane was planted in the ground by the nose, the tail of the aircraft pushing up for the sun and moon. It looked like a child's toy half sunk in a sandbox. We stood around and stared up at it. I'd hate to be the poor fucker that had to bail out of that craft. Santiago said. Large pieces of machinery rusted all around us. An old ship half-sunk peered at us from the ocean. It was the largest ship I'd ever seen. It was a tanker of some kind. I'd hate to be the fuck that had to abandon that sinking ship, I thought. A ship like
that and a port like this were never new. They always needed painting. They were built to be discarded. We got lost on a maze of boardwalk and found ourselves at the end of a pier, where we had to turn back to start again. I felt like the figure in a puzzle that has to be led through the maze to the pot of gold at the end. Finally, we found a road that led back down to the beach again. It turned back, under the docks, hugging the shore, but we crossed off the path and back onto the sand. The sand was thicker, deeper on that side of the pier. I could feel it draining the energy from my body. We walked down to where the ocean rolled up and hardened the earth, making our path sturdier. My feet were soaked. Then we were in the suburbs, small houses, but still houses, or at least the makings of what might signify a house. There weren't any lights on in any of the tiny houses. Dogs barked after us. It sounded like a pack of them was forming to take chase and put us to flight. I looked suspiciously in their direction. There was no end in sight. I wanted to panic. I wanted to give up and stay where I was. Let the army find me, I thought. Let them come to our rescue. We might even have friends in the city that might run across us. The army might be rolling toward the same shore, denizens of screaming machinery, and silent guns at their ready. They were coming to save us, because how could they possibly afford to lose us.

"It's a hell of a city," Santiago said, after we must have walked fifteen miles.

"How's your neck," I asked.

"Can't feel a thing," Santiago said. "What do you know about ships," asking no one in particular. Neither Zeller nor I said anything. "I've always wanted to build my own boat," Santiago said. "Out of wood. You know, those boats that you can take
around the world. Only I don’t know shit about working with wood or boats. Still, the occupation is the saint."

I couldn’t understand how he was able to talk with his throat torn open like that. He should have been a memory.

Slowly the city turned to shacks that looked like animals crawling into the night to die. There were lights on, here and there, in some of the shacks. Dogs were barking in front of us. There were fires in some of the alleys. None of them seemed to be tended from where we stood.

“Look at that,” Zeller said. “A flaming trashcan.”

And sure enough, there it was. We stopped and stared at it for a moment. Transfixed. “That’s pretty good,” I said.

Far out over the ocean I could see lightning. We stopped and turned toward the ocean, letting the wind feel over us. The night was turning the color of mud.

“I guess that guy was right,” Santiago said. “It really is going to rain.”

Soon the dogs stopped barking and we heard a few people yelling in the city. Santiago said he was exhausted and needed a moment. He fell into the sand. He fell asleep quickly and I looked at the wound on his neck by moonlight as best as I could. He was covered in dirt. Here and there, the blood or sweat had pushed the dirt aside. The bandage was loose and didn’t even cover the wound, like he’d loosened his necktie at a party. Even in the moonlight I could tell that the bandage was covered in filth. The mixture of blood and dirt looked like tar.

We heard yelling that seemed to be getting closer. We tried to wake Santiago but he wouldn’t move. He was in the deepest sleep I think I’d ever seen anyone. He began
snoring loudly. It matched the rhythm of the waves almost to perfection. His chest rose and fell heavily. One moment the yelling sounded like laughter, the next it became bitter and resonated with what sounded of hate and jealousy. Zeller told me that it was my turn to go see what was going on, that he'd stood watch at the hospital. He assured me that he couldn't carry Santiago anywhere all by himself, so not to worry, they weren't going anywhere.

"What if something goes wrong," I asked.

"I don't know," he said, he was watching the lightning. I wondered whether or not he was listening for the thunder and whether or not he'd count aloud or not as soon as I walked away, so that he could gauge the distance. If it were only that easy to tell how far from harm we were. "Fire a shot or something," he said.

"Like in the movies," I said. "Won't they know where I am?"

"Look, would you go running around in the dark if someone was firing a gun?" he asked.

"If I had a gun and was with a lot of other people, I would." Besides, we hadn't scared anybody away yet. I outranked Zeller, but I went anyway. I wouldn't fire a shot if anything happened. I'd let them take me away. Maybe I'd make the news. I hoped that my mother would give them a nice picture of me; not the one from basic where I looked like a space monkey—anxious for the launch in my goon suit. The stupid haircut. The stupid expression of surprise and feigned manhood on my face. Everyone else scowled out like warriors. I looked out of my picture like somebody surprised to find out that there was a moon.
Through the alleys and along the edges of buildings I moved as though I were
crawling into the voices themselves. I wrestled with their shape and pitch as they stroked
about like fire. A man and a woman were dancing. The entire crow was all movement,
but then they stopped. It was a rather lopsided carnival with seven men and two women.
A tall man kept hitting the back of the head of a man that was all jutting teeth. The tall
man hit him with his open hand and the man that was all teeth began dancing with the
woman. The couple held each other stiffly, pushing each other back like children at their
first dance. There was no music and the others didn’t make a sound. They kept their
waists as far from each other as possible. You could hear the ocean far off in the night. I
wondered whether or not they could hear Santiago’s snoring. Maybe they were dancing
to the barking of all the dogs. The couple stopped dancing. Then they were all arguing.
The dancing couple looked at their feet as if they expected their feet to remember the
steps of some dance even if the mind couldn’t remember. They looked at their feet the
way you might look at a friend who’s decided to leave you alone at a party of strangers.
The tall man slapped the man that was all teeth and said something. The man with jutting
teeth didn’t move. He looked too tired to dance anymore. I could feel for him. I was as
tired and beat as he looked. Perhaps he was waiting for the others to join in or take over.
The men that had been watching the dancing backed the man with jutting teeth against a
wall. The dancing woman joined another woman, maybe a friend, and they cowered
back, away from the men. Several more women appeared out of houses. The man with
jutting teeth looked frantically from the ground to the faces of the men that held him in
place. Then he was talking to the crowd in a fevered pitch. All the windows up and
down the street were empty of spectators.
The woman who hadn’t been dancing, the friend, she began arguing with the tall man. The dancing woman stood back, away from everyone, with her head bowed. Neither of the women wore shoes. The woman was loud but I could tell that she was frightened by the way her body shook, not from conviction, but fear. You could tell that she didn’t believe what she was saying by the way she didn’t look once at the man they held back, but instead, pleaded with a man that feigned interest. She must have been the neighbor come out to help. She was the best friend offering support and protection.

The tall man stood there with that tense, bowed expression, full of hate and fury the way the third rail sits quiet yet electrified. He was waiting to come alive. He was longing to be touched. You could tell that he wanted to do some damage by the way he stood. His body begged to break into movement. He wanted to crucify himself and the world. By watching, I think that if he knew, at that moment, that whatever violence he inflicted, whatever damage he caused would come back tenfold on him, it would have only made him angrier and more vicious to break the world apart. His body was too tight, coiled, as the dancing woman approached, then reached out and touched him on the arm. It was a mistake. I almost screamed at her to keep her hands away from the cage, but she would always touch him. and she would always want to touch him in that moment. She had to know. And he broke loose. He hit her, once, twice, hard on the face before she could even touch the ground. Her head echoed against the ground. The man with the jutting teeth against the wall made a break for it but two of the men caught him and slammed him back.

She either coughed or sneezed, but air kicked out of her body carrying blood with it. I couldn’t tell whether the man doing the damage was brother, husband, or wounded
lover by this point. She coughed another clog of blood into the air. She sat up. Blood was coming out of her nose and mouth and ears.

I wondered what part the man with jutting teeth against the wall played. He saw me. He had a quizzical look on his face and said something to the others and one of them slapped him.

I hid against the wall of the building. None of the men looked in my direction. I hadn’t noticed but there were several children in the alley with me by now. They’d found me and gathered about me. They’d walked up behind me and were watching the fight, taking little notice of me as if I were one of their gang.

Two guys held the man against the wall and the tall man ran at the man with the jutting teeth and hit him at full speed, crushing his forearm into the tall man’s face. The tall man’s head bounced off the wall and his body collapsed to the ground like all of his bones had risen out of him and marched away. They kicked him over and over, mainly kicking at the face and crotch. When the man protected one area, they kicked the other. Finally he stopped trying and just gave himself over to them. He abandoned his body to them, probably just hoping they’d tire of him and leave. I thought of all those teeth.

The tall man said something to the others as a friend handed him a knife. I could see its curve like a slivered moon in the night. They pulled the man with jutting teeth’s pants down. They had him pinned. I couldn’t see what they were doing, but I knew. A small girl put her hand on my shoulder and leaned over me, watching the men from behind me. She leaned against me with all her tiny weight. I could feel that she held her breath. Her eyes were huge and white. The tall man moved from the other’s genitals to other’s mouth. He slapped up on the man’s jaw. You could hear all those teeth clash.
The tall man stood up and kicked the man with jutting teeth sharply in the chest. The man with jutting teeth didn’t move. I looked but couldn’t see anything through the movement of men. They left his pants down around his ankles.

The dancing woman was sitting up by now, with the help of her friend. The tall man walked over to her and punched her in the face with the hand that held the knife. It was a move I’d seen before. It was a move they’d taught us—punch, cut. Inflict as much damage as quickly as possible. The friend, the neighbor stood back. She ran down one of the streets and out of sight. The man tore her shirt and sawed at her chest and ribs with the knife. The little girl next to me was breathing again. Her face was inches from mine. She looked both mesmerized and horrified. And then all of the men were gone. The woman didn’t move. They started gathering around the wounded woman. She just stared up at the night’s sky. I thought it was time to go back. I was sure that Zeller was wondering what had happened. Then the women took up stones from the street. I thought it might be a ritual or a game that the children might join in, but they watched quietly as if they hadn’t quite learned the rules yet. One woman threw a rock at the head of the woman on the ground. Crack. Another threw one. Crack. It was horrible, the sound of rock against bone and flesh. I couldn’t hold or explain such a sound.

Finally they left her alone as well. They hadn’t even bothered with him. Then the kids went out and looked at the damage. I walked out there with them. I had to see.

We’re always attracted to the train wrecks.

The kids followed me when I started back to the beach. The girl was holding my hand by that point. I didn’t know what to do, so I let her. It was nice, the way they didn’t talk. They just followed. They reminded me of the children in the hotel. I lost a few
along the way. They must have turned to go home. I motioned for the rest of them to stay where they were when I started closing in on the beach. Children had parents. I motioned for them to disperse, to go home. They looked at me for awhile. Then most of them walked away, disappearing up alleys and into houses. The little girl wouldn't leave me though. I tried to make her understand that I had to go but she just stood there. "Go," I said, like she was animal. "Go home." I walked back among the shacks. I sidetracked here and there so she wouldn't know exactly where I needed to return. I ran up streets, running as fast as I could to lose her. Every time I stopped, there she was. She thought it was a game. She was laughing. It went on and on. I so tired I wanted to cry. I ran by people drinking from beer bottles and dark containers, they cheered me on, and she followed. We were hound and hare dashing through the streets.

I turned and chased her but she loved it. Finally, I had to stop. She was laughing uncontrollably by this point. Then she must have seen the change come over my face and her tiny mood turned a little more serious as she took a deep breath the way children do when they've run too long too remember breathing. She leaned against my leg, smiling at the buildings, the moon, the night, the people that were everywhere and watching us. I extended my arm and pointed my palm at her, the way you will with a dog when you want it to stay, the universal symbol of stay. I tensed and arched my body so that she would know to stay. It was a new game. One where you disappear—never to be found again. Not in this world. I felt for her as I backed away, some of us love it when we're discovered, when someone finally comes across us in our hiding place. We've failed and we've succeeded. The repetition of children's games chases us through life. She didn't know how to stay, she just kept following me. So I took a role of duct-tape out of my
back and smiled at her as she let me put a twist of it around her ankles. I showed her how to hop and she laughed the entire time. And then I took off running. I stopped and looked back, we have to, and the look on her face was hard to chase away as I made my way down to the beach.

Zeller and Santiago were both asleep. Neither of them heard me. They were out in the open. You could see them in the moonlight. You could see the shapes of their bodies some five hundred yards away. They looked so tiny under all that night and sky. The sky over the ocean looked brown, muddy, blocking out the stars. The night over the city was clear and bright.

I sat down next to them. Somebody should have stayed awake but I couldn’t stand to wake either of them. And I couldn’t stand to be alone, so I closed my eyes.
Seven

I woke up first. It was still dark. I felt like I'd slept my way into another world. I would have given anything to go back in time and never join the army. There's never the same lambency in sunset as in sunrise. So, finally, because sunrise and sunset look nothing alike, I knew that it was morning and I remembered where we were.

The sky and the ocean were the color of mud. We started walking. The city stirred slowly around us. Zeller looked at his watch and said it was Sunday. Sundays had always been a source of disappointment in my life. I'd always expected more of them, only to receive the cold shoulder. It was a day I neither understood nor a ritual in which I was allowed to participate. I felt too much like the man that throws rocks at
children as we trudged along the beach. That watched as others were castrated. I'd had enough of love in the last few days. I wanted it all to go away, to fuck something else, to break something else, and to never tell me the truth again. We passed shacks and shanties and it came to me that this was one beleaguered place to spend a Sunday. Had I ever seen a worse Sunday? Sunday has to be the saddest day of the lot. "Sunday is one sad sack of shit." I finally said. But strike it up, I'll never be here again, this is the worst Sunday you'll ever spend, I told myself.

"Sunday," Santiago said, and that was all he added. He held his hand over the wound in his neck.

All was spread out behind us now. All that was left of the city was a multitude of multicolored tents which looked like a thousand balloons. Their beauty could have been the moment captured in a jigsaw puzzle. I tried to muster sympathy for those poor fucks. You had to be bad off if you couldn't afford a house in Mogadishu. Your luck will always turn for the worst. I wanted to console them, congratulations.

The world was the color of mud. Santiago was the color of mud. The blood of his wound the color of mud. If it wasn't the color of mud, why give it a look. We needed to find Santiago something to break or fuck, or he'd probably die soon, I thought. That's the way men like him suffered to stay alive. He was born to suffer. He loved to suffer. And like the rest of us he was addicted to the tragedy, and to going it alone. When we weren't friends for a week, he told me at the end of that time, as though to make it better, to make a little sense of it. You have a little Santiago in you, and I have a little Stantz in me. And that was supposed to make it all better. But what do you know, we all have a little Santiago in us. We're all wound and suffering.
We passed a man fishing the ocean. He walked into the waves, up to his waist, and cast, with all of his might, his body leaping up from the waves as he added to the momentum of the lure with the pendulum of his body. I thought the whole contraption and the whole act was going to drag him out to sea. We sat down to watch him fish. He cast that lure as though he were casting the city and its curses out of him. There was garbage all around us. I hadn’t noticed it before, which was strange. But it lined the area between the beach and the city and, in places, it came down to the beach and out into the ocean itself.

I could just make out an island on the horizon. I wanted my own island. I wanted to be alone on my island. I deserved one. I deserved to watch the seasons change on my own island. I’ll go there one day, I thought. And I’ll make it a paradise.

The ocean smelled a little better than the center of the city. Still, the water frothed with shit and piss. A sewage dumping plant was right up the way, I could see its great cogs, its pipes jutting out over the ocean. That plant wasn’t pumping anymore, but tent city was dumping everything they had into small creeks that emptied into the ocean. With all the sewage and trash, the air was heavy with flies. They were huge and fat, a majestic purple. The man caught three fish in a row. They loved feeding in the waste. There are those that long for what makes the rest of us sick. Some of the piles of garbage smoldered. Smoke rose from their centers.

The fisherman lined his fish lazily up on the shore in front of us. He looked up at us, the pink orifice of his smiling spotted with rotten and missing teeth. One of the fish was deformed where, perhaps in its youth, something had taken a bite out of it. The man held it up for us to examine.
"What a beaut’" Santiago said. "God my neck hurts. ’ Which was a huge admission coming from him. He had two black eyes and blood had dried under his nose. The white’s of his eyes were full of blood. He put his head back on the dirt.

"We still have the medical kit," I said. "We’re out of compound presses but I could try and clean that out better and put some stitches in there.‘ I looked closer at the wound. The bullet had torn through his neck but there wasn’t much of an entry or exit wound so it should have been easy to close.

"Don’t fucking touch it," he said. He pushed the compound press back up and over the wound.

The fisherman walked back into the water. He worked the ocean like a conjurer. Wherever he threw his line he caught a fish. He was pulling them out left and right and tossing them to the shore. If a fish took his bait, he’d bait the line again with a bloody mess that he kept pulling out of a bag around his neck. The man pulled a fish off his line that had been halved, and was still bloody, by something else in the water. The man held it up to us, smiling at the novelty he’d caught. He tossed it to the shore and began walking out of the water. Then he disappeared, and appeared, twisting and turning in the water.

Zeller and I stood up and ran toward the shore. Blood was in the water around the man. The water was so muddy that we couldn’t see anything. Zeller fired a few shots at a flash of gray. The man bobbed in the water. We both must have thought that the other should go in after the man. He hadn’t even made a sound. His body was drifting away from us, wailing in silence. He bobbed again, like something was tugging at him. He disappeared and reappeared as the swell moved him out. As the body was pulled further
out, part of the body and some of the insides rolled ashore on the waves like an old jellyfish.

We turned and looked at the city. Nobody was paying any attention to us. We loaded the fish into Zeller's pack and started moving again.

Finally there was no more city. It just stopped and the desert began. We walked away from the beach and up a hill away from the beach so that we could see the full desert. There was a clear division where the city stopped and the desert began. There were horrible and gnarled trees and bushes that stuck up out of the sand as far as we could see. The trees weren't any taller than a man. It didn't look like much of a place to hide or find an army. It looked like more nowhere.

We walked a few more miles and then stopped. Santiago took out his bayonet and started cleaning the fish. He brushed them open with his bayonet. "Thank you," Santiago said quietly to someone, most likely to the fish. I didn't ask and I didn't really care. I didn't want a life ruled by superstitions.

Zeller and I went to look for wood and kindling. We found dried out seaweed along the shore and we picked up a few small, dead, gnarled trees.

And then it started raining. Huge, fat drops full of dirt. We looked up. I took out my canteen cups and they filled quickly with water. The water smelled like rotten fish. I dropped in some chlorine tablets. If you drink a place's water, it'll stay with you. I thought. That place will be in you forever. Another superstition. Still, I thought, when I died the water would be dried in my bones like the rings in a tree. Someone could excavate me one day and cut off a section of bone—see this line, he was there, and on and on out from the center of birth to the edge of death.
I handed Santiago one of the cups. “People get all kinds of diseases from these things,” I said, pointing to the fish, the water, and finally at our very surroundings. Everything around us was a source of dying and disease.

He laughed at that. “Least of my worries,” he said, looking down at the cup. He looked at the water like there was something in there for him to read. He looked at it for a long time. “I’m shot in the neck and you just made me afraid to drink the water.” He put the cup down and found a cigarette in his pocket. “So stupid,” he said, looking out at the ocean.

The fire went out and we couldn’t get it going again in the rain. We tried to light the fire under the cover of the trees but the rain poured off of them to the ground and struck out every fire we tried to light. The trees weren’t even tall enough to provide cover. We tried to tie off a poncho, but the wind was too much by now.

“People eat sushi all the time,” I said, looking at the large uncooked fish flanks that Santiago had prepared.

