

SO SHALL WE PASS

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I

We are at all times dying. I see it in my palms: waning lifelines, blistering like worms baked by this woeful Texas sun. They crawl from my palms, up my arms, until they are lost beneath my skin. My breath draws their tendriled forms deep into my lungs, where they snake through my blood to reach my skull.

They eat away at me—not all of it, though. I keep some stuff hidden well. I don't trust much, but I do trust those hidden parts. No one can find them, sometimes not even me. Find me? Find you! Fuck you! Worms: I hate them.

I don't want much. I just want to make it through this cycle, this wicked spin of the wheel. Hope: a silly indulgence to make ourselves feel better. Or is it real? Who knows?

This is the story of how I am going to kill my father. "Honor thy father and mother." I know the rules, but my mom is dead and she never cared for him that much anyway. When she died she told me to watch out for my little sister, and to watch out for myself. She's been dead a year now, and it's getting harder to watch out for either of us.

He hates everything with a cancerous hate. A hate so deep it would cut down the trees of the world and replace them with the scorched fields we have here in Wharton. I've seen this Hate in my dreams. At night it stalks through our house, watching my sister and me sleep. When it prowls through our house, I try not to fall asleep. I stay alert and observe because I know it wishes to steal us away.

Hate lurks in the shadows outside my bedroom. I stare at the doorway, my face half-covered by the sheets. The room starts to spin as if I'm lying on the blade of a whirling fan. Dizziness blurs my vision and I must look to the center of the ceiling to keep from getting sick. Just as it overwhelms me, I peel my eyes from the ceiling to catch a fleeting glimpse of Hate. It's always just a glance, but I see him emerge from the shadows. He wears a large black robe, like a judge's robe, but with some sort of silver box over his head. He stands in the doorway as the spinning increases. I try to sit up but centrifugal forces press me deeper into my mattress. As he leaves my doorway for my sister's room, I'm able to sit up just enough to roll off my bed and onto the floor. When I hit the floor, I wake.

My name is Jacob, and I have lived for seventeen years on this farm. My mom named me after a man who wrestled with God. I believe in God, but I fear He may not believe in me.

We live in Wharton, Texas: a hot, old town full of emptiness. The heavy Wharton heat melts my vision, showing me that everything is composed of nothing more than fluid and movement. I can see a lot of things: things that make me laugh, things that make me cry, things that make no sense. The senseless is the closest thing to evil I know. Sometimes the evil scares me, but lately I've realized that it's hard to tell the difference between what some call

evil and what some call good. Besides, I don't believe in opposites.

I live with my dad and my sister on our farm a few miles outside the center of town. We live alone in a small house, surrounded by our three fields and a neighbor's field. Our fields have lain fallow for several seasons now. Except for a few resilient patches of grass, they are nothing but parallel mounds of burnt brown earth, windswept and desolate in this oppressive summer heat. Beyond our fields there is a forest brimming with thick oak trees. They provide shade and cool, without the need for air conditioning.

A dirt road, nearly a mile long, serves as a border between our first field and our neighbor's. The first field is named Abraham. It runs north to border a poorly paved county road, which leads to town in one direction, and Mexico in the other. On rainy days only large trucks with four wheel drive can make it through the sludge of our dirt road driveway. When it's dry, the cars that come and go can barely be seen through thick clouds of dust.

The second field is named Isaac and rests adjacent to Abraham. Isaac stretches east for several acres. The third, and final field, is named Esau. Esau wraps southward and westward around our property in a clockwise direction until it reaches the southernmost point of our neighbor's field. Esau is the largest of our three tracts, constituting nearly half the circumference of the curving property line. The fields surround our house on all sides to form our own unique zodiac, with us at the center. Each one of us has our own sign, but they are secret and known only to the fields.

After mom died, my dad pulled my sister and me out of school. We're home schooled now because he says we need to help him around the farm, but the farm is already dead and he never bothers with our curricula. Instead, I give the

daily lessons to my sister. At night I try to complete mine, but I'm often too tired to finish them. Plus, my lesson plans are usually boring, and I suspect they are wrong.

Whenever possible, I go to the town library for real education. At the library I can read whatever I want, and the people inside are kind. Although my dad doesn't like me visiting the library or checking out books, I frequently sneak them home. I hide them between my mattress and my box spring. I'll often read my sister the books I've found instead of her lessons. I like books about science and math, but she prefers to read about animals, castles, and adventures.

On hot days, when life is fluid, I hear the worms speak to each other while they mine my thoughts. "This is no life," bellows a sonorous voice as it tunnels through my head.

"This is what I see, though."

"None of it's real. Only us," responds the voice. The voice smooths the wrinkles in my head. I smile as I allow its parasitic passage. Surely, this heat plagues my mind.

I reply quietly with my thoughts, "Pain like this feels good sometimes."

There's no response, only a fluttering and wheezing like a deflating tire.

I chide, "You want my bleeding mind because, after all, blood cleanses."

But the voices have stopped. They don't like being troubled with rebuttals. The worms taunt me because they can't find the hidden parts for which they yearn. They steal things from me, but I always keep what needs to be kept. They would devour my core, if they could find it.

And this is madness at its inception.

II

The dilapidated red barn at the intersection of the second and third fields dwarfs our house. This is my father's space, his home on the property. Much blood has been shed inside this barn, but blood brings life, so I welcome the gift. Sacrifice is necessary.

My dad calls the barn his office. It has two large gates on the first floor, mouths at both ends. Each mouth is muzzled by a rusted steel gate attached to the wall with four steel bolts the size of branches. Behind each gate is a retractable red door that can be opened by flipping a switch or by pulling a chain from inside the barn. But usually, the doors remain open.

The mouth that faces Esau is flanked by two rows of hay bales, extending nearly half an acre behind the barn to form something like an open rectangle. The barn forms one side of the rectangle's perimeter, the hay bales form the other two sides, and the fourth side is left open so trucks can come in and out of the barn without being seen.

The basement and the first floor are dedicated to raising my dad's prized fighting dogs. People come from all over

Texas and beyond to purchase his puppies, and, occasionally, to watch them fight. He breeds the most ferocious pit bulls in Texas. They are bred solely for the purpose of killing and surviving.

The barn faces our house and my bedroom window. At night, when the lights in the barn are lit, it looks like a skull with flaming cavities. The second floor of the barn is only accessible by a small staircase on the first floor. The staircase leads to a large door. Once a bright yellow, it has since faded to a dull pastel hue. I vaguely remember my mom choosing the color while she was still here, with us. I've been upstairs only once. A few years ago, my dad took me through the yellow door, into a room about twice the size of my bedroom. He led me to another room, straight ahead, where there were stacks of cardboard boxes which he made me re-stack by the back gate.

At the other end, I saw another locked door. When I asked about it he grabbed my shoulder and hissed, "How did Satan become Satan? Because he had too many questions." He thrust his savage face close to mine, his strong paws gripping my shoulders tightly to impress his message more clearly. "Just re-stack these boxes down by the gate. Don't get any ideas about peeking. If I find one frayed piece of duct tape, I'll have something special for you when I find you."

"Something special" was his way of telling me that if I disobeyed him he would surprise me with a nasty correction. He's very imaginative with his punishments, and I learned long ago he is not a man to be crossed. He goes beyond the simple punches and kicks that can heal or be ignored if you concentrate enough. No, he goes for the kind of punishment that hurts. Wounds that take longer to heal.

I haven't seen much of the world outside Wharton, but this life of mine still interests me. But am I really me? Perhaps the real me is sleeping soundly somewhere in an air-conditioned mansion. I'm convinced animals are the ones who have figured it out. They don't question. They didn't waste time evolving overly active minds. They just do the best they can with what they have been given, and even the ones who have it tough still find a reason to fight.

My dad doesn't host dog fights often because it attracts too much attention to our farm. I've seen a couple of fights, and they support my hypothesis that life is worth fighting for even when death seems like a joyful end to suffering. The dogs are isolated and neglected their whole lives, but once they're put into that pit, they fight as if life were the most precious piece of scrap meat ever dished out. They will fight until the last drop of life is ripped from them. But why? To fight again at a later date? I guess that's the reason: to keep fighting for the few inches of freedom they have.

I guess love makes life worth the struggle. Once you have felt that infinite depth, the present struggle seems like nothing but a passing storm. It's said that God loves us all. Whether that is true is not for me to know or understand. I don't really like answers or truths. They are too simple to be sufficient, and too often truths are used for more harm than good. Love simply plants a seed deep in the soil of the soul. The seed waits patiently for the storm to pass so the sun can once again shine down on its beaten skin, and bring forth life from death.

When my mom died, I knew I wouldn't have much longer to live. My lifeline was connected to hers; it's written in my palms. There is nothing I can do to change that, but

I'm not afraid of dying or death, so it's okay with me. I know it's very cliché to not fear death. Everyone wants to show everyone else how little they fear death. People demonstrate their lack of fear by jumping out of planes, racing cars down dark county roads, and countless other ways, I suppose. But the reason I'm not afraid of death is because I feel myself dying a little bit every day. My body is perfectly healthy, but my mind is slowly suffocating. I hear it gasping.

The worms come to me in my dreams now. I seek shelter in whatever mind-cave I can find. I hear them tunneling above me and below me. I try not to betray my position, but they entice me with their entreaties.

"Jacob, don't you want to see how it feels to touch a pretty girl? Their skin is soft, smooth. Or how would you like to find a new home, away from here? Wouldn't you like to know what really happened to your mom? We won't hurt you, and besides, you can't stay hidden down here forever. This is no place for a young man. You should be above, where you can use your eyes and stretch your legs and breathe deeply from the fresh air. You're in our territory now. Come on out, Jacob. We won't hurt you. This is only a dream."

I lie in the dark waiting for them to find me. They're right: I can't stay down here forever. This is just a dream, but I can torment them in their search, much like they torment me in my life.

Torment. Torture. Break me and I'll break you.

"Fuck you, worms! I'm right here!" I scream. And then I wake.

A light from the door above hits my face, dazing me for a second.

"Where am I?" I think to myself.

My dad descends the rickety basement stairs. He scrutinizes me while his eyes adjust, then begins circling me like a dog preparing for a throat snatch.

He growls, "What're you doing down here?"

"I really don't know. I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep." This doesn't placate him. He stops circling, but holds his glare. His eyes are black and glassy. The air thickens.

"You fell asleep out *here*? It's a hundred degrees in here. What were you really doing?" He takes a step closer to me, squinting as if unable to focus. He suspects me of something, but of what I'm not sure. He has always been overly suspicious, especially of me. His face morphs into a spiteful contortion.

"Seriously, I don't know how I got down here. One second I was up top oiling the garage door and the next—" Quicker than the light that filled this room, he swoops across the remaining space between us and clubs me in my stomach. I buckle over. The right side of my body collapses against the right side of his. The sweat on his hairy arm anoints my skin as he pulls his fist from my torso. For a moment, the side of his body supports mine, slowing my inevitable fall. Perhaps not though. I fall to my knees with a painful thud. My head gravitates to the floor as I suck in more of the fetid basement air. I no longer feel his body near mine.

"Get up! Get out of here!"

I struggle to my feet. If I so much as show a sign of hesitation, the next blow won't be so easy to overcome. As I walk up the stairs, I don't have to turn around to know he is standing there, watching me. His eyes burn holes in my scalp like two hot coins pressed against my skin. He dares me to turn around and say something, but I know better.

How the fuck did I end up in the barn's basement? I curse myself up and down for letting this happen.

The worms have done this to me. They're the ones who got me into this trouble. I know they're laughing at me. They think they're so smart. They think I'm an easy target. They're wrong.

III

Outside, the fresh air restores me and the pain is gone by the time I get to the house. I once read somewhere that “There are no fears we ourselves did not create.” I liked this quote when I first encountered it and I like it now. When I come across a message with substance, I like to form my own translation to match it. My match for this one is: “We are where we are, and we move as we please.”

We strive to make connections. Even you, whom I can't see, are here with me now. We're all here to find meaning in this brief moment of lucidity we call life. We just have to know where to look. It's in the birds, the flowers, in the nothingness that touches me. This world can be hard at times, but we must be harder.

My dad's dogs are known for their total lack of fear. He has bred it out of them. It's easy to see in their eyes. They hold a vacant stare, much like the glassiness in his eyes. These dogs do not hesitate to kill. They go directly for the throat and they don't stop until they kill or are killed themselves. I'm just another dog to my dad; except I'm his dog, with his own blood in my veins. My thoughts go

where his have been. I know the darkness that beckons us both. The difference is that I can choose not to follow those thought lines. I don't think he can.

As I walk up the stairs to the house, I pause. I have to compose myself before dealing with my sister. Underneath the stairs, I see a patch of tall wildflowers—bluebonnets. Although I stand still, my shadow wavers over the bluebonnets like a wind-whipped flag. They speak a language I faintly remember from dreams. It's a beautiful tongue, but the meaning slips my mind. My ribs begin to ache again, focusing my sight on the stone steps in front of me. I hope nothing is broken. I walk into the house.

Immediately, my sister's voice calls for some help with one of her books. The sound guides me through the dead air inside.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Look at this picture in my book. Why does that sheep have horns?"

"Because that's not really a sheep. It's a mountain goat. They live way up in the mountains, up where only the birds and very few animals can make it."

"Why do they live so high?"

"I suppose for several reasons. Well, first, I bet the views are pretty nice up there, right?" She nods enthusiastically. "And second, it's a lot safer than living in the lower lands where there are bears and wolves and people."

"Do they talk with the birds up there in the mountains?"

"Of course they do," I say. The air feels thin in this room and a fierce pain stabs my chest when I exhale.

"What do the birds say, Jacob?"

I turn around to face her, trying to steady my breathing. "They talk about how clean the air is and how sweet the

water tastes, about what it's like to close your eyes and let the wind carry you. And how if you don't like one place, you can simply jump up into the air and fly someplace else."

"I like that, Jacob." She smiles and her eyes sparkle. "I'd like to be a bird one day."

"Well, I read somewhere that all life is reborn into some other life when we die. Or something like that. So maybe that means you will get to be a bird."

"Will you and mom be there?" She looks concerned now.

I think about the darkness in me, and how in my future rebirth I might not be so fortunate as to be a bird, but necessity compels me. "Maybe, but if you don't see me or mom you'll have wings and good eyes so you'll be able to find us."

"But what if I can't?" Her discomfort remains evident in her tone.

"Listen to me. No one knows how birds always find the right way to fly when the seasons change. It's just inside them, and they know it because they feel it and believe it. The directions to us will be in your head, just like the directions the birds follow. Either way, you'll find us or we'll find you."

Her eyebrows relax. She says, "Jacob, you're right. Mom will be easy to find. I already know where she is. She's here."

"I know, she'll always be alive in our hearts," I say with feigned optimism.

"No, Jacob. That's not what I mean. I mean that she's here, on our farm. I've seen her since she left us. She walks in the fields at night, and sometimes she comes to me when I walk near the woods. You haven't seen her? Not even in a dream?" She looks perfectly relaxed.

“No, I haven’t. What do you mean you see her?”

“I see her face, mainly. Her body is hard to see and she says I can’t touch her, but it’s her, Jacob. She says that you’re going to save us.”

“Save us from what?”

“Dad.”

IV

The sun is setting, and the heat dissipates. The liquid ground solidifies once more, the ambient light turning a darker shade of orange. The jostling world slows, then recedes from my vision. I am twisted in the space around me, and in this distorted moment, I realize that I occupy no space at all.

I breathe.

Moments flash and pop around me like lightning bursts of clarity. Inspiration: it means being breathed on, or having breath inside you, or something like that. Ugh! Breathing still hurts. My ribs must be broken. Maybe not, though. It's hard to know anything for certain at this time of day, during the transition between light and darkness.

There's a dog fight in the barn tonight. I have no desire to see it. Besides, I'm not allowed in the barn during fights. It's not that my dad wants to protect me, or anything like that. I don't fully understand why he never lets me watch, and I don't really care what his reasons are, if he has any.

People will arrive shortly after the sun sets. It hasn't rained in days, so dust will be kicked high into the air. The

headlights will pierce through the dark clouds like the sun through fog. There will be only men tonight. My dad never has women near the barn, especially during such a violent sport. It's a sport, I guess: sport in the most real sense. The Mayans, who lived south of here, would play a game which involved a ball and a hoop, a variation of soccer and basketball. Each match ended in death for the losing team. But it wasn't just the Mayans who played games with death. We've all been playing with death since birth. But we all die, so why even play the game? Because. Because is not an answer, but because is sometimes the best I can come up with.

My sister will fall asleep soon after dusk. I'll set the fan on high to drown out any sounds from the barn, but there really isn't much you can hear from her bedroom anyway.

Outside her window rests a sturdy pecan tree with a rope swing tied to one of its branches. In the middle of October, when the weather cools a bit, the tree sheds its buttery pecans. My sister and I collect this gift. We look forward to cracking the shells and filling plastic bags full for future snacking.

Trees are truly the highest order of creatures. Not only do they feed and shade us, but they exhale what we inhale. They breathe me in and I breathe them out. They make life seem a little more bearable, even for my sister and me, here, in the flatlands of Texas. The earth will speak to you when times get hard. You just need to listen.

My mind has become muddled. Why is he hosting a dog fight? It's been such a long time since we've had one here. Something feels off, or at least something is putting me off. But, I can't waste my energy like this: batting at flies that cease to swarm. Tonight, after my sister falls asleep, I'll sneak through the fields. I need to spend some time alone, with

the forest, listening to what it has to say. The trees out there in the eastern woods have survived terrible thunderstorms, and many years here in Wharton. I feel their call. Tonight I must go to them and listen. A new moon begins its cycle tonight. The sky will be dark and clear of clouds. Only the lonely stars will shine through the empty space above. Why is it called a “new” moon when there is no moon in the sky? It should be called a dead moon.

I step into my sister’s room and listen to her breathe. The rhythm of her breath sounds like sleep. It’ll be fine to leave the house tonight. As I turn the fan on, I see a pair of headlights far beyond our neighbor’s field. The lights wind through the silent darkness. They slow to make the turn onto our dirt road driveway. The driveway is hard to notice during the day, let alone at night. If you’re traveling too fast, you’ll miss it.

I run into my room to grab a flashlight from underneath my bed. I can see the barn’s face through my bedroom window. Its eyes are bright, as they stare menacingly over the fields, through the dark night. I run out of my room and into the hall leading to the front door. I pause again to listen to the sounds of my sister’s bedroom. She’s still breathing. She’s still sleeping. She’s still in a better place.

I need to get us out of this place. Time is now my enemy. Waves of dizziness flow from my stomach to my head, and tears well within my eyes. Emotion overwhelms me. Suddenly, the deep and hollow sound of a slow drum beat resonates around me. It must be my heart. It lulls me to complacency, urging me to quit before I begin. I shake my head.

I shut the front door quietly behind me. The fresh air feels good and my dizziness wanes. I run through our yard, toward Isaac. I’m fast and I know these fields better than

anyone. As I run, my lungs work hard and fast to suck in air, but the drumming continues at the same slow speed. I am halfway across the field when I feel my feet sinking, deeper and deeper, into the dirt rows. I slow to a walk. The drumming remains constant.

My feet are heavy. I can barely lift them over the dirt mounds. I stop and rest. I look back over the field to my house, then to the barn, which seems to simultaneously lurch toward the house and me. Through the darkness I watch a small procession of headlights wind down the dirt road to park behind the barn. A faint howl floats through the air. I look at the stars, but they are countless dots of color, falling toward me like flecks of polychromatic dust.

I am dead inside.

Death gnaws at my mind. Suicidal fantasies tempt me to end this enterprise. But what's the use? I see little difference between life and death. All is one, and all is the same. These words give me comfort because I gave them meaning. I have created meaning. I am a creator. There is solace and peace in creation, well maybe not peace, but solace. Life, then death, then life again.

The star-flakes sparkle an array of haunting colors. Their beauty stuns me, and I cannot peel my eyes from them. They fall upon me to form a series of interlinked chains that overwhelm my vision. I no longer see myself, only the burning impressions of diffuse light.

I am consumed by these flecks of color, and the constant, rhythmic drumming. The star-chains vibrate in conjunction with the drums. They match frequencies. They pull me into the sky. The curving chain nears my face and begins to whip violently: thought lines lead me one way, and now another. There's a pattern here, but I can't discern it.

A prism of light bursts in front of me. The crackling reduces my body to something less than nothing. The chain forms a point, thrusting its way through my forehead. I dissolve into pure energy. I am a million different strings, bundled into one tangled mass of rope. A moment of darkness engulfs me, and then I see the pattern. It is a tapestry, a woven blanket. I drift through this net of energy, searching for my body, but I see only a blur of colors and lines.

Shit! This is a trap: those fucking worms! I scream, but I no longer have a mouth. Everything skews to bright red as the drumming intensifies. I try to close my eyes, but I have no eyes, so the colors remain. The rope burrows deeper into my head. I reach out to halt the advancing rope, but it continues its plunge into my forehead. I have no ears, but I hear the worms speaking. I listen helplessly as they strive to unravel me. The voices sing discordantly: “Jacob, we don’t want to hurt you.”

“Your pain is just illusion.”

“We can take it away.”

“Give it to us. There’s no use hiding it.”

“We’ll find it anyway. Just let us take it from you. You will have peace, rest.”

I try to drown out the voices. I repeat my own thoughts, earnestly, until I hear them resonate within: “What’s mine is mine. My only holiness.”

The drums stop, and the colors change to a lighter shade of pale. “Who are we, Jacob?”

“You’re stuck here. You can’t break free from the cycle, so you want to steal from me.”

The voices shriek as the rope exits my forehead. A calming silence eases the tumult around me, but I suddenly become aware that I am falling. I accelerate until I know

death is imminent. White light spills upon my vision as my body slams into something hard, but familiar. Dazed and reeling, I stagger, then fall onto a soft pile of grass, dirt, and roots. I'm lying at the foot of an oak tree, near the entrance to the forest. Behind me, the barn lights are glowing beyond the fields; a roar wafts through the air, over the fields.

The forest breathes deeply. I stand up to regain my breath. I conquer the space around me, shrugging off my dizziness. A trickle of blood moves slowly over my lips. It tastes like metal. I feel thin inside as I enter the woods.

A few hundred yards into the woods there is a large clearing with soft grass, and, in the summer, bluebonnets. My ideal burial plot would be here, in a bed of bluebonnets, just outside our fields. I would lie down in the center of the bed, staring up at the sky as I drifted off to death. The soil here is fertile, and my flesh would nourish and bless this fecund ground.

The clearing looks like a giant divot in the middle of the forest, large enough to hold nearly a dozen hay bales. I don't know how this space originated. It's likely that someone cleared this area many years ago, but for what purpose I'm not sure. I have found arrowheads in these woods for as long as I can remember, so maybe the natives formed it. My mom loved this forest. I used to pick dew-berries here with her. We would pick them together, then bring them back to the house. She would make a pie out of them. But enough of this. These thoughts leave me even emptier inside. I've been punctured, and although I keep moving forward, I can't plug this hole; slowly, but surely, I will be drained.

A breeze works its way through the forest. I hear it approaching before I feel its presence amidst the trunks, leaves and branches. I pause to clear my mind.

Jacob, be still.

I step into my sanctuary. There is something here. There is always something here. I close my eyes to feel the soft energy permeating the air around me. It is constant. The forest energy inspects me, evaluating my motives. Our energies commune before I am allowed to proceed. I step into the clearing's center and look up. The stars gaze down upon me. I sit and close my eyes.

Our vibrations synchronize. I listen to my breath, my being. I inhale deeply and slowly. I feel the oxygen enrich my blood with life. I feel my heart pump life through my body. I am born again.

Come to me.

I exhale. The spent energy leaves my body: stillness abounds within me. I die.

Come to me.

The cycle of life and death shows itself to me. I see the spinning wheel. I am the spinning wheel.

Come to me.

I sink deeper and deeper into my breath. I am at equilibrium inside. The source of my being surfaces. There are no words here. Only feelings. Warmth. Peace. Steadiness. I feast on this nourishment.

Revive me. Heal me. Save me.

There is more energy here than I can handle. I must be careful. I do not understand these forces, and most definitely cannot control them. I open my eyes and look around me. This is my gift: to see. I see the light as it passes through this world. This is my curse. "My name is Jacob. I once lived," I say to the forest. I stand up to walk back home.

I leave the clearing and move swiftly through the forest. I approach Isaac as I near the forest's edge. I pause to look at the now stationary stars. It's late, and I must get back to the house. I jog over the exhausted earth. I wonder whether

it will ever yield crops again. Once a field has gone this long without care, it is hard to revive.

My dad will almost certainly sleep in the barn tonight; it's more or less his home these days. The barn lights are all still on, but the hay bales conceal the barn's other mouth so it's hard to tell if anyone is still there.

When I arrive at the house, I step into my sister's room. "Jacob, are you okay?" she says to me with concern in her voice.

"I'm fine. Why?"

"I saw what happened to you in the field. I saw the lightning strike you. I saw it throw you." She pauses as if pondering something; perhaps frightened. She continues, "I ran out to the field to see if you were okay, but you weren't there. I got scared out there in the dark so I turned around and came back to bed."

"I'm fine. It wasn't lightning. You must've just woken up from a dream. I thought you were sleeping when I left."

"I was sleeping, Jacob. But I woke up for some reason and I saw the flash. It came right out of the sky like lightning, but without the thunder. But, you're okay, right?" She is confused. So am I. My body aches, making it hard to concentrate.

"I'm fine, really. I'm fine. Go to sleep. You have a lot of homework and chores to do tomorrow." As I step into her room to tuck her into bed, I hear a loud crash from somewhere outside, near the barn.

"What was that, Jacob?" she asks, seemingly unconcerned.

"It's nothing. Go to sleep."

"Jacob, you smell like smoke."

"Go to sleep," I repeat. "Stay in bed. I'm going to see what that sound was."

Agitated, she tries to sit up. I gently push her down into the bed. "Please don't leave, Jacob. Dad will be so mad if he finds you snooping around out there while he has his friends over. He told us to stay away from the barn today."

"Yeah, but that crash didn't sound like the gate to me. I've got to see what it was."

"Don't go, Jacob, or I'm going to cry." She is serious and fully awake now.

"Okay, okay. I'll be in my room. Goodnight." I'm lying, but she doesn't realize it. She believes what she hears. I should save her from the pain she will feel here. I could read her a story, or just make one up. I'd lie next to her, listening to her breath until I knew she was lost in a world of dreams. Then I would cover her face and smother her. She would gasp, and she might even wake up. I'd whisper, you're welcome, and she would thank me. Then her vision would go black, asleep once more. But I would never do these things. I could never do these things. I'm a creature of reaction: fight or flight.

Nothing fits here. I come close to discerning patterns, but in the end, they all fall to pieces. But I once saw a shape that made sense to me, a shape that surely governs existence. The asymptote: a pair of two arcs, curving in opposite directions. These dichotomous arcs extend for all eternity in the same shape, but away from each other, toward different infinities. Forever coming closer to the zero line, but never touching it. This shape is real. False opposites, forming one and the same function. Darkness and light. Some say there is more than this, but there really isn't. People are lying when they say otherwise. Reason is nothing. Clarity is nothing. There is no separation. All essence is one substance. Only infinity is real.

My beating heart brings me back from my thoughts.

My sister drifts back to sleep and I head to my room. I look out my back window toward the barn. Several figures stand in one of the second story windows. My dad must have some people upstairs with him in the barn; his party is running late. I wonder what that sound was? It's not like him to leave someone downstairs in the barn unattended. I put my flashlight under my bed and step quietly through the house, exiting through the kitchen. I walk to my right, approaching the barn at a circular angle. The men remain upstairs standing and talking. The barn gets closer. I pause to listen. I am still fifty or so yards away from the barn. I hear nothing. With each step I feel a rattle in my jaw. I know this is wrong. This is stupidity.

The barn rises above me with each step.

I dabble and tempt this world to touch me, and it often does. The haggard hands of fate fondle me. My insides roil and spasm. They lead me to a place of release. I allow this molestation because this is me. If I thought I would lose myself in these moments, I would not let this happen. I don't fear the darkness because I am the darkness.

I am dark like you—like what I wanted all along. I am prepared, now, as I arrive at the barn.

Faded paint coats the splintered barn walls. I'm close enough to touch the front gate. The air smells metallic and heavy, like blood. I stop to look back to the house. It remains nestled deep within the pecan tree's outstretched arms. Depth perception eludes me and I am confused for a brief moment. I hear my dad and his people upstairs, but all of the lights have been left on in the main room of the barn. It seems that quite a few people were here tonight. The pit has been taken apart carelessly and the dogs are still there: three dogs, all of which lie in a pool of blood. One is breathing heavily and lying on his side, while the other

two lie motionless. I've never seen so much blood. The two motionless dogs are clearly dead. The blood has congealed to the floor like a wandering amoeba. A few footsteps rattle the floor above me.

The dead dogs have torn throats, and their eyes are still open. The living dog watches me with squinted eyes. He breathes fast and hard. His stomach is badly wounded. His intestines look like eels that have escaped from his body, only to suffocate and die. I recognize this pattern. His eyes see only shapeless light. Death is all but here for him now. I walk toward him and kneel to look more closely into his eyes. His nose twitches and he shows his teeth to me. They are bloody and stuffed with fur and skin.

A quick rush of air hits the side of my face as the dog lunges for me. He can't reach me though, and he lays his head back down and continues panting. His breathing grows harder, but his eyes haven't left mine. There is still no fear in the dog's eyes, only a persistent, blank stare. Although wary of me, he is relieved to have someone here to accompany him through the hazy transition from life to death. I'll stay here to die with him. This dog was bred to kill and to fear nothing. From the looks of the two dead dogs, he was bred well. And now his reward is release from these tortures. He will be better off from here on out, and hopefully his next life will lead him closer to a final release from the cycle.

"We're on the same the wheel," I whisper to him. He understands me. He's finished holding onto this world. He's finished fighting. He exhales deeply and his breath slows. My eyes burn with the tears the dog cannot cry. I feel responsible for this death scene. I step closer to the dog and bend down next to his face. He is calm now and his eyes are deep. I place a hand on his forehead, then slowly move it down to his oversized jaw. A warrior dies before my eyes,

beneath my palm. His breathing has all but stopped, and I pull his eyelids shut and hold them closed so he can more clearly see death's embrace. Sometimes we see better with our eyes closed. The dog's breath fades to stillness. Tears blind me, forcing my eyes shut.

I try to gather myself, but the crunching sound of footsteps outside the barn suddenly distracts me. I open my eyes to distorted colors. Electricity surges through my body. The scent of cigarette smoke fills the air as my steps approach the front gate. I glance swiftly at my surroundings, searching for a place to hide. The back gate and side doors have been shut and locked.

I have nowhere to go. I freeze. I am paralyzed.

A large black man steps cautiously around the corner of the front gate, into the main room where I remain frozen next to the dog. He is smoking a cigarette and holding a shovel in his left hand. He appears lost in his thoughts, and I notice him before he notices me. For a moment it looks as though he will walk right past me and up the side stairs to my dad's office. He stops and takes a long drag from his cigarette. The red embers move hungrily up the white paper toward the man's long black fingers. The smoke accumulates in his mouth before he slowly pulls the cloud deep within his lungs. He pauses his breath; as he exhales he looks up at the scene in front of him. He remains composed, but his eyes narrow into sharp slits.

"Hm. So you must be the boy?" He speaks with an unusual rhythm, as if purposely stressing the wrong syllables. He relaxes his face to reveal light brown eyes, with a surprising hint of kindness. His blue jeans are dirty and I notice some blood around one of his well-worn khaki boots. He wears a black shirt with the emblem of a white wing cradling a knife. Below the emblem, red letters spell,

“173rd Airborne”. He stands tall with a lean, but contoured frame.

“I’m Jacob,” is the only thing I can muster.

“Ha, boy! You must be pretty fucking tough to handle that crazy son-of-a-bitch. You do know he’s crazy, right?” A smile hides beneath the sharp edges of his face. He takes another long drag from his cigarette, then flicks the butt toward the front gate. He walks a few steps toward me, then stops and exhales. He looks from me to the dog.

“Titus was a champion tonight. Some crazy Mexican from Brownsville came in chirpin’ up a storm about how good his dogs were and whatnot. He was steppin’ on your dad’s reputation, claiming he had the best blood line of fightin’ dogs in Texas. That crazy Mexican bet two of his dogs against your pops’ champ here. Titus killed both of them Mexican’s dogs.” The black man waits for me to respond. I don’t say anything. I don’t know what to say.

He continues, “What’s wrong with you, boy? You on something? You look frazzled. What? You never seen a dead dog?”

“Not in a long time,” I reply.

“Well, I know your pops is a little off, but he ain’t all that bad. You ever hear he was a war hero in Vietnam? He even got some medals and shit like that for it. Probably got them hiding somewhere around here, I bet. Well, he was more than a hero to a lot of us that were with him. He was a Sergeant, but he should’ve been an officer. Those fuckin’ college boys and their rules. Your dad got some rules of his own, but damned if you could ever figure out what they were.”

He buries his black hand deep into his left pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. He continues, “He’s tough as nails though. We were all Airborne boys: 173rd.” He

points to the emblem on his shirt. “We were the ones who jumped out of helicopters, down into the bush of Vietnam. Right smack in the middle of all those sneaky Viet Congs. We were nothing but toys. Toys and boys, that’s what we were. Your pops never said much about all the shit politics. He never said much of anything, except when helping our Lieutenant keep his head on straight. But he sure had some sense of knowing when things were about to heat up. Everyone in his platoon always stayed real close to him. It was like he knew what the jungle and the V.C. were going to do before they did it. Those little Asians were sly, and we always knew they were out there, watching us, in that dark jungle of theirs. But your dad could speak to the jungle. I’d watch him whisper to it as we crept along our way. With him at the front, *we* became the watchers. And when we found those poor V.C. bastards . . . well, you can probably imagine . . .”

He nimbly flips a cigarette from the pack to his fingers. He lights it, then says, “It wasn’t hate though. He didn’t hate those people we killed. He just killed. We all just killed.”

The fire bleeds its way up the black man’s cigarette.

He continues, “Someone in that jungle was looking out for that cold hearted son of a bitch. That’s for damn sure. You want a cigarette?” As I take the cigarette I hear footsteps above me, walking toward the door at the top of the stairs.

“Shit. Don’t tell my dad I was here. I wasn’t supposed to—” I take off running toward the house trying not crush the cigarette the black man just gave me. I look over my shoulder to see him watching me while he finishes his smoke.

I walk quietly around the house and enter through the front door. My sister is breathing peacefully, lost in a deep slumber. I go to my room and place the cigarette in

a shoebox underneath my bed. I peek out back. The black man stares at our house from the front of the barn, still puffing large plumes of smoke. I know he can't see me because I've watched the house from the barn on many nights myself. The windows give off nothing more than a dim reflection of the dark night. We are both searching for each other, but only I can see him. He finishes his cigarette and flicks the butt outside the gate. He turns to address the four men walking up to him.

My dad walks to the front gate to usher everyone inside. He steps out to close the gate, then shoots a piercing look over his shoulder, directly at my window. I drop to the floor and wait. A grating sound fills my head as if he had shattered the glass in my windowpane.

After a few moments, I slowly lift my eyes back to the window. The gate is closed, and he is nowhere to be seen. The sun will rise soon and I need to rest. I crawl into my bed, and, through the window, watch the evening's last remaining stars.

V

Sleep affords me no rest. The sun is up early and the heat is already stifling inside my room. I've always made the best of what I find around me, but this heat makes it difficult to find silver linings. My head is hazy with steam.

These conditions are ripe for worms. They lie dormant in my head, waiting for a moment of weakness. They are my stalking shadow, a virus; half alive, half dead. A part of me, but not of me. Oh well, I can't worry about this now. I need to wake my sister and make sure she gets her day started.

Her faith in this world perplexes me, but I'm sure she doesn't have much longer before she has her first encounter with the world as I see it. It might be too late to prevent that collision of worlds, but I need to place my hope somewhere. Our species needs to feel like we have a purpose. We are like beasts of burden, yearning for a yoke to be placed around our necks.

Everything gleams bright when you first wake up, but it all darkens as time passes. I blink through the blurred colors. My focus returns, allowing me to see the world again. I am

thankful for my vision. It allows me to see things before they arrive. Every day I grow more certain that my perspective is life as it really is. I have earned some sort of reprieve from the worms. It's as though I no longer pose a threat. Perhaps in their eyes I am already a completed tragedy. Blessings and curses are often difficult to separate.

I head for my sister's room to make sure she is up and moving. She is probably reading in bed, waiting for me. She loves to read, like me. Books are excellent gateways. That's what we need: a gateway. I walk into her room, but she is gone. Anxiety creeps down my neck until my skin prickles. This sensation corrodes my body. Weariness makes every shadow darker, every movement heavier.

A yell pierces the hot air.

The sound splits my head and my mind leaves my body. I see myself grab my sister by the neck, slamming her into the door. I feel her pulse in my clenched palms. My fingers nearly touch each other at the back of her skinny neck. Instantly, I loosen my grip and my mind returns to my body.

She looks somewhat startled, but more pleased than anything. "I scared you, didn't I? I heard you wake up and I knew you'd be coming so I hid behind the door. I wanted to surprise you. I thought it would be funny."

"Well, it wasn't funny," I reply. "I could've hurt you and then I'd be upset."

"Yeah, but you didn't." She looks satisfied with her little experiment.

"Yeah, but how do you know I wouldn't have hurt you, accidentally?" I ask her in a serious tone.

Her confident smile remains unchanged, "Jacob, you can't hurt me. You would never hurt me. It's just a game."

"What game? We're not playing a game."

“Sure we are,” she huffs confidently.

“Whatever. I’m just sorry I grabbed you so hard. Are you okay?”

“I’m strong, Jacob, just like you. What am I reading today?”

“You’re not reading until later tonight. Today is math: adding and subtracting. And then later, geography. Listen, I’m going to make some breakfast for you. I need you to water the garden out front, and then clean up the kitchen after you eat. Then you can get started on your schoolwork. I’ll be at the barn most of the day, but I’ll check in on you later. There’s stuff for lunch in the pantry. I’ve got to help dad clean up the barn after his party last night.”

Her confident smile turns to a pout. She says, “Okay, okay . . . that’s fine, but do you want to hear about my dream last night?”

“Sure, what was it?”

“Well, I don’t know *what* it was. After you came back from the field I fell asleep again, but I woke up when I heard someone swinging out in the yard. I thought it was you so I went outside.”

I interrupt her, “I told you not to leave the house at night. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“I know, I know. No, just listen, it was a dream, you see. Don’t get mad, Jacob. Are you okay?” She inquires with an unfamiliar tone.

A jolting frustration disturbs me. That wasn’t me a moment ago. I want to tell her so, but I can’t. I say, “No, I’m not angry. I mean, yes. Yes, I’m okay. I’m just . . . I’m . . . I’m sorry I grabbed you. Are you sure you’re okay?”

She ignores my question, eager to recount her dream. Her urgency evokes a sense of dread within me, but I tell her to continue.

“So I walked outside to see who was swinging. There was an old man I’d never seen before. He was really, really old, and he was wearing a really old gray robe, like an old towel. He was very skinny and bald, except for some long white hair around the sides of his head. He was just moving his legs back and forth, scraping the ground with his feet and not really swinging. The swing barely moved. He was staring at the ground and he looked kind of sad so I asked him if he was okay. He looked surprised to see me. He said he was not okay and that he was very sad. He said he had just died.”

I interrupt her again, “Then how was he talking to you?”

She said she asked him the same question, but the old man didn’t know either. However, he said he could prove to her that he was, in fact, dead. The old man stood up and walked toward her. As he neared her, he tried to take her hand to lead her somewhere, but when he reached for her hand sparks erupted. The sparks seemed to hurt the old man severely, yet she remained unscathed. The old man seemed to be luring her around the house. She followed him because, as she explained, “I wasn’t scared of him anymore. I knew he couldn’t hurt me.”

When she followed him around the house, she noticed the barn was gone, and a large black castle stood where the barn should have been. Smoke poured from the top windows, while fire flickered through some of the lower windows. An open gate allowed entrance to the castle. When she approached the gate she said she could hear moans and yelps.