We looked at them for a long time, the rain falling all over the halves. Santiago cut a small piece away from one of the fish. He held it under his nose and smelled it. They were the color of mud. They blended in perfectly with the sky. He held the fish away from his face and drew and exhaled two large breaths, and then he put the chunk of fish in his mouth and swallowed it whole. Zeller and I watched him. “I’ve tasted worse,” he said. He cut off another piece and did the same, but this time he gagged afterward. He put his hand to the wound in his neck, like he could push the pain back down. “It’s just the texture.” He started bleeding again. The rain thinned the blood and it ran down his neck and it was a bright red before it mixed with the old layers of dirt and blood and
I couldn't imagine anything worse than being wounded in the rain. That dirty water stinging the wound. The rot of everything it touched.

I was starving, so I cut incredibly small chunks off and swallowed them whole, washing them down with mud-colored water. The water was worse than the fish so I finally gave up and just swallowed the tiny pieces of fish. The rain and wind kept up and soon enough we were all cold. Zeller and Santiago put on their rain gear. I wrapped myself in my poncho and put a T-shirt around my neck. I hated it when the fat, cold drops landed on my neck. I imagined if there was a devil, and he wanted to know how to torture me for eternity, all he'd have to do is drop one cold, fat drop at a time down the back of my neck.

I let my canteen cups fill again. Then I poured them into my canteen, where I dropped in another chlorine tablet. We only had four chlorine pills apiece, and we used three of them, one with our first cup, and one for each canteen, which left us one each. Michael had said it would rain a month, I tried to imagine it. The aftertaste of fish and water was unbearable. Santiago handed us each a cigarette. We cupped them with our hands so they wouldn't get wet.

"It was either eat or die," Santiago said, trying to console us, but himself the most. I think. His teeth were chattering.

The fish and the water made us sick. We disappeared into the desert, one by one, calling out to make sure we wouldn't come across the others. We'd walk back after the fits and try and laugh about what had just happened. Then it would wash over us again, and soon we couldn't control our own bodies.
I hung my pants on a limb and lay on the ground. I was too sick to worry about scorpions, centipedes, or snakes—they had to be at home anyway, afraid they might be washed away by the rain if they went outside. Sometimes I leaned, doubled over against a tree. I took up whatever position seemed like it might offer relief. The waste streamed down my legs. I hadn't known that I had so much in me. My skin felt like it was on fire. I was freezing but I was sweating up a storm. Finally I was so cold I just put my pants back on, leaving them un-bloused.

I don't know how long it lasted. I crawled back to the beach and sipped at my water. My body shook with spasms.

"Somebody doesn't like me," Santiago said when he sat down next to me.

Zeller came back and collapsed next to us.

"We'll stay here tonight," Santiago said.

I took out my poncho liner and wrapped myself up for the night. The ocean was as flat as a pane of glass. There were light, soft, muddy clouds directly over the ocean, and above these, dark, ominous clouds that looked like dark clots of earth. Between these two covers of clouds was a cut of the sun, so that it looked like sea and sky had been flipped.

I couldn't hear anything over the fat drops of rain. I did my best to listen all night. I listened for helicopters, Humvees, tanks, anything that might stand as a sign of our forces.
In the morning we felt a little better. We found a highway and followed it when it was parallel to the beach. Walking was so much easier on the paved surface. We stayed away from potholes and the ditch.

Soon we saw a ribbon of black smoke rising from the stretch of highway in front of us. We spread out, putting more than a body’s length between us. Santiago then Zeller flip the safety off on their weapons and it sounded like the click of insects. Santiago pointed us off the road and down onto the beach a hundred yards away.

We came to a portion of the road that had been washed away from the rest, leaving a huge chasm of slow moving water emptying into the sea. We carefully made our way through the knee-high water and a few hundred yards up the beach we found the cause of smoke. A UN semi-trailer charred and black, gutted by fire, was smoldering beside the road. Sacks of rice were scattered behind and about the trailer bleeding their contents onto the road. The rain washed the ash of the wreckage to the side of the road. Black puddles mirrored the wreckage and our passage. The shine of chemicals in the water added a mix of color to the muddy sky and our forlorn expressions. Zeller and I each put one of the heavy bags of rice into our rucksacks. We looked cautiously left and right and about us as we moved through the ghost of an ambush. What had Cooper said. I tried to remember. that places of a tragedy were notorious for ghosts. If anyone had come to the aid of the soldiers in the truck, either to rescue them or retrieve them for burial, they were long gone. We looked for signs of a convoy, tracks of the enemy, anything, but found nothing. So we moved in the direction that we deemed forward. Anywhere away from the city was moving in the right direction.
We found an abandoned upside down caboose on the beach. We had no idea how it came to be out there in the middle of nowhere. Perhaps dropped from the sky, maybe washed up by the ocean, but all aside, it was a strange thing for someone to misplace. Cabinets, bunk beds, and a table were bolted to the ceiling, which should have been the floor. In the floor, which should have been the ceiling, was a single light bulb that was still intact. Looking at the light bulb, I wondered how they could see in there with so little light. You couldn’t have read or written home in such a shadowed condition.

We used our e-tools to break a hole in the ceiling of the caboose. Moths were everywhere. They kept getting confused and dying in the tangles of my hair. There were hundreds of them. If the rain touched them they turned to mud. When we slapped them against the wall or even out of the air they turned to dust. Everything was soggy and soaked, so that it was hard to get a fire going. All the windows in the caboose were shattered, so the smoke exited at every orifice—it must have appeared as a funny sight if you could see it from the outside, smoke rolling out of its eyes and ears and mouth like a comic genius. We heard AK-47s in the distance now and then.

Soaking the rice in rain water, we scrubbed at it and tried to wash it as well as we could. We boiled the rice in our canteen cups. A film of dirt rose to the top of the boiling rice, and we kept skimming it away. Then we took turns drinking the boiled water. We’d skim the top, and leave the bottom because, essentially, we were trying to get to the middle layers as best as we could. We believed this was where all the nutrients were hidden.
We slept a lot, and we finally lost track of time. One of us always tried to stay awake to pull what guard duty we deemed necessary, which wasn’t even really guard duty, it was only a matter of listening to the way the rain fell. We listened for the substantial and tried to feel a redeeming sound in us, like the sound of a helicopter, but there was nothing but rain. You could always feel a helicopter before you could see it.

One night I woke to find Santiago staring out the door. I stayed, wrapped in my poncho on the floor. But I asked him if he heard anything.

He said that he heard children.

I listened but heard nothing.

I wanted to tell him that I often made myself listen, made myself really feel the night, my whole body an ear, electric and trembling, feeling the night and rain for something coming to save us, and how you could hear just about anything out there, armies passing by just on the edge of your senses, a helicopter’s rotors smacking at the waves and desert just out of reach, and everyone you ever loved, a parade, a procession.

“I swear to god,” he said. “I heard the sound of children playing outside.”

I stood and looked, hoping that my eyes might bear witness to what my ears couldn’t, but still there was nothing. I was reminded of something Cooper always said. “Believe only half of what you see and none of what you hear.

“They weren’t even there,” Santiago said. “I looked but they weren’t even there. My head’s going away on me.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “You’re as right as you were yesterday.”

“You don’t hear them do you?” he said.
“Just don’t answer them,” I said. “Don’t think about it.” All I could see was his silhouette in the doorway. His back was to me. I felt like he was ready to move again, like that’s what he was going to say next, that he needed movement and maneuvering the way most men needed air and sustenance. He never could sit still.

“Kids,” he said, softly. “You might as well shoot them in the head the day they’re born than bring them up in a place like this.”

Seeing him in the doorway, I felt like I was in the stairwell again, waiting on the seventeenth floor, unable to see. I felt that scared again with him talking. I felt trapped and buried.

“The ocean’s wrong,” he said. “It’s out of tune.” And he stood and went out into the rain. And I let him go. But I stayed awake all night, wrapped in my poncho, and huddled as far back into the corner as I could squeeze myself.

I was working on the radio, thinking about how worried my parents must be. News of our adventures would surely be everywhere by now. Will they make it? Will they come out alive, the media asked. Bookies were taking bets, relying on the rhythm of defeat. I wanted to call them, to write them a letter: your little boy is fine. He's receiving three hot meals and he has a cot each day: three hots and a cot, that's all we need. Is worse than being a parent? Dear mom and dad, I'd say in my letter, your little boy is fine. He loves you much. It's a beautiful place, the world. I wouldn't really send that though. Africa is fine, I'd say. It's never scary. And I never feel alone.

Listening to the rain, I thought of something my friend Shane once said. He said that if you looked through a telescope and you could see clear to the end of the universe
that you'd see the back of your own head as you looked through the telescope. He said that he'd read this somewhere, in some scientific magazine that promised enlightenment and proof of God or laid vulnerable our principals of belief.

My head was humming and I couldn't stop thinking about the faces of the dead. Without me, leaving me behind as if I were an empty slate. my mind scribbled away to rediscover the resting place of those we left behind and of those we left in our tracks. And the ocean was so off tilt that the world struggled, clicking and grinding against its cogs, vibrating up through me and invading every layer. And things were getting worse because I was starting to believe Santiago.

The rain was the only presence that resembled anything of stability. When it changed its shape, the direction it came from, its variable, its drumming, it moved all at once, like a body in motion, like a flock of birds.

"It'll rain forever," I said.

They ignored me. The smoke had driven most of the moths away, but those that were left were dying in the corners.

I went back to working on the radio. I'd taken it apart to clean it and to dry it out. I knew a little about radios. They were my brother's hobby. Growing up, he always had four or five radios rising up from the boxes in which the parts had arrived. We always looked forward to reading the addresses, to see where, and how far, they had traveled from. He saved his allowance, Christmas money, and every dollar he made mowing lawns to spend on radios. My grandfather had been like that, the kind of man that could work with his hands, and that could hold his body steady long enough to use a soldering iron to put a wire or a transistor into place. He was the kind of man you found hunched
over his work table, magnifying glass held steady on a stand above a circuit board while one hand held the part in place, and the other went about its work with freedom and indifference. I had none of that in me. I was clumsy, but I was trying.

Santiago was leaning in the doorway.

"Do you have any more cigarettes," I asked Santiago

"I got a few I'm saving," he said.

"How many men do you think it is okay for your first wife to sleep with?" Zeller asked.

"First wife," Santiago said, "what, are you planning on several wives?" Santiago laughed.

It was an unfamiliar sound. I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard him laugh. And here he was, smiling, ready for a joke, for a good time. He clapped his hands together and rubbed them like he was ready to punish the next comment that Zeller made.

When Zeller didn't say anything, Santiago added, "Several wives, now you're talking about a hell of a time." He had a T-shirt over the wound in his neck. He sat down in the doorway. Because the caboose was upside down, he sat on the top of the doorway.

Santiago blocked the wind that was coming into the caboose. The caboose smelled like rotten fish, rice, breath, and body odor. We'd been living in it so long that we'd become accustomed to it.

"No," Zeller said. "I mean how many men are too many for a wife?"

"Are you smitten?" Santiago asked.
Zeller shook his head. "No."

He thought for a moment. A moth tried to rise out of the corner but died trying. "Four? Five? You think that's too many?"

"I imagine it depends on the woman," I said.

"That and how smitten you are," Santiago said.

"I mean," Zeller said, "you don't really want a wife that's in double digits, do you?"

"Who cares," I said. "As long as she loves you."

"I have to say I agree with him," Santiago said. "Who cares?" He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the frame.

There was sand in every crevice of the radio. I turned it upside down and a few parts fell out. I looked at them and then at all the sand that fell our as well. The sand was ruining all our equipment. I'd taken the bolt out of my M-16 that morning and I could hardly open it for all the sand that had cemented it shut. It was raining and still there was sand in the air. We'd be covered by the drift of sand dunes soon. It would take the skin off our bodies and bleach our bones. They'd find us folded in the sand, clinging to air and earth because the sand had ruined it all away.

"How many men did your wife sleep with before you?" Zeller asked Santiago.

"Hell, I don't know," he said. "I never asked." He stood and walked to the door of the caboose. "It doesn't really matter."

"You'd like to know though?" Zeller asked.

"Why?" Santiago turned and walked to the other wall, then turned and walked back to the door. "Besides, I do know, and you can't change who she or you slept with."
It really doesn't matter. You can't change what's done. She'll always have slept with that many men and you'll always have slept with that many women, so who cares."

"I'm just asking," Zeller said. "I just felt like talking about something." He was quiet for a little while, but I could tell by the way that his face worked that he couldn't let it go. "You sleep with her history though. You sleep with everyone that she ever slept with and that they ever slept with and on and on."

"That's a real theory you got there," Santiago said.

I thought about telling them the theory of Shane's telescope. There was a lesson there that they could use. I didn't know what the lesson was, but I knew: telescope, back of head, moral.

I could see that Santiago was growing angry, so I had to ask it, I had to do my part in instigating trouble. We'd been forced into the caboose for so long that I needed a show. So I asked Zeller, "How many women have you slept with?"

"Ten, eleven," Zeller said.

"Is that Zeller talk or real talk?" Santiago asked.

"At least ten," Zeller said, "with one of them I was kind of drunk."

Cooper was a virgin. I wanted to tell them. And he wouldn't have liked this conversation. His wife to be hadn't slept with anyone either. Their history added up to zero. Telescope, back of head, moral: zero. He was saving it up for his girlfriend who had another year of high school left. The two of them had decided that this would be best. He told me all of this one night as I got drunk over the absence of love in my life. I wish I were plagued by a life of too much love.

"Are you using imaginary numbers?" Santiago asked.
“Look,” Zeller said, “you may not care who your wife’s fucking, but I’d like to know the details of my wife’s sex life.”

“Shut up,” Santiago said. “Just shut up. Let’s just sit here in silence and shut the fuck up.”

“Whatever,” Zeller said.

Santiago was fast. He had his hand around Zeller’s neck and was pushing him against the wall of the caboose. He had his knife in his other hand. He held it a hair’s breadth from Zeller’s right eye.

“I don’t fucking care how many men your wife fucks,” Santiago said. “If you don’t shut the fuck up I might come over and fuck her for the hell of it.” He slammed Zeller’s head against the wall, it echoed in the caboose. “I might even come over and fuck your kids.” Santiago let him go.

“Fuck you,” Zeller said, walking out of the caboose. He didn’t even take any of his raingear, and the drops were fat and drunk with dirt and sand.

I was embarrassed for the two of them. I should have warned Zeller to shut up after Santiago’s speech the night before about dead children.

Santiago walked out into the rain without any raingear as well, as if to say through his very actions, *Fuck you, Zeller* That’s showing him, I thought. It was a nice touch, brimming with dignity and retribution. We all had a part to play—why not play it as best you can. I thought of those that had died and realized that if we were going to kill ourselves we might as well make it hurt. Why carry an ordinary cross when you could carry one that weighed twice as much, was spiked, and whipped you every step of the way.

86
I decided that if I had a choice, I’d take a woman with the same count as myself. Why not choose a stone from the same quarry? I thought of a love letter I might write her: 

Endure affection. Anticipate affection.

The wind was heavy and the sound of all that shifting rain had me thinking about love. But it didn’t matter. I’d never even really seen a woman naked before. I mean really naked: in her room, when she’s getting ready to go somewhere without me, and it’s like I’m not even there, because they’re only getting ready for someone else, for others. in front of me. I was thinking about Lura again. About how I might love her because I thought about her more the longer I was, and the further I was away from her. I’d never really seen a woman naked. I’m on her bed, and her rising up from me and what we’ve finished or never even started. And when she leaves it’s like someone left a door open somewhere.

I wanted to send Lura a letter so that she would be as haunted as I found myself. We broke up a few months before I left for the war. I sent her a letter and it said nothing sacred, nothing profane, only:

Sometimes I think of you.

That was it, and that was all, just that one line in the center of the page. There was nothing else but white on the page because I was sure enough with myself to use paper that didn’t have any lines. I’d made a special trip to a craft store for the purchase. It was as much about what I didn’t say, as what I’d said. The true beauty was in everything that I left unsaid.

Still, this might have scared the shit out of her. Some don’t dwell as much as I do. Friends are always telling me not to look so desperate for love. Don’t think so much
about it, they say. If you let it go, it’ll find you out. Sounds like shit to me. I’ve never thought of a bear attack, yet a bear has never found me out.

I’ve never made love in a strange position. I’ve never played the role of the jealous lover. I find some contentment knowing that most of us end up with someone. She never wrote back. And because she wasn’t home the last time I called, I knew she wanted to be left alone. It was another note: Because you weren’t at home, I know that you wanted to be alone—only I didn’t send that one. I was on my way to becoming a real Casanova in the letter department.

I was glad that that Santiago and Zeller left me alone for a moment. I could only imagine their contentment in their silly feud. I was sure that Zeller’s wife would never meet Santiago and his wife and kids. But I was glad they were gone, because leave me alone for a moment and I’m falling in love again.

The whole thing was ridiculous, we were hardly speaking anymore. Their argument wasn’t going to help matters. We couldn’t stand each other, and Santiago was listening to the sounds of dead children at night. The army brought us together. I wanted to think that was all we had in common. But I knew it wasn’t. We’d broken the world open together. We’d cracked the illusion like an egg and found that the yolk was soft and runny—deformed and crippled. Life longed to be what it was and what we couldn’t see behind, which seemed like a lot of empty and dark. Everything was racing for that long dark tunnel. We’d only found that we were able to kill men, women, and children with an unfounded equality. Why disguise your guilt I thought, it just makes things less humorous. When you’re guilty, the world is really funny. Santiago was onto something
Santiago. He was the kind of soldier that civilians told stories about. He was the kind of soldier people expected to be in the military. He was the cliché—a drinker when he wasn’t on duty, strong, and willing to take an order; but, don’t let this be misconstrued into thinking that he was ignorant, because he was anything but ignorant. Some of the smartest people I’ve ever met were in the military. Many were people disillusioned by the reality of America and her ways. They were so disillusioned they wanted to see her from the inside. There were those that followed blindly and stupidly like bleating sheep, those that loved the arrogant orders given by those in charge, but the rest of us shuffled aimlessly, complying just enough to stay out of trouble, assuring ourselves that the GI Bill might come to something in our life. The GI Bill is the best and worst thing that ever happened to America. Never educate your killers. John Stuart Mills might like that thought. The ability for highs and lows going up and down: I’m happy, I’m sad, I’m raving from my well of depression.

Before the war, I knew a soldier that killed himself in South Dakota—this disturbed me because I was born in Rapid City. A friend told me the story. He had been on antidepressants for awhile, and fallen off of them like a man off the wagon. He left behind his family and friends and decided to see Mount Rushmore, just up and left one night—his wife said she must have thought in her sleep that he was only going to the bathroom, in the morning she thought it was strange that he’d gone to work without saying goodbye; then she tracked him by his credit card, that little plastic beacon, bastion of lost souls. I heard he killed himself out there, shot himself in the head. I didn’t have the heart to ask the friend that told me this, whether the soldier that killed himself was coming or going. Whether he’d seen the two great American shrines out there in the
wasteland. I’m not a kind man to the Dakotas, and for that, I apologize. I didn’t have the heart to say, jokingly, to the friend that told me, “I’ve been on that road before” — I mean, the highways that wind through the Dakotas are some of the more depressing stretches of road on this earth. Why send someone out there alone? Why let them go?

I could have gone out to check on Santiago and Zeller, I thought. But I was having too much fun in my own mind. Maybe they were murdering each other. They’d probably shoot at the same time; die together, feet apart, trying to put another magazine in their M-16s.

I always think too much in the rain. It’s been a curse and a blessing.

Santiago returned. I finished with the radio. I put the batteries back in. I tried it. It wouldn’t work. I handed it to Santiago so that he could mess with it.

He took the radio from me and threw it outside. I sat there, watching the radio in the rain. It didn’t seem a very smart thing to do. Finally, Santiago went out and brought it back in. He was all heart.

“We should have brought Cooper,” he said. “We shouldn’t have left him back there.”

“We can’t do anything about him now,” I said.

“This isn’t going to end well,” he said.

“Cooper’s dead,” I said, “now what do we do?”

He moved the switches on the radio around as if that might help it work, as if it were that easy. Even if it did work, we didn’t know the frequencies or the sequence they were hopping between. They changed the frequencies daily, no exceptions. Perhaps they left a channel open for the missing.
"What do we do?" I asked.

He set the radio against the wall and leaned back. "I don't know?" He looked out of the caboose door at the ocean. We were almost out of rice. I was thankful for the rice, but I was thankful for the promise of a day when we'd run out.

It was late one night and we hadn't seen the stars or moon in weeks. We hadn't talked to each other in a few days. Santiago was straying out into the world again, disappearing at night. I woke once to catch him looking into the fire, talking to Cooper. But it was another night and the rain was still strong.

"I bet they make a movie about us," Zeller said.

"Yeah, made for TV," Santiago said.

I thought about the handsome men that would act out our youth, the beautiful women that would act as our loves.

"What do you think about those kids we killed?" Santiago asked one night.

"Why?" I asked. He might as well have asked me what chemicals had united to make up the floor of the ocean—I would have had as much to say on either subject. It didn't matter.

"You and Cooper, you talked about ghosts," Santiago asked. He was on his back, staring up at the upside down table. "Do you believe?"

"No," I said.

"I believe," he said. "I think we're supposed to. I think we're given a choice when we die. We can go up, or we can go down, or we can stay right here. Those that
stay here are so goddamned angry about dying they just want to tear it all out of the world. Some are just too angry to go. Maybe too sad, I guess."

"That was Cooper's theory too," I said.

"I know," Santiago said. "We talked about it the night before the city."

"That's all a bunch of shit," Zeller said.

Santiago rubbed at his forehead like he could rub his thoughts to the surface and out of his head. He rubbed at it like he expected a genie to pop out. It'd be easier to manipulate the creases and folds of age from your face, I wanted to tell him. He hadn't heard Zeller. At least, he didn't show any signs of listening to Zeller.

"Maybe if the end was too violent," he said.

"I just don't believe," Zeller said. "I can't" He stopped for a moment, "I believe in the soul."

"What if there's a song for everything," Santiago said. "What if we all have a song? What if everything has a song? I don't really mean a song, though," he just wanted to get it out. "Something, spiritual, I guess." Santiago picked up something from the floor, perhaps a grain of sand, and threw it toward the small fire.

"I guess I'm following," I said.

Zeller stood up and walked to the door. "Who fucking needs it," he asked. He took up his raincoat and walked out into the night. I watched as he stopped and turned his face skyward, catching the rain in his mouth. There's a song of rain if you only listen.

"I've always been more afraid of something than nothing," Santiago said. "Those two kids, that guy, the rest of them—that's a song we're going to hear for a long time."
“Maybe,” I said. I walked to the doorway and crouched to look out the opening, looking at all that ocean. It was forever to back home.

Santiago settled to the hard ceiling that served as our floor. He reached out and took my poncho liner, the only thing I had that served as a blanket. “Just take this back if you need it. I’m tired. Freezing.”

“Maybe we got something there,” Santiago said. “Hell I don’t know. Whatever it is, I’m not impressed.” Then he was quiet for awhile. “You think of a song for the unimpressed.” He raised an arm and snapped his fingers against the palm. “That’s the sound of one hand clapping friend.”

“I don’t know.” I said. And I didn’t. But I wanted to make some sense of it. I wanted to try. It was too easy to just accept it in silence or on faith, which I imagined was the same song.

“You just keep talking,” Santiago said. “And you’ll end up somewhere.”

I stepped outside and the rain ran through my hair. The rain felt nice for once, alive and indifferent. It ran down my face, catching in the corners of my mouth. It didn’t taste like the rain of home, the rain I remembered from childhood.

I could barely discern the island from the caboose. It was like a phantom on the horizon. It was like the missing limb that still itches long after it’s gone. It was the ghost of all islands. It was the idea of all islands. It was the original island from which all others sprang. It was once part of the world but now it was cast away. The island was something to think about. I populated it in my mind. A mad scientist might have worked there. Perhaps I was that scientist. Maybe that was real. I stoked the fire and realized it was nothing more than imagination. I felt betrayed, angry, and embarrassed by the fact
that it was only imagination. Such things were always belaying my experience of this world.

Then it was incredibly quiet, and the rain stopped. Santiago stepped out of the caboose and Zeller walked up to join us. Santiago went back into the caboose and came out with his pack of cigarettes. He handed one to each of us. Then the thunder started, it shook all around us.

"We should move out tomorrow," Santiago said. "We've been here too long. Everybody knows where to find us by now."
EIGHT

The next morning, when there was enough light, we moved out. We told ourselves that we were done traveling by night. If anyone was still looking for us, let them find us on the move.

There were thousands of people moving along the highway. The multitude was out in force, scavenging the roads, moving about again. Most of them were moving in the direction we were, away from the city.

Santiago's neck looked better on the outside, the wound had scabbed over, but it was still swollen. An infection hibernated underneath the surface.
The diet of nothing but rice had left us weak. We couldn’t walk far before we had to rest. We were constantly running out of breath. We’d been walking with our minds and eyes content on the pavement. People passed us, unaware, we thought. We were alone in the moment and didn’t care.

Then we walked right into midst of them. There was a truck with a Russian anti-aircraft pulled to the side of the road. A crowd of people had gathered about at a distance from some men with AK-47s that were taking turns with a young girl in the ditch. The crowd cleared away as we walked into their midst. We didn’t even notice as they peeled away from us, revealing our shabby disguises.

They were having there way with her right out in the open for everyone and God to see. She didn’t moan, she didn’t cry, she was just there, motionless.

There were four of them. Who knew whose turn it was next, but the three standing turned away from their friend in the ditch, his shiny ass clenching and unclenching with each thrust. It was disgusting. I wanted to shoot him for being a fool. I wondered what his mother would think. Would he want her to know that he was a sick and cruel individual who couldn’t keep his dick in his pants? The man turned and smiled, he wanted the crowd’s approval. He deserved appreciation. Then he noticed us. He blinked stupidly up at us. His eyes slit, moist with pleasure.

“Easy,” Santiago said. “Let’s just keep going. Don’t turn around, just step back and let’s get out of here. These guys don’t want a fight with us.”

The man on the girl stood and pulled his pants up, he watched us intently. I couldn’t see the girl’s face, which was probably better. All I could see was her naked belly, the curl of her pubic hair which was matted against her body, her legs open, her sex
shining and pink. If I couldn't see her face, she wasn't human. She wasn't even a victim in this world.

We backed slowly away. They were smiling at us. They laughed at our departure. They pointed their friend back to work, but he waved off the rest of his turn. They motioned for us to come back. They motioned that it was our turn now.

"Somebody's going to fuck you like that one day, friends," Santiago said, smiling at the men.

Most of them gave up on us and turned back to their little party in the ditch. Only one of them stared after us—probably the smartest one in the group.

We heard another truck approaching, fast. There were helicopters in the distance.

They left off their joking and jovial attitude and climbed into the truck. They sped by us, within inches, toward the approaching sound. The one we had interrupted smiled down at us from the height of the bed of the truck. He was manning the anti-aircraft gun now. He could have shot us. People hurried out of the trucks way to the side of the road and into the ditch.

The two trucks turned together onto a side road that went out into the desert. They drove back into the thicket of thistles and devil trees. We stood where we were, too tired to move. I could tell by the sound that they were Apaches. When they came into sight we began waving our arms and trying to get them to notice us. There were hundreds of people gathering around to watch. The trucks began firing at the helicopters and the helicopters fired back. You could hear the whine of the big .20 calibers spinning on the helicopter's snouts. He explosive rounds exploded in the dirt and around the
truck. We cheered them on. We stood in the middle of the road, cheering our friends into the fight.

The truck with those we knew on it moved slowly, bouncing over the dirt road, back toward the pavement. The other truck was burning. I could see dead bodies littered about it. People lined the road, like us, gawking up at the excitement. The truck accelerated toward us, we stepped back to let it glide by. The helicopter launched a rocket. The truck was only a few feet from us when the explosion lifted it from the ground. The blast knocked Santiago back into me and we fell into a group of people behind us.

There was the weight of another on top of me. Blood was dripping on my face, I could taste it. Tap. Tap. Swollen and pregnant like the rain we'd seen. People were moving all around me. I couldn't hear or feel the helicopters. I couldn't hear anything. My ears were ringing and my head was pounding. I struggled to move, wondering what was out there. Instinct, something, motivated my body to move aside even if my mind wasn't responding clearly. Someone physically kicked at my head, I felt their foot. They kicked again. It seemed like a whole crowd of people were taking turns kicking at me as I tried to lift myself from under whatever else was on top of me. They kept kicking. Someone took my M-16. I felt it leave my hand. They were trying to get my 9mm out of its holster but couldn't work the snaps. They were trying to take my rucksack off. I pushed a body aside, and tore at my holster, knowing enough to pull the 9mm out. I struggled to stand, but only managed to get into a kind of crouch. They were looting all the bodies they could find. I fired a shot into the air. I couldn't hear it, but felt the weapon's kick. They kept coming at me, they wanted the 9mm. The crowd wanted what
the dead wore. I shot a man that reached to pull the gun out of my hand. He was an older
man. He looked small, fragile, as the old will sometimes. The others stopped. Staring at
me like it was my fault for not keeping them calm. I pointed my 9mm at them and they
finally backed away. The truck was burning behind me. I could feel the heat. I stood up.
I didn’t see Zeller or Santiago. I thought maybe I couldn’t recognize them among the
burnt bodies. I seemed to be the only thing that wasn’t on fire. The crowd left me alone
and went about looting the other bodies. Smoke rose from the dead around me. People
had stripped the clothes off most of the dead so that they were naked. There was a body
that wasn’t burnt so badly. The dead man had an erection. The crowd dug through the
debris of the flaming truck, disregarding the fire all around it, and pulled the men out.
stripping their bodies of the weapons and everything else of value. The anti-aircraft gun
started burping its rounds off. They were cooking away from the heat. Someone took
my arm and helped me to the ditch. I looked back and saw the man that I’d shot.

I sat in the ditch with several others. They didn’t give me any more notice than
they might the sun. Rounds cooked off from the burning weapon. shots rang over our
heads with weak whistles. The ammunition can in the truck finally exploded and one of
the rounds landed next to me, glowing bright green. My luck was like the Roadrunner’s:
bullets could turn corners in this world and find you out. Someone in front of me must
have taken the entire blast. You never knew where to stand in a war. You never knew
where to position yourself in this dance.

The helicopters were gone. They must not have seen us, or why would they have
fired? But if they were here, then there was a base somewhere close by, perhaps. Maybe
not. sometimes they flew ahead, carrying extra fuel for the long trips, giving up bullets and bombs, giving up in weight what they needed in distance. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't decide. I couldn't find Zeller or Santiago anywhere. It was like they had disappeared.

I left the road and crowd behind. I made my way into the desert, past the bushes and brambles and trees of thorns that weren't any taller than me, because I knew that I should be alone. I had no idea where the threat was anymore. We'd only taken to the road because we thought it'd be safe with the other refugees.

I walked parallel to the road for a few miles, trying to turn my mind off. I tried to remember some of what Santiago said about survival. I looked back on my survival school training. Santiago would have told me not to think so much. That was all I could remember. I hadn't really listened to the rest. I hadn't really cared. I wasn't meant to go it alone. But it always turns out that way. I was tired. How could you always be on your guard? Yet how could you not?

I found a rock to sit down on. I could see the road from there. I made a lot of noise, not enough for those on the road to notice, but enough for any animals in the immediate area to take note that I was a person, maybe not a large person, but a man none the less. And people kill spiders and snakes and dogs and tigers. I looked about and saw nothing or no one, so I took out the clip and counted the five rounds that were left in it. I had two more 9mm magazines in my rucksack, and one in my ammunition built. I would have taken the bullet back from the man on the road if I could. I didn't know what to think of him. I didn't know what to do with his memory. I'd been threatened, I told
myself. I'd been in danger. I told myself it didn't really matter. I slapped myself on the helmet to remember to forget any guilt that I might feel. I worried about Santiago and Zeller. I watched the road for a long time, hoping to catch sight of them. But there were only strangers out there. I couldn't have imagined so many people moving between cities in such a shit country. They were going from one nothing to the next. But what did I know? Maybe they were on the trail of gold. Every road goes somewhere. There's always a promise of something on the horizon. I thought, watching their clothes more than them. Red shirts, blue shirts, khaki shirts, red pants, blue pants, khaki pants. Strange colored suit pants, wool pants, cotton pants, who knew what pants, all moving out for another abandoned city. The mile markers were in another language, but still they promised nothing. Signs pointed and promised nowhere. Nothing really came and went. It only flowed. I was too far away from the wreckage. I wondered if I should have stayed longer, lingered a moment more at the edge of all that waste. What would the people passing by think? What would they recognize? I couldn't imagine how far we'd walked since the city center.

In places the desert was still wet. My boots and pants were covered in a red film of mud and dust. My BDU top was covered mainly with dust. I slapped my shoulder and watched the red dust rise. There was blood on me in places. It had dried and turned black. It was crusty. I didn't want to touch it. I took off my helmet and wiped at my face with my hands. I could feel dried mud and blood and who knew what else on my face. Too tired to wipe it off, I put my helmet back on and started walking. As I moved through the bushes and trees between the desert and the road, I watched for Santiago or Zeller.
Finally, I made a decision and followed a path through the desert that looked like it led back to the city. I thought I might go back to the hotel and hide out until the army arrived.

I walked into a clearing and someone whistled at me. There was a house less than a mile in front of me. I would have walked right into it without even noticing. An American soldier ran out and grabbed me, guiding me back to a spot hidden from the house among some trees and in a thicket.

“What are you trying to do,” he demanded of me, “give away our position?” He looked at me like I was an idiot.

I looked around. There were others there. Their faces painted with camouflage. Each had a unique design on his face—one had tiger stripes, another was made up to look like a great serpent, another had the hollow gaze of a ghost mask, a howl darkened in around his lips. They looked at me like they’d never seen a man walk before. I wanted to dance for them. You are the fool here, their looks said.

“Jesus Christ, man,” the man in the snake getup said, “didn’t you fucking see us waving at you?”

“No,” I said, sitting down next to the man that had grabbed me. It was nice to be alone in a war.

“What the fuck happened to you,” the man with the ghost mask demanded. They were pushy. They were used to getting the answers they wanted. They were made for interrogation.
"I got lost," I said. "With the others," I pointed toward Santiago and Zeller in one direction, looking in the other at the city. I made a feeble attempt to bring it back into the circle where I sat. "I think they're dead."

"You look like shit," one of them said. "A big shit sandwich."

They laughed at this. It was their joke. You could tell they'd heard it before, probably a hundred times.

Another man, whose face was all in black, dove among us and, pointing at me, said, "I don't think dumbass gave us away." He hated me already. I could tell. I was always starting off on the wrong foot. I could only apologize for myself so much.

"You look like shit," he said, leaning close to look at my leg. "Jesus Christ," he said, pointing at what looked to be a long wound that cut through my boot and into my ankle. The blood was dark purple, thick, and syrupy. "You should put something on that."

"Yeah," I said, "I've been meaning to."

He nodded.

"What do you mean you think your friends are dead?" someone asked.

"I couldn't find them," I said.

"Go check for them," one of them said. "On the road?" he asked me.

I pointed at the smoke in the distance. Two of them left.

"You kill anybody yet?" one of them asked.

"That's what we're here for," he said, turning to look at the house in the distance. "We'll vouch for you. If you need it. If you want us to. You should go in with us. We're going to tear this house the fuck down."

"I'd like that," I said. I could use some friends. "Do you have anything to eat?" I asked. "I'm kind of hungry."

The man that pulled me aside was looking at my leg. He took out a medical bag.

"We killed an elephant, yesterday," one of them said. "Fucker went down like you wouldn't believe. You should have felt the earth move." He looked around him at the others. They all nodded.

"Big boom," another said. "Big fucking boom when that sack of shit hit the ground."

"Thing I'll remember that for-fucking-ever, man," one of them said.

I wanted to tell them that the dead didn't make a sound. That even if you died standing, you should still have the decency and the grace to let your body rest easy back to the earth. Those that I had seen die had let their dead bodies float them quietly to the floor. They never collapsed. The dead had style and grace far beyond decency. Maybe animals collapsed though, I'd give them that. Animals don't make great ghosts. I'd never killed an animal.

"I'm Mark," the guy who had pulled me back said. He rolled my shirt sleeve up and gave me an IV. "That's Clip," he said, pointing at the man who wouldn't shut up, who seemed to want all my pity. "Candid," he said, pointing to the man with the snake face. "Jordan," he said pointing at Mr. Tiger Stripes. "Simon and Nichols just took off for your friends," he said. Mark cut gently took my boot off and rolled my pant leg up.
He picked pieces of the pants, earth, and other debris out of the cut. I couldn't feel a thing. When it was all cleaned off, my leg didn't look that bad. There was a long cut, but it was all surface, Mark said.

"You ever shoot an elephant?" Clip asked.

"No," I said. "Never even seen one. I'm kind of hungry." 

Mark gave me an MRE, ham slice, my least favorite. It was probably everyone's least favorite, the one you saved for unwanted guests. Their hospitality was off.

"You mean in person," Clip said. "You've never seen an elephant in person."

"Yeah," I said. "I guess." I chewed on the ham slice.

"Because seeing is believing," Clip said.

"What about at the zoo?" Candid asked. "You never saw an elephant at the zoo? Man, where did you go to school?"

"Yeah," I said. "I guess I did see one at the zoo, a long time ago. Maybe there were even two." I hadn't been to the zoo in years. The last time I went to the zoo was with Lura. I wondered what she was thinking about at the moment. I always know I'm in love when I can't stop asking what they're thinking about. As if by knowing all of that, I could know everything there was to know.

"Man," Clip said, leaning back against a tree and looking at either his boots or the ground. "I sure shot the fuck out of that elephant."

"Yeah," I said. "I bet you did."

But then he looked like he was going to cry. Everything about the place was absurd enough that you could expect anything at any moment—if someone had said boo, or Bambi, we would have all been in tears. "What's with the house?" I asked.
"Who the fuck are you?" Clip asked.

"Joshua Stantz," I said.

"No." Mark looked at me for a moment. He was still sitting next to me. "Who you with?"

"10th Mountain," I said. "You?"

"Marines," Mark said. "Recon."

"How'd you get out here," Clip asked. The others had turned around to listen by now.

"There ain't no white guys in goddamned clans," Jordan said. "Leave him the fuck alone. You're in that group that went missing, right?"

"Alpha Company," I said. "Sure. Maybe I could use your radio?"

Clip shook his head. "Radio silence, Candy." Now they were giving me nicknames. "We're in the thick of it." He smiled.

"Who's in charge," I asked.

They looked at Mark as he raised his hand.

"If you could just call and get me a ride out of here," I said. "I could even walk back and meet them somewhere. You could tell them about the others."

"I'm sorry," Mark said. "Orders are orders. I can't break the silence. We don't know if anyone else is listening.

I wanted to tell them that the clans weren't technologically advanced enough to program a VCR. "What if I was dying?" I asked.

"But you're not," Mark shook his head. "Sorry."

I finished my MRE. "Who's in the house?"
"One of the warlords," Mark said, leaning back and pulling his Kevlar over his eyes. "Wake me up in a few hours. Someone else get some sleep in this rotation."

Jordan offered me a cigarette and pointed me behind a tree for cover. I didn't want it. I asked for some water. They handed me a canteen.

"He's got some sheep," Jordan said. "We've been messing with them. They come out and meet us in the morning and in the early evening. We give them food that's drugged so they don't care if we slip in amongst them. We're going to use them when we go into the compound. When they move back inside, we'll move with them. Good idea, right?"