“The old man stared at me with a crazy smile, like he was about to laugh. He started to walk toward the castle, then turned around to me and waved a long gross finger

at me. He wanted me to follow him, but I was scared now. Then I heard a loud slam and I saw you running from the house toward the gate of the castle. I screamed out for you but you didn't hear me. The old man laughed when I yelled at you. I ran past him while he laughed, and I chased after you. You ran right into the castle even though it was loud and on fire."

My sense of dread thickens as she, somewhat unwillingly, continues her story.

"When I got to the gate there was no one inside the big room of the castle. The room was huge and dark. The only light was coming from a fire upstairs. I stepped inside the room, and the gate shut behind me, and the old man was there again. He wasn't laughing anymore. There was a dead body on the ground in the center of the room, but it didn't look like the old man's body. The old man pointed at the body and said that the body was his, but I didn't believe him. He was talking quietly, like he was scared. I was starting to get a little more scared, not of the old man, but of the castle. Then these giant people came in and started looking at the dead body. The old man was scared and hiding. The giant people could see the old man and when they saw him they started to chase after him. The old man ran down a dark hallway and the giants followed him."

She eyes me imploringly, as though expecting me to say something. I remain silent, and she continues.

"When they all left I walked closer to the dead body, but then I heard a loud noise coming toward me from another hallway. I was scared and didn't know what to do so I went to lay down next to the dead body and pretend that I was dead too. Then there was a swoosh of fire from the hallway and three people came running out of the hallway and all three were on fire. Two of them were smaller than the other

one, and the two smaller ones were fighting the bigger one. They were slamming each other into the walls, burning everything they touched and making loud, scary sounds. I was so scared that I started to cry. When they heard me, they stopped fighting and started to walk toward me. They were walking across the room so they could burn me. I just knew it.”

She pauses again, but this time she examines me as though she were pondering whether or not to continue. My legs feel weak, but I ask her, “And then what happened?”

“And then you came running in from a different hall and burst into flames like them. You picked me up while you were on fire, but you didn’t burn me. You carried me up a hallway and then up some stairs. You were running so fast the wind felt cold. The other people screamed when they saw you, then started to chase us up the hallway and stairs. When we got to the top of the stairs, there was a small room that only had one light bulb in the ceiling, and there were no other doors but the one we came in. You threw me down and turned around to slam the door shut behind us, but the other fire people bursted in and started to wrestle with you. They were beating you up pretty bad and one of them left the fight and started to come after me. I screamed for help so loud that the ground started to shake. There was another loud screaming coming from somewhere else in the room and the fire people fell to the ground, but you didn’t fall. You started kicking them and ripping off their arms and legs. I tried to grab you, but you didn’t even feel me. You were still on fire and were ripping them to pieces and wouldn’t stop. You just kept trying to rip more pieces off them. You started to burn me when I tried to pull you away. The ground was shaking harder and harder, and then the light bulb went out. Someone grabbed me and pulled me

down the stairs, through the hallway, and into the big room again. I couldn't see who it was, but I knew it was mom. When we got to the main room, the door came crashing open and mom threw me out of the castle, into the yard. I screamed back at her and asked her about you. She said she was going back to get you, but that I should stay away from here. She said she needed to take you to the woods to stop you from burning."

"Were you scared?" I ask.

"Not really. I was happy to see Mom and I knew that she would save you."

For some reason I suspect she's lying to me. "So then what happened?" I ask.

"Well, Mom came back with you in her arms. You weren't on fire anymore, but—but you looked dead. She put you down outside the castle and told me to take you to the woods, but I couldn't pick you up. I asked Mom to take you, but she said she couldn't leave the castle. She looked a little scared, so then I started to get scared."

"And then what happened?"

"And then I woke up." Her eyes look deep into mine. She wants an explanation, an answer.

"It sounds like you've been reading some crazy stories. Everything is fine. It's getting late, so get on with your chores. I'll check in on you in a bit."

She tries to conceal her sad eyes. As she passes me, she stops to hug me. She places the side of her face against my torso, where my stomach meets my chest, and squeezes tightly. She releases her grip, then looks at me and thanks me for saving her from the fire people. She leaves her room to begin her daily routine. A smoky light clouds my vision.

We are stones in a river. The world passes over us, through us, past us; yet we remain where we began.

Something warm and familiar flows through me. Hold on to this, Jacob. Embrace these shadows of a world vaguely familiar, but somehow indiscernible. You are not alone here. This moment is eternal.

VI

After I finish cooking and eating breakfast, I head for the only bathroom in the house. It sits between the kitchen and the bedrooms, closer to the back of the house. The lone window inside the bathroom faces the field Esau. The toilet breaks constantly and the turquoise shower tiles have broken off to reveal the dirty plaster beneath. We only have about five minutes of hot water on our best days, but it's so hot today that I will enjoy the cold shower.

I turn the shower to its hottest setting and undress while the water warms. I sit on the toilet and watch the bathroom fill with steam. The steam gradually cascades from the shower, then rises slowly to the ceiling. The air is thick, but easy to breathe. My body momentarily relaxes and my eyes close. The atoms of my body move in synchronized waves as though obeying an unseen metronome. The vibrations cover me in a tender embrace. I give myself to this moment: buried underneath layers of steam.

The steam thins and I know I have already missed the peak of the hot water. Before getting in the shower, I catch a glimpse of my reflection on the small square mirror.

Through the fog, I see my dad's face in the reflection. I am him. And we are one.

Stepping into the cold shower brings a rush of sensation. My muscles contract and tighten. My body twists into a knot until it accustoms itself to the sudden change in temperature. I am changing into something stronger than I used to be. Hair has pushed its way through my skin, and soon I will need to shave daily. These arms give me strength. My legs are pillars that hold me steady, and carry me swiftly. I run soap meticulously over my body. I know this pleasure is artificial, but it is real to me. I lose myself in a heedless lust, sliding my slippery hands over my now hard shaft. The tightness of my grip contrasts beautifully with the fluid motion of my hand. An awareness, like vision from a thousand eyes, emerges. Sensation overwhelms me, followed closely by a paroxysmal climax: elation, clarity, guilt. My exalted vision subsides, returning to the sliver of spectrum perceived by human eyes.

Angrily, I turn off the shower and grab a bristly towel. I have weakened my mind and my body. I go to my bedroom and rummage through a pile of clothes. I dress and exit through the back door of the house.

The ground already ripples with heat. The azure sky is an ocean dotted with towering marshmallow clouds. I turn left toward the barn when I notice the black man returning from the field named Esau. He has already noticed me. A cloud of smoke billows from his chimney like frame. He stops at the front gate to finish his cigarette and watch me. With each step the barn grows larger, until finally, it consumes my view. The black man flicks his cigarette and stands confidently in the barn's shadow. He bends down to grab a garden hose, turning the knob slowly. There's a hissing sound, a few sputters, and finally a steady flow of

clear water. He drinks some of the water, then places his head under the crystal stream. The dirt below him turns to mud.

“You want some of this before I turn it off?” He asks me.

I shake my head no.

“Your pops is waiting for you inside.” He motions me toward the front gate with a turn of his dripping black head.

I step into the barn’s mouth, but there is no relief from the heat. If anything, it’s harder to breathe the stagnant air in here. Pieces of the pit and benches remain scattered over the floor of the barn. The dogs are gone, but the pool of blood remains. Flies buzz over the pool, sipping the nourishment left for them.

Life feeds on life.

The faded yellow door opens, and my dad steps a few steps down the stairs. “Clean up this mess. Put all the furniture down in the basement closet. Make sure you get *all* that blood off the floor. And help Vernon with whatever he needs.” He hasn’t shaved in a week or so and his beard is a thick patch of matted hair. He notices me examining his face, but he doesn’t seem to care. Something else occupies his mind. His eyebrows furrow, and his attention returns to this moment, to me.

He glares at me and says, “Jacob, don’t forget to keep your mouth shut. If anything ever happens to me, the state will separate you and your sister. You’ll be raised by different people. You’ll never see each other. You won’t even know where she is. Plus, if you ever slip, I’ll make damn sure I get to you first.” He walks back upstairs to his office. He shuts the door, but doesn’t lock it. The heat has demented us all.

At least now I have a name for the tall, black man. I turn around to see Vernon rubbing his hands over his face while he smiles a smile I don't understand. My spine tingles. I scan my surroundings: nothing but Vernon, me, furniture and blood. I feel trapped, or at least I feel a trap. My senses are heightened to the point of pain. Should I speak first? No. Stand here and react. Reaction is my only option now. Vernon seems to sense my unease.

"What you know about fire?" Vernon asks me. His smile is gone.

"What do you mean?" I reply cautiously. He fixes his probing eyes upon me.

"Can you start one? Put it out? Control it? That sort of thing." His purple-black skin, with the sunlight behind him, makes him look like a shadow draped in clothing. His clothes hang in the air, suspended by immaterial limbs.

"Yeah, I can do that," I say.

Fire consumes and cleanses: life and death in one burning glow. I once read that a few moments after the creation of our universe everything was much hotter than even fire: something closer to the surface of the sun, something fluid and wet, like blood, except hotter.

"We'll use this old furniture. These benches are better off as firewood." Vernon reaches his long branch of an arm into a dark spot near the front gate. He pulls out an axe and motions for me to come take it. The axe's wooden handle slides smoothly through my hands, the heavy head begging me to throw its weight. This tool wants to fulfill its purpose.

Vernon interrupts my thoughts. "Clean up this blood first." He briefly kneels to hand me the water hose. He smells sweet with sweat.

“When you’re done with that stuff, come around to the side of the barn and help me out with the fire.” He walks away. The sunlight refracts, bending as it passes through the beads of sweat on his smooth head.

“Esau!” I yell. Vernon stops walking and turns his head to look over his shoulder.

“What?”

“That’s what I call the field you’re working in.” I let the axe slide through my fingers until the head hits the ground.

“Why?” Vernon’s voice rings with guarded curiosity.

I tell Vernon how I once dreamed that little bean plants covered the field, and I saw a man in the field cutting down the plants with a sickle. I walked over to him to get a better view of what he was doing. He was humming to himself as he swung his blade back and forth. As I neared him, he looked up at me and told me the plants were lentils and that he was harvesting them for his brother’s funeral. I told him I was sorry for his loss, but I’m not sure if he heard me. He just kept cutting the plants and humming.

Vernon turns the rest of his body to face me. Once more, the blinding sun makes him appear like a rupture in the fabric of space: the absence of light in human form.

I tell Vernon how I looked to my right and saw another man’s body lying on a wooden plank. The plank was placed over a small hole filled with wood. The dead man was much larger than the one cutting the bean plants. He had long red hair and a thick red mustache and beard. I asked the bean cutter if this was his brother and he said, yes, this was his brother. I asked the man for his brother’s name, and he said it was Esau. And that was when I woke up. After that, I decided I would name the field after the dead man with red hair.

The man-shadow wobbles before my eyes. The heat transforms him to fluid. “Does your pops know about your dreams?” he asks.

“We don’t talk much,” I say rigidly.

Vernon laughs. “Boy, you and your pops is quite a trip. But you should be careful chattin’ up with all these dream figures. I’m serious. Once they know they’re heard, they don’t stop talking. Now, go on, get to work.”

VII

The water only spreads the blood; it doesn't clean it. I find some old rags on a saw horse near the steps leading to my dad's office. I leave the water running on the barn floor while I scoop the congealed blood into the rags. It oozes over the cloth, onto my hands. The flies fight for the last drops as they follow me to the trash bin. I turn the water off and take a mop to the wood-beamed floor. The now gloppy amalgam smears the floor, but the mop smooths the clumps. The sop drips through the floor's cracks, down to the darkness of the basement below.

Usually, there would be at least two or three dogs out here barking, but after a big fight my dad will sell some of them to interested parties. After seeing the big performance last night, the dogs must have been a hot commodity.

I rummage around the room for some sawdust to spread over the floor, but I can't find any. I move on to breaking down the furniture. I toss the mop against the wall and exchange it for the axe. The axe swings through the air like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. I gather the axe head's momentum, propelling its orbit above my head. The

momentum dies, and there is a single moment of pure rest. It stands still above my head, light in my hands, suspended by its own power. I pull my arms down to send the head into a wood splintering chop. The old furniture breaks easily under the power of my swing, as if it had anticipated its own destruction.

When I finish chopping the old benches and pit planks, I pile them into a heap. Sweat pours from my skin, stinging my eyes pleasurably. I walk toward Esau to let Vernon know I've finished cleaning and chopping. I see Vernon before he sees me. He is placing scrap wood into a wide trench he must have dug not too long ago. The shovel has been stabbed into the field so that it stands upright. The trench seems wide enough to fit a small car, but from where I stand I can't quite see how deep it goes. I stop about ten yards from Vernon. He still hasn't noticed me. He stares into the trench as he throws in some broken two-by-fours.

"Vernon, I'm finished cleaning. What do you want me to do with all that wood?"

He starts. I see surprise in his eyes and, for a moment, something else: sadness.

"What was that?"

"I finished cleaning and chopping all that stuff. What do you want me to help you with next?"

Vernon just stares blankly at me. A sigh leaves his chest. He pulls a soft-pack of cigarettes from the back pocket of his jeans. He places one in his mouth, but he doesn't light it. The cigarette adheres to his cracked lower lip.

He says, "I need you to go around back of the barn. Grab me them two gas cans near the gate." Vernon finds a match in his pocket and strikes it against his denim thigh. The match explodes in a bright light that he captures through the tip of his cigarette. He pulls and holds the smoke, deep

within his lungs, before a thick cloud escapes his mouth and nostrils. His breath continues steadily, strongly.

“What’s the hole for?” I ask. Curiosity is one of my many weaknesses.

“To hide something,” he says reticently. Vernon’s eyes narrow.

“Treasure?” I ask in a failed attempt at humor. Jokes often ease difficult moments, but not when I misuse them.

His wide grin displays large white teeth, which glisten in the blistering heat. He speaks slowly, “I wish. I do wish. But not today. We ain’t burying any treasure today.” He takes another drag of his cigarette. “Why don’t you come take a look for yourself.”

As I approach Vernon, I see that the trench is not very deep after all; maybe three feet at most. When I get to the edge I see old rags wrapped around something shaped like a body. Vernon billows another cloud of cigarette smoke, but this time the cloud overwhelms me. I smell an unrecognizable mixture of smoke, sweat, and sweetness. I feel a bit dizzy. Maybe it’s the smoke? Or maybe I just need some water? I collect myself before I ask Vernon a question to which I already know the answer.

“What’s in the hole?”

“That, there, is what you would call a lesson learned too late.”

He offers me his nearly finished cigarette. I take it, pretending I know what to do with one. I place it between my lips, and suck the smoke into my mouth. I let the smoke build before pulling the cigarette away and breathing in the hot smoke. The thin vapors hit my lungs, and instantly, I feel a change within my body. A choking sensation overcomes me and I cough uncontrollably. Despite the inundating heat, a wave of coldness passes through me.

Vernon laughs. “Hoo-doggy! Be careful boy. Those things can kill you.”

Pleased at my effort, he slaps me on my back with a strength I had not anticipated. His large hand knocks me off balance causing me to teeter forward toward the edge. I counter the sudden shift of weight by throwing my upper body backward, trying desperately to center myself above my sliding feet. My arms flail, and for a moment, I am certain I’m going fall into the hole. Just as my feet give way, I feel Vernon pull me backward. His tug changes my direction just enough for me to land on my rear end, near the edge, and roll safely away from the hole.

“You were about ready to jump on in, weren’t you?” Vernon continues laughing, and for a moment, he seems to have lost the weary countenance he previously held.

I lie on my back, staring at the ocean-blue sky while the black cloud of Vernon dances around me in laughter, slapping his knee spastically. “Who’s in the hole?” I ask.

“A man who tried to insult your pops—tried to do him wrong on a deal.” The serious look returns to his face. He continues, “You see boy, your pops operates by a different set of rules, but they’re still rules. When that dead man in there wronged your pops, he was given a chance to right his wrong. Your pops don’t give a damn about what people think or say. But when that fool tried to mix up some business with your dad . . . well, that was the last straw. You don’t mess around with certain people. That’s why you just need to be real, always, and you’ll be straight. You know what I’m saying, boy?”

“Yeah. Why would you be anything else?”

“Because people like to feel good about themselves. They like to make others respect them by knocking them down instead of building themselves up. They don’t realize

you can't knock someone down that doesn't care about all that stuff on the top layer. People like your pops have seen struggle. They know no one is going to push them off their without a fight."

"Did he kill that man?" I ask, pointing to the body in the hole.

"Not really. That fool wanted to buy Titus' litter. But when your pops offered him a fair price the dope said no, because he said he had some dirt on your dad and he wanted to work out a special bargain. Now, that ain't no way to open negotiations."

"So what happened? How'd he kill him?"

"Well, he let the man know there weren't no bargaining involved. He also told him that trying to blackmail people ain't no way to go about doing business. Your pops was trying to enlighten the poor fellow, but some people just don't want to learn nothin'."

I sit up and glance down at the dead body. He looks like a mummy, but without all the jewelry and decorations. Dirt clings to my sweaty neck, and the heat covers me like an unwelcome blanket. "So how did he die?"

Vernon walks over to the skewered shovel, leaning one of his long arms against it while he peers down into the mummy's tomb. Still staring at the body, Vernon says, "Well, your pops boxed up the dogs for this dead as dirt fool, then he demanded the cash. But instead of honoring his side of the deal, the kid pulled a gun on your pops. The kid said he was going to take these dogs and go home, free of charge, or else he would light up your pops right where he stood. He said no one would say anything if he killed your pops because the cops don't give a rat's ass about shit in these parts."

Vernon pauses his story to examine me.

He continues, “Well, there’s one thing you got to know about pulling a gun on someone, and this kid apparently didn’t know it. If you ever pull a gun on another man, you got to be ready to kill that man. You have to think about those kinds of things, and make those decisions before you decide to flash a gun around. It don’t matter if you’ve got the biggest, baddest, most deadly piece of pistol in Texas. If you ain’t ready to kill the man you point it at, then you ain’t ready to own a gun.”

“Why can’t you just scare someone, without killing him?”

Vernon looks surprised. “Boy, because some people just don’t scare that easily. And then you got someone who ain’t scared of you, and now, wants to kill you for threatening him. You catch me, boy? You see, your pops has had lots of guns pointed at him over the days, and he definitely ain’t scared of dying. He died when he was about your age, out there in those jungles. He’s a ghost now.”

Vernon pauses, staring at the field and forest beyond. “Man, once you seen that evil within . . . that side where you’ll do anything just to fight off that fear . . . that’s when you realize we’re just a bunch of animals backed into a corner. You either roll over and die, or you fight and die. But you see, boy, either way, we all die. Either way, we’re already dead. Some of us just know it more than others.”

I smile. Vernon notices but says nothing. “What did my dad do when the guy pulled the gun?”

“Well, he was about five feet or so from the guy, but he’s quick as lightning—he lunged at the fella faster than the guy could make up his mind about pulling that trigger. Your pops grabbed the gun and started grappling with the kid. The kid lost his feet and he slammed him hard to the ground, with one hand on the gun, the other on the kid’s

throat. Once he had the kid on the ground there was no hope for that poor soul. The gun slipped right out of his hand as your pops closed his grip around his throat. You see, boy, the kid just hadn't really thought someone with a gun pointed at them would do anything other than what he was told to do. I picked up the gun and pointed it at some of the boy's people just in case they jumped in. These kids were young punks from down the road in Victoria. They thought they was the next hot thing, but they hadn't met any people like your pops yet. They fancy themselves up and coming gangsters, like Mafioso or something, but they ain't got no brains. Just big nuts and a gun. You gotta give them that. They ain't scared. But they ain't scared because they're stupid. These punk kids are just after money, drugs, and girls. Your dad, well, I just don't know what he's after."

"Were you ready to kill, you know, if they pulled a gun?"

"What, boy? You even listening? I already told you. Those are the rules with guns. You don't got no business messing around with a gun if you ain't prepared to use it." Vernon fixes his stare on me. His eyes are semi-eclipsed moons.

"So my dad choked this guy to death?"