"Sounds like a hell of a plan," I said. "Where's the main column at now? I'm sure I could just walk back there."

"Can't let you, Nancy," Clip said. "You're with us now. If we let you go and they get you, we've wasted our time. I hate wasting time. Seems stupid."

He had a good point. Still, I thought, they didn't have to impress me. Don't go out of your way on my part. I wanted to tell them.

"You're in, right?" Jordan asked. "Payback time, right, for all your dead fucking compadres." We were deep in the trees. The sun didn't even touch us there. It was a little chilly. "It'll be easy," he said, as if that decided it all, as if, with that, I threw my lot in automatically.

"Where's your M-16," Mark asked.

"I think I lost it," I said.

"Those things happen," Mark said.

"Yeah," Clip said. "You're in some deep shit for that move."

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“They’ll take it of your paycheck,” Jordan said. “They’ll make you pay for that motherfucker, and it’s expensive.”

“More than you make, Susie,” Clip said.

“How’d you get out here,” I asked.

“Humvee,” Mark said, pointing off toward the road.

“They’re excited about something,” Mark said, looking through the binoculars. They had binoculars, night vision goggles, and infrared scopes. They had everything you could ever ask for in a war. I wondered what they saw in all their little devices. I wanted to see, but I was afraid to ask.

“Look at this mother fucker.” Jordan said, kicking a tarantula into the center of the circle where we all sat.

I stood quickly. Those things could jump. It was the color of sand. Everybody was standing by now.

“Holy shit,” Jordan said, laughing nervously. “Look at the size of that thing.”

It was the largest spider I’d ever seen. It could have been the centerfold for National Geographic. Jordan threw his knife at it but missed. The handle of the knife brushed against the spider’s back. I swear it hissed. Clip had a long stick that he used to push the spider back into place with.

Mark threw his knife and missed. Then Candid missed as well. Finally, Clip smacked it with the stick and it popped into the air like ball.

“Holy shit,” Jordan said.
Finally, Clip just strode up to the spider and stabbed his bayonet through the tarantula's fat body. The spider's legs kicked as it tried to move, but the knife was stuck firmly in the ground. Clip pulled the knife from the ground gently so that the spider was still stuck on the blade. He turned the knife over so that the spider had nowhere to go. He took out a lighter and lit it under one of spider's legs. "Ever give someone a hot foot?" he asked. "Doesn't seem like anything anyone ever really did."

He took up Jordan's knife and used it to push the spider deeper onto the blade. Then he cut off the legs, one by one all the way around in a circle until it was just a fat, plump spider. We all watched. The legs fell to the ground, fluttering. I thought of picking one up, making a wish, and blowing it from the tip of my finer.

Mark went back to watching the house. I really wanted to see what was going on outside the house.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"Chewing qat after dinner," he said. "They bring out a basket of it each night and set it in the middle of the table. Then they go off and fuck a few ladies and fall asleep. Hell of a life."

Clip put on his gloves and threw the spider at the trunk of a tree. He went through the whole pitching routine, kicked his leg high and let the spider go. He missed the first time and had to chase after it. The second time he moved closer to the tree and put more arm into the throw and the spider popped against the trunk.

"You get laid while you were in town?" Clip asked.

I ignored him.
“There are some gorgeous women in this country,” Clip said. The others were laughing at him.

“We’re getting all the tag we want in this motherfucker before we leave,” Jordan said. “Some real James Bond pussy. Even the married guys.”

“I’m just asking,” Clip said. “Even the astronauts had Tang fucker”

“You kiss your mom with that mouth,” Jordan asked. “‘Cause you got a problem with your language motherfucker.”

They were too original. They were just passing time. They were more lonely and scared than anyone I’d ever seen. We’re better than you they wanted to scream. They didn’t even want to talk about my friends that might have been dead on the road or in a ditch or back in the city.

I fell asleep for awhile before Clip hit me on my helmet. “You’re doing the kickin’ chicken,” he said. He slapped me on the helmet again, the Kevlar was heavy. I took my helmet off. I could hardly stand the protective weight. I don’t think I had ever felt so tired. I wondered if babies were this tired after they were born. He slapped my head again, laughing. It was hard to believe that he had a mother that could have loved him.

“We heard you killed some kids,” Clip said. “That’s what they were saying back at camp. You said you didn’t kill anybody.”

“Who cares,” Mark said, turning from the house.
“I think we should know who we’re helping,” Clip said. “I like to think I’m a noble person. What about you, Stantz?” I never liked it when someone said your name like it was a dirty word. They were too involved in worrying about life and death for me.

“What’ve you got for us, Stantz?” Jordan said.

“I didn’t shoot anybody,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Mark said. “Leave him alone.”

Clip put an arm on my shoulder. “I’m sorry. What happens here stays here. right? That’s why we’re all getting laid before we leave.”

“Sure,” I said. It made it sound like a vacation. Leave your secrets in Las Vegas. Leave your identity at home. On the ride back to America I could reassemble myself out of whatever beliefs were available, some of Zeller, some of Cooper, and maybe even a little of Santiago. I never knew those kids, or any of the others, but I was sure that I had a little of them in me as well.

“Who was the last woman you were in love with,” Clip asked.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s a game we play,” he said. “To pass the time.”

All soldiers had a game they played to keep them awake, to keep them aware. In my platoon it generally entitled knowledge about the promiscuity of the homecoming or prom queen. Not all the games were relevant to high school, most of us hated high school, most of us loathed those we had left there. still, it was the only thing we had in common. There were deviations allowed, such questions served only as a starting point, a theme. If you had a story about getting laid at a funeral or a wedding, it served the purpose just as well, often better.
I didn't want to tell them about the last woman that I'd loved. I didn't want them to know any more about me. They didn't deserve any knowledge of her. It was profane that I even thought of her in such a place. But, most of all, I didn't want them to know anything about her. We do that with certain memories and dreams, with certain prayers and superstitions. Some love borders on superstition. If I don't step on this crack she'll love me. If I call before eight she won't. Leave it alone.

"Why last loves?" I asked. "Last loves never seem to matter as much as first loves."

"Oh," Clip said. "We got us a genius."

Mark and the others laughed at this. I just thought it was crazy to talk about the last woman you'd fallen in love with when you could talk about the first. I fell in love with a woman I saw walking into a library once. I never saw her again. But I spend too much time dwelling on her.

"No," Jordan said. "really, who was the last woman you fell in love with." He was excited about this game.

I lied. "Jessica."

"Jessica what?" Clip asked.

You couldn’t talk to men like this about women. I’d have had better luck with Santiago and Zeller.

"Jessica Williams." I said.

Mark and Candid watched the house. The sun was close to setting. They must have been watching for the sheep.

"She lives in Boston now." I said.
“You from Boston?” Clip asked.

“No,” I said. “Kansas.”

“Well,” Clip said, “you ain’t in Kansas no more.”

They all laughed. It was the funniest joke ever.

“She from Kans-ass, too?” Clip asked.

“No.” But then I was talking about Lura and I wanted to back out of speaking about her. “I don’t know where she’s from, originally. Her father moves around a lot because of business. She’s in college now.”

“Nice,” Mark said, turning back to look at me, as though this raised me up a little in his eyes, as though it really mattered where we were from, what we did before, and whether or not we’d ever really been in love.

“I’ve never loved anyone except myself, really. I wanted to tell them. Even then my love was only fleeting. I had a nice conversation with myself once, before the war on a drive from Kansas City to Wichita. I was alone and said something funny aloud, and then I said, I like you. Which made me ask, Really? And sure enough, I did—for most of the drive at least.

“She’s pregnant now.” I said. Which was true, again, only I wished it wasn’t. “But it’s not mine.” I only said it because it didn’t really matter to me. It was embarrassing for her.

They all nodded. You heard stories like that all the time in this line of work. Nobody wanted to be with a monkey, as Santiago always said. Put on the monkey suit, get the monkey cut, and get your ass to formation in the morning. See all the monkeys marching in their pretty line?
“You must have did something real good stuff in a past life.” Clip said. They laughed at this. “There’s consequences to be paid.” They laughed some more. “I’m just fucking with you. Seriously though, that’s fried up. I feel for you.”

Mark looked at his watch and picked up the radio and made a call. I watched him. Everyone watched him. “He’s not here,” he said.

That was all. That was the message.

“They’re moving into the city tonight,” Mark said. “We’re taking the compound. We’re cutting off all his hiding places. Let him take to the streets.”

The others were excited. They looked anxiously at each other.

“You’re with us now,” Mark said. “We’ll get you back to your company when it’s over.”

“Maybe I could use the radio real quick?” I asked.

“That was it,” Mark said. “That was our window. That was the only moment in all of this mess we could call.” He turned back to the house.

“I just want them to know I’m alive,” I said. “I’d like to tell them where the others are. Tell them about our mission.”

“That’s nothing to us,” Mark said. “I’m sorry, but you’re looking at my mission. We’re taking this compound.”

“Sure enough,” I said. I sometimes have a hard time remembering that I’m not the only person alive in this world.

It was getting dark fast. Every noise had me looking in another direction. Night was the noisiest time of day in that place, and probably in any war. Everything seemed alive and vibrating, begging for attention. No wonder Santiago believed in ghosts.
They disguised their faces with more camoouflage. With each touch they wanted
to imbue their body with another layer of cruelty. Some tribes believe that masks give
them special powers. They attach all kind of crazy shit to their tribal masks in order to
make them stronger, to make them feel stronger, to make the wearer, and the victim,
believe that the mask is stronger. These guys felt as though something as thin as a layer
of skin could protect them from the night. Clip took out what looked like a coin, and
moved it to another pocket. Like all beliefs, we carried some that were portable—
pocketsize. They covered their faces to make way for the animals beneath. They took
themselves too seriously for me. Yet I couldn’t take myself seriously enough. When
they passed the camoouflage my way I let it go on by to the next man. I asked if they had
reinforcements coming to help, playing the part of support, or backup. Santiago was a
killer I wanted them to know. Santiago had a lot to go home to and look what happened
to him when he was alone and naked in the world. Clothing, paint, it’s just another layer.
another belief. It doesn’t really cover anything. It doesn’t really protect you from
anything, even the weather. I asked them again if there was anyone to support us.

“We’re all we need,” Clip said. The others agreed.

The sheep came to meet us halfway. Mark said the shepherd was usually too high
on qat to do anything by this point. The sheep were happy to see us. Mark and the others
gave them drugged grass that they’d mixed together back at their base. Someone had
been thinking about a mission like this for a long time.
Mark told us to get low. Someone was walking around the wall that surrounded the house. We crouched among the sheep. My face was inches from that of a sheep. It looked at me. It chewed away on something sweet. It had breath like a baby’s.

When it was clear Mark ushered the sheep and his men forward. They were using the sheep as cover. I let myself slip further and further back in the crowd until they were moving forward without me and I was moving back. I turned and ran toward a line of trees. I expected to meet someone at every step. I wandered until I found the clearing where we had been. They’d taken the radio, but they’d left their rucksacks, so I dug through each and took what I wanted, which was only food. Let them hunt me out, catch me up on that.

Gunfire broke out in the compound. I hurried about, looking for their Humvee. I’d shoot the lock off, I thought. I remembered the car in the city. They had a radio. I thought, they could always call for another. I’d swear I was crazy by then if anyone asked, if anyone said I stole the vehicle. People are always getting away with less.

Tracers broke the night open and went past me. Someone was in front of me, firing with an AK-47. I could tell by the sound and by the color of the tracers that were coming at me. I ducked into a thicket. Thorns tore against my chin. I felt the sting of a thorn gripping my cheek. I fired at the exact spot where the shots had come from. I knew I hit my target by the way the night seemed to stop in response. I was imposing this silence on the world. My heart and brain felt like they were going to light my body on fire. I was scared they were everywhere. I expected at any moment someone to turn a corner and kill me. They’d been waiting for us the whole time. I knew they would find
me out in the thicket and kill me. I knew I would be angry and the thorns would tear at me forever.

"Fucking shit," I heard. And I knew it was Zeller. He screamed, firing wildly into the night.

I wanted to scream out but I held it back. I wanted him to know that it was me. I didn't know what brought him here, how he had found the Humvee. But I didn't want him to know that I'd shot him. I fought to hold it back.

"I got you motherfucker," he shouted. "Cooper, come in on his right" he called, and I almost looked for him. I almost stood up to see if Cooper was really there. "Zeller, take his left." He fired wildly in my direction. I let the thorns tear at me but I made myself as small as possible. There were insects in this world that couldn't get as close to the earth as me, I tried to believe, to make myself flatter, so that any shot might go over me. "Stantz, move in," he called. "That fucker shot me. Make a mess of him," then I heard him spit heavily. He fired at the night.

I thought about going back and asking those in the compound to call for a medevac. But then he'd know it was me. I couldn't help him.

He called out for imaginary medics. He ordered Cooper, Fizer, Heath, Santiago, and all the rest to storm my position. "Now," he called, over and over, then he'd tear a few more rounds into the night. Soon, he was out of ammunition. All he had left was his 9mm. They were still fighting in the compound.

I needed to move. I jumped up and fired a few rounds into the ground at my feet. "Zeller," I called.

"Stantz?" he asked.
“I got him,” I said. “I killed him.” I hurried toward him. “We need to get out of here. They’re fighting in the compound over there. This is their Humvee. I say we take it and get you to a medic.”

“Santiago’s coming back in a moment,” he said. “He went looking for the owners.”

Santiago ran up next to me and took a knee next to Zeller. “What the fuck,” he asked.

“Someone shot me,” Zeller said. “Stantz got him though.”

I’d shot Zeller in the midsection. He looked horrible. His face was burnt, probably from the explosion.

“What happened to you back there?” Zeller asked. “We couldn’t find you.”

“We got separated,” I said.

I helped him into the Humvee. It was locked. A thick chain ran up from the floor and around the steering wheel. Santiago felt for the lock. He kicked at it, but nothing happened.

“Just break part of the steering wheel and take the chain off,” Zeller said.

Santiago kicked at the part of the steering wheel where the chain was. When it broke, he slipped the chain off and started the Humvee. There was camouflage netting that covered the Humvee. Santiago and I tore the netting off.

“You drive,” he said. “He climbed into the back with Zeller and worked on his wound.”
I left the lights off. We could see enough from the light of the stars and the moon to guide us in the direction where we thought the road was. We drove away from the compound, so that was enough.

Santiago asked Zeller what he wanted to eat when we got back to camp. Zeller was quiet.

"You shot him?" Santiago asked.

"Yeah," I said. "He was shooting at me when I walked up. So I fired back. I didn't know. He was using an AK-47. How the hell was I supposed to know?"

I looked around and all I could see was night sky and dunes. We bounced violently along. It didn't feel too bad with the night wind feeling over us. Movement was freedom. It was essential to our survival. The promise of forgiveness seemed to rest in the hands of our advancing army. We tore around the desert for awhile, following patches of ground that looked like roads and turned out to be nothing. When I didn't care any longer I turned on the lights so that we could see where we were. After awhile we found a road. I tried to get my bearings. I imagined that the army would be nearing the city soon. They'd be tearing across the desert and over the highways. But it probably wasn't such a smart idea to rush headlong at the spearhead of an advancing army. When I couldn't really get a bearing, I just decided to drive. I hit potholes without even worrying about landmines. I drove through ditches when I needed, and tore the engine up on the long straight stretches of road, so that it was smoking.

I was looking in the back at Zeller when I noticed an American soldier signaling me from the side of the road, waving a flashlight in warning, trying to get me to
recognize, and I slammed on the brakes. It wasn’t in time to keep us from hitting the back of a five-ton which had its lights off. We hit it pretty good.

The soldier was laughing like I was the craziest person he’d ever met. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever seen,” he said.

I didn’t care anymore. “I didn’t see you.”

“You okay?” he finally asked, leaning into the Humvee. He had a friend standing behind him. “Saw your lights coming up the road,” the soldier said. “Jesus. You could see you guys coming a mile away. Bouncing all over the road. It was actually kind of funny.”

“Who you with?” the other one asked.

“Who are you with?” Santiago asked, opening his door.

“This is the end of the convoy,” he said. “We’re the last ones in line. You don’t look so good, Sir.” he said

“I think he’s dead,” I said.

The soldier leaned across me and into the Humsvee and snapped the lights off. “Someone’s here,” he said, into a radio, like I was someone knocking on a door.

“I think he needs a medic,” the other soldier said, looking at Zeller. “I think this one’s dead, but better we’d get a medic back here anyway.”

Santiago was out of the Humvee, leaning on the hood. The two soldiers watched Santiago.

“Watch out,” I whispered, to no one in particular. “He’s crazy.” I put my hands on the steering wheel, ready to guide us wherever the soldier pointed.
NINE

They sent us south to Mombassa to recuperate. I had a newfound respect for the world being as they could send you away during a war to rest. Our flight followed the edge of the ocean, not in the direction that we'd tried to escape, but still, it was the edge of the ocean. We covered more miles in the first ten minutes of flight than we'd been able to cover in a month. Within ten minutes we were well outside the city, safe at so many thousand feet.

They'd given Santiago medicine which took care of the infection in his neck. The bullet had passed clean through, they said. There was nothing out of the ordinary considering he'd been shot. We'd done well with the wound, with the world, and with
the war, they said. It’s not hard after all. I wanted to tell them, we’re all fighting a war, and we’re all, spiritually, missing limbs, or wounded, or such. If you can’t heal yourself, who can you heal? I tried to create a joke out of the past, but I had nothing on the nature of reality. Zeller and the old man that I’d shot kept me awake most nights of R&R. Santiago drank himself crazy and tore the hotel room up saying that he was going to find those children. He was going to make it all better he said. He was going to make up for it. Why bother, I thought of asking.

Before we went to Mombassa they gave each of us a Purple Heart. I’d always wanted one. As long as I could remember I’d wanted a decoration to show that I was hero in case I didn’t believe myself, or in case I needed validation.

Santiago said the medals reeked of the children we’d killed. You can get a license plate, Santiago joked, that says you’re a recipient of the Purple Heart, so sit back and let your dick get hard. It’s a tough place, he said, we’re all dying to fight and fuck—so take it or leave it, but just give me a decoration to prove that I came out alive.

But before they let us go, and before they gave us the medal, they called each of us, alone, into the operation tent. And then they debriefed us. “What happened?” they asked. “What went wrong?”

They were eager to understand and to care. A chaplain was there, a psychologist, all that was missing was our mothers, or someone else to hold our hand. They didn’t ask for an apology, they just asked for the truth. But it worried me, because someone wrote it all down. I told them the truth, until I got to the part about Zeller, then I lied. I told them he was dying when I found him. I told them I lifted him alone into the truck. That he
was heavy. That he weighed a ton. They knew enough not to believe. They knew the truth, but they passed over it in moments of silence and long doubtful glances.

I gave them a catalogue of all the times I’d almost died. It became important for me to share this with them—when would I ever again have such a captive audience, such a caring audience, such a knowing group of supporters standing behind me ever again. I told them I was no longer invincible, like I’d always thought. They liked this. They knew enough to know I’d learned the lesson that I was supposed to learn in war. They told me there was always more to come.

They asked for specific details and locations for finding the dead that we’d left behind. I told them what I knew. Apparently, they’d already found Zeller. He wasn’t hard to reach, and now all they needed was Cooper. They told me that Fizer and Heath were dead. That they hadn’t found their bodies yet, and that they’d been drug through the streets by their dicks along with all the others who died in the helicopter crash. The missing and the dead were coming out of the woodwork, they assured me. Only, they didn’t phrase it like that. I wanted to ask where they found a few others, some of those that I didn’t know. They must have paraded Heath and Fizer through the town. I realized, beating their empty bodies with sticks and rifle butts like they were piñatas. And then, and only then, to leave them on the outskirts of town, probably on the trash heap. I wanted to ask them where they might look, but then I realized that they’d think I was obsessed. So I left it alone.