"Nah, just as the kid was starting to pass out he let go of his throat. He kept him pinned down for a bit, but I guess he decided he didn't want to kill this fellow so he got off him and told him to get on his way before there was trouble. The guy's friends helped him up and brushed off his shoulders. They were pulling him toward the back gate, heading for their truck, when the kid pulled a knife from a sheath on his ankle and charged at your pops. The boy slashed wildly, but your pops just took a step aside, away from the blows, then slung the boy face-first into a post.

Broke the kid's nose instantly. The kid was dazed, but he held onto that knife and kept slashing away in your pop's direction. The guy's nose was bleeding like a waterfall, and his eyes were damn near drowning in tears."

"Was he crying?"

"Nah, he wasn't crying or nothing like that. That's just what happens when you get your nose broken. You can't stop those tears from coming. Your pop's just kept taking steps back, but when he got near the pit he grabbed one of them old benches and clocked that boy clean across the chest. The kid must've been all sped up on something strong because your pops swung that bench like Hank Aaron, but the kid just kept barreling forward. Your pops lost his balance a little, and the kid caught him clean across the stomach, but it was only a little surface cut. He did another side step and caught the kid's wrist. He twisted the boy's wrist down toward the ground so that the knife pointed to the floor, and after he twisted the kid's wrist even further, your pops pulled his leg up and stomped on the elbow, shattering damn every bone in that fool's arm. In all my years, I've never heard such a loud thunder as the sound of that arm breaking. I swear the crack echoed in that room for about a minute, just bouncing around, trying to escape. His elbow got turned completely around so it looked like it was put together backwards." Vernon illustrates the painful episode by twisting his own arm as far back as possible. His movements verge on the grotesque, but for reasons unknown I perceive them as comedic. Vernon hesitates, seemingly unsure of whether he should continue. I ask him if that was how my dad killed him.

"Nah, like I said, this fellow was sped up on something. Your pops kicked the knife away and stood over him a while. The kid was kneeling there, breathing heavy. But sure as day

he lunged at your pops' again, trying to make a one armed tackle. Your pops sent one swift kick into the guy's throat and the fellow went crashing backwards into the dog pit. He fell on a splintered post, and it went straight through his back. It must have gone into his lungs or something because he started to cough up blood real fast. He tried to reach back to pull it out, but he only had one arm that worked and he couldn't reach it. No one helped him, but he didn't seem to mind. He finally calmed down, and took a nice quiet look around him. He died a few moments later. Your pops told the man's partners he didn't want this to happen, and if their friend would've just maintained himself properly this never would have happened. He also warned them there was no room in these parts for snitches. If they had any gripes or complaints there was a man in Victoria that would hear them out, a fair man that your pops would talk to, but there would be no other mention of this anywhere else. Them other boys knew good and well their buddy started the whole mess. Well, it don't matter anymore, they're straight now. Besides, they know your dad is connected out here. They paid for the dogs, promised to keep their heads straight, and everyone parted just dandy. You see, there are rules that aren't written in any courthouse. Those are the only rules that matter."

Vernon is trying to help me, but I just don't give a fuck about learning any rules: written or unwritten. "What do you mean, *connected?*" I ask him.

"Well, that's not really for me to say, boy. You're a smart one. Try using more than your eyes to see. Now go fetch them gas cans." Vernon grabs my shoulder, showing me lightly toward the back of the barn. As I walk away I hear him humming: the notes sound minor and sad.

A wall of hay bales hides the back gate of the barn. To get to the gate I can either climb over the hay bales or walk the fifty or so yards around the stacks and then back to the barn. I am too tired to climb, so I choose to walk around the wall. These bales form a natural parking lot for my dad's visitors. People usually drive their trucks straight to the back of the barn then park down between the two columns of hay somewhere. They seem to use these bales as a hideout, but to me it's unnecessary. There is nothing to hide from out here.

I turn the corner around the last hay bale, and see two large gas cans just outside the gate, close to where Vernon's truck is parked. Through a window on the second floor I see my dad slouching. He looks as though he is dragging something across the floor, but from this angle I only see the top half of his body. His shoulders and head move back and forth as he struggles with the burden. Suddenly, he stops. He stares down at me. He always knows when I'm looking at him.

Our eyes momentarily lock, freezing me mid-step. His eyes probe greedily, but I forfeit nothing. There is nothing left. My vision blurs, and when it returns, the window is empty. I continue toward the gas cans.

The rusty cans sit heavy in my hands. The gritty handles slip through my fingers as I walk, forcing me to readjust my grip every few steps. The sweet smelling fumes waft up, through the air, and into my inquisitive nostrils.

As I approach the trench I see Vernon returning from the barn, embracing a heap of the wood I had chopped earlier. He places the wood next to the hole's edge, then turns to watch me struggling over the uneven soil of the field. Some people believe God breathed into a handful of soil to create life, but no breath could bring life to this soil.

Instead of meeting me halfway, Vernon waits for me next to the trench. I drop the cans and wipe my grimy hands against my jeans. The mummy sleeps peacefully, wrapped snugly in his rags.

“Vernon, can I see the guy before we . . .”

“Do what, boy?” He pauses, then chuckles softly. “Aw, shucks. Sure, go ahead and suit yourself.”

I jump into the trench, nearing the mummy’s face. I swoop down next to his chest and begin unwinding some of the rags that shroud his face. His head is heavy in my hands as I unravel his mask. The rags unwind from the hair down. His dirty blond hair is long, thin and soft. His forehead has a few wrinkles and is sunburnt to a slightly pink hue. His eyes are open and blue and beautiful, much younger than his face. Young, but still older than mine. They are the sky with flecks of green interspersed throughout. Dried blood clings to the whites. I can’t tell if the blood comes from his nose, or from busted vessels within. Blood is smeared across his cheeks like cheap face paint; a thick, well-manicured beard had been forming down the side of his face. His stare is empty. I feel nothing for him, but I ache nonetheless. I don’t need to see any more. I pull his cold eyelids down, over his eyes while searching for any remaining energy. I hear a muted voice in my head. It says, “So shall we pass.”

I shake my head then pull away. I wrap him up again and pull myself from the pit. Vernon hands me a can of gasoline to begin the baptism. The mummy absorbs it like a sponge. Blessings and curses are often hard to separate.

“How much should I pour?” I ask Vernon.

“Almost everything. Just leave a little bit for the wood.” Vernon tosses more wood into the pit.

Hunger churns my stomach, but there is still work to be done. I put down the gas can to throw the final few pieces

of wood into the pit. I give the heap one more shower with the remaining bit of gasoline. The sun has fallen to a more bearable angle in the late afternoon sky. Our shadows are long, sweeping over the grave. Vernon throws the last piece of wood into the pit then pulls out a book of matches.

He strikes a match, then lights the rest of the book with the lit match. Brightness and smoke burst from his hand as he tosses the bundle onto the pile. The flame spreads like a hungry animal devouring its prey. It washes over the heap of wood and onto the mummy below. Spirals of fire leap from the grave, dancing their way to heaven—or maybe they're escaping from hell? A flash of heat pushes me back from the edge. The flames feast on the fuel, wood, and flesh.

Demons dance in these jumping flames. They curl their long fingers in and out, flailing back and forth, up and down, in me and now out of me. These soul-thieves celebrate and boast as though they have conquered some great nation. Their song stirs something deep within me. It's a memory of ancient gods that have long since died. It's a song of sadness, of lamentations. The dancing spirits mourn for their short lived divinity, and for the deaths of their worshipers. My divinity reverberates a constant tone. It's a flame the demons would love to steal from me. When we were gods we lived from the universe within, and now we are lost in a world of formless shadows. Vernon was right. Our eyes often deceive us, and we must learn to see the world without them.

Before me, now, I see an end to one story and the continuation of another. The dancing demons make hollow noise. There is no victory or loss here; only expansion and contraction, an infinite cycle of moments. Sometimes I feel as though I am being punished for seeing these things so clearly. My only hope is to make it through this stage with

my soul intact. If I can make it through, then I'll be closer to that place where I no longer exist as me. That place where I can touch the source of all energy, then dissolve peacefully into nothingness.

Vernon grabs my shoulder firmly, but without malice. "This fire looks like it's going to take care itself. Let's go dump these gas cans in the garage and drag the hose closer to this flame. Just in case somethin' spreads."

When we arrive at the front gate of the barn, my dad is loading a few small boxes into the passenger seat of Vernon's truck. I toss the gas cans inside the gate. I stop at the entrance to grab the hose, while Vernon confers with my dad. He nods calmly at Vernon as if a question were being answered. The two men say nothing as they head up the stairs to my dad's office. I don't wait to see if I catch the eyes of either man. I eagerly turn the corner and head back out to tend the fire.

When I return to the fire, the flames have receded. The gasoline has been fully consumed and the fire hardly reaches a foot or so above the edge. The mummy still sleeps on his glowing mattress of embers, blanketed by the burning wood coals. I busy myself about the hole, throwing in a few old sticks and dried leaves while I wait for Vernon to return. Fire deconstructs us. It reduces our complex atomic structure to something much simpler. And simplicity is beautiful because it is one.

I hear Vernon whistling and turn to see him walking around the wall. He's holding a large bag of charcoal in one arm, and a small bundle of wood he must have gathered on his way from the barn.

As he nears me, he tells me we need to add a few more logs to make sure it gets, "Real hot."

"I think it's pretty hot already."

“True. That may be true, boy, but we need to make sure.”

“Make sure about what? He’s already dead.”

“We need to make sure it gets real hot in there. So hot there won’t be nothing but bones; charred black bones. Blacker than me, boy. Ha!” Vernon slaps his leg as he releases a peal of laughter. His tone is stern, but facetious.

I return his smile as I think about the charred black bones. Do they really turn black? Blacker than Vernon? I examine his obsidian skin while he scoops handfuls of coal onto the burning mummy. “Come on, boy! Help me spread this shit out.”

A warrior observes his environment. He sees the world. He observes without fear, without malice, but he observes at all times. Vernon looks at me warily, but I smile at him and then return to the cremation.

The fire dies down, leaving behind a glowing bed of red-orange coals. We return to the barn to empty the trash cans into a dumpster my dad keeps near the back gate. I search the floor for beer bottles and cigarette butts. The sun will set soon, but the heat lingers upon the ground. The evening gives birth to a wave of changing light and color. The moon is waxing; a bright fingernail scratching the dark, empty sky.

Vernon picks up a rucksack from the bottom of the stairwell. “Alright, boy, make sure you pick up any trash you find. That fire should burn through the night, and once it goes out, you need to fill in the hole. Your dad’s going to do a thorough inspection, and if he finds anything . . . well, damn, boy, you know better than I do. Alright, I’m outta here. Who knows, maybe we’ll see each other again.” Vernon waves goodbye as he heads toward his old gray pickup truck.

Sadness floods me. “Wait . . .” I say involuntarily.

Vernon stops and turns to face me. “What?”

I’m not certain why I said anything. I have nothing to say.

“Good luck, boy. Just do the best you can do with what you got.” Pivoting smoothly on his left foot, he turns toward his truck, but pauses for a moment and turns to face me. He looks me squarely in the face. “And, don’t you lose what you got.”

It’s getting hard to see in this light, but I can see Vernon smiling as he walks away. He glides into the front seat of his truck and fires up the engine. He reverses swiftly, kicking up a cloud of dust and grass. The headlights recede from my vision until they disappear behind the hay bales.

I return to cleaning, but when I head for the front gate I notice my dad’s office door is open. Did Vernon forget to close it? I stand petrified at the bottom of the stairwell, listening. The stairs beckon me; temptation is an unknown path.

I decide not to tempt fate, and to return to the house to fix my sister some supper while I wait for the fire to burn down. Maybe I can take another peek at the mummy after the fire burns out. I don’t think bones turn black, definitely not as black as Vernon. Although I am sore, my step is light and easy.

Something crashes to the floor upstairs just as I leave the barn. Curiosity wraps me in a stranglehold. I can only resist for so long. I turn to face the barn’s gaping mouth. I watch myself pass through the yawning cavity. The yellow door remains open as I near the stairwell. A pale light bulb drips an unnatural orange light from the ceiling. My steps are quiet, guarded.

“Are you okay up there?” There is no response. I float quietly up the stairs toward the door my mom had painted. A burning smell hits my nose—slightly sweet, but somewhat rubbery. This smell differs from the pyre outside. As I reach the top of the stairs I examine the threshold. There’s nothing peculiar. I enter.

My dad lies hunched over on the floor, near a locked door across the room to my right. His shallow breathing hints at sleep, but his awkward position signals something other than slumber. His back grazes the wall as he leans sideways, in a semi-fetal position. I move away from him, toward the desk. The ceiling lights are off, but a small lamp on the desk remains lit. The desk faces a window overlooking the field Abraham. An overturned chair sits in the middle of the room, in front of a second locked door.

Halfway between the desk and the chair, lies a silver spoon with a dark brown, nearly black, ladle. Some sort of syringe, much like the kind used for a flu shot, rests next to the spoon. I pick up the spoon and sniff: sweet and rubbery, with a bitter taste on my tongue. On the desk sits an overstretched piece of rope.

I glance back at my dad. The only sign of his breath is a slight movement in his stomach and a muffled gurgling. Inside the drawer there are a few lighters, a plastic bag with a lumpy brown piece of dirt, and a large metal ring with about two dozen different keys attached to it. The keys jingle in my hand, reflecting distorted light back upon my eyes. Over my shoulder, my dad gurgles noisily.

I examine the keys more closely. None of them are labeled, but it’s as if they are magnetized. I head to the locked door not blocked by my dad. They rattle softly in my shaking hands.

This door has two locks: one on the door knob, and the other is some sort of bolt-action lock. I try the door knob first. The first key doesn't work—on to the second: another rejection. Finally, a key slides smoothly into the lock. My heart jumps. I look over my shoulder. Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle. I turn the key, hear a click, and the knob is released from its hold.

The bolt contraption is about the size of a wallet, and the key hole looks much larger than the one on the knob. I go straight to the larger keys: first one . . . no entry. Second one . . . entry, but no release. Third one . . . entry, a turn, and a popping release. I check on my dad once again. His mouth makes a smacking sound as he opens and closes it, his tongue flopping lifelessly between his lips.

I open the door slightly and slip through the dark crack. Quietly, I pull the door shut behind me and stand in darkness. I spread both my arms horizontally, as wide as possible in opposite directions. I feel around to my left, but my hands brush against a smooth dry-walled wall. To my right, my fingers pass over a light switch, which I immediately flip up.

Two bulbs attached to a beam above the room come to life. Appearing before me are boxes of varying sizes, all neatly stacked and organized. This room is about half the size of the previous room. To my left are larger cardboard boxes, the kind you could fit a television inside. Several rows of boxes are stacked in high columns that extend entirely across the wall to my left; the farthest columns nearly reach the ten foot ceiling. To my right is a much shorter, but equally long stack of shoe boxes. Hanging from the middle of the ceiling is a string that leads to a pull-down attic ladder.

I examine the first row of larger boxes. They are all duct taped closed, except for one. I see four large sacks of the same

red-brown substance that was in my dad's desk. I pull one out. The fragment is slightly sticky, like a lump of tar, but soft on my fingertips. I place the tarball back into the bag, seal it, then close the box. Next, I hurry across the room to the stack of shoe boxes. The shoe boxes have rubber bands around them, slowing me for only a moment.

I open the box: keys!

Keys to an escape from this place, keys to another chance: a new beginning. The unfamiliar inception of hope stirs within my soul. The shoe box is filled to the brim with rubber banded stacks of hundred dollar bills. I close the box and move to the next one. The rubber bands snap my skin, sending goose bumps up my arms. Again, more banded stacks of hundred dollar bills. Holy Fuck! There must be well over a hundred shoe boxes here. What's going on here? Hoarding all of this, and for what? He never buys anything for himself, and definitely not much for us. What's he planning to do with all this cash?

These are real keys. Money is the key out of this prison. It's the key that unlocks the door to a new path. This is a gift. This is a signpost in an endless forest. Breathe. You need to breathe, Jacob. Panic fills me, but I soon realize it is just happiness, excitement. I step back to the door to make sure my dad is sleeping. His gurgling continues.

Like lightning, the thought arrives.

I should kill him, tonight, take some of this money, and run. It would be days, maybe longer, before anyone noticed anything, and by that time we would be long gone. All good plans require swift action. I am ready to kill him: knowingly, intentionally, willfully. I am already broken, and I fear I have no soul to save anyway. I prepare my mind for the impending destruction that is concomitant to murder. I welcome the droning sound of death.

I stack the shoe boxes back in place, exactly as I found them. Well, almost exactly as I found them. Before rubber-banding the last box I remove as many stacks as I can fit into my pockets: six stacks of hundred dollar bills. I re-stack the now depleted box and grab two more, tucking them snugly under my arm.

I turn off the light and quietly shut the door. I lock the door knob from the inside and after a few attempts I find the correct key for the bolt. Click! The bolt re-locks. I place the key chain back into my dad's desk and bound silently out of his office and down the stairs. I begin a sprint to the house as soon as I exit the barn. The sky is peppered with glimmers of distant stars and the rapidly waxing moon. I burst through the back door and run into my bedroom. Underneath my bed there is an old duffel bag my mom had bought for me when I still attended school in town. I empty bundles of cash into the bag that once held books about faraway places and happiness. There is a loose wood plank underneath my sister's bed where I can hide my treasure. I look at the bills again. I run them through my fingers to feel their cottony texture. I hold them close to my nose, breathing the stale odor. Reality can feel so nice sometimes. It's been a long time since it has felt this good.

I burst into my sister's room. She is sleeping on top of the covers with her books and some crayons scattered about the bed. She is already wresting herself from her deep sleep as I dive under her bed to find the loose plank. My hands find the inch gap. I pry up the plank and shove the bag into the crevice. She is awake by the time I pull myself out from underneath her bed.

"Jacob, is that you? What are you doing down there? I'm too tired to play right now," she mumbles through sleepy lips.

“I’m sorry. I was just looking for something. Go back to bed.” I stand up and head for the door.

“Wait, what were you looking for? Well, nevermind, I don’t care. Jacob, I’m having bad dreams again.” She lifts a hand to me as though beckoning me toward her, but I resist. Time is dwindling for me to act, and moreover, I don’t want her to feel the evil building within me. She drops her arm, but continues talking, “Jacob, I dreamed you were in a boat on a river, or something like that, and I was on the shore following you, but you wouldn’t row to the shore to let me on your boat. I kept calling out to you to row over to me, but you didn’t say anything or even look at me. It’s like you couldn’t hear me, even though you weren’t very far. You just kept staring straight down the river. Staring at something. And then you lay down in the boat and when you sat back up you were covered in blood. I screamed and screamed, but you didn’t hear me. After that, I couldn’t scream anymore because it hurt too bad. Then, I tripped on something and you kept drifting on by me. I tried to catch up, but I couldn’t. You just kept drifting farther and farther away from me, down the river. And then I woke up, and you were here, under my bed. It’s like my dream brought you to me.”

I remind her that she doesn’t need to worry about me, not even in her dreams. “I’m going to be fine. You’ll always be able to find me, even if you can’t find me here.”

“What do you mean, ‘find you here?’”

“You know exactly what I mean, don’t you? There are lots of different worlds. When you dream, you dream in a different world, when you wake up you’re in another world, a waking world. When you die you go to another world, and before we were born we lived in another world. But you

already knew that, didn't you? The memories are still fresh in your head. And guess what?"

"What?"

"You and I are going to see more of this world, here: the waking world. We're going on a real life adventure, you and me. You just have to promise to never speak of this again, until I tell you it's okay. Can you promise me? Can you do that? It's very important that you never, ever, speak of our adventure until I tell you it's okay. You have to do exactly what I tell you to do. You understand?"

She nods. "Okay, Jacob, I can do that. But I want to tell you something. Something I think I feel. Jacob, I don't think this world likes you very much."

I laugh to myself. "Well you know what? Then I don't think I like this world very much either."

Her laugh is dark, darker than I would like to hear from her. But such is life sometimes. I tell her goodnight as she crawls under her sheets. She makes a kissing sound and flips onto her side. Several crayons fall to the floor. As I leave, she calls out to me. "Jacob, are things like this in the other worlds, too?"

I answer her from the hallway. "I don't know. I think things are good, but sometimes it's hard to see that. It just takes a while for our eyes to adjust. Go to sleep, you're fine. I think this world likes you."