“Will you ever think of this again,” the chaplain asked politely. “I mean, do you think this is something that is going to bother you?”
I smiled back, weakly, as if to let him know that I alone had come out alive. I gave them time to ponder my smile, time in which they could wait—it felt like that was what they wanted me to do. But then I knew if I answered the question wrong something would happen. They'd probably send me to Walter Reed Hospital where it'd turn out I really had been crazy as a shithouse rat all these years. They'd give me a middle cell so that there wasn't even a wall between me and the outside world. There would just be a wall and another crazy person, and another wall, and another disillusioned soul, and on and on. I wondered what kind of answer they wanted. They were older than me by ten, even twenty years. They were in their thirties and forties, and each one of them had the kindest eyes I'd ever seen. They smiled and acknowledged everything I said with warmth and emotion. They were the nicest people I'd ever met in a war. When I reached their age I didn't want to be talking about the war. Looking at them, I thought that I might forget about it. That when I went to college, if I went, I'd tell them I was a little older than the rest of them because I'd spent some time in Europe, backpacking. I'd tell them I'd smoked opium and drank absinthe if they seemed like they might be alright with that. I'd tell them, *It's a beautiful place, the world.* Sitting there it all ran through my head. Anything they wrote down was incrimination enough, more news for the permanent record.

"No," I said. "I'll never remember it all." And then I smiled again, politely, to let them know that I alone had come out alive, and because I wanted to leave. Then I was embarrassed. I was always letting myself get embarrassed.

They didn't even ask about the Humvee. Turns out it was mine to steal all along. The Humvee had always been mine to steal and would always be mine to steal. They
asked me if I wanted to call home on one of the priority lines set aside for officers and
non-combatants. They pointed to a phone in the corner of their tiny operations tent—
hidden in a corner among all those strangers. They said that they'd already notified my
parents that I was fine but that they were sure my parents would love to hear from me
subsequently. I had to get out of the tent so I told them I was starving and that I'd call
my parents as soon as I ate. I was too shaken up to call them right then and there.

I asked them what the plans were for Santiago and I. I was hoping that they
would say they were sending us home, and that they were done with us and that our
services were no longer needed. But there was no such luck. They said there was an
island offshore that they had plans to send us to. It would give us a break from the
action, time to recuperate, the chaplain said. They didn't say it would give us time to
prepare for our reentry into society, which was the notion that must have been implied.
They didn't say that it was time to chase away the ghosts, real or imaginary. They didn't
say it was up to us to form new memories.

I liked the sound of going to an island to recuperate. It made it sound like a club,
a place you went for holiday, seclusion, we were the rich and royal and this was our
chance to escape and put our minds back together while getting our bodies in shape. I
was already forming a plan. With letters to write, and books to read, there was much to
catch up on, and I should have no problem wiling away the day.

When I was standing to leave they asked me about Santiago.

"How is he taking," the Chaplain asked. Everyone was intent on the question.

"After all, he lost his whole squad."

"All but me," I said. "He's taking it well. He's strong."
When it was over, I went and sat in a tent they’d setup for the soldiers to watch movies in quietly and comfortably. There was a VCR and a wall of movies and every time a movie ended people would get up and leave and more people would come in and the bravest person in the room would put on whatever movie he wanted to watch. Or a caring person might ask what others wanted to see. I wasn’t brave enough to stand up and pick a movie from the wall. I wasn’t brave enough to ask what others wanted to see, but I told Santiago he could meet me there after they briefed him as well.

There was a black and white movie on about barnstormers. A woman stood on the top wing of a plane as it rolled over in a barrel roll, blowing her scarf back, her smile tight. The pilot’s eyes were piercing, even behind the goggles. In another scene, a trapeze was lowered from one plane to another and a woman waiting on the wings, dressed in sequins, a tiara, tights and a suit with cupped, pointed breasts, leapt toward that swing, caught it, and swung her body into an acrobatic pose at how many miles an hour I’ll never know. In between the stunts and aerial feats, there were men and woman trying to get each other to fall in love with them. The planes were the men’s dueling pistols and the women’s stage. I couldn’t tell who liked the arrangement more.

Santiago found me in the television tent. We watched the end of the movie and then left when they went to put in another film. Santiago said he wanted some coffee, so we went to the mess tent. I thought it was too hot for coffee. We sat outside, under a canopy, at some tables they’d setup around the mess area and Santiago sipped at his coffee slowly. It was in the shade at least.

“What did you tell them,” I finally asked Santiago.
“Never marry a woman that’s had sex with more than four people,” he said.

I could see the wall of the city that I’d thought was full of eyes.

“I told them what they wanted to hear,” he said. “I told them you were a hero.”

He took a sip of coffee. “That I was hero. I told them we were all heroes at one time or another.”

I didn’t need to ask him about Zeller. I knew he didn’t tell them. There was no reason to.

“I told them that we sure shot the fuck out of some people,” he said. “And they shot the fuck out of us too. And that I know that we should be even for some reason but that I still don’t feel it. I told them we’re still lost.”

I tried to really see how we were still lost. I thought of accepting it without questioning. “They’re worried that you took the loss of your squad pretty hard.” I wanted to ask him whether or not this was true. It seemed true in all of his movements and the dark bags under his eyes.

“They asked me the same thing,” he said.

“And?” I said.

“And they don’t know.” he said.

The night before we left for Mombassa, I’d called my parents. The line of people waiting for the phone was usually long and winding. Generally it snaked through the camp, behind the chow hall, between the bunkers, past the shower point, around the shithouses, and on and on almost across the runway and onto the beach beyond. I always thought of the pearly gates when I saw that line. But we were being mortared that night.
so I was full of hope that the line would be short. As soon as the mortars began landing I rushed to the phone line, slipping past others rushing toward the bunkers. My gamble paid off. There were only two people in front of me when I arrived at the small wooden shack that served as our phone booth.

Phone calls were free on the military lines if you could get through, but most of the time they didn’t actually work, and when they did you felt like you were a child on the old can and string. Getting through to anywhere was always a chore—you had as equal a chance of reaching the North Pole as you had of reaching your family. It was a task as daunting as the search for the Holy Grail. First you had to get through to one of the military operators in the theater of the war—this was nearly impossible if you were on the enlisted men’s phone; the generals and other officers, and the higher NCOs and those that worked in the Operations tent all had access to numerous private phones spread out throughout the camp which took priority over the regular run-of-the-mill-man’s phone. All men were not made equal. Generally the phone was busy the moment you picked it up, so you just had to wait until it crackled to life for you. After I had the local operator on the line I begged her to put me through to somewhere. She dropped me in Germany. From Ramstein things became a little easier, and the people a lot nicer. The further you were from the war the rate at which your happiness and pleasure increased was immeasurable—it was straight out of John Stuart Mills. I begged for the man to put me through to another operator somewhere in America. He asked for another air force base or an army base that was close to my home. still, I could end up anywhere.
Finally my mother answered. It would be the greatest understatement of all time to say that she was glad to hear from me. She praised every known deity and invented a few for the occasion.

I asked my mother if she'd seen me on the news. She said she hadn't. She said she didn't even know I was missing until the military called to inform her that I'd been found. Nobody back in America was talking about the war, she said. She and my father were only able to find out about it through vague news reports in foreign newspapers.

"You're okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine," I said. Mortars landed in the camp around me. I watched them like a child might watch lightning bugs. I was afraid until I realized that I probably wouldn't be struck down while talking to my mother. It wouldn't bode well for the other side if I took one for the team while discoursing with my mother.

"Everyone's fine," she said. "We're all a little worried for you, but we're okay. We're praying for you."

"I know," I said.

"Can we send you anything?" she asked.

"I can't really think of anything right now."

Back home winter was beginning. And between us there were other seasons on other shores and in other hearts. I was an ambassador on a separate shore, a thousand seasons from home.

As my mother listed the things that she might send, a mortar landed on top of a warehouse next to me. The corrugated structure rattled from the impact. My mother
asked what it was. I told her it was a helicopter starting up for a night mission. I told her they were loud.

Even though we were under attack, there was still a time limit on the phone. Many operators would cut you off automatically after fifteen minutes on their line. The further you got from the war, generally the less they cared about this limit. But our local operator was always quick to pull the plug. So as soon as you began talking to someone you always felt that distant hand ready to yank the plug on your call. No matter how hard you tried to tell yourself you were talking to those back home, that this was your mother, and this was your father, girlfriend, wife, child, and on and on, time was always taking you further away, ready to abandon you again to the war and an empty line. I realized then that this was a problem in my life, waiting for people abandon to me. Every time I fall in love I'm waiting for her to leave.

"How're the others," my mother asked. She knew everyone in my platoon. She'd sent us cookies almost once a month since I'd been at Fort Drum. She'd talked to all of them on the phone at least once.

"They're good," I said. Now wasn't the time to tell her. Maybe she'd find out by watching the news or reading the paper. But now wasn't the time to tell her. I'd let her know when I got home. Or I might never tell her. Suddenly, and I don't know why, but I had the urge to assure her that I had never shot anyone. I fired in their direction. I'd tell her, if she ever asked. After that, I'd say, I don't know what happened to them. I'm a horrible shot. I'd console her. I'm good at hitting walls and trees, things of no consequence, but that's about it.
"Tell them to make sure they call home," she said. It must be the hardest thing in the world to be a mother.

I told my mother we might be cut off soon. I told her I loved her. She said she loved me. It was all she could do to let me talk to my father.

I could tell by the way that he talked to me that my mother was probably crying. She was probably tearing through the cupboard to find the ingredients to make Santiago and I some pumpkin bread. She knew Santiago loved her pumpkin bread, and he did. Whenever she'd sent me a package at Fort Drum she included a loaf for Santiago. He was my squad leader, so she must have imagined him as a kind of mentor, a father, but he was more to her, he was a protector, perhaps even a mother figure that she felt at home with. She never even met him. She'd talked to him a few times from when we all drank together in my room. I had a nice stereo, a nice television, and a wonderful collection of music and movies that everyone could appreciate. Still, I was sure that Santiago had as much sway in my household as a doctor might.

"She hasn't been sleeping," my father said. "How much longer do you think you'll be there?"

"I don't know." I was horrified by the thought of my mother awake at night worrying about me. It was dark out by night. Someone had penciled on the wall of the makeshift phone booth, *Ignorance is bliss.* Beside this was a drawing of a rat. Someone had penciled in the name of the commander of the war. There was a likeness there, something that played about the eyes.

"Don't be a hero," my father said. "Just get back to us."
"I know." I said. We said it all the time to each other. *Don’t be a hero*. And nobody really wanted to. It was our mantra to stay alive. It showed that you had power over the very idea of glory. It showed that you were a rational and logical human being that wanted to stay in this world. But they made movies about heroes. Heroes went into politics. Heroes got laid sometimes. Heroes were remembered forever. Or for a few days at least. But I’m always getting it wrong. It’s not like they handed out constellations to heroes anymore. Elvis, and his obsession for white panties with pubic hair peaking out. Elvis and his Don’t-Be-Cruel mantra, didn’t even earn a constellation. Who was I? They were all taken. The sky was already full of all the gods and heroes that you could ever want. And what had they done for us, I wanted to ask my father. I wanted to pencil on the booth.

"They never said you were missing," he told me, which was probably a blessing. I thought about Zeller and the others, how their parents had a few more days of happiness because of the delay in information. There were some things you could never give back, so give them an extra day, I thought. "They showed them dragging that guy through the streets," he said.

"Wow," I whispered, I don’t think he heard me.

"I don’t know where," he said, "but I think your mother saw it."

I didn’t say anything.

"Just come back to us," he said.

"I will," I tried to assure him.

"It’ll be okay," he said. "We’ve always been okay before."
He was right. We'd always been okay before. As a family, our luck always held out. My brother had survived cancer, and, as I prayed each day, would continue to survive. My brother's cancer only scared me in the fact that I knew he had to face it alone. Don't let him go it alone, I used to catch myself praying at night. Our family had survived while others had gone down in flames. It was hard not to think that ours had survived in place of theirs. What did we owe them, I wondered. Probably nothing. It was all a fluke. Just don't let him go alone--let him go in love.

"I love you. Now talk to your mom again," he said.

One of the operators came on the line and told me that I needed to wrap it up.

"I love you mom," I said.

"I love you too," she said.

Then there was silence on the line. It made me feel worse than before. As is perhaps the case with all long distance calls, it made me feel worse. It was like I'd only caught a notion of the individual, as though I'd only had an idea of what they were, and that was wrong all along. I can't imagine how long distance calls can make someone feel better.

The mortaring had stopped while I'd been on the phone. I hadn't even noticed it. But it was horribly quiet. Almost peaceful. The only time it was ever quiet was after an attack. Otherwise the night was fighting to get inside your head and to settle on your soul. Of course the night was all a matter of nothing and could be explained away.
PART TWO

TEN

The platoon assured us replacements—they called them a second rotation. Except for Santiago, the first rotation had consisted mainly of people that were single.

The replacements would probably come from our platoon, so the chances were that we'd know most of them, unless they sent someone new. Still, they'd be from different squads. We'd be like Frankenstein, pieced together, a patchwork of others.

Who knows why, but somebody ordered that the caboose be moved from its remote location. It had a strange appeal, I guess. They asked us to move into it as soon as possible. We were going to stay there while they got everything ready for our move to the island. It was placed on the beach between the Italian and Pakistani camp—Santiago.
and I had a nice laugh the moment we saw it. Santiago put his bag on the floor inside the caboose. It looked completely different now that it was right side up. The table served a purpose again. The holes that we’d made had been fixed and now there were six cots already setup in the caboose. We were silent for a time, looking around at everything.

“I think I might sleep outside,” I finally said. “It’s stuffy in here.” It smelled like rotten fish and rice.

Santiago put his gear on the table. “Which corner would you take if you were going to sleep in here?” he asked.

“Anything near the door,” I said. “Nothing in the back.”

He nodded and put his gear down on one of the cots closest to the door.

We moved one of the cots outside and placed it next to the caboose. I sat down and leaned back against the caboose. The ocean was beautiful in front of me. Santiago went inside the caboose and sat on his cot. He was quiet in there. Neither of us unpacked. We’d just be packing up again when the word came down that we were going to the island. I watched the ocean and thought about falling in love. The sun was warm and the breeze was cool and soon I fell asleep. Going into sleep, I thought I’d have to remember the moment, because I might like to remember it later.

Santiago’s heavy step on the floor of the caboose woke me up. I could tell I’d been asleep for some time by the stiffness in my neck and back from leaning against the caboose. That and the sun had moved on to the other side of the caboose. Santiago was stretching and yawning when he stepped around the corner.

“Damn,” he said. “I’m more tired now than when I fell asleep.” He sat on the end of my cot.
"They're moving us to that island because they don't want us around," he said.

"What do you know about that?"

"Nothing," I said. "Still, I might like it."

"They don't need us around to remind them that survivors are the exception in any war," he said. "They're trying to forget us to death."

I wanted to tell him that we didn't have to go to the island. That maybe if we asked they'd let us stay in the camp, or, better yet, they might even send us home if we put it to them. Weren't we privileged, after all? We'd come out alive. But I knew it was worthless and futile. Still, he should have asked. He should have begged. He was the leader of our shit gang.

"Maybe they want to give us a break," I said. "We're due for a little rest. It's our turn to pull the easy mission."

"There'll be nothing to do out there but think," he said. He was watching the ocean—thinking about sharks, ghosts, who knows what.

I just wanted him to stop talking, to stop thinking, to stop reminding me about everything that had happened. His presence reminded me. And then I'd thought about it long enough so that I couldn't go back to sleep. There was time enough in this world to be scared later.

"Fuck 'em," he said. It was his easy answer to everything. "You want me to bring you something back from the chow hall?"

It was a long enough drive and a long enough wait that I knew he'd be gone for at least half an hour. "Whatever you get, get me some as well," I said. anxious for him to be gone, anxious to be alone.
Shane had been in our platoon before we left for the war. But while we were away, he’d been assigned as the general’s driver and had arrived in the country when the general came over a few weeks after we’d first arrived. The general was staying at the airfield that night, so Shane asked for his permission to stay out at the caboose with Santiago and I. Shane was one of my best friends in the army. He was tall with dark hair and an Italian complexion. He’d attended a community college for a few semesters and backpacked across Europe before joining the army. He brought a case of grape soda. It was good to see a friend.

Soon we were talking about those that might come over as replacements. The more we talked, the more we were really talking about and recognizing those that weren’t there anymore. They kept coming back into our conversation even if we weren’t talking about them. It was like we were parents all of a sudden. Cryptic around the children so that we could really talk about what was going on in our lives. The more we changed the conversation, the more we grew quiet, the more they grew in clarity. It had something to do with the fact that they were all we ever knew together.

It had been dark for awhile. They hadn’t set our caboose up with any kind of lanterns for light, so we sat there in the dark, listening to the waves and trying to do our best as friends and accomplices to keep the world outside away. “What’s the first thing you’ll do when you get back,” Shane asked.

“Turn on all the lights,” I said. “Wherever I am.”

“Sounds fun,” Santiago said.
"I’d like to open the refrigerator in my room and just stand there looking at cold beer and food. God, a cold can of Coors sounds good. Think I’ll call Vince tomorrow and ask him to stock the fridge.” Vince was my roommate back at Fort Drum. He worked in the commander’s office, so he didn’t have much a chance of making it overseas for the show. We were quiet for a time. The sound of the sea came back to me and I wondered when it would leave me. There was something I was supposed to know, something that I’d heard before, or maybe read, about the ocean reflecting the world outside and world inside. It had to do with memory, I thought, but all I really wanted to do was skip a few stones into the middle of the breaking waves. It was Santiago’s idea. I wanted to ask him whether or not it was still out of tune.

“My kids won’t even know who I am when I get back,” Santiago said.

“That’s a good way to start all over again,” I said. “Maybe even try and make everything okay.” I’d once heard that Santiago had lost some rank somewhere in the past for hitting his wife. But I didn’t believe it. Rumors too often ruled our life for no reason.

“Nothing wrong with starting over,” Shane said. “I don’t remember when my dad came back from Vietnam. Would have been nineteen seventy. I was only a few months old. All I really remember about him before he found a new wife and had some new kids was that he had a friend with a wooden leg who used to swap that leg out with all kinds of crazy things. He had the end of a baseball bat he used to wear that was painted like the American flag. I think he might have had a golf club, but I’m not sure about that one. I really just remember that bat, the way he’d pull up on his Harley and that bat would just be resting on the controls until he stopped and then he’d plant that bat on the ground.
They used to sit in the backyard all night, don’t even remember if they really even talked. I guess they had to. It seems like they used to laugh a lot.

“Yeah,” Santiago said. “That’s what we’re all supposed to do after this, right?”

But I imagined him already thinking about his children. I couldn’t remember how old they were, maybe one and two. I know they were young, still tiny. The only time I’d ever met his wife and their babies was the day we left for the war, standing outside company headquarters waiting for the school bus to pick us up. It makes me feel bad that I remember the moment more for the school bus than for all of the families and friends watching their lovers and husbands and wives and mothers and fathers leave. It was a regular tearjerker. The single guys stood off to the side smoking and backslapping to make ourselves feel wanted. It was all about the moment I realized we’d be riding on school busses. I saw a whole fleet of them in the distance going to another company and I remember thinking how shit it was of the army, how embarrassing it was that they couldn’t even get us nice busses, coaches, something other than the large yellow buses that took children to school and stopped at railroad crossings. And it was worst than that because when we did get on the bus, we still had our rucksacks and the seats were made for children. I’m a tall man, skinny, but with long legs, and I couldn’t fit in the seat, and there were two of us to each seat of course, and neither of us could really fit. The aisle was full of everyone else’s shit by the time we got on the bus. They made us sit with our rucksacks in our lap, but my legs were too long so that I couldn’t even fit myself in the seat, so I had to do a kind of isometric half-standing half-sitting over the seat, ass not even touching anything, back pushed against the back of the seat. M-16 awkward and dangerous as it clanked about my side. And it was a two hour drive like that. I
remember that more than all of those families—probably because mine wasn’t there. Although my mother and father and brother loved me, they couldn’t be there, and I wouldn’t have expected them to be there. The army only gave twenty-four hours notice of the date we were leaving, and they lived in Kansas and we were in New York. We’d been in suspended animation for over a month waiting to leave. I remember the seating situation more because I had no wife or lover to wave me away into the distance and make it all seem so cruel, romantic, or whatever it was that you were supposed to feel as you left for some foreign war. But there were so many more wars we left behind. Those that were married worried that their wife or that, perhaps even they, might commit some sin of lust. Everyone, in their head, was fighting to find out if they were a hero, quick enough to live and smart enough to stay alive. Or maybe they were worried it had nothing to do with speed and intelligence. Maybe it was all cruelty that kept some going. Luck others, maybe it was always luck—after all, we were always saying. If it’s not your time, then it’s not your time. For me it was the seating situation.

But Santiago’s babies—I couldn’t really remember what they looked like as I listened to the sea and the shore. I’m sure they were beautiful. All babies are. I guess. On that day I’m sure they were tiny and tired and wrapped up against the morning air, the sun, wrapped up against everything that you wrap them up against.

I was tired of listening and thinking all the time. If it were one or the other, I thought, I’d rather live in my head than the war.

“I don’t even know if she’s still there,” Santiago said. “I never know what she’s thinking. She probably took the kids and went home. I just wish I knew what she was thinking sometimes.”
"None of us know what anyone else is ever thinking," Shane said. "How could we?" Shane opened a can of soda. "Why would you want to know?"

"You're probably right," Santiago said. "She should have been home when I called."

I hadn't even asked whether or not he'd gotten through. I hadn't thought of it. It made me feel horrible that I hadn't even bothered to ask. But it was hard to feel sympathy for a man that had faked a woman with Cooper dead and his babies at home.

"Most of us are too busy thinking about ourselves," Shane said.

"Maybe you just missed her," I said, trying to help. "Maybe she's there right now, maybe she sits there all day thinking you'll call at any moment. I bet when she leaves the house she's mortified that she's missed your call. She probably believes that the phone is ringing the moment she leaves the house to go the store."

Most of the married men were more worried about finding something to fuck, so that they seemed like they rarely dwelled on the fact that their wife or lover might be doing the same. Of course, when they did worry about it, it was with a kind of lethargic panic. It wasn't pretty to watch or feel. You could see around their eyes. The worry of the appetite of the flesh, of the failure of the flesh, is nothing like that. It's all a matter of looking inside and questioning.

"She's probably been out fucking Jodie," Santiago said, and he laughed.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard him laugh. You could laugh yourself to death in a war.

"Damn Jodie," he said.
Jodie was the mythological scourge and usurper of maidens and girlfriends and wives and mothers in all the cadences and rumors we'd ever heard. Jodie was always portrayed as from "back on the block," which didn't really bother me because I was from the suburbs of Wichita, Kansas. Jodie was always back on the block fucking your woman. Jodie, it was clever, the questioning and touch of femininity with which his name was uttered, as though he bore both dick and vagina. He had an all seeing power to get into any women's pants. He knew tricks most men couldn't even understand.

"She's alright," I said. "You should think about how you can be a better father and husband."

Santiago lit a cigarette.

"But what do I know?" I said. "You'll worry about it no matter what I say. What the fuck do I really know? My advice is cheap. My mother always told me I could be the next president. And I can't wait to start telling my children that. Tell your children they can be the president if they really try." I was talking more to Shane, trying to joke with Shane, but it made Santiago laugh. "In your children's case though, vice-president. because mine will be president."

"I'll shoot you if you're ever president," he said.

"Fair enough," I said.

Santiago stood and moved to a corner. He lit another cigarette, cupping it in his hand to keep as much light hidden as possible.

"When I get back I'm going to the finest restaurant in town," I said. "Maybe I'll take the mayor's daughter." It was a show for Shane. I wanted him to know I was anxious to live. "I dated the mayor's daughter a few times."
“Shut up.” Santiago said.

“No way,” Shane said.

“Really, I dated the mayor’s daughter once.” I said.

“Bullshit,” Santiago said, “how big is your town, twelve people?”

Shane was laughing.

“Quarter of a million,” I said. “Actually, I don’t know if she was the mayor’s daughter or the governor’s daughter.”

“Big difference there,” Santiago said.

“He was in politics. I know that.” I’d heard the story somewhere else, and I wanted to see if I could pull it off as my own. I pictured a girl I knew, and her house because she was relatively wealthy. “They had an elevator in their house because her brother was retarded and in a wheelchair. I tried to fuck her once while her brother was in the room with us watching TV. We were behind the couch.”

“You’re sick,” Shane said.

“He was off to a corner of the room, unaware and drooling. It was late. He was watching some horror movie. I don’t even think he really knew what he was watching. I don’t know why he was in the room with us, maybe it made her feel safe, maybe it made her parents feel safe, maybe that was the only TV. He laughed a lot at stuff that didn’t make sense. And I’m not just saying that because people say that kind of thing about retarded people. I mean, seriously. I’ve got nothing against them. They make me kind of sad in a way. Guess they’re as happy as the rest of us though. Maybe even happier.

Anyway, she just held me in her hand.” I didn’t know why I was telling them this, it was true, the part about politics was a lie, but the story, the feelings, the situation was true. I
guess I wanted to feel like we were friends again. Still, I didn’t want them to really know
anything about me. Santiago most of all. I didn’t want him to think about Joy. That was
her real name, Joy. Yet I didn’t want him thinking about his babies and the war so I had
to tell him something. Joy and I were both sixteen when this happened. She had
beautiful green eyes. I didn’t tell them that we both had our pants off, that it was the first
time I’d ever had my pants off with a woman. I didn’t want to admit that at that age I
was a child, and that I must have had no respect for her, to put her in that situation. Of
course, she was there with me, and I can’t remember which of us really initiated it.
Probably both of us, but it seemed cruel in retrospect, even embarrassing. No, it seemed
lonely. Memory, what the fuck do you do with it. It’s the worst ghost I know I can
never remember the happy stuff. Instead, I’m stuck with moments that make me feel
lonely and ashamed. I think too much in the moment. Joy should have been perfect for
me at that age. “She just held me in her hand asking me to wait. I waited myself right
out of that one.” I didn’t tell them how I showed up drunk at her brother’s birthday party.
How we were only sixteen and how stupid this was. A friend and I had stolen some wine
from a grocery store. We also had a little marijuana that my friend’s mom had given
him. Anyway, Joy never asked me back.

“Alright,” Santiago said.

“Anyway,” I said, trying to think of another story that would pull Santiago out of
his spin.

Shane was laughing at Santiago and I. He must have found our worries amusing.

“That’s good stuff,” he said.

“I’m going for a walk,” Santiago said, picking up his M-16.
"There's a phone in the Humvee," Shane said. It's reserved for the general, but I use it all the time to call home. You get immediate priority, so you don't have to wait."

"No," Santiago said. "I couldn't stand it if she wasn't there again." And he walked out of the caboose. He didn't even put on any of his Kevlar.

"You heard from Lura," Shane asked.

"No," I said. "She told me not to write. She said I couldn't decide between her and the alcohol. This was before I tried to quit. You saw how that went. God, we'll ruin our life for nothing. Jodie's all over Lura and Joy." Jodie would follow them forever. He'd quit drinking for them.

Shane took a box of Tangerines out of the back of the Humvee. "These should be good." I hadn't seen fresh fruit in months.

We walked down and sat on the beach in front of the ocean. I peeled a tangerine, and then I was sad that I'd told them part of the story about Joy. All I could really remember was her brother laughing at some horror movie, and her and me anxious and ashamed, waiting in the dark to lose our virginity. And the moment never arrived, forever in time we're still there waiting. Suddenly, I hated the story because now it was in my mind with Santiago's babies, and I couldn't understand how I had let this happen. And I thought about how I'd always be in that stairwell or somewhere in the war waiting. I couldn't remember what it was I was trying to do, why it was I shared the story with him, even if it was disguised in the pretense of lie. He had no reason not to believe me. As a matter of fact, I think he always believed me. He was always asking for a story, searching for one he hadn't heard, or asking me to repeat one I'd told him before.
We ate tangerines in the night, in front of the ocean, under the moon and stars. Our proximity to everything was a matter of loneliness and distance. We talked about the girls we’d known and what we were going to do when we got back. We made plans that held more finality in their making than they would ever hold if they came to fruition. London, Paris, Rome, and Athens were promised. I tried to think of each in turn, but instead all I could see in my mind was a city spread out at night, lights blinking, wavering, and shifting as though it was, now and then, hidden by water. We fell asleep on the beach.

In the morning we were surrounded by tangerine peels. “What a sight,” Shane said, when he awoke. Looking out at the ocean then down at the tangerine peels and the occasional empty can of grape soda, he smiled. “Not a bad night.”

He took a toothbrush out of his rucksack and brushed his teeth on a ledge of rock. He stood and looked out at the water for a long time, and I left him alone. He was from Anaheim, so I imagined all that water must have reminded him somewhat of home. He’d surfed now and then before he joined the army, and he was always promising to take me west and show me how to stand up on a Pacific wave.

Then he was leaving and it made everything worse. I wanted to tell him that I could be alone with Santiago anymore, and that I was actually kind of scared of the man lately. “You take care of yourself,” he said, standing beside his Humvee. It was still early, and none of the other camps were making any noise. He’d make it back just in time to go to breakfast with the general. “I’m sure your mom would tell me to give you a hug,” and he was right, he’d spoken to her before. Those were the kinds of things she
asked of everyone I met. So he gave me a hug. "I'm glad you made it. I was worried about you."

I watched as he circled the end of the runway, running downhill and out of sight toward the hospital that was up against the wall that ran around the city. The dust the Humvee kicked up kept rising into the air. It never seemed to settle back again.
A dead shark washed ashore in the night. It was well over twenty feet long, and about half the size of the caboose. Sitting on a ledge, not far from the shark, I threw a rock that landed short. I was well away from the shark's head, sitting to its side, so that I had a whole lot of body at which to aim the rocks. The shark was parallel to the waves. The shark's head pointed in the direction of the caboose. Santiago walked around the shark, making a wide circle around its head. I wanted to peer into its mouth and eyes, but I knew I was too afraid. Santiago bent to one knee on the side of the head facing the land. The delicate foam tips of the waves touched the shark and Santiago's boots. The
foam carried a lot of sand in it. When Santiago stood up, his knees were wet, covered with a fine layer of sand. He moved around and looked over the fin in the direction of the caboose. He used the fin as a sight. I thought I stood and walked down to get a better look.

"Wow," Santiago said, not turning from the shark, but talking to me. "This thing could do some damage." Santiago sat in the sand at my feet. "It's time to go," Santiago said. The boat was ready. He'd seen to it himself. "Fuck the replacements," he said. "We'll come back for them. They can call us on the radio."

"It's at least twenty feet," I said.

"It's huge," he said. "You wouldn't want to meet him in a dark alley."

I was at the airfield again, waiting on the replacements.

"Hey, Candy ass," Coleman, one of the airfield guards, called out as he and Smith walked toward the Humvee where I sat.

The patched together surface of the tarmac, never a uniform color, reflected the sun as well as a mirror might. The heat exuded was close to unbearable. So much heat coming off made me think that fires were busy consuming things below the surface. I imagined the huge mirror-like surface vibrating to the hum of the earth, dashing and dotting messages out into the unknown.

Pock marks in the tarmac showed where mortars and RPGs that the Somalis fired most nights had gauged the surface. The metal was jagged and turned up in these spots like a stick had been poked through from below, which gave it all the appearance of the rounds having been fired from underneath, from the inside out. I parked away from
any craters, in a spot that hadn't been touched yet. Lightning always hit twice. You heard the stories all the time, some guy hit by lightning in a field in France during the war, and subsequently, twenty years later, he's hit in a park in Nebraska. The lightning is always roaming for those it knows.

These craters and the color of the tarmac reminded me of the surface of the moon. When was the last time we walked on the moon, I tried to remember. Had they ever walked on the moon in my lifetime, I thought watching Coleman and Smith shuffle my way. It's just one more thing that we can bemoan to separate the generations. One more thing we can point to when saying that the past failed us. We went to the moon, but what did we leave, another flag, another marker to remind us, to make us believe that we alone are distinct. I'm all for starting the years again at zero. I'm all for renaming the calendar after something other than every flavor-of-the-month god that failed us.

We'd met before. Coleman, Smith, and myself. Coleman sat down in the passenger seat, while Smith sat in the back passenger seat. Each day they came and sat with me while we waited on the passenger plane.

"Not today, Candyass," Coleman said. "You're not leaving today. You need to get your name on the list." He tapped his clipboard on his knee. He knew the name of everyone leaving that day, and he usually had the manifest for all arriving passengers. I never asked to see it, and he never offered to let me. I didn't need to see the list. I was happy thinking that I had a mission, waiting on the incoming replacements. Plus, I thought, it would be nice for those from the platoon to find a friendly face waiting for them. It was better that I give them a ride than they ride on one of the cargo trucks that was always parked and waiting beside the pock marked terminal. The drivers were
usually asleep when I peered across at them. A few had on headphones, listening to something.

"Why didn't you tell us that you were the one that got lost in the city, Candyass?" Coleman asked.

"Didn't really think it was important," I said.

"Damn," Smith said. He said it the way you do when you remember a friend that was killed in a car wreck.

"We've never even been into the city," Coleman said. "We can see it from here—"

"And smell it," Smith said.

"—And smell it, but what's it like?" Coleman asked.

"It's big," I said. "You've seen the maps. It has everything a city needs. hotels, stadiums, homes—and tents on the outskirts."

"I know Coleman," said, "but what's it feel like when an army's not here?"

Smith nodded.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Is it like Mad Max," Smith asked. We laughed at this.

"Something like that," I said.

"No, really," Coleman said.

It would have been easier to tell them about the surface of the moon, or to explain love to them. It would have been easier to invent a new calendar, and go back to year zero, because Somalia was real. Somalia hummed along with the body electric when you tried to block out all the noise at night and listen for silence.
It's a scary fucking place, I wanted to say. But I knew that they were mainly thinking about the children. That they were really asking after death—what it was like to shoot somebody, to see them shot, and to see your friends and acquaintances shot and dying. They didn't really want to know about the city. You're lucky sometimes. I could have told them, when those around you die. They show you where the enemy's hiding.

"You been to the beach?" Coleman asked.

"I don't understand why they don't let us go on a convoy," Smith said. "Anybody could do this job for a day—even you, Candyass. I'd sure like to see it from the inside. See that stadium. Bet it is one eerie looking place."

We sat there and thought about the inside of the city, the eerie stadium and marketplace foremost in my mind.

"I hope I get some mail today," Coleman said. "Nothing beats a letter from the ladies."

A TWA plane landed. They were flying them in on civilian airplanes now. Comfort was key. They usually showed a film on the flight over. Sometimes they got an airline meal, which was always better than an MRE. Other times they brought a bag lunch. Those that got off the plane were from another division, the Screaming Eagle. None of the replacements from my platoon were on the flight. Coleman and Smith sat in the Humvee with me and watched as the soldiers climbed into the cargo trucks that were waiting to take them to the main camp. There uniforms were new, pressed. There weapons glinted in the sunlight.
One of the soldiers from the trucks brought Coleman what looked like a set of orders for the flight. Coleman put it under the manifest list on the clipboard. The soldier went back to his truck. Coleman looked at the manifest list for a time.

"Not today," Coleman said. "Not today." Then he and Smith went back to the shade of terminal.

He didn't have to tell me. And he didn't need to keep telling me. I knew it'd be easier to beg my way to the moon than to beg my way out of here.

When I got back to the caboose there was a crowd of soldiers standing around the shark. Santiago was sitting on my cot watching them.

"Don't go in the water," Santiago said.

"What," I asked.

"It's something else they forgot to tell us," he said.

"There's always something," I said.

Santiago said that their friend had been attacked by a shark a few days before. He had been swimming with his friends when a shark bit into him, tearing his left arm off. Another soldier in the group was cut, where he said the shark's fin caught him, when he tried to grab the dying friend. The soldier with the missing side was dead by the time they brought him ashore.

The soldiers stood around the head of the shark. One of them began hitting it with his rifle-butt. He aimed the blows at the mouth, trying to knock the teeth out. He swung the rifle, missed the teeth and hit it full on the head. It took the sound forever to
reach us. The image already settled in my mind. The man got the teeth he wanted. I heard him say that he was going to make a necklace out of them. Pretty, I thought.

The next day it was closer to the caboose. Insects and crabs filed out of the sharks' gills and mouth. It might have grown in the night. Santiago squelched a cigarette out on the dead animal. He walked around it once, inspecting. I sat on the reef again. I still wanted to walk around it and look in its eyes.

"Its eyes are gone," Santiago said. One more dream was gone.

"How's your boat going?" I called to him from my rock. I knew it was done, he'd told me it was done, but I wanted to hear him talk about it. I was hoping to get him excited. To bring him back from wherever it was he wanted to go these days. He'd been silent since we returned to the caboose and the city. He was thinking too much. I could tell by the way he stabbed at his food. By the way he was sucking the sodas and the cigarettes down.

"It's going," he said, looking from the shark to the ocean. "I always wanted a boat—the ocean." He walked toward the ocean which seemed to run up the beach to meet him. He was out a ways. "You ain't much of shit in this world unless you sailed the seven seas," he screamed back at me over the wind and water. He pissed into the ocean.

Late in the afternoon, a group of engineers arrived and began loading sandbags. They were building a ziggurat of sandbags. Whenever the engineers took a break they gathered around the shark and tried to stare it back to life. They kicked at it with their
Some put bandanas over their nose and mouth. Someone had a camera. He took pictures of different men posing with the shark. Every time they looked at those pictures they’d be trapped in the war again. Forever trapped with a big shark and a stupid grin on their faces.

I wanted a camera. I thought about all the poses one could strike. The foot on top, gun in hand—the trophy kill. The head next to the mouth—the lion keeper. Maybe even a picture of me distributing pieces of the shark to the starving—saving the masses.

After the pictures they pried teeth out of the animal’s mouth.

“A dead shark’s mouth can still snap shut,” Santiago called down to them. He’d just walked outside. “Reflex,” he called. But they either didn’t care or didn’t hear.

“I stepped on a dead bee, once,” Santiago said, taking a seat in the sand. “It still stung me.”

Santiago called headquarters and told them about the shark. He told them that it was starting to smell. That it was attracting wildlife.

They told us to wait a few more days. That the tide was sure to carry it out. Someone called back a few minutes later and asked us to save them some teeth. They also wanted the dorsal fin because it held medicinal powers. Santiago said he was going to set it on fire soon. I asked him not to.

That night I was listening to Zeller’s Walkman when the first mortar hit. I was watching the shark and thinking about moving into the caboose for the night. When the first mortar hit it scared me something good. When the next mortar landed I went hollow.
inside. Sorry for myself all of a sudden. The island they were promising to send us to wasn’t close enough and we weren’t there yet. With the prospect of escaping this close I couldn’t believe they’d still shoot at us. A tougher man would have shrugged it off. It was enough now to take the soul out of me.