Another dark laugh escapes her bedroom. "I know. It's funny, isn't it?"

It is.

I step quietly into the unlit kitchen to grab the large chopping knife I've used on countless occasions to prepare dinner. As opposed to a cleaving knife, this knife is a versatile blade, well suited for stabbing, slashing and chopping. I take the knife and exit the house, silently, through the kitchen.

I see nothing but the barn, and, inside the barn, I see our escape. A disorienting sensation overwhelms me, but I use the barn as a beacon. It is a skull shaped lighthouse guiding me to the other shore, to a release from this web of madness. This life is only part of a greater process. There are stages to it, but I don't know which way is forward and which is back. I have been here before, and now I return.

I step quietly over the barn floor, easing my way to the bottom of the stairwell. I listen for sounds from above, but I hear nothing. I proceed up the steps. The yellow door remains ajar, and I hear the gurgle of my dad's unnatural breathing. I step through the doorway. His office buzzes with a melancholy energy. It is a temple without an altar: holy. My over-stimulated nerves have left me numb, unable to enjoy the pleasure of being able to choose my own destiny, but it's okay. I'll keep searching until I feel something.

The knife comes alive in my hand. I feel a magnetic pull toward the object of my affection. I am a stalking shadow. I float toward him and observe his movements. He now lies more on his stomach than on his side. His arms are outstretched above his head, opening his lungs to breathe the shallow breaths that struggle to pass through the phlegm in his throat. His cheeks are covered in a thick stubble of hair, and his over-sized Adam's apple scrapes against the floor, unconsciously trying to swallow.

I step over his body, aligning my feet just outside his splayed shoulders. I squat, placing the knife point between his brain stem and his right ear. I angle the blade downward so my thrust will cut into flesh and vessels, instead of getting caught, or slowed, by bone. I wrap both my hands around the hilt, locking my fingers. Sweat begins to drip down the side of my face, and I notice my hands are shaking. I must do this now, while it's easy and he sleeps right here below

me. This, too, is a gift and I must make the most of it. My resolve strengthens. I make a vow to that great source of all energy: this sacrifice is necessary. There is no pleasure here, only necessity. As I hover above him, I inhale deeply and lift my hands high above my head.

Crack!

My face is crushed with pain, and something warm begins to cloud my vision. Instinctively, I retreat toward the door, but as I scamper, I stumble and lose my balance. My body slams awkwardly against the floor, and my flailing arms accidentally throw the knife through the doorway. With the wind knocked out of me, I scramble for the door. But my dad has already grabbed my right ankle. He pulls me toward him as if reeling in a fish. I kick wildly and land a solid blow against his chest. He has sprung to his feet and the blow disturbs nothing. His grip tightens around my ankle, and with ferocious strength he pulls me across the floor, slamming me against the wall. My teeth rattle in my mouth, slicing into my tongue.

I see a streak of blood smeared across the floor. My dad looks wobbly on his feet, a little dazed himself. He hasn't spoken a word yet and seems a little unconcerned with me for a moment. I lay motionless on the floor, my hands over my left eye to stop the bleeding. He makes an unsteady circle around the office, stopping at the desk to rummage through his drawers. I pull myself against the wall to better defend myself from the next wave of blows. I need to get to my feet, but my head is spinning.

He stops rummaging and his attention returns to me. My limbs feel like lead, but I lean against the wall and slowly begin to prop myself to my feet. I turn my body to the side, defensively, as he nears. He bolts across the floor to seize me. I see his eyes clearly. He looks confused and lost.

“What are you doing up here?” His voice is hoarse and raspy. The phlegm distorts his tone. His balance waivers and I try to free myself from his grip, but my resistance only tightens his hands and steadies his mind. His strength overwhelms me. With one arm he drags me to the center of the room, and with the other he grabs the overturned chair and sets it down in front of me. He shoves me forcibly into it; nearly sending me head over heels backward. The chair rocks back on two legs, but it doesn't fall.

“Don't fucking move.” He stumbles out the door and down the stairs. The knife rests somewhere below on the barn floor, alone. If I were a hero, or even just a little braver, I would rush down those stairs, grab the knife, and try to finish what I started. But, I am no hero. I sit alone in this room, with my vision dimming and my head swimming. Something in my chest pierces my lungs when I breathe deeply, but I have to breathe. My lust for air is inescapable, so I shorten my breath to an intermittent pant, the syncopated rhythm of death.

A few painful breaths later, he returns with some frayed rope. He fastens my wrists to the armrests, then ties them in excruciatingly tight knots. I ignore him and sink deep within myself. This is illusion, and it too will pass. I sink further into the emptiness of my thoughts, but there is no haven here. I continue my fall through this space, hoping only for a place to land. Find it, Jacob.

I can fall no further.

My eyes open to my dad wavering unsteadily before me. He holds a lighter under a spoon while staring at me. After a few moments of heating the spoon, he tosses the lighter on the floor and pulls out a needle and a small bottle of clear liquid. He sticks the needle into the bottle, while balancing the liquid content of the spoon. He draws the

clear fluid into the needle, then places the bottle into his pocket. He expels some of the fluid into the spoon, then stirs the ladle with the needle's head. After a few stirs, he goes to his desk and grabs a cigarette from one of the drawers. With his mouth, he rips the filter from the cigarette and skillfully peels the paper off the cotton filter. He dips the filter in the ladle.

“What were you doing up here?” His eyes blink often and sporadically.

My speech is labored. “Your door was open. I heard a noise up here, so I came to check on you.” Lies are always better when mixed with truth.

My dad smiles, and through his teeth I see the tip of his reptilian tongue. “I know you're lying, Jacob.” He sticks the syringe into the now saturated cotton filter, drawing out a dark, brownish fluid. He tilts the needle up, squirting some brown fluid from its tip. A large drop drips down the syringe like a tear on a dirty cheek. His eyes lock with mine in an attempt to read me, but there is nothing to read. I raise my head to meet his stare. The void inside him is more than I can bear. In his eyes are the questions I am afraid to ask, the blasphemies I am afraid to speak.

He walks over to me and presses my elbow firmly against the armrest. His black eyes fixate so intently upon my arm that I can't help but look myself. The blue veins begin to rise like swelling rivers. I look back into his widely opened, eager eyes. He points the needle down, bringing it to a hover above one of the larger blood-rivers: the Nile vein of my arm. I struggle to free my hands, but the Nile becomes even more engorged, flooded with life giving blood. He plunges the needle into the vein. He pulls the plunger back and I watch my blood flow into the syringe's reservoir, mixing with the tar-brown fluid. He looks into my eyes, and smiles.

For a moment, I forget everything. I wish I could freeze him like that forever: smiling and seemingly happy. I look down at my arm as he empties the blood-mixed fluid into my vein.

Instantly, relaxation overwhelms me. My arms release their tension. My body begins to dissolve. Something familiar and soft envelopes me. My head is heavy, but I manage to get one last glance at my dad standing over me. His voice reverberates in my head, but I can't make out the words. The sounds die quietly in the emptiness between us.

My breathing flows into easy waves. Floating down a river, lying on a bed of furs, I stare up at the dim orange sun. Beyond the shore I see the snow covered peaks of a towering mountain range. Sound waves drift through the air. They bounce off one another in oblique angles, but my mind pieces together their wayward sounds to form a coherent shape and pattern: symphony.

Fountains of water spray from the river, cutting swaths of distortion through the sky. The sound of voices grows steadily around me. Beautiful voices from beautiful girls. I close my eyes to better enjoy the deep delight of my drifting. I close my eyes, but my vision becomes more acute. Here are the singing girls. They stroke stringed instruments and wear wispy silk, accentuating their nubile shapes. I am a king on his throne, and these lovelies are mine. My body spasms in slow waves of bliss: lapping, rolling, returning to the ocean of pleasures from which they originated. With my mind, I beckon the girls nearer. They obey. They are mine. This is mine.

Suddenly, I notice an immense creature sitting on a floating throne above me. He watches me disinterestedly. Flames envelop him like a robe, but he does not burn. In his right hand, he holds a gold scepter with a jewel encrusted

tip. His crown is also gold with six sharp spires. In his left hand, he flicks a long whip which undulates in harmony with the movement of his wrist. His eyes glow red with fire. He laughs to himself, or maybe at me. Who knows? His smile is powerful, but I return my attention to the lovely curves, shapes, and movements of the girls. My eyes absorb the rawness of the pleasures they offer.

I caress the soft garments that sit upon their smooth, pale skin. Their warmth runs through my fingers and over my body. I look down, and I have many arms and many hands. They are intertwined and flow freely over the dancing beauties. I halt one of the delicate bodies to more thoroughly examine her. Just above her supple breasts rests a necklace which piques my interest: miniature human skulls have been strung together across her flesh. The skulls are charred black, with jewels set into the eye sockets. I slide my hand down her chest to take the necklace in my fingers. I smile at the skulls. They smile back at me.

Before thoughts even form, visions materialize before my eyes: distant shores, distant lands, they are all mine in this world of sleep. My burdens are lifted and in this moment I find rest, respite, relief.

Words only dilute the experience. Feeling is everything here. I lie back and rest my head in the lap of my darling nymph. She caresses my hair and face. I cherish this warmth, but I begin to realize the temporal nature of my visit. This is only a passing world, and I am only a visitor. This world has played an evil trick on me. I was wrong to allow myself to fall into such a delirium.

The pleasures begin to disappear. I reach for the girls, but my hands do not obey. The girls fade farther and farther from me, until they are gone. I open my eyes to silence and blurred colors. The stabbing pain in my side reminds me of

my other reality. My dad sways in front of me, struggling to keep his balance. His arms dangle lazily, and his eyes have rolled deep into the back of his head. A needle hangs from his arm as he mumbles incoherently.

The initial tsunami of euphoria has subsided; only aftershocks of the drug remain. My stomach feels sick and nausea overwhelms me. I turn my head and vomit on the floor. My stomach continues to churn, but the relief is instant.

The knots of the rope dig into my wrist. A trickle of blood has dried where he injected me, forming a red-brown circle the size of a crusty penny. My dad stumbles toward the wall, slamming into the locked door. He slides down like an egg splattered against a wall. The vomit stinks and the smell is making me sick again. He continues mumbling to himself in an oddly melodic tone. The room begins to spin again. I feel heavy: heavier than this chair can support. Another wave of euphoria washes over me. I close my eyes to enjoy it. This warmth gives me strength. The temptation to linger in this dream state distracts me. I must get out of the barn.

I twist my wrists, pulling the knots closer to my fingers. A fingernail on my left hand barely reaches a loop. I scrape the loop toward my palm, but the knots are too tight. I pull harder, feeling the loop begin to loosen, but the strain breaks my fingernail. Despite the now unprotected flesh on my fingertip, I try again. This time I slide a joint of my bloody finger into the loop, then pull. Instantly, the rope's grip is loosened. I immediately begin ripping at the other knots, which I undo hurriedly.

My dad has slipped into another slumber. I must get out of here before he awakens, but I can't move. I am too heavy. This is apathy, and although similar in character

to nothingness, it differs substantially in content. This is punishment for my desire. My desire to kill my dad has turned on me, and for this, I now pay.

Vicissitudes: ups and downs. This is life.

Finally, I summon the will to move, but it is more like a slide than a movement. I am mercury in liquid form, spilling from my chair toward the path of least resistance. A hollow thud greets me as I hit the floor. I peel myself from the ground and crawl from the room on my hands and knees. The room spins at alternating speeds, forcing me to my belly every few steps. Halfway to the door, I begin to understand my dad's language.

"We're trapped. Jacob, why can't you see it?" His eyes are still rolled deep within his head, revealing only white almonds with an occasional brown, bobbing quarter moon.

"What trap?" I ask. My voice is strained. The effort drains me. I rest on my belly until I can move again.

He continues, "I'm stuck here, forever." His voice is full of resentment: base and mean. He is detached: disassociated beyond recognition. He has brought this sickness upon himself. He selfishly guards and protects it. And for what?

"You aren't trapped," I reply as I wait for my strength to return.

He doesn't respond. I begin to drag myself toward the door. The hair on my arms raises as another powerful wave flows through my body. I know I am alone in this world, but I also know that this is only temporary. This is an obstacle that needs to be conquered. The faded yellow door approaches me. I pass through it, a different person from the one that entered.

I make it to the stairs, lifting myself up to lean on the railing as I descend. My movements are clumsy. Halfway

down the stairs my foot slips and I tumble the rest of the way. I feel nothing as I fall. It's as though I were watching myself on film. I rest on the barn floor trying to gather my wits. From the corner of my eye, I see the kitchen knife resting on the floor. For a moment, I summon the strength to repeat my endeavor, but my resolve fades quickly. My body still feels too much like liquid to try again. Panic creeps through me as I realize I can't lift myself off this floor. My dad will soon be up and raging again.

It dawns on me that he never saw the knife. I flung it out the door the moment he tripped me. Plus, with this stuff coursing through his veins, the sequence of events must surely be hazy. If I can make it back upstairs and clean up the mess, he might not remember I was even there. I am beginning to understand this drug and how it affects me. I can anticipate the waves before they crest over my body. With wobbly legs, I walk over to the mop and bucket which lean against the wall. I crouch, bracing myself for another nauseous moment. The wave passes without incident to my stomach.

I see my sister walking toward me from the house. I walk toward her, but after a few steps I fall. My legs simply can't hold me. She begins running to my side. Her feet move the earth below her.

"Jacob, what's wrong? What happened to you?" She looks terrified as she arrives. She places her little hand on my shoulder, while I lie there waiting for the bitter euphoria to pass. I've failed her.

"I'm fine. I just fell down the stairs." My voice is raspy and weak, but she seems somewhat reassured by my explanation. I tell her to go back to her room. It's too late for her to be out here. "You should be asleep."

“But I was hungry, Jacob. And I was just looking around the kitchen for some food, then I thought about you, so I went to look for you. I made some peanut butter crackers. Do you want some?”

I would love to join her inside, but I must return to the barn. “Listen, do you remember that adventure I mentioned earlier?”

She nods. I continue, “Well, we’re going to be taking it very soon. You need to be ready. So that means you need to go back inside, and put whatever you want to bring with us in your backpack and hide it underneath your bed. You understand me?”

She nods, then asks, “Where are we going, Jacob? How long are we going for?”

“We’re going someplace far away, like in the books you read, where there are mountains, and breezes. And we’re never coming back. Do you understand? Never.”

She smiles. “That sounds nice, Jacob, but we can’t go anywhere with you all dirty like this. And, you stink too.”

I assure her once more that I’m fine. With an unmistakable hint of aggravation, I tell her to go back inside and not to leave the house until I come get her.

She looks at me with a pitiful gaze, and turns to leave. I rest my face upon the brittle grass until I hear the back door of the house slam shut. Then, I pull myself back to my feet and return to the mop. I fill a bucket with some water from the hose. I struggle to resist the dreary slumber which urges me to lie down and nod off. My vision is clouded in gray. Euphoria, then rest, then nausea. The cycle repeats.

The stairs are like a steep mountain trail, but I begin my trek, mop and bucket in tow. An eerie déjà vu unsettles me. When I enter the room, his eyes are open, staring vacantly past me, through me. I freeze in my tracks. He doesn’t

move. I proceed toward him to clean the mess. His eyes are focused, but not on me. I use the mop as a crutch, guiding my uncertain steps. His eyes stalk the mop head, following it like a cat tracks a mouse. Maybe he, too, is dreaming about girls, and rivers, and mountains. Who knows?

I feel safe, and even though I stand on a fault line I'm not worried. For one thing, if he's been doing more of this stuff than what he put in me, it's unlikely anything could pull him from his slumber. If anything, I feel closer to my dad now than I have ever felt. It's a shame he's so sick inside. It's a shame I need to kill him. Now just isn't the right time, but there will be others.

I finish cleaning and head back down the stairs. I empty the bucket outside the barn, then I head back inside to grab the knife. As the drug wears off, I welcome the returning pain in my side. I am irritable and tired, but I want to go check on the fire before I head back to the house. There are no clocks in the barn, and I have no sense of time.

I leave the barn, and turn toward the field Esau to check on the burning mummy. A faint plume of smoke rises from the pit, but only ash and embers remain. The orange-red coals glow beautifully in the pit. The geometry of the shapes and shadows does not make sense to my eyes, but I revel in the sight. The waning embers speak a song of immense sadness, and beautiful tragedy.

The pressure of time weighs upon me. We must make an escape. Tomorrow, if possible. For now, I sit and enjoy what remains of this night.

After a while, I head back to the house and crawl into bed. A sense of peace consumes me. I tell myself there is no pain that I did not create. The words and their meaning sound nice to me, so I smile. I ride these thoughts to their end, until they evaporate in the hollows of my soul.

Michael Barrera

The place where there is neither reason nor logic, only pure nothingness—my universe within. My breath grows smooth. I drift to sleep.

VIII

I open my eyes to the glare of my dad in the doorway. He stomps toward me and pulls me from bed. My head is hazy, but the adrenaline keeps me sharp. He lifts me toward his face. His breath smells sour and bitter. Our noses nearly touch.

“What were you doing in my office last night?” My shirt begins to rip under the pressure of my weight.

“I was cleaning up downstairs and I heard you fall. I went to check on you. I tried to see if you were okay.”

Our eyes lock in a deep stare. He seems to sense I’m lying, but he doesn’t know for sure. I fight hard to conceal the satisfaction inside me right now. He throws me backward onto the floor, glaring at me.

Frustrated, he stomps away and heads back to the barn. My hourglass is nearly drained. I have to get us out of this place. I don’t know where we’ll go or what we’ll do, but I know that we need to get out of here. My mom was originally from San Diego. Maybe she still has some family out there. She didn’t have any siblings and her parents were old, but maybe she still has some cousins or something.

Either way, it's the best shot we have. We need to get out of here before he discovers what really happened. Even a bad plan is better than no plan. Plus, the ocean sounds nice.

I shower, then head to the kitchen to cook breakfast. After breakfast, I'll fill in the pit and do whatever else needs to be done around the house and barn. I'll tell my dad I'm going to town for some groceries. That's when we'll head straight to the bus station, for a bus to San Antonio. From there, I should be able to find a bus or train to El Paso and beyond. First, I need to make an accounting of that cash. And how will I contact my mom's relatives when we arrive? I need a name to look up when we get there.

My sister enters the kitchen, and asks me what all that noise was all about. I ignore her question. She is calm and smiles at me. It's unfair that she never loses sight of the beauty within her. An unexpected envy dims my reason.

"We're leaving for our adventure today. Be sure you have your stuff ready to go."

"Where are we going Jacob?"

"We're going to San Antonio first, and then out to California to see Mom's family."

"What about dad?"

"What about him?" I reply bitterly. Whose side is she on? "He's staying here. It's better for us to go by ourselves. Where do you keep that box of mom's old stuff? What's in it?"

She says she has some earrings, an old mirror, and a picture of our mom.

"Can I see the picture?" My question is more demand than request.

"Sure, I'll go get it." She scurries away to look for the picture, while I finish cooking. I throw the food on the rickety old table. The plates clang against the veneer tabletop.

I am already sweating profusely. Rather than cooling me, the sweat coats me like melted butter, insulating the heat upon my face.

“Here it is,” she says as she returns. She hands the picture to me. “Isn’t she pretty?”

She was pretty. I nod my head in agreement, which seems to please my sister greatly. I flip the picture over. Someone had scrawled her name on the back, along with a date: August 1958. The picture is only a wallet sized photo, but the image of my mom, young and hopeful, solidifies my resolve to escape. Now I have her maiden name, but there must be a hundred names like this in the San Diego phone book. San Diego is bigger than San Antonio, at least I think, and San Antonio is a thousand times larger than Wharton. I still need something more substantial, but this is a good start.

I hand the picture back to her and tell her to put it somewhere safe. “Also, be ready to leave, today. You can skip your studies if you have to. Just be ready to go when I tell you.”

She seems only partially interested in what I’m saying. The picture of my mom distracts her.

“Did you hear me?” I disrupt her trance.

“Yeah, I heard you, Jacob.” She smiles.

“Good. Now sit down here and eat something. When you’re done, clean up your mess and get ready.”

“Okay.” She eats quickly.