I walked into the caboose to put my gear on. Santiago turned his flashlight off. He was writing a letter.

Two more rounds landed north of the caboose. They sounded like they were right on top of us.

“Maybe you could write her a letter for me,” he said as we put our Kevlar on.

“You’re better at these kinds of things.”

“I’m always falling in love,” I warned him. “I might like the idea of her. Never a success—always falling.” My life is one long once upon a time about the loss of love.

“Pretend she’s that girl you’re always writing,” he said.

“Fair enough,” I said. “Right after I jerk off.”

“Nice,” he said, shouldering his M-16.

“How’d you know I was writing her,” I asked.

“Who the fuck else are you going to write,” he asked. “Nobody spends that much time writing their family.”

Another mortar. Closer. The caboose rattled, sand and rocks struck the top of the caboose. Santiago and I looked at each other.

“I might write my mom every day,” I said, as I followed him out of the caboose.

“Aren’t you the patron saint of all sons,” he said.

“Maybe I’m the patron saint of strangers,” I said.

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The caboose rested among dunes and hills. Still, you could see it from the height of the city. Santiago and I ran up the beach and settled on top of a dune. We could see into the Italian camp. Three mortars landed in quick succession. They were walking the rounds into the Italian camp.

The whine of helicopter turbines sucking at the air began on the American stretch of the airfield. They were starting up the Black Hawks and the Cobras. The helicopters’ blades slapped and pounded at the night. They made your chest feel empty, the body a receptacle for their sound. You could smell their hot exhaust in the wind, which was whirling the air, mixing the smell of spent fuel with the smell of ocean.

Another mortar and a secondary explosion opened the Italian camp in light. The Somalis had hit a helicopter. Fuel tanks full, it doused everything around it. Under the glow of flame, nothing looked real. It was saturnalia. People came out to struggle to contain the fire, to keep it from spreading to the other helicopters. The men circled the flames spraying foam onto the fire. They were orchestrated around the fire. Moving as one, they danced in slow circles, spraying foam at the base of the flames. I couldn’t help but cheer them on.

“Jesus,” Santiago said. I turned to him. He was looking through a set of binoculars. “Jesus.” He must have said it fifteen times before he handed me the binoculars. “People are dying.”

When the American helicopters took off the Somalis stopped mortaring. The Somalis weren’t stupid. They knew that we could find them. That we could triangulate and that we had equipment to pick up the traces of heat and the residue of gunpowder. We could pinpoint it to a block, and finally to a house. They’d hurry women and
children outside to surround the buildings from which they'd fired. The American helicopters would fire a few warning flares, nothing else. The Somalis would be moving the mortars as we spoke so that it wasn't even worth sending a team to try and confiscate the weapons or catch those that were using them.

The Italians had the fire under control. I handed the binoculars back to Santiago. Santiago called headquarters on the hand radio to tell them that we were fine.

Tracer rounds began arching out of the Italian camp toward the city. It was the only point they had to fire at where there wasn't another UN camp between them and the city. It was a small opening, but they were pouring a lot of fire through it. For all I knew, nobody lived in that section anyway. When we'd passed through it there was nothing but abandoned factories and warehouses stripped of everything essential.

Santiago and I watched with delight. It was hilarious. The futility of their need to escape, their need for retribution. It was a communal outburst. Everyone in the camp must have been on the line firing uselessly into the city wall and buildings.

They started firing in every direction. Rounds popped over our head, some going out to sea and some into the Pakistani camp. Because every third or forth round on average in a soldiers' magazine was a tracer you could easily see what people were aiming at. You could see when they were firing wildly and when they were gathering their bearings. Rounds hit our dune and the ocean and ricocheted straight up toward the sky.

Santiago and I slid to the bottom. We leaned back and watched the light show. The wind was humming through the dunes, blowing sand into our eyes and down the back of our necks, so that it gathered with your sweat and made moving irritable.
We listened to the radio. Headquarters was telling everyone in the American camp to get to a bunker and not to return fire. They repeated this several times. The main guard point between the Italian camp and Mogadishu called headquarters. They were under heavy fire from the Italians. The bunker wasn’t set up as well to protect from an attack from behind. The soldier said the Italians had shot the .50 caliber’s ammunition can and it had exploded. Both of the guards were wounded. You could hear the panic in voice. They were calling for permission to defend themselves. Headquarters told them to hang tight. Headquarters assured the guards that they were on their way and that they were working everything out as quickly as possible with the Italian camp. It’s hard when you don’t speak Italian, the radio operator at headquarters said. The guard said his friend was in shock, that most of his friend’s knee was gone.

It was a bright night. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky. Just stars and moon. You could see up to a mile away, I gauged.

The Pakistani camp fired back. A few rounds fingered the dirt next to Santiago. Shit.” Santiago said, pointing his weapon at the Pakistanis. We were in their line of fire. By now the Italians and the Pakistanis were exchanging serious fire. You couldn’t count the stars through the tracer rounds.

Santiago took a flare out of his pack. “Follow me.”

We ran along the edge of the ocean. I thought it was beautiful breathing in all that night air. Santiago dove to the ground and raised his rifle so that he looked like a plastic soldier. He began firing at the ocean. I stood, watching. The rounds hit the waves and ricocheted up toward the moon. You couldn’t hear them hit the ocean. All you could hear was the surf continue. He jumped to his feet and started running again.
We hid behind some rocks and Santiago launched the flare over the Pakistani camp. The flare swung gently in the breeze. It cast the Pakistani camp in shadows and metallic silver light. It looked like another world.

Santiago stood and fired from the hip at the Pakistani camp. For the sake of fairness, I took aim at the Italian camp and fired into the line of helicopters. We might have hit somebody, so we ran to a ledge of rocks right in front of the caboose. The shark was there now, on the beach directly in front of the caboose. Hiding behind the rocks, we both looked at it. I couldn’t think of anything to say. I wanted the ocean to take it away. I took out my 9mm because I knew there weren’t any tracers in the magazine and emptied the clip into the shark. Santiago did the same with his 9mm.

I looked up the beach in both directions. Nothing but the ocean moved as far as I could tell. Nobody was coming so I sat back. Santiago stretched himself out on the sand. He placed his Kevlar like a pillow. He put a new clip in his 9mm and held it across his chest.

He was only a few feet away but his thoughts were forever out of my reach. I wanted to ask him what he was thinking about. Have you ever thought of suicide, I might ask. Not in the sense of actually pulling the trigger, of actually ending it all. I just mean think about it, the way you might think about winter in the midst of summer. Just a thought. Nothing that holds consequence. Our life is just as much the moments left out as the moments contributed—the moments chosen. You know you can’t shoot a ghost. I thought. But perhaps you can if you shoot yourself in the fucking head. It’s never an easy question to answer. I kept my mouth shut and leaned back against a rock. I looked
up the beach. I took our silence as an admission of guilt. We take our silence everywhere.

The following morning the shark was still on the beach in front of the caboose. Tiny black pecks marked the spots where the bullets hit. I didn’t walk to the opposite side to look at the exit wounds. They were always larger.

“Something big took a bite out of it.” Santiago said, standing on the side of the creature that faced the ocean and that I couldn’t see.

I looked across the shark at him. It smelled horrible.

“It’s all tore the fuck up,” he said.

We walked back to the caboose and sat on my cot. Everything looked normal in the Italian and Pakistani camp.

“Never shot a shark before.” Santiago said.

“I’ve never even been fishing,” I said.

Santiago thought this was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “Never been fishing,” he said, laughing and doubling over. “Oh my god,” he said. “That’s a good one. Josh has never been fishing.”

“This fucker stinks,” Santiago said, handing me the radio. “You call them.”

“You’re in charge.” I said.

“Yep,” Santiago said. “So you can call them.”

They were busy from the night’s action but I finally got through to Sergeant Jones. We knew him well enough to ask the ridiculous questions and expect a decent answer.
"What'd you see last night?" Coleman asked. "We heard there was lot of fire in your area."

"I didn't see anything," I said. "We were hiding."

"You should have said we were sleeping," Santiago said.

"Hiding," Coleman said, like he liked this. I could only imagine the stupid expression on his well-rested face.

"When are going home," I asked.

Coleman keyed the microphone just so that we would hear him laugh at this. When the radio finally went silent, I said, "There's a shark. It's dead and it's been here for a few days. It's starting to rot and it's right in front of the caboose."

"A shark," Coleman asked.

"Dogs are interested in it," Santiago said. "Tell him dogs have rabies over here and if I get bitten by a third world dog it's his ass."

"A shark," Coleman said, again. "Can you get me some teeth?"

"Dogs are interested," I told Coleman.

"How hard is it to get the teeth out?" he asked.

"Coleman," I said. "I want this thing out of here. I need this thing out of here. It smells and it's rotting in front of the caboose."

"Tell me who picks up dead sharks and I'll call them for you," he said.

"Coleman, please," I said.

"This one falls under act of god, friend," he said.

Then it was Lieutenant Marks breaking into the conversation. "Where's Sergeant Santiago?"
"Anyone but Marks," Santiago laid. "Tell him I'm fending dogs off". He looked at the shark.

"He's down by the shark," I said.

"How big is it," Marks asked.

"Twenty feet," I said.

"I'll take care of it," Marks said, and signed off.

Santiago went into the caboose and started kicking at the cots and throwing things about. "He'll ask us what we're doing." In mock answer, he said, "We're waiting to go to the island." As if Marks were answering he gave a mock reply, "Well you can fill sandbags while you wait." Then it was Santiago again. "Piss on that."

"We're fucked if they want to see our weapons." I said.

Santiago came back and stood in the door of the caboose and looked at the beach. "Damn," he said quietly. He was serious again. "Walk down and look for casings." He looked at my M-16. "Give me your weapon and I'll start cleaning them while you go look for casings." He took my M-16. "Damn," and then he turned and walked back into the caboose.

Marks arrived with the colonel and several other officers. Santiago and I watched them from the doorway. They walked around the shark, pointing out the bullet holes and bites. The shark didn't seem to smell as much as the day before. The Colonel seemed distracted as he looked at the shark. He only nodded or shook his head when someone spoke to him. He and Marks walked up to the caboose.
"There's a case of grape soda for you boys in my Humvee," the Colonel said. He pointed Marks toward his Humvee and the soda. When Marks was gone he said, "Looks like you took some hits last night. There must have been some serious fire for that thing to come out of it looking like that." He looked from Santiago to myself and smiled lightly. He turned and looked at the ocean. "It's beautiful." The breeze off the ocean made it hard to believe that anywhere else on earth wasn’t touched or trembling by the sea.

"I don't know what the ocean does to us," the Colonel said, "but she does something." The Colonel took his helmet off and ran his fingers through his hair. He looked older with his helmet off. I couldn't imagine a life of war. He had gray hair. The longer he stared at the ocean the more the lines on his face stood out. He'd been etched by decades of combat. I'd seen the man run the ranks with those of us under his authority. He'd gone through the air assault and airborne refresher courses with the rest of us. I never expected him to be that old. I wanted to ask him how it happened. How, in leading a life of war, time could ever catch up with him. You can destroy everything but time.

Everyone told stories about the Colonel. I wanted to ask him if they were true. I wanted to ask what he'd heard about Santiago and I—whether or not he had anything to compare or whether it all paled. He wore a combat patch from the Third Cavalry Division. He'd been in Vietnam, a Cobra pilot. Santiago said flying helicopters in the war wasn't the same as what we did. It wasn't the same as taking it to the streets, as taking it to the enemy, as getting to know them on their turf. There's up there, Santiago once said, pointing at the sky, and there's down here. And they're not the same.
Marks put the soda inside the caboose. He walked down to get his pictures like the other officers. We should have loaded our dead shark on a flatcar. We could have sold tickets in a traveling show. I could drag out burnt babies and dead bodies to culminate the experience.

"Have a soda," he said. "Take a load off," he looked back from the ocean and grinned at us.

Santiago took a seat in the door of the caboose. I passed out the sodas among the three of us. They were cold. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a cold drink. Everything was warmed by the sun in this place. Everything was either tepid or close to boiling. I wanted to spit everything out in this place.

"I read the report last night," the Colonel said.

I knew he was talking about the time we'd spent lost in the city. But he'd only read half the story and that one was full of inconsistencies and lies. I wondered how much of the truth he'd come across or discovered in that report. He'd seen a lot in all of his years, and I knew he wasn't stupid. I wanted to know what he believed these events would portend. With only half the story he still knew more than we did. I expected. He might have said: One year of bad luck for each person you killed; or one lifetime of bad luck for each.

"I'm sorry that we couldn't get you out," the Colonel said. "You sure as shit made a mess of it."

"What did you expect us to do," Santiago asked.

"Handle yourselves a little better," the Colonel said. He stretched his legs out in front of him from his seat on my cot. He'd been looking at the ground, but now he
looked up and looked in Santiago’s eyes. “Lies are thin.” He looked back to the others standing around the shark. He let it settle for a long time then he stood up. “That dead boy,” the Colonel said, “what was his name,” and he looked at Santiago. “Zeller?” Santiago nodded. “They pulled an M-16 round out of his stomach.” He leaned his head back and finished off his soda. He looked at the empty can. The Colonel nodded. “Nothing will come of it,” he said. “Nothing ever comes of it.”

“The engineers will be here this afternoon and they’ll take care of the shark,” the Colonel said. “I told them to take care of this.” He stooped and picked up a piece of shell in the sand. “We need you out on that island soon. The rest of your squad will be here tonight. Get the boat and be out there by tomorrow.”

Santiago lit a cigarette. I asked him for one. It sounded like it would go well with the grape soda.

“Put those cigarettes out,” Marks said when he approached up the hill. “You can smoke when we leave.”

“It’s all right,” the Colonel said. “Everyone needs a vice.” He turned and looked at me, “My wife asked me to quit. She said I was to live to see my grandchildren.” He liked this. The idea made him smile. I knew he wasn’t smiling for me as much as he was remembering, probably smiling because of her. “Are you married,” he asked me.

“No, sir,” I said.

He nodded. He looked back to the ocean. “You’ll be married soon enough. And you’ll quit smoking soon after that. So for now, you’re forgiven.”
The officers were long gone when the engineers arrived. I stood on top of a hill and looked out at the island. There were close to twenty engineers. None of them came up the beach to ask us how we were and we didn’t go to them. We were only an hundred feet apart. They walked around the shark for a long time. They took their pictures and pried out what was left of the teeth. They parked a flatbed next to the shark and tried lifting the creature with a forklift that they’d brought along but the shark was too large for the tiny forklift. The back of the forklift lifted off the ground as it struggled to heft the weight of the dead shark. After standing around and discussing the situation for close to an hour, they called for another, larger forklift. They looked up at us with a kind of distrust, perhaps knowing that it was us that had put them to work. About half an hour later, a larger lift came lumbering down the road, its weight swaying with the bumps. Positioned next to the shark, black smoke poured from the forklift’s smokestack as it labored its forks through the sand and into position under the shark. They lifted the shark slowly. Six or seven were gathered about it to make sure that everything was fine. About four feet off the ground the shark burst open. The skin retained its shape but the insides poured to the ground. It was a thick putrid jelly. I could tell it had gotten into the boots of those close by. I felt for them. The stench was unbearable.

Santiago was shaking his head. He was trying not to laugh. He walked into the caboose and I followed him. I could feel the engineers looking at us like it was our fault that the shark had died and washed ashore, rejected by the sea.

Santiago lit a cigarette, to get rid of the smell, he said. Not that he needed an excuse.
They must have hated us by now. I thought about taking them some of the grape soda. I picked one up to check. It was still cool. There were too many of them though, and the grape soda tasted too good with cigarettes.
"I fucking hate this place," Kennedy said, after two weeks on the island. Tossing his lit cigarette into the air and kicking it toward me. I was sitting on my cot. The cigarette hit my arm then landed on the ground in front of me. The ashes burnt my arm. I stepped on the cigarette but made no sign that it had hurt me. Santiago looked up from a magazine that he was reading at Kennedy.

"It'd be so much better if you weren't here," I said to Kennedy, trying to make it sound like a joke, only it didn't.

"Fuck you," and he meant it. Kennedy could have easily broken me in half. He'd been recruited to play football at almost every major American university with a decent...
football program. He had all of his recruiting letters framed and hanging in his room at the barracks. Only he had the misfortune of coming from a family where it was tradition to join the military out of high school. That and he had the misfortune of falling for his families lies and joining.

"It'd be a lot better if none of us were here," Santiago said. "So shut the fuck up"

Santiago could have easily taken Kennedy. "I guess it's our turn to cut some more of the path," Santiago said, looking at me. "You three go for the supplies."

The army had quit bringing our supplies after the first week so we made Benny take us in the boat instead. Santiago made our hourly radio checks, other than that, he said nothing to those at HQ about the island. The island should have been a paradise, but we were there, that was true enough, so we somehow managed to mope it up.

We called Kennedy "Socks" because he once lost his M-16 on a training mission at Fort Hood. I had the fortune of losing mine after an explosion so they left me alone. I still had my 9mm though, the murder weapon. When we came out of the field and out of training, Sergeant Santiago made Socks carry a log everywhere with him, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, wherever Socks went the log had to go. The log represented an M-16, and was a reminder about the weight of loss. If you lost something in the military, they not only made you pay its monetary value, they made you pay back all of its spiritual and karmic value. But we called him Socks because the lieutenant made him wear his LBE with socks full of rocks in the ammunition pouches as another reminder about the weight of loss. And one day, we were sitting in Cooper's room playing poker, when we heard Kennedy walking down the hall. You could hear the rocks
rubbing and clicking together. Poor Cooper looked around the room, smiled, and said, "Of Socks." And it stuck.

Everyone was renamed in the army. It was far easier to lose a nickname than it was a person. There were a lot of ways to disappear in the army: transfer, end of service, missing in action, or killed in action.

There was an older, earlier path across the island. But overgrowth marked its abandonment. We were cutting the trail because there was nothing else to do on the island. Santiago needed something, anything to keep him busy, to keep his mind from the long and lonely moments between one morning and the next. The further we cut the trail into the island, the more I thought I could feel the path growing over behind us. It felt like walking in mud, how each time you lift a foot out of the mud, the mud always manages to suck the earth shut where you've just been.

When we made it to the center of the island there was a clearing with a large mound where several paths seemed to converge. "Well what do you know," Santiago said when we walked into the clearing. He took off at a jog and ran up the side of the mound. It was the highest point on the island. I swung my machete and it sunk deep into a young tree. I left it there as I walked after Santiago. "Wow," he said when I reached the top. And the view was beautiful. There was the ocean and the continent unobstructed. We sat down and smoked a cigarette. The wind was loud in that place. I leaned back and built mansions and dragons out of the clouds.

"What'll you do after this," Santiago asked.

"I don't know," I said.
"You know we won't talk to each other anymore," he said.

I couldn't tell if he was joking or not. I thought it was just Santiago being melancholy Santiago. Losing most of his squad gave him a little liberty. I thought. The others were afraid of him. The army was afraid of him. He'd been tainted by bad luck. And I was in on the lot.

"They don't train us for after the war," he said. "How could they?"

"Why would they?" I said.

"They'll get rid of us when the war is over," he said. "They'll find a way to get us out of the army."

"I hate the army," I said. "I only did it for the college money. I'm getting out at the end of next year anyway."

"They'll get rid of me," he said. "And I'll be stuck with this forever."

I stood and walked down from the hill, looking around. I couldn't listen to him anymore. I found a cave on the backside of the hill. If you bent at the waist there was enough room that you could squeeze through the opening.

Santiago walked down and looked into the cave as well. He took out a smoke grenade. "This'll scare anything out of there."

We hadn't found any large animals on the island. Compared to the continent it was uninhabited. There weren't even spiders or insects that I could find. We never heard birds. "I'm not sure I want to scare anything away," I said. "We could just leave it alone and get back to cutting the path."

He smiled at me then pulled the ring and tossed the smoke canister into the cave. We each put our back against the hill on opposite sides of the door, crouching a little. I
locked a round home in the chamber of my new M-16. Santiago did the same. Yellow smoke rolled from the opening. I trained my weapon up a narrow path that came out of the cave but nothing made itself clear in the smoke. If anything was living and hiding in the cave, it rode out hidden in the smoke—another feat of magic. It took forever for the thick yellow smoke to clear. Santiago stood in the entranceway. His flashlight barely lit the darkness. I could still see coils of smoke clouding the ceiling inside the cave. It was horribly dark in there. He peered inside for a long time. He stepped back, "After you," he said, sweeping the beam of light like a doorman showing the way.

"Fuck that," I said. "I'm not that interested in exploring anymore."

He went back to peering inside the cave.

"Look," I said, "let's just get back to work." He ignored me. He was intent on the darkness inside the cave. "I'm not a big fan of spiders," I said, hoping to scare him out of the idea of going in the cave. "And that place looks like it has a few spiders. Big spiders. The worse kind."

He pointed the light at the ceiling of the cave.

I clicked my weapon to safe. This must have reminded Santiago because he did the same. I pulled the charging handle back and ejected the round into my hand. I removed the magazine and put the round in it.

"I think there are graves in here," Santiago said.

"Oh, come on," I said. "We got work to do."

He moved into the cave, drawn by curiosity. Stepping to the entrance, I bent to a knee for a better look. The ceiling was low enough that Santiago had to stoop as he walked around. I kept looking over my shoulder. The scent of fertile earth filled the
cave. The smell reminded me of night drives past lush fields in Kansas. At the time, I thought it was a scent so bountiful it could only be endured.

"I think they're definitely graves," Santiago said. "Six of them."

I ran my finger along the stock of my M-16. The metal was cold. I wanted to press my forehead against the cold stock. "Let's finish the trail and go back and play some cards or something," I said. I wanted to get him out of there.

"What do you see," he asked.


"No," he said. "They're graves."

I could see a little of what he did, but not as much because I stayed in the doorway, the sunlight across my back, making total acclimation to the darkness impossible. Santiago moved slowly between what he believed to be graves. He stepped over graves and walked between them, inspecting, the tiny beam of light moving slowly over the ground with each of his steps.

"You ever bury anybody," he asked.

"Haven't had a lot of experience in that area," I said, growing restless, uneasy. I lit a cigarette for something to do. "Yourself," I asked.

"Where do you think their heads are?" He asked. "Foot end, head end," he said, moving the flashlight across the length of one of the graves trying to make heads and tails of the situation.

"Maybe they're buried face down," I said. "Let's leave it alone."

I was suddenly acutely aware of the fact that it was only Santiago and I on the island. And nothing scared me more than he did. We knew enough about each other to
leave these graves alone. The dead held nothing on Santiago. Fear of him was fear
enough. I wanted for the others to be back right then and there.

"I can’t wait to go to Kingston when we get back," I said. Santiago loved
Kingston. He loved the prospect of adultery. Desire should have brought him back.

"Maybe Lura’s waiting for me," I said. I was reminding myself of something that
felt like home. Lura’s name was like a charm that could pull me back: another
superstition. I was plagued by them. If I get Santiago away from the cave, she’d come
back. If I missed all the cracks in Mogadishu, she’d come back. If I didn’t step on any
shadows on the way back, she’d fall in love with me again.

"What are you so afraid of?" Santiago asked.

"Nothing," I said. I shook my head, not knowing what to say or what he wanted
to hear. I thought he might snap if I said the wrong thing so I thought it better to say
nothing, knowing that at times this was even worse.

"What are you so afraid of?" he asked, again. "This is our chance to make up for
all the damage we’ve done."

"I’m not interested," I said. "I just want to cut some more paths."

"This is how you get over Zeller," he said.

"There’s time for that later," I said. "I’m not worried about Zeller anymore."

He was drawing something in the dirt with his finger next to one of the graves. I
imagined another finger, on the other side, reaching out and tracing along with his. I
wanted to see what it was he was drawing, but I knew the moment that I crawled into the
cave to look, the moment that I sat next to him, he’d just obliterate it. He worked that
way.
“Come here,” he said.

I stayed in the doorway.

“What are you so afraid of,” he asked.

Ending up somewhere I don’t know, I wanted to tell him. People I know going it alone without me. Santiago.

“You know what’s funny,” he said.

I missed the familiar. I longed for the known—a familiar touch, the scent of home, parents, and Lura. When I get back from this, I thought. I’ll never go anywhere again.

“What do you think happened to them,” he asked. He didn’t answer his first question. I wanted to know what was funny.

“I think the more appropriate question is, ‘Who are they,’” I said.

He ignored me.

“I wonder what happened to them,” he said, bending over to examine one.

“We don’t know them,” I said. “They could be anybody.” And I was scared because it meant that they could be anything, and because I could see his reasoning. In his mind they could be angels or devils, friends or foes, even those that we had killed.

“Let’s leave them alone,” I said. “Maybe they want to be left alone. Did you ever think of that? Why stir it all up again.”

He gave himself over to exploring the cave. He crawled about and scratched at the earth. I sat in the doorway watching the sun burn the clouds away. Santiago couldn’t lift those mounds out of the earth alone, and that was the problem. I kept hoping that he would lift the whole thing and disappear into the sea. He could leave me for the sea like
a monster might. The sea had the power to change everything. But it was all out of tune in our world.

It was a long time before he finally said anything again, "I wonder what they died of?" He had dirt on his fingers from crawling and prodding. He was squatting over one of the mounds.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we chose our own way?" But then I was quiet because I realized that I wasn't being lighthearted, that I wasn't detracting from the moment. And also because I realized that we choose our afflictions. We always choose what will waste us away. They're not visited upon us, or broken into the stone; they're always there, waiting inside like the figure of the slave waiting to be freed from the marble. Endure affliction, anticipate affection, I'd been wrong all along.

"I can't wait to go college," I said, longingly, to myself. I didn't think Santiago was listening but I was eager for the sound of my voice—sometimes we need to be reminded who we are.

"At least you have that," he said. He'd taken out his bayonet and was poking into the dirt between two of the graves.

You're Carlos Santiago, I wanted to tell him.

"I keep telling myself I can't die yet," I said, hoping to say something that would help. "That I have to finish this so that I can go to school."

"What are you going to die of?" he asked.

"I don't know." I said. "Not this?" I said, meaning the war. "My mom would be really upset if I died here." He laughed at this. He was listening again. "God knows we can't let our mothers down. She'd be pissed if I died before I had the chance to go to
college. She’s a big fan of the American dream. I’m supposed to be something. I’m supposed to forget this.”

He shook his head, smiling. “We’ve known that all along.”

“You’re a tricky bastard,” I told him.

“At least I say something.” And he went back to prodding the earth.

“I’ve been looking at these maps,” Santiago said later, holding the flashlight steady on the map in his hand. We were all sitting around the camp drinking some of the beer that James and Kennedy had bought from the Germans. “There’s an island a little west of here that we can take them to.” He held out the map and pointed at a small dot. I stood and walked over to look. The dot was surrounded by nothing but numbers as though it were too small for a name.

“Them?” Benny asked.

“The dead,” he said. “Those graves that Stantz and I found. You don’t want them here do you?”

“And that dot,” I said. “That’s an island?”

Benny started talking to the others, they were trying to talk about something else, but I could tell they were listening by the way they took long pulls on their beers and looked around at the night. They were hoping that I could talk some sense into Santiago.

“You want to move them,” I said. “Which involves digging them up.”

“They could be anything out there,” he said and he looked in their direction. The others looked at him when he looked away. “We can only be who we are. Besides, it’ll
give us something to do. And I don't want them here. The work will pick us up. Clear our heads," he called for another beer. James threw him one.

Benny was the captain of the ship. Santiago had sway over him, but Benny was in charge of the boat. Santiago left and followed the path that led down to the beach.

"That dot's an island," I asked Benny, handing him the map.

"Maybe," Benny said. "It's worth a look. There's no denying, it's something to do. That guy needs hobby right now."

I walked point as we crossed the island toward the graves. The sun wasn't even up yet. It was December. There'd be snow on the plains by now. Time was a flesh wound that just wouldn't be bandaged and I couldn't even remember the month of our arrival in Somalia. Time was a blur. I tried to remember my mother's, or father's, or brother's birthday, but there was nothing before the war.

We moved with a body's length between us. Our M-16s and entrenching tools clicked like insects when branches and limbs slapped against them.

In the cave the dead were nestled in a darkness of dirt and roots. We each paired up with our battle buddy and went about clearing away the layers to the bodies underneath. Santiago would often stop and stare into the distance, out of the mouth of the cave like someone had called him. Perhaps he realized that it was only the wind, or worse, nothing at all, and then he'd go back to digging.

When we took our first break and walked outside to smoke, James whispered out of Santiago's range, "Somebody needs to call psycho back from the wild."
“What the fuck do you want me to do?” I asked. I was afraid of Santiago. I was afraid of what he could do and what he could become. Calling him back implied a level of communication in which I didn’t want to be a participant. It called for a dialogue in which I had no understanding or experience. I took my gloves off. Blisters were forming. I was no good with a spade.

Benny and Kennedy walked over to us. Santiago stayed in the cave, working away.

“Fuck this.” James said, loud enough that Santiago might have heard. “If you don’t say something, I will. You’re second here, you need to say something.”

“This is stupid,” Kennedy said loudly.

“Look.” I said, “just go along with it. This guy needs our help. It’s the least we can do.” I looked around at them. I hoped this plea was enough. They lowered their eyes to the ground and smoked quietly.

“I don’t know.” James finally said. “We’re talking about dead people here. We’re talking about digging up and handling dead people. That’s kind of weird.”

“People do it all the time,” I said. “Resurrection men, they’re called. People move graveyards for towns and rivers and to make room all the time. This is just one more case of making room.”

“This is a little different,” Benny said.

“This is our chance to help him.” I said.

“To help him,” Benny said. “Look in the mirror psycho-boy.” And he laughed, giving me an elbow to back it up. I must have looked offended, or scared of myself, because he added, “I’m just playing with you, man.”
"Why are you sticking up for him." James asked.

"Why not," I said. They didn't answer "Is that island really there?" I asked Benny.

"Maybe," he said. "You never know with these maps. There's no danger in looking though. We got a big enough boat that we could look around for a few weeks if we needed to." he started hurrying to the end because Santiago was walking toward us.

"Hell, we could go somewhere else and get drunk for a time, it's not like anyone is checking up on us." Then Santiago could hear us.

"What do you do," Santiago said, "you stand tall." And he stretched, reaching to the sky with his hands open as if to tear out a portion of blue to set aside for later.

"You remember that last kid I shot in the city?" Santiago asked me. "It was impressive. One hell of a shot. on the run, I still hit him center mass."

The others looked between the two of us. "You and Zeller shot them." I said.

"Yeah," he said. "Zeller," he looked off into the wind again, listening. "Zeller's another story."

"You should shut up now." I told him.

He drew his shoulders back. "It's easy to point it all at me. to make fun of me. But there's a little of me in all of you." He was always the same advice. He had nothing else to offer in this world. He'd said it before here. and it was also a lesson he'd given us before to gain our friendship when we'd left him alone, outcast when he first arrived at our platoon. He was a lifer. We wanted nothing of the army as a career, so we left alone to his own devices. He was a fool, ignorant and betrayed at every step of the way.
"All the same," he said, looking at me, "it was a fine shot." He turned to the others. "You can hold yourselves cheap because you've never been there," he said. And he turned back to the cave.

"That's bullshit," I said. But he decided to ignore me.

The earth directly over the bodies was easy to move, as if it had been loosened by other, earlier hands. But we had to chop at the ground around the bodies, adjusting and turning the heads of our e-tools so that they were more like axes, more for cutting. When we finally uncovered the rough outlines of the dead, we put our e-tools aside and used our bayonets to break away the last clumps of fertile soil. Finally, we put bayonets aside, took off our gloves, and used our naked hands.

We took a break for lunch before raising them out from their holes. I imagined that the dead knew our names and the names of the places that we called home. They knew about our maps and charts, and the ship that was anchored in the lagoon. The dead wanted to be taken off the island. The dead were tired of our ceaseless wanderings back and forth across the island, from our camp on the east to our favorite stretch of beach and the guard point half a mile away on the west side of the island. The dead hated our movement, our sterile mobility and aimless motion. Santiago had me believing even when I didn't want to. Mogadishu had made me superstitious. So they wanted to go a little further west. Let's offer them cigarettes, I thought, watching the entrance of the cave. The dead would smoke them in a way that the paper remained but everything contained by the paper was a fine white ash, whiter than the paper.
There were six dead, arranged by height, and what we joked was rank. They
looked to be laid out according to some past, perfectly symmetrical, organized plan. We
sat outside the cave, outside the clearing, watching the entrance.

"They’re so shallow," Benny said.

"I’d imagine it’s because there’re no large animals on the island," James said.

"There’s no one to dig them up but us," Kennedy replied.

I wasn’t eager to remove them from the cave. They were kind of beautiful in
there. Wrapped in what looked like a rust-colored canvas, with colorful scarves tied
around their waists, the dead possessed a sanguine authority in the cave.

In the shade, hiding from the heat of the day, we washed our hands with a bar of
soap and some water out of a 5-gallon can that Benny had brought from their camp.
James handed out some beer that he had carried in his rucksack. And Kennedy handed
out the MREs that he’d carried.

"What do you think they’d say if they could hear us," Kennedy asked, taking a
beer from James.

I didn’t like the question. It was ridiculous.

"Shut the fuck up and dig," Santiago said.

Kennedy poured some of his beer onto the ground. He looked up at us, "They’d
like that." Kennedy stopped, listening, waiting. We all listened. Kennedy held the
silence. "Shut the fuck up and dig," he said, in the same voice he might use to tell a
ghost story.

Santiago spread out his poncho for a game of spades. It was the only card game
that we all knew. I sat out so that Kennedy and Benny could team up against James and
Santiago. I finished a book that I'd found in camp. It was about brothers who killed fathers because of land, money, and women, although now, because of death, and the end of the book in sight, none of it mattered to them and they all had repented. Santiago quit the game. He lay on his back, looking up at the trees and sky, shadows settling then moving with the wind across his face.

The dead were stiff, almost petrified. Yet they were light and mobile. They gathered easily in the clearing outside the cave as we worked hastily to wipe all the dirt away.

"It's funny," Santiago said, standing over me and James as we lifted the last body out of its hole, "we're all just a single pea in a single pod by this point."

And I knew what point he meant.

"That'll be you one day," he said, looking at me, then he turned to James, "and you, and me." Then he lifted the body out of our hands, ignoring our help, and pulled it close to him, into his arms as he walked out of the cave.

The dead had been beautiful in their holes. Now they seemed lazy and lounging, mischievous loiterers spread out in the clearing. They were no longer uniform or symmetrical outside the cave. No matter how hard we tried, we just couldn't get them to line up right. They looked desiccated and shrunken. It was hard to believe that such things could have really whispered to Santiago. That such things could have made their cave a dark maw, could make even the earth in their cave seem capable of being something feral. But it was only our need for belief that us try to organize the dead into something that resembled unity and dignity.
We went out of our way to tour the dead through our camp as we carried them toward the boat. We took turns carrying the first two toward the camp. We began singing songs that we all knew. We began to count cadence.

"There's a song for every occasion," I said. So we sang a song for moving the dead.

Benny jokingly showed them where we kept the cigarettes. He called out each man's cot, that place where we tried to sleep or write home.

"That's my duffel bag," James said. "The beers in those boxes."

"And here's the extra batteries for the radio," Zeller said, kicking an ammo can as he passed it, "in case you want to phone home."

The dead looked pitiful against the backdrop of ocean and sky on the western side of the island.

"Some fresh air will do them good," I said.

The next morning, we took medicine so that we wouldn't get sick and crossed the lagoon out into the ocean. Soon, we noticed the vast desolation of the sea. It was more than we'd ever thought. Benny tried calming us down. There was so much space in which to get lost. The swells weren't that bad, but there were moments, when we were well down in the swell, that the only sky was that directly above us and the horizon was nothing but a wall of water.

We tried to get excited about the open sea. Movement, disguised as freedom was better than nothing at all. Benny taught us how to steer a boat in the open ocean. He taught us to set and follow a course, and he showed us how to blow the horn and scare up
any birds that might have drifted out from the continent and settled on the water. Benny
told us stories about the frigid and harsh Northern Atlantic, and each of us looked to the
other, hoping we were in a kinder ocean.

Around noon the global positioning system started resetting itself constantly, and
the compass began turning wildly in its casing. We all looked to Benny

"There are all kinds of things that will shake a compass," Benny said. "And we
might be passing between satellites. Look, as long as we have the sun and the stars, I'll
know just about where we are. We have enough fuel to cruise in any direction for about
four days, and we all know the continent is that away. Just go get some sun and let me
run the bridge," he said to Santiago and I.

"They won't leave us alone," Santiago said, as we walked down the steps to the
deck.

I looked at the boat which held the dead. The wind was beginning to pull back
the tarp that covered them. The ocean was calm, the only breeze coming from our
momentum. When I looked at Santiago, I thought he looked rather scared. I could see it
in his eyes.

The longer we sailed, the more I thought about the dead. The others began
looking at the boat and Santiago and I with a sense of malcontent. They hated us. They
hated the dead. There was a small storm moving across the ocean in front of us. The
clouds were heavy with rain, but there wasn't any lightning. Benny said a nice rain at see
was beautiful.

"There's nothing out here," James said, when Benny and Kennedy came down
from the bridge.
The tarp on the boat was all the way undone and was flapping in the wind. We knew nothing about knots.

"Let's dump them here," Kennedy said.

"They'll never leave us alone," Santiago said.

He'd lost his power over us. And the others lowered the boat with the dead into the ocean. The steady swell kept pushing it against the side of the ship. It was futile.

"Somebody needs to take a rope." Benny finally said. "Go down and push the boat out enough so that it will break away from us. Of course," he looked at the deck, "you'll have to swim back. The swell's easy, a good swimmer will make it back, no problem. You'll have a life-vest. Or you can take the inflatable raft and pop it open when you're far enough away, and we'll pick you up in that."

Benny picked a number between one and an hundred. I lost. I took off my boots and put them next to each other at the base of the bridge, tucking my socks inside. I took off my camouflage top and folded it clumsily, dropping it over my boots. I stood in my underwear.

They lowered me into the boat. I wore a bright orange life-vest that was too big. Looking up, as water slapped the side of the boat and sprayed across me, I realized how beautiful they all were. I smiled up at them and the clouds that were pushing in. We had a long bit of rope and I tied to the head of the boat.

"Don't worry," Benny said.

It took me some time to get the boat away from the ship. I had never really rowed before, and the open ocean didn't seem a good place to learn. The dead took up most of
the room in the small boat as well. I wondered where they’d come ashore, if they came ashore.

The rain began, easy and gentle. The rain sounded like a song on the water.

When the line that connected me to the ship never grew taut, I realized that this was just one of the many signs that things weren’t going to work out. Benny waved that I was far enough away. They were yelling out that the rope had slipped. It floated loosely in the water. I dropped the canister that held the life-raft into the water. I pulled the cord and it inflated weakly. I knew it wouldn’t hold me. Something else had gone wrong. I knew there was no way I was getting in the raft, and I was too tired to swim.

Those on the ship began pointing above my head. I turned and couldn’t see anything at first. Slowly the swell brought me above the horizon. There it was, the spark of an island, soft and glimmering like the edge of the world. When I turned back to the ship, I saw them approaching quickly, the joy and fear of recognition in their eyes.