“I’ll be back later. I’ll be at the barn for a while.” I leave the kitchen through the side door, heading for the barn. In the distance, I notice a van crawling down the driveway, presumably headed for the back of the barn. My mouth tastes funny, and I can’t seem to shake this irritable feeling. As the van nears our house I see two Mexican men in the

front of the van, and possibly another man in the back. My eyes catch their attention. They examine me suspiciously before turning their eyes back to each other. I see their lips move, but lose sight of them as the angle of the van's windshield changes. All of the windows are rolled up, so the van must be air conditioned. The dust clouds trailing the van drift back to the earth like falling incense. The puzzle is complete, a pattern emerges. I know how this unfolds.

These guys are the transporters. They will pick up the drugs, then take them to some other point. I've loaded vans and trucks like this for my dad before, but now I know what they're moving. I enter the barn and notice that the yellow door is open. The van pulls beyond the hay bales, and reverses to the back gate. My dad walks down the stairs, staring at me as though he is about to say something, but he says nothing. Instead, he watches the van. It comes to a halt and three men exit.

The two Mexican men have thick black mustaches and leathery brown skin. They are noticeably shorter than my dad, but seem stocky and well proportioned. Their eyes are black. The third man is taller and has whiter skin. His face is perfectly shaved, and his hair is more brown than black, but still dark. He wears white a cowboy hat which he removes as he nears us. He carries a duffel bag like the one I have hiding under my sister's bed: most likely another treasure trove of cash. The money carrier is definitely not Mexican, but he has the look of something other than your typical Texas white man, something a bit more ethnic, but still white. All three men wear blue jeans, brown boots, and loose fitting silver-buttoned shirts with various plaid prints. My dad stands where he is, near the bottom of the stairs, and lets the men come to him. The man with the white

hat extends his hand to my dad who takes it and shakes it firmly.

From where I stand I hear muffled greetings. My dad nods at the two Mexicans who stand back near the van. The white man looks at me and says something. The two Mexicans stare inquisitively in my direction. I stare back with strong, but apathetic eyes. I have learned that my eyes command people's attention, but I dislike attention. If I had it my way, I would pass through this world without leaving a mark, invisible and immaterial. I would just observe and enjoy my allotted moments, trying to find something, or anything, to keep my mind occupied. I smile at the thought of living a different life. Not because I wish I were someone else, but because I realize I wouldn't change anything at all. I am proud of who I am. In fact, I often feel superior to most people I meet.

I must have lost myself in thought because when I come back to my senses all four men are staring at me. Three of them stare blankly at me, while my dad looks annoyed.

"Did you hear me? What's wrong with you? Get over here and help these guys bring a few boxes down into the van."

I nod my head. All four men begin to walk up the stairs. When we get to the top of the stairs we file into my dad's office. There are a dozen or so large boxes which he has already stacked in the center of the room. The boxes have been duct taped shut and he motions for me and the Mexicans to grab them. He signals for the white man to join him in the room to my right.

As the two men approach the bolted door, my dad reaches under his shirt for the key chain clipped to his belt. He briefly, and accidentally, flips up his shirt, revealing the grip of a handgun tucked into his jeans. An errant ray of

light strikes the revolver of the pistol. The light hits my eyes hard, dazzling me momentarily. He looks over his shoulder to see if anyone noticed the gun. The Mexicans are already fast at work, so his eyes catch only mine. I promptly look down at the boxes and begin to lift one. I hear the keys jangle, the bolt pop, and then the metal-on-metal, sliding sound of release.

The Mexicans speak to each other in rushed, fluid Spanish. I understand a few words: “muchacho,” “una paliza,” “fue golpeado,” along with some others. The rhythm of their language seems to fit this setting better than English. The sounds flow seamlessly through the stifling heat.

I grab one of the boxes and follow the guys down to the van. As we near the van one of the Mexicans speaks to me in English: “Put here.” He points to the ground behind the van. I toss my box down. The taller of the two Mexicans opens the rear fold out doors of the economy-size van. The back row of chairs has been removed. Two captain’s chairs remain fixed in the middle of the floorboard. The Mexicans begin loading the van by sliding the boxes all the way to the back of the captain’s chairs. One of them grabs my box and tosses it lightly into the van without asking me to help. After they load the boxes we begin back up the stairs, except this time I am in the lead. When we enter my dad’s office he’s standing by the desk, speaking sternly and quietly to the white man. Both men calmly turn their heads just enough to survey the room’s entrants. Their narrow stares relax as they return to their conversation.

We grab another round of boxes and head back downstairs. One of the Mexicans says something in Spanish which I don’t understand, but which causes the other one to laugh deeply and loudly. When we get to the bottom of the

stairs, the taller Mexican turns to me and speaks in broken English: “You know what dees is?”

I shrug my shoulders.

He says, “Candy.” They both burst into laughter again; not necessarily mocking me so much as just trying to pass the time. I take no offense. Besides, they are dirty, ugly people, and they smell like rotten death. But for the sake of humoring them, I participate in their diversions. I nod, then say, “Candy, yah!” Then I pretend like I have a needle in my hand. I act as if I’m injecting the imaginary needle into my arm, then roll my eyes.

They stop laughing, seemingly surprised. Not too surprised though. I think they are just a little offended that their perceived superior knowledge was trumped. Their apprehension lasts for only a second, then they smile warmly at me, as though welcoming me to their inside joke. We head back upstairs for another load. When we arrive upstairs, my dad and the white man are gone.

On our way down, I see my dad and the white man turn the corner of the front gate to enter the barn. The white man is laughing, but my dad’s gaze is stern and focused.

“Muchachos! Como estamos? Listos?” yells the white man.

The taller Mexican replies: “Almost, boss. Almost.”

Heat pours from the sky as the great burning eye stares impassively down. Here, we are powerless: chained to fate whether we like it or not. Choice seems like an illusion to me, but I must believe I’m the master of my fate. It makes things more interesting, and more bearable.

My lips crack from dryness and I taste the metallic sweetness of blood. I need a drink. I walk toward the water hose next to my dad and the white man. I look at neither of them. My mouth waters in anticipation. I turn the nozzle

and let the hot water run for a few moments before the cooler water rises from the well. The sunlight refracts into a stream of broken rainbows. This stream has always been moving, and it always will be.

What am I saying? My mind escapes me in this heat. I have a hollow center where I glorify myself: the Temple of Jacob. Some say, "Pride comes before the fall." But I would rephrase it to say, "Be proud, because you are already fallen."

I smell the cooler water as it finally flows forth from the hose. It is a much needed rain on my drought-plagued tongue. I drink rapidly, until my head throbs. I splash some water on my face and drop the hose, refreshed. I close the nozzle, and tell my dad I need to go into town for groceries before the stores close. I ask him if he needs any more help, whether he minds if I leave now.

His eyes narrow, all four men stare at me inquisitively. He replies, "Sure, but leave your sister here, and be back in three hours. You have more work to do."

I pause. Then say, "But she wanted to come into town with me and I thought—"

He interrupts, "I said no! Three hours, that's it."

The wheels spin in my head as I scheme my next move: nothing comes to me though. Dejected, I head back to the house.

"Jacob! Wait a minute. Take this to Tom Seward's office while you're in town. Just tell him to put it in my file." He holds out a sealed envelope. I walk back and take it from him.

IX

“Are we still leaving today, Jacob?” my sister asks while sitting on her bed with a stack of books. “I’m ready when you are,” she says. Her wet hair is matted to the sides of her face.

“Maybe, but later. I have to go into town to do some grocery shopping and run some errands. I’ll be back in three hours.” She returns her attention to her books, uninterested in my words. I leave her room, heading to mine to change shirts before going into town.

We live about four or five miles from the town center. Depending on how I travel, it can take nearly an hour one way. I can bike, but my bike is at least ten years too old to use safely. I would never forgive myself if I died because of an injury resulting from that stupid old bike. I find the cigarette Vernon gave me the other day, and a book of matches, then I hit the road on foot.

Halfway down the dirt road, I realize I forgot to bring water. I look back to the house. It wavers in the heat. The barn’s angry face stares upon the fields. I’m thirsty, but not enough to walk back. When I reach the end of the dirt

road, I take a left and make my way along the county road that leads to town. A few pecan trees line the pavement, providing pockets of shade. I amble down the road to the sound of expanding silence. I guess this place isn't as bad as I make it out to be. It's probably the same as any other place. Regardless, I can't stay here much longer.

I pull the cigarette from my pocket. It's slightly bent, but the paper is still in one piece. I decide to smoke it. The hot smoke tastes rich, sweet and spicy. I fill my mouth with smoke, before inhaling it deep into my chest. My head instantly feels dizzy, but it steadies itself promptly. As I exhale, I feel calm. My vision tightens.

The cigarette is another paradox. It burns the sensitive skin in my lungs, nose and throat, but the steadiness it brings my mind far outweighs the momentary burning. Plus, there is something welcoming in the burn. I exhale through my nostrils and watch the smoke float inertly in the still, hot air. The moments seem frozen. My entire existence is but one frame in a much larger animation sequence. Behind me, I hear music approaching.

I glance back to see a pastel, blue-green car driving toward me. I step off the road and put my thumb out into the street. I take another drag from my cigarette. The car begins to slow, veering closer to the shoulder. The music is loud and foreign to this quiet road, but my ears cling to the sounds. The drums pulse with the primal sound of life.

The sunlight reflects off the windshield, obstructing my view of the driver. The car is a long two-door sedan with a soft-top leather roof. The design is intended to resemble a convertible, but the roof is affixed permanently to the vehicle's frame. Nonetheless, the car looks well kept, even if it is a bit old. As I walk toward the passenger door, I think I

see a broken hood ornament, but the hood's reflecting light blinds my view.

I stick my head into the opened passenger window to see a beautiful girl, probably in her early thirties or late twenties. Her hair is pulled up in a haphazard ponytail, exposing her smooth neckline. On the far side of her head, a white flower pokes past her profile. Her emerald eyes peer over thin framed sunglasses which have slid down the bridge of her nose. A few wisps of her light brown hair have fallen carelessly from her ponytail. A coral spaghetti-strap top covers her small, yet clearly firm, breasts. From my angle, I can see far enough down her blouse to know she is not wearing a bra.

She turns the music down, looks me up and down, then asks, "Where you headed?"

I look into her smiling eyes and feel frozen. A certain strength buoys my resolve though. "I'm headed into town. It's only a few miles up this road here, can you give me a lift?"

"Sure thing. Hop on in," she says with a voice I can taste in my ears.

The handle burns my hand when I open the door. I slide onto the cream colored seats. She puts the car in gear and slowly pulls away from the shoulder. In my periphery I see her look at me. She asks me my name, and I answer.

"Nice to meet you, Jacob. My name is Rebecca, but I go by Becca." She pulls out an ashtray from the dashboard. I ash my cigarette, take one more drag, then flick it out the window.

"You know those things will kill you, right?"

"Yeah, but we're going to die anyway, so what does it matter, right?" I turn to look at her. Her breasts move in perfect synchrony with the undulations of the road. The

waist of her blue jeans is cut low, and her hip bones press against the waistband to form a slight protrusion.

She laughs. "I guess you're right. Are you some kind of philosopher or something?"

I laugh at her suggestion and I assure her that I am no philosopher. "I'm just trying to find a way out of this shit town. And what about you? What are you doing out here, in Wharton?"

"Oh, well, I'm just passing through from Corpus on my way to Houston. I think I took a wrong turn a ways back, but now I'm back on track. At least, I was . . ." She glances at me, but I look away from her eyes. "I'm on my way to visit some family out in Houston. Then, I'm heading to New Orleans, to start over."

I ask her what she means by, "starting over."

"Well, you know, I'm going to start a new life out there. I have some friends who work in the French Quarter. They can get me a job and give me a place to crash for a while. Jacob, you ever been to New Orleans?"

I shake my head no.

"Well, it's beautiful. Really beautiful. The food is the tops, and there's always good music playing somewhere. You should try to make it out there sometime." She pauses again, as if she were going to ask me something, but decides against it. Instead, she asks, "Do you like Led Zeppelin?"

I tell her I don't know what that is. She laughs in astonishment. For some reason she is baffled. I'm slightly embarrassed, but it's the truth.

"I'm only kidding you," she says. A few moments pass before she asks, "How old are you, Jacob?"

"Seventeen. Why?"

"I'm just curious." She wets her lips and pushes her sunglasses back up the bridge of her nose. The corner of her

mouth flutters. She looks at me again, and asks, “So, Jacob, what happened to your arm there?”

A large red lump has formed where my dad injected me with his drugs. My wrists are also marked red, where the ropes had been, and a few of the bruises have an odd yellow tint to them. Now is a good time to lie. “I fell off a ladder while I was clearing a hornet’s nest.”

“It looks like you got stung pretty bad?” She peers down, over her sunglasses.

“I’m allergic.”

She returns her stare down the road. “Maybe you should be a little more careful next time you mess around with a hornet’s nest. Especially if you’re allergic, right?”

After a brief pause, she asks, with the same playful tone as earlier, “Jacob, do you lie a lot?”

“I try not to, but sometimes you just have to, you know?”

She nods without looking at me, smiling to herself. She says she knows exactly what I mean. “People usually only lie because they have to, because they have no other choice.”

I shrug my shoulders.

“You see, good people only lie when they need to, and you seem like a good person. I’ve been there too, Jacob, but somebody saved me. And believe me, I wish I could save you from your lies, but you just have to know that things always get better.” Her tone is more serious now, and her eyes are glued to the road.

“I just don’t see how some things can be fixed.”

“Jacob, the *how* isn’t important. I believe there really is something good out there that will keep us on track if we just look for it. We’re all here to save each other, and at the very least, we should keep our eyes open for the chance

to save someone else. You should remember that, okay? Also—”

I interrupt her. “I *am* going to save someone. I’m going to save my sister, but I don’t think that’s why we’re here. I mean, I don’t think we’re here just to save each other.”

“Then why are we here?”

“I guess we’re here to just do the best we can do, without hurting others.”

“Maybe so, maybe so. It’s all a bunch of bullshit anyway, right? I mean, not all of it, but a lot of it at least. People get all bent out of shape over the most stupid shit. Our government is fucking insane, the world is fucking crazy, so much of it, you know, is just fucked up. But I think you’re right, Jacob, all we can do is just the best we can do.” Her voice sounds thin, perhaps strained by these bleak thoughts.

Her shapes and curves distract me. She turns her head to catch me examining her. “Jacob, what are you looking at?”

Clearly caught off guard, I tell her I’m looking at her.

“You think I’m pretty?” Her voice suddenly sounds shy.

“Yes,” I reply without hesitation.

“Well, I bet a good looking kid like you could probably pick and choose any girl he wanted in this town. Probably even a girl much prettier than me. Do you have a girl?”

“No. I don’t go to school in town so it’s kind of hard for me to meet girls.”

“I find that hard to believe, but whatever. Thanks for making me feel pretty.” She examines my gaze, but I keep my eyes on her body. My eyes are as enthralled by her shape, much like my ears are enamored of her tone. She clearly likes my attention, and I enjoy giving it to her.

“I’m a little too old for you, Jacob, so don’t go getting any crazy ideas now.”

It’s too late for that, so I lie to her. I tell her I just zoned out listening to the music. “Not that you don’t have a nice body . . . and face too, I mean—”

She laughs. “Oh, you are just too much.” She slows the car and steers it to the side of the road. She looks squarely at my face. “Do you want to kiss me?”

I nod.

“Well, then do it,” she says as she closes her eyes. I lean forward to kiss her. Her lips enrapture me. The moisture of her mouth elevates me to immeasurable heights. A sense of vertigo overcomes me, but I press forward for a final burst of sensation before I am too overwhelmed. I pull away and lean back into my hot seat, spellbound.

“That was sweet. I’m glad you kissed me,” she says, her cheeks flush.

I tell her I enjoyed it too, but that we should probably get the car moving before we suffocate in this heat. She doesn’t respond, instead, she continues to stare at me.

“You’re a strange boy, aren’t you? Do you get that a lot from people?”

“I don’t get much of anything from anyone,” I answer.

She closes her eyes as she leans in for another kiss. This time she slides her hands roughly through my hair, grabbing and pulling my face closer to hers. Her tongue slides into my mouth. Another surge ripples through my body. But just as rapidly as she initiated our second kiss, she pulls away.

“You’re a good kisser,” she says as the car begins to crawl down the road again. “So what do you like to do with yourself when you’re not hitch-hiking or seducing older women?”

I don't really know how to answer. I like to read, but I explain how I don't really have time for much else other than tending to my sister and the farm.

"What about friends? Do you have any friends?"

I shift in my seat, then admit, "not really". I tell her I don't often meet, let alone get to know, new people since I'm always out here in these fields. A trickle of hot air blows through the stale space between us.

"Well, I'd go crazy out here all by myself with no friends to talk to," she says casually.

"Yeah, well, that's probably true," I say with a laugh.

"What's so funny? What do you mean it's true?" she asks with a woman's curiosity.

"Oh, I don't mean anything by it. It's just . . . well, I guess you could be right about going crazy out here. I swear there's something about these parts that can drive a person crazy."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's got something to do with the openness and the heat. It plays tricks on your eyes. I mean, ever since I've been little, I've seen some weird shit out here."

"Um, Jacob, now you're starting to sound a little crazy."

"So what? I mean, I hear voices, and I'm pretty sure I hallucinate sometimes. But who knows? It could be real, too? You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean. But that's mainly because I used to eat a lot of acid." Her pursed lips form a thin smile.

"Acid? What do you mean?"

"You know, LSD. I used to eat a bunch of it. Best damn thing ever. It'll make your face melt right off your skull, in a good way, you know?"

“Yeah, I guess. Yeah, I think I know what you mean.”
After all, my world is in a constant state of melting.

“You want to know something else?” She speaks with a serious tone as she steers the car back onto to the shoulder. An orange blur flies past us, honking angrily for not pulling far enough off the road. She ignores the bellowing horn and leans closer to me. “Jacob, we’re all part of something bigger. Don’t let anyone ever tell you otherwise. We’re all hitching our way along, never really certain where we’re headed. And, most of all, we’re all fucking crazy. Anyone who tells you differently is probably the most fucked up of all.”

She eyes me sternly. “Jacob, what did you mean earlier, when you said you were going to save your sister?”

The hot, unmoving air creeps to the forefront of my awareness. I tell her about my dad, about his state of mind, and about how our situation doesn’t seem to offer many options. “It’s just not safe for us out here anymore. Plus, my mom is dead and we don’t have any other family, or any reason to stick around, so we’re running away. I don’t think either of us will make it very long if we stay. We need a fresh start.”

“Did your dad do all of that to your arms?” She reaches her hands toward my wrists. I pull away, reiterating the complexity of our plight, but she doesn’t seem to understand me. My words have no meaning.

“Jacob, why don’t you call the police? People can’t do these types of things to children.”

“Sure they can. Especially when you pretty much know everyone in town, and they’re all afraid of you, or owe you something. He has control over people like you can’t imagine. I don’t know how he does it, but he does. They all just turn a blind eye to him, and to us. We’re out here near

the county line, where no one seems to notice us. It's like we're a family of ghosts." I gaze upon the openness of the fields. "Becca, you said something about how it's our job to save people?" I wait for a sign of her recognition.

She nods, so I continue. "Well, what if I pay you to pick up my sister and me on this road tonight? I can pay for your gas all the way to New Orleans and more. You can just drop us off in Houston and we'll catch a bus out west. That's it. You'll never see us again after that, and you won't have to worry about us at all."

Her lips curl and her eyes narrow. "I don't know, Jacob. That's kind of like kidnapping. Listen, why don't we just go to the sheriff, together? I can threaten to make a big fuss and raise some hell. What do you think about that?"

I shake my head impatiently and look out the window to my right. "No, you're not understanding me. Even if the cops came and arrested him, they would separate my sister and me. I can't have that. Plus, none of this matters, because they won't do anything. Just forget about it. Let's just get moving and get into town." I readjust myself in the seat, unable to find a comfortable position.

She doesn't move. I feel her eyes on the side of my face. She sighs. The stillness of the heat becomes unbearable. She puts the car into drive and crawls gingerly off the shoulder. After a few moments, she speaks. "Okay, Jacob. I'll do it. I'll drive you to the bus, but then you're on your own. I can't do anything more than that. I could get into a lot of trouble for this; a lot of trouble that I don't need. You understand me?"

I nod.

"Okay. Meet me where I picked you up and I'll take you to Houston with me. Let's meet late though. How about two A.M.? Do you have a watch or anything like that?"

I tell her the stove in our kitchen has one.

“Okay then, it’s a date,” she says. The colors outside the car blur into a single, brown-green rush.

I ask her what she is going to do in the interim. She seems a bit more relaxed now that she has made a decision.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m not in any rush to get to Houston so I’ll probably just go grab some food, then head down to that Colorado River Park I saw signs for. Maybe smoke a joint and watch the water. You know how to get to the river park?”

“Yeah, you stay on this road until you pass through town. After about two miles, you’ll see some signs. You can’t miss it.”

The hot wind refreshes my spirit. She pulls into a parking spot in front of the town theater. The sign above the building reads, *Double Feature*, but the film titles aren’t listed.

I thank Becca for the ride and the kiss.

It could just be the heat, but her cheeks blush. “No problem, but don’t tell anyone about that. I don’t want to add kissing on youngsters to my rap sheet. So what are you doing here, anyway?”

“I have to get some groceries, and do a few things for my dad.”

“You sure are obedient for a soon-to-be runaway,” she says, her mouth open with laughter.

I compliment her eye for irony. “Well, maybe I should’ve been an actor, huh? See you tonight.” I step away from the car as she drives off.

Downtown is basically one big square, with the county courthouse anchoring the center. Businesses line the interior perimeter of the town square, while a few plantation-style mansions dot the outer perimeter. Beyond the perimeter of

the town lie cotton fields, corn fields and pecan groves. Before I begin my errands, I rest in a pocket of shade underneath the theater's awning. A memorial across the street burns an eternal flame, a tribute to the town's veterans. Both my dad and his dad have bricks engraved in their honor, set in the ground surrounding the flame. It's amazing how much people still glorify war. Why should violence be venerated so highly? Oh well, who knows . . .

I walk down the street toward Tom Seward's office. Tom's office sits at the corner, a few store fronts down from the theater. A large glass plate gleams in the bright afternoon light. It reads: "Tom Seward, Esq., Attorney at Law." I step into the air-conditioned office and pull out the envelope my dad gave me. The walls are paneled with dark wood, most likely fake. The earth colored shag-carpet is thick and soft beneath my soles. A heavy-chested receptionist looks at me worriedly. She addresses me with a perfunctory greeting, but I ignore her when I notice Tom enter the room from the door behind her.

"Hi Jacob." He heads past the receptionist without glancing at her or listening to her garbled words. "What brings you here today?"

"I've got to give you this." I hand Tom the envelope. He takes it without examining it.

"Sounds good. I'll put it in your dad's file. You want some water or a soda?" His tone is nasally and weak.

"Sure, I'll take a soda." Tom signals to the receptionist. She hesitates a moment, but then obediently tromps over to a refrigerator to pull out a can of soda.

Tom's eyes move frenetically from my face, to the ground, to the walls, to his receptionist. It's as though he fears his eyes might burn, or perhaps get stuck, if they stay fixed on any one spot. He's obese, and his double chin rolls

over his collar, nearly swallowing the knot of his tie. Even though the room is air conditioned, he sweats profusely and continuously wipes his forehead with a handkerchief. He reminds me of a pig who has escaped the slaughterhouse. He reeks of fear.

Tom hands me the cold soda, already coated with a thin layer of condensation. I thank him, more from compulsion than gratitude.

“Of course, no problem. Tell your dad I’ll put this in his file. How’s your sister?”

I don’t answer him. I simply shrug my shoulders, focusing intently on Tom’s eyes. His round pig-eyes beam with pride, but I see a shriveled spirit. Maybe I could use Tom to change my fortune: his blood as a libation to the gods of this place. I imagine the squeals and cries from his writhing body as they vault through the hot Texas air, then fall to the ground, hitting nothing but my own deaf ears. Alas though, no god would accept Tom upon his altar: sacrifices must be worthy.

He can see the evil in me and it scares him. Everything scares him. He has lived his whole life building walls to hide behind. The degrees and certificates, which decorate his office, are shields that protect him from evil people like me. I appreciate the law in theory, but I cannot respect it in practice. In theory, the law provides a foundation and order, but in practice, it only serves to cage.

“So what brings you to town this afternoon?” He continues speaking to me as though I had answered his previous question. I open my soda and take a deep swig. The cold bubbles fizzle in my stomach and burn my throat gratifyingly. A muffled burp rises from my abdomen.

“Grocery shopping,” I say. I take another swig while Tom continues gabbing.

“Well, we haven’t had much rain this summer and—”

“So what was in that envelope?”

Tom’s face twists. “Jacob, that’s privileged and confidential. Now why don’t you get on with your shopping. I know for a fact that your dad doesn’t like people asking a lot of questions about his affairs, and that applies to you, too. He’s not as bad as you think. He’s made provisions.”

“Provisions? For who? For what?”

Tom maintains his contorted expression. “Why, for you and your sister. The land your father owns is quite valuable, and if you’re lucky, one day it might be yours.”

“Maybe so.”

I nod to Tom and his secretary, then leave the office. Despite the appeal of inheriting a valuable, but cursed plot of land, my resolve to leave remains.

The grocery store sits on the other side of the town square. I cross the street to cut through the courthouse lawn. The courthouse seems much larger than necessary for our town or for our county. The walls are immaculately white and tall. Four ornate pillars anchor the corners of the building. They rise above the roof line, contrasting sharply with the blue sky like the protruding tusks of some beast buried deep beneath the earth. Inside, people from all over the county plead their cases against one another. Man judging man is a system that’s clearly flawed. We search for solutions using tools that are not equipped for our purposes.

The eternal flame flickers in the saturated air, struggling for breath in the summer heat. I walk over the engraved bricks. The names stare up at me, and beyond me, to the open sky. Some of them are dead, others not. I suppose some of the names could be heroes, but they are all victims; even the ones that survived their tours. They were shipped off to fight wars none of them fully understood, but oh

well, people will always be thrown into oceans of cause and effect. We control very little other than our own choices, and maybe not even that much.

The library tempts me from across the street. But I need to get back home soon, so I continue to the grocery store. To my left I notice four guys, nearly my age, milling about next to a car parked under a pecan tree. I recognize the guys from around town. They seem to be waiting for someone. Something about me catches their attention, and even from here I hear the gears turning in their heads.

One of them yells for me to come over. I glance in their direction, but I'm enjoying my solitude, so I ignore their plea. Rumbles of frustration make their way to my ears and I hear another yell from one of the guys. I glance over my shoulder as I near the street. One of them is walking toward me with a large grin across his face.

"Hey wait up, man! Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

I say I'm home-schooled without stopping or turning my head.

"Hey, hold on a sec, I know you. Your name is . . . wait, I got it . . . Jacob. You live out near the county line, don't you? I heard you guys haven't planted anything out there for a while. What do you do with all that land, if you aren't growing on it?"

I stop to face him.

"How do you know my name?"

The kid seems pleased to have evoked some sort of reaction from me, but his pleasure does not seem malicious. My tension ebbs. He says, "I just remember reading your name in the newspaper after your mom's death—uh, I mean, funeral. The article said that she had two kids, a boy and a girl. And since you were close to my age, I remember

asking a teacher at school about your story. Also, Steve, that guy over there—” I glance over to the vaguely familiar face of the stock-boy who often gives me curious glances when I come to the store. “Well, his family owns the grocery store and he recognized you and pointed you out to us. I just remembered your name because that’s my name too, and I remember thinking about what I would’ve done if my mom had died and stuff like that.”

“So what would you have done?”

“Done about what?” he asks, somewhat confused.

“What would you have done if your mom had died?”

“Well, I don’t know. I guess I never really thought of it that much,” he confesses.

“But you just said that when you heard about my mom’s death you thought about what it would have been like, right? Well, what did it feel like?”

“Hey man, I’m sorry if I offended you, but I was just striking up conversation and whatnot.”

We are incapable of communication; a dizziness swims in my head. I apologize for the confusion. “I didn’t mean anything either. I’m just having a bad day. I’ve gotta run though, I’ve got some groceries I need to get.” I turn to walk away.

“Well, okay. See you later, Jacob,” he says with a friendly tone.

I continue toward the store. I hear the guys mumble to each other. I feel their eyes on my back. I don’t like the feeling, but I don’t really care that much, either. A few laughs reach my ear, but I continue to distance myself from their sound.

I cross the street and walk into the town’s only grocery store. I grab the stuff on my list and take them to the counter, pulling out some bills for the cashier. The cashier

mechanically bags them, hands me my change, and I leave. Not a single word exchanged, only goods and services.

Bags in hand, I begin my long walk home. Again, I see the four guys from earlier, plus another one. The new arrival to the gang is a bit younger than the other guys. He moves clownishly, as if reenacting a story. I take the same path through the courthouse lawn, without acknowledging them.

Soon I hear the crescendo of burnt grass crunching under a lean stride. The sound peaks as he enters the periphery of my vision. I turn my head to halt his approach. His eyes look like thin pieces of glass, ready to break at the slightest high-note. He looks uncertain in his posture and expression, but he quickly gathers a bit of wherewithal. His shirt is made from a quality cotton, with a firm collar. His linen shorts hang low, covering his knees.

He struggles to conceal a smile. He asks me where I'm headed.

Without stopping, I say, "home."

"Hey, wait. My friend over there says you're walking all the way back to the county line. Is that so? In this heat?"

I nod.

"Well, that's a long way off from here. That's my older brother's car over there. I'm sure we can give you a ride out to your farm if you just come hang out with us for a bit."

"I don't have time. I need to be back in less than an hour, and since it's about an hour's walk from here, I had better be on my way."

"Fine, fine. We were just waiting for the next movie and it doesn't start for an hour. We can take you now if you'd like."

I stop walking, suddenly feeling drained and tired. The thought of a ride sounds enticing, so I tell the clown I'll

take him up on his offer. He looks pleased, and signals for his friends to meet us. The group understands his signal and walks toward us in near unison. A chill runs down my spine, deep into my thighs. The kid places his hand on my shoulder, ushering me toward the approaching guys. Instinctively, I shoot my head toward his hand, then to his eyes. He removes his grip.

The four approaching guys are all dressed neatly. They are my height or shorter, and I believe I outweigh most of them except for one. I am a solid three inches taller than the kid next to me, who now squirms like a dog eager to please his master. When the guys are close enough, the clown announces that I want a ride to the county line. "You can do that, right, Robert?"

I quickly clarify that I did not ask for a ride. "He offered one," I say while glaring at the clown. The kid frowns at me as if I had betrayed some shared bond, but he says nothing.

The shortest of the guys, Robert, I suppose, replies, "yeah, we have time. We can drive you out there real fast." Robert is the shortest, but his features are sharp and smart. His olive skin stretches over a well-defined layer of muscle. He moves awkwardly as if he were handicapped in one of his legs, but perhaps it's just an injury. His light brown eyes match his skin tone perfectly. Actually, upon closer examination, he is handsome and he makes me feel at ease.

The guys introduce themselves. A name and face I won't remember, then a handshake. Another name and face I won't remember, then another handshake. Again. And again. And finally, "My name is Robert. It's nice to meet you." A magnetism exudes from this person. A glow, like a multi-colored corona, emanates from him. His formal proportions do not match his awkward gait. Regardless of

his affliction, a steady spirit pours forth from his broken body.

The clown informs me that the guys are here to flirt with the girls when they come out of the theater. “My brother and his friends think they are so cool because they leave for college in a few weeks: Rice, UT, Baylor, SMU.” He pauses to see my reaction. I am somewhat interested, but my nascent curiosity evokes only a longer, more absent stare. The long afternoon shadows begin to flicker and drift unnaturally. The colors around me shift, transitioning through the spectrum. I try to ignore the changing colors, but dizziness consumes me.

“Are you okay?” asks Robert.

“I’m fine. It’s just a headache. I get them when—no, I mean, you were, we were—” A green flash consumes my vision as the sun drops from the sky. Darkness swallows the town. Movement ceases. Frozen shadows outline shapes of men. Their eyes glow orange-red, burning spheres of fission fixed in empty space. A crack rattles the sky above me. Columns of light pour through the ripping sky. The fissure grows larger until it encompasses the whole horizon. The light exposes craters in the town’s center: jagged, scarred, and forsaken. A strange gravity pulls me to the ground, but the warm earth catches me.

I smile.

“Hey, man, are you okay?” Robert looks down at me, blocking the sun from my face. Mockingbirds chirp from the trees. “I think you’re having a heat stroke. You passed out for a second. Let’s get you over to the store for some water.”

“No. I’m fine. Seriously, I just lost my breath. I get migraines, from allergies.” I sit up, but feel enclosed by the town’s buildings. I smile at the guys’ worried faces. “Sorry

about that. I guess I got some hops mixed up in my breakfast this morning. You know?"

Their worried expressions turn to confusion. Robert says, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about, but let's get you over to the shade."

My strength returns. I stand on my own strength. I assure the guys once more that I'm fine. I tell them I really need to get home. "Robert, can you still drive me?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course," he replies. "You know, if these types of fainting spells happen a lot, you should really go to a doctor and get yourself checked out. You could have a tumor, or epilepsy or something serious like that. My dad's a doctor. He could get someone to check you out."

"Epilepsy? No, I just have allergies during the summer from all the dust and pollen."

"Alright, whatever." After a brief pause, Robert asks, "So you're home schooled? How much longer till you're done?"

"This is my last year," I say.

"And then what are you doing?" asks one of the other boys. "You going to college, joining the military?"

I tell them I haven't really thought about it much. I say I'm probably just going to see where I end up, and then go from there. My honesty comforts me.

"Yeah, I guess it's hard to tell where we'll be a year from now," replies the boy as we get in the car.

I ask the guys what they will study next year at college, but no one seems to have a clear idea. Robert says, "My parents said the first two years of college are really meant for exploring ideas, and that your area of concentration will just come to you naturally, almost without making a decision. You know what I mean?"

I don't fully understand, but the idea sounds appealing. As we cruise down the county road, I see the van with the

Mexicans driving toward us. As they pass, the two Mexicans notice me in the backseat and nod slightly. My face remains still.

The guys drop me off at the beginning of our dirt road driveway. I thank them for their kindness and wish them well. I wave goodbye as they turn the car around and head back to their lives in town. I return to mine. A thin swath of grass grows between the two matted, parallel tire paths. The ravine next to the road cradles a sliver of water in its trough. The air here smells cooler, and sweeter, like honeysuckle.

The barn, like our house, is planted to the earth only superficially, whereas the trees spread their roots deep into the soil. They pull nourishment from the earth, sending it up to their outstretched arms. Even in this heat, and in this miserable town, the trees stretch their branches to the sky, grasping the energy falling through this place. They take their life's energy without feeding on other life, without hurting others. We animals steal, kill and cheat our way to our energy sources. Oh well. Such is life.

A tranquil boredom sedates my mind as I approach the house. I would expect to be excited about my plan to escape, but I feel nothing. I cherish this apathy, this nothingness.

People fear nothingness because they think nothingness equals death, or an absence of good. But, nothingness is also something. It's a singularity: a point of existence beyond time and spatial dimension. I want to be there, in that nothingness. Quantities and qualities exist in a world of limits, but I am limitless. I know that potentialities eventually become realities. I offer a word of thanks for the chance to see the beauty that exists beyond me. Hopefully, one day, I will leave behind these haunting echoes of dissonance that have killed my once emboldened spirit. Hopefully, one day, I will be beyond me.

X

Back at the house, my thoughts swirl as I prepare for our escape. They evaporate as quickly as they appear in my head. I close my eyes to rest my mind, but the careening thought-lines do not stop. My thoughts—rarely are they enough, and most often they are empty.

I feel only vanity in my decision to leave, nothing more. This whole circumstance is comical. I cling to these moments, as if grasping roots on the bank of some river, desperately trying to pull myself from the water. But time moves too fast to pull myself out. I must be overtaken by these rushing waters. I must drown, here, in this river of life. Besides, time, like pain, is only an illusion. We can breathe in this water if we try. Life teaches us to perceive the patterns of this universe, and how to interpret them. This is why I breathe deeply when I can; to find my thoughts and feed my head with oxygen.

The sun falls heavily through the late afternoon sky. Darkness will arrive soon. I make dinner for my sister and myself, then pack sandwiches for later. At the dinner table, my sister absentmindedly pokes at her food with her fork.

“Jacob, why do we have to leave again?” She looks uneasy.

I tell her she knows why we have to leave, because our dad is sick, really sick. “It’s not the kind of sickness that makes you lie in bed. It’s the kind of sickness that makes people do bad things, to hurt others around them. He has a problem no medicine can fix. Plus, dad’s not very nice to me, and I worry that if something were to ever happen to me, he might not be that nice to you, either. And who would be there to protect you?”

“Yeah, I guess he isn’t very nice to you. And that’s mean. But he isn’t that mean to me,” she says timidly.

“Yeah, but he hasn’t done anything nice for you either. You and I both should be going to school, not sitting out here on this dying farm. We don’t even plant anything anymore. You and I should be dreaming of going to college, of making something special out of our lives. Be honest with me. Do you understand what I mean?” Urgency grows within me as I plead with her to see things from my point of view.

“But I like reading by myself and having you grade my work and teach me things. If I went to school, I would never see you, and I wouldn’t like that. Plus, I don’t have any pretty dresses to wear, like the girls in town have.”

“That’s exactly my point, don’t you see? You should be able to have those dresses, and meet other girls your age, and play and learn with them. Just like I should be able to meet kids my own age and play and learn with them too. We would still be able to hang out, and I could still read for you and look over your homework, but we would be able to do so many more things if we actually went to a real school. Listen, you like to draw things, don’t you?”

She nods.

“Well, what do you like most about drawing?”

“I like making something. I like moving the pictures from my head to the paper. And it makes me feel happy when you tell me how nice they are. I like how when I draw, I only see the drawing in my head, and nothing else. It’s mine. And it feels nice to share those pictures with other people, like you, because it means that they really are as pretty as I thought they were. I don’t know, Jacob.”

I explain to her how if she were someplace better, she would be able to draw for more people than just me. I tell her those people would encourage her to continue drawing, they would inspire her to see even more clearly the beauty within. “And those people would take care of you and keep you safe. So please, just try to understand that this trip is best for us. Do you understand?”

“So, Jacob, what do *you* want to share? What do *you* want to give the world?”

I smile. “Well, I don’t know about that, but I do know that you have something to give them, so maybe my gift will just be you. I don’t really think the world would like to see what’s in my head. Those pictures aren’t as nice as yours.”

She giggles, then prods her food some more.

I remind her to make sure her bag is ready because we’re leaving tonight. “Try to get some sleep before I wake you up. We’ll head down the road to meet my friend, Becca. She’s very nice, and pretty, and you’ll really like her. She’s going to drive us to the bus, and from there we’ll be on our own. But we’ll be fine.”

“And what are we going to do when we get to California?”

I briefly outline my plan to her. “It’s not much, but at least it’s a start. And that’s all we really need.”

She smiles in agreement. “Sometimes, when I draw, I just start off with an idea, and by the time I get the picture onto the paper it changes into something different. I like it when that happens. It’s like the idea comes to me from somewhere else. I mean, how can I draw stuff that I didn’t even see until it was already in front of me, on paper? I mean, where does that come from? That makes me happy.”

Between greedy mouthfuls, I ask her why that makes her happy.

She answers quickly, as though she had anticipated my question. “Because it means there is something pretty out there. And that’s nice. Jacob, you have to let yourself see those pretty things. I have an extra sketch pad you could use if you want to try.”

“I’ve tried drawing before. Something gets in the way of what I see in my head and what I can put on the page. You don’t have that problem, and that’s special. Your eyes and your hands are able to work in both worlds. It helps all of us other people see the world the way you can.”

She has drifted off in her thoughts, but returns quickly once I stop speaking. She says, “I’m sorry, Jacob. I wasn’t listening. I was thinking about how happy you make me.”

Her words pass slowly through my mind, like waves in search of a soft beach. I smile.

XI

I go out to the barn to see whether there are any more chores I need to complete for my dad. When I enter, I see him arranging wood on the floor. I tell him I did the grocery shopping for the week. “I still have some leftover change from the jar.”

I reach my hand into my pocket to pull out the bills and coins, but he just shakes his head and says, “No, don’t worry about it. Just put it back in the jar or keep it. It doesn’t matter. In fact, here, put this in the jar as well.” He hands me three one hundred dollar bills. “That’s for groceries for the rest of the month . . . and some new clothes. You look like shit.”

Stunned, I extend an arm to accept the money. His hands possess an agile strength under the worn skin. He releases the money; his fingertips spreading like fireworks across the life lines of my palm. His energy is calm, contemplative. He notices the gentle touch across my palm and pulls his hand away. While standing across from him like this, I realize I am now slightly taller than him. My nostrils sit a fraction higher than his. I nod and say, “thanks.”

He doesn't answer. He seems lost in my eyes. He says, "Jacob, do you ever get jealous?"

"Jealous? Jealous of what?" My confusion quickly turns into a sickening fear.

"Jealous? Jealous of what?" He mocks me with a tone of disgust.

His eyes inhale the remaining sunlight, darkening the world around me. "You know, jealous of all those town kids. Jealous that they're going to college, traveling the world, all that bullshit?"

His eyes glaze, suddenly unfocused. Crack! He slaps my face with an open palm, but it doesn't hurt. My head barely moves. The slap was more show than force. He is tempting me. My eyes narrow, and my body tightens. The veins in his neck and on his forehead bulge, but he speaks calmly. "Jacob, I am a messenger. You can't stop me, so stop prying around where you shouldn't."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say.

"Yes you do." He grips both my shoulders, preventing any possible retreat. "Jacob, I take from those who don't use what's in front of them. I help them discover something new. I help them see that we are all just stuck here. Motionless. Condemned to reappear, here, now."

His grip tightens around my shoulders, his fingers sinking deeper into the tissue under my joints. He pulls me close to his body, his face only inches from mine. He continues, "I know you think there's something wrong with me, but open your eyes." The moisture from his stale breath wets my lips. He shakes me as he speaks. "Open your eyes!" Sprays of saliva wash over me, unwanted rain falling on a dead earth.

I smell fear on his body. I want to pity him, but I cannot. I interrupt his hissing breath. "We're just passing through;

it doesn't last forever. We just need to find something, here, before we can leave."

His grip eases slightly, creating some space between us. His head wobbles on his shoulders like a spinning top. He says, "Jacob, you think I don't know this? What's in me is in you, too; so don't think that you can fight it, because you can't. It's too strong. It has kept me alive; it brought you into this world. And it's the only way out."

I shake my head. I say, "I don't know where the paths lead or how they work, but you're wrong."

"You're a fool! Like your mother! Get out of here, I have work to do." He releases his grip on me, and walks into the barn's mouth.

On my way back to the house, I begin to see him more clearly. I understand his selfishness. My self is the only thing over which I feel control. Even if that control is just an illusion, and there is a good chance it is, I don't care to see through it. Oh well, enough of this. I have more urgent matters at hand. My breath steadies as I contemplate the plan for tonight.

I crawl into bed, but I can't sleep. I stare at the ceiling, thinking of the money in my bag. I am certain there is enough to get to California, and feed us for months, maybe longer. Working out the details will be another task, but all I can do now is take the leap. The path will either open before us, or swallow us whole. I hope I have made the right decision, but what does it mean to make the right decision?

I tell myself, "the right decision is the decision that's best for my sister and me."

But what does that mean?

“Something is best for us when it is the way it’s supposed to be. If it’s the way its supposed to be, then it satisfies some greater pattern.”

But, if there is a pattern that must be satisfied, how could anything ever be otherwise?

I shake my head. I try to focus my mind on my breathing, away from my thoughts, but I cannot. The human mind is so trained to find patterns that it often creates meaning where meaning may not actually exist.

I get out of bed to check the oven-clock’s time. The linoleum floor grips at my feet like fly paper. The clock reads midnight. I glance briefly at the waxing moon as it climbs through the dark sky. It glides faithfully around the earth, through the cold, empty space above. Its reflected light reminds us that the sun still burns with life giving energy.

Time moves agonizingly slow. The clock has no seconds-ticker, but when I listen closely, I hear the spinning gears measuring our planet’s movement. Our trip is a cycle. We laugh, sing, and cry, all while hurtling through the emptiness of space, only to return where we began. We trip hard. We trip well. We trip because we have no choice. We build things, we create life, we do so much, but for what?

From my room I see the lights of the barn’s second story windows. My dad’s skull-shaped castle has been there since the dawn of my memory. I’m not really certain who built it. I have always assumed it just grew from the earth, long before any of us arrived. He has always preferred it over our house, which is fine with me.

At birth we are thrown into the world, vastly unprepared for the inevitable confusion of living life. We do everything we can to find meaning, to find patterns, to make sense of things, but there really is no pattern we fully comprehend.

Our species has become so distracted by life that we can no longer find the path to death. We have lost the way to rebirth, escape, and freedom.

I am an extending progression, passing through the quadrants of all positive and negative values. I am the asymptote. I approach the axis, but never touch it. If I could pull myself together, enough to be at one in my head, then I could complete the equation, unify my mind. Instead, my consciousness exists in fragments. Maybe my sister was right. Maybe there was something I could have given the world, or could have given someone. But now, I fear it's too late.

The night's silence overwhelms me. I am weary and need a place to rest; someplace far from the clamor of my thoughts. I will not be able to fall asleep tonight. After a while, I head to the kitchen to check the time: one forty-five.

It's time to leave.

XII

My sister's eyes open slowly, but widely. I whisper to her that it's time to go. Her arms reach out for my neck, as if trying to hug me, but I suspect she is just using my strength to help lift her out of bed. She clings to my neck a little longer than necessary before releasing me. In this moment, my life connects with hers. We breathe one breath.

The pale moonlight pours through the window. I pull the straps of her bag firmly around her shoulders, then pick up my bags. I hold the side door, shutting it quietly after she passes. The tire tracks on the driveway glow softly in the moonlight, leading us as we begin our journey.

I urge my sister forward, down the driveway. "Come on, hurry. We're meeting Becca just up ahead."

"Where is she?" she whispers.

"Just a little farther. Just keep moving . . . and don't look back."

The hard, dry ground crunches underneath our rushed steps. Pieces of hard rock stab the bottom of my thin soles, trying to end our flight before it begins. I walk behind my sister, occasionally giving her a gentle shove to keep her

moving quickly. When we reach the end of the dirt road, we take a left, down the much darker county road. The black asphalt absorbs the moonlight.

“Where is she, Jacob?” Her voice sounds uncertain.

I don’t see anyone, but I still have a little farther to walk before I reach the spot where I had met Becca earlier. I reply, with exaggerated confidence, that she’ll be up ahead. “Just keep walking.”

Tension clutches my stomach. The knotting sensation starts deep in my bowels, working its way up my intestines, and into my torso. Anxiety is a sickness. It reminds me how weak I really am. These emotions control me. They crush me where I stand, shaming me. I didn’t want to be here. I never asked to be here.

Becca, please be there. Please. I reach back and grab my sister’s hand; she acquiesces to my forceful grip. She would follow me off a cliff in broad daylight if I asked her to do so. If I break her trust now, her world will unravel. If she viewed the world through my eyes, she might not have the strength to continue.

Somewhere ahead, through the darkness, I hear a rumble. Becca’s car sits idling in the darkness, alone, except for the sound of the motor. I smile and give thanks to that which I do not understand. My unworthy praise, given to gods that appear as many, but are actually one and the same.

My walk turns into a run. I hear the patter of my sister’s feet as she struggles to keep up with me. I fling the door open, pushing down the front seat and stuffing my sister into the back of the car. I say hello to Becca and introduce the two girls. Before I finish speaking, my sister climbs over the center console and hugs Becca. The side of her face rests against Becca’s neck. Despite the darkness, I see

Becca's confounded expression. She has no idea what she has committed to, and for this I am sorry. However, now, it's too late. I pull my sister away from Becca. "Stay back here, and try to sleep a little."

I push my seat back, then close the heavy door. The clanking metal resonates in the darkness. I thank Becca once more for meeting us, for helping us, for being here. I tell her that we really need to go.

She remains mute, unmoving; seemingly unaware of my presence. I grab her hand and squeeze it gently. "Becca, please, let's go." She hesitates a moment longer before squeezing my hand.

She breathes deeply, confidently. "Okay, Jacob. Let's go."

XIII

In front of us, the dawn breaks through the black-blue horizon as we travel east, toward Houston. We join the caravan of headlights on the interstate. The car cruises quietly in the far right lane while faster cars speed by us on their way to the city. My sister sleeps soundly in the backseat while Becca grips the wheel, carefully navigating the clogged artery. She has tuned the radio station to a rock and roll channel. Defiant, assured beats lift my spirit.

The city of Houston emerges from the coastal plain nearly forty miles from its central business district. Outlying strip malls cling to the highway exits. All kinds of stores: furniture, adult videos, liquor, car dealerships. It is a never-ending sequence of people peddling their wares.

“Why do we need so much stuff? People think they need so much stuff. I’m telling you: we’re bound to consume everything, and when we finish with that, we’ll consume each other.”

Becca doesn’t reply. She maintains her tight grip on the wheel. After a few moments, she says, “Well, it’s a good thing there are so many gas stations, otherwise you’d be

out pushing by now.” She smiles at me, and with her right hand, she gives me a playful shove in my ribs. I wince, but her touch was worth the pain.

“You know, you might have just broken one of my ribs.”

She doesn’t respond. I tell her I’ll pay for gas when we stop.

“No, it’s okay, Jacob, I’ve got it.”

“No, it’s not okay. We had a deal,” I say. I reach into my duffel bag to pull out some cash. I shove a hundred dollar bill into the front pocket of her jeans. Her legs feel warm, soft, inviting. The tips of my fingers graze the downward-sloping portion of her inner thigh. The cloth between my fingers and her leg feels thin. I trace a trail of sensation, which I see only with my fingertips. I pull my hand from her pocket and tell her she has no choice. She must take it.

She gives me a sideways, cautious glance, pouting her lower lip. Begrudgingly, she says thanks. She spots a gas station ahead, and exits the interstate. The station’s storefront is constructed to resemble a log cabin, with wood barrels and wagon spokes attached to a faded wood facade. The whole thing looks fake and offensive, but at least they tried.

“Jacob, where are we?” My sister says as she rouses from her slumber. She rubs her eyes and looks around. “I have to pee.”

Without hesitation, Becca chimes, “Okay, sweetheart, me too. Let’s go on to the ladies room while your brother here fills the tank.”

“Okay,” she answers, unbuckling her seat belt.

“Hey there, keep that thing buckled until we stop. You don’t want to fly through the windshield, do you?” I twist around to get a better look at her. She seems comfortable and bright eyed. It’s the brightness in her eyes that motivates

me. That light is worth more than I'll be worth, more than anything I'll ever know. She sticks her tongue out at me and contorts her face grossly.

"Wow, I didn't know you were a model. Hold that pose, let me find my camera." I turn around to act as if I'm looking for a camera. After a few moments I look back over my shoulder at her. Although clearly exerting great effort, she still maintains her hideous face, and for that, she deserves credit. I laugh so loud it hurts my ribs.

Becca parks next to the gas pump and, inadvertently, we un-click our seat belts in unison. I hear my sister giggle in the backseat. The sun now paints the morning sky a green-blue tint, and the air is already warming. Thankfully, a cool breeze still emanates from the night air farther west. The thick humidity lingers over us, a reminder that the sea is near.

After I finish pumping gas, I head into the gas station to find Becca and my sister. A bell jingles against the door sill as I walk in. A large stuffed bear sits in the far left corner. It stands on its two hind legs, its paws outstretched menacingly. The bear's teeth slice the air around its mouth. What a shame. Such a powerful animal, killed by the simple squeeze of a trigger. I rarely come across evidence suggesting that humans are *not* evil. We exert dominion on this world as if it were a duty.

Becca shouts from across the store, "Jacob, you want a brisket sandwich?" She stands in front of a deli stand. My sister stands next to her looking at the meats behind the glass.

"No thanks, we packed some sandwiches. We're fine."

My sister pleads with me from across the store. "C'mon Jacob, they look so good. Our sandwiches are yucky now."

I concede. The guy on the on the other side of the deli counter packs three brisket sandwiches and three large pickles into a brown paper bag. I grab some potato chips and some sodas from a refrigerator and bring them to the cash register.

“Is that all?” asks the cashier.

“And the gas from that blue car out there,” I say, pointing out the glass windows to the car.

“Alright,” he responds. He mashes buttons on the register. Becca reaches into her pocket and pulls out the hundred dollar bill. The cashier counts out our change, then reaches into a bucket of candies and hands one to my sister.

“Thanks, mister,” says my sister.

“Y’all have a nice day now. Take care,” says the attendant. He waves a long goodbye as we leave. I nod, and my sister waves goodbye.

When we return to the car, Becca tries to hand me the change. I tell her to keep it. “We still have some driving to do, so just hold onto it.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “I was thinkin’ . . . you guys will be much more comfortable on a train out west, rather than a bus.”

I don’t answer, but she doesn’t seem to mind. The engine roars as we merge onto the interstate again. I haven’t slept in what seems like forever. Suddenly, the rumble of the engine, the thumping of the road, and the whooshing wind coalesce into one sound, which hypnotizes me. Becca and my sister chatter about something. Their words dissolve into a lulling resonance. Dark arms embrace me. They cover me in a cloak and pull my eyelids closed. The sounds harmonize on a minor note. My mind leaves my body, entering a world of quiet darkness. I follow the sound of the note until there is nothing.

XIV

When I wake, we're passing downtown Houston. I've been here before, but the buildings never cease to amaze me. The sky-scrapers exude status. Some of the buildings have sharp angles for added flare, others have colored glass to contrast the lifeless color of steel. We speed past these modern obelisks like a comet passing the sun. How did people figure out how to stack things so high? Build them so sturdily? And who fills them? I imagine them empty inside, like hollow trophies.

Becca looks at me and says, "Hey there, sleepy head. Nice nap?"

"Yeah, I guess. I didn't dream. I don't really remember much."

"Well, did you know you talk in your sleep?"

"No. What did I say?"

She pauses for a moment to change lanes. "I couldn't really pick out much. Something about music. Trying to find your way to some music."

"I didn't think I was dreaming, but sometimes it's hard to tell."

From the corner of her eye, she casts an inquisitive look at me. “Do you do that on purpose? Or are you really just like that? It’s kind of weird ya’ know?”

“Like what?” I ask her, a bit offended.

She smiles, shakes her head and says, “You know, talking like a preacher, or something like that. You always sound like you’re trying to say more than just the words you say. But I’m beginning to think that really is just how you talk.” I don’t answer, and she doesn’t continue. But only a few moments later she asks, “Do you think you’re wise or something?”

I think before answering. “Well, I don’t really know what you mean by that. I really don’t know much of anything, and I always imagined wisdom as being certain about something. So, I guess, no, I don’t think I’m wise. I’ve seen and felt a lot of things in my head, and I have a feeling that not too many people have explored their minds like I have. But I’m not certain that is wisdom, or that I’m wise. I just kind of bounce around life reacting to my circumstances. That’s not wisdom so much as observation and instinct.”

She laughs loudly, “Whatever, Jacob! Man, you really are out there. You’re a trip.” She reaches over and pats my thigh. The vibrations ripple through my lap, converging between my legs. A pleasurable yearning grips my body, and my breath slows into a deep sucking, followed by a controlled exhalation. Becca has power over a lost part of me. I glance at her as she grips the steering wheel, her fingers snugly wrapped around the leather frame. She hums and taps her index finger to the music’s rhythm. Becca manifests the notion of extension; of moving beyond the seen. She leaves me weak in my legs, but I am stronger than her. I can see it in her body and feel it in her touch. I could have her

if I wanted. I look away before I get caught in a whirlwind of thought-lines.

Sound barriers border the adjacent neighborhoods, protecting the houses from the nuisance of commuters, trucks, and all sorts of passing machines. We come to an intersection on the feeder road and take a right to enter a neighborhood full of one-story homes that all look nearly identical. We turn down one of the cookie-cutter roads and head to the end of a cul-de-sac. The house we park in front of has a few bikes and some plastic toys strewn about the front lawn. The grass is withered, reminiscent of Wharton. Three cars are crammed into the driveway; the garage door is open, revealing heaps of boxes, old furniture, and a bunch of rusty tools.

Becca sighs as she kills the engine. “We’re here,” she says with feigned satisfaction. My spine tingles at the sight of her unease.

I ask her why she seems uneasy, but she simply shrugs her shoulders, saying nothing. She pulls the keys from the ignition, looks back at my sister and then at my waiting eyes. “Jacob, I have to tell you something. This is my cousin’s house. I’m just going to pick up some stuff I left here for storage, and then we’ll be on our way to the train station. For now, you need to keep an eye on your sister.”

My heart beats heavily. My mind struggles to keep pace. Becca continues, “We won’t be here long, but my cousin’s husband is not a very nice guy, and—well, you should just be careful.”

I look back at my sleepy sister. She says, “It’s hot. Can we go inside?”

“Yeah, yeah, hold on.” I open my door and flip the seat forward to help her out of the car. She unbuckles herself and squirms out of her seat, reaching back to grab her stuff

before scurrying past me. She stretches in the ripening sunlight. The cement road ripples under layers of heat. Something different shows itself in Becca's eyes. She walks around the car toward me. She says to my sister, "Why don't you run along to the front door? Wait for us in the shade up there. You can ring the doorbell."

"Okay," she says. I watch her walk up the crisp lawn.

Becca touches my arm, but I feel none of the energy I normally feel, only fear. "Jacob, I think my cousin's husband is a little off. He's not necessarily mean—well—I've just seen the way he is with my cousin's little girl, and I just have a feeling something isn't right. I've said something to her before, but she doesn't listen. She just gets mad, and thinks I'm trying to ruin things in her life. I just wanted you to know that I don't trust the guy."

"Then why did we come here?" I ask, frustrated by her warning.

Becca assures me that we won't be long. "I just have to pick up some stuff I left here before I went to Corpus. I'll be as fast as I can, and we'll be out of here in no time."

I coil my nerves. Tension equals energy. In order to survive, you need to react quickly. Most of life is just one prolonged reaction. We are stuck in a world of reaction.

"You ready, Jacob?" Becca asks.

I toss the duffel bag over my shoulder. "Yeah, let's go."

Becca nods, then heads toward my sister, who waits patiently at the front door. We reach the porch's shade, but the heat remains undiminished. "Go ahead. Ring the bell," Becca urges my sister. She complies with eagerness, or sadness—I can no longer read her. When the air is this thick, it's hard to see clearly.

There is commotion on the other side of the door, sliding locks, twisting knobs. The door opens to reveal a

fairly pretty girl, a little older than Becca, but with no light in her eyes.

Becca speaks first. She says, “Hi Jade, long time no see. I told you I’d make it back to pick up my things.”

“Who’d you bring?” Jade replies emptily. She looks at us as if she were blind.

Becca says matter-of-factly, “This is Jacob, and his little sister. They’re family of a friend in Corpus. I’m dropping them off at the airport later this afternoon. They’re going to Dallas to visit their grandparents for the summer.”

My sister shoots a glance at me, but I stare purposefully back at her, commanding her to follow my lead. I grab her shoulder and squeeze it. The tension in her shoulders relaxes underneath my grip.

I extend my hand to greet Becca’s cousin. She looks down at it, as if my gesture were a foreign language. She takes my hand mechanically. There is no grip or movement, only the cold, clammy extension of her limp arm. Her hand mirrors her eyes. There is no energy in this woman’s body. As she releases my grip, her eyes flash an expression that momentarily terrifies me. I shudder. She steps aside, allowing us into her home. My sister looks at me uneasily, but I gently push her through the doorway, trailing closely behind her.

Jade closes the door behind us, and for a moment, we find ourselves just standing in the foyer looking at each other. A dining room opens to my left. A wall blocks our forward progress, but there are two openings on either side that lead to the living room. My sister breaks the silence. “May I please use your bathroom?”

Jade nods. “It’s around that corner right there, and then straight down the hallway. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks,” my sister says, as she hustles around the corner before I have a chance to stop her.

“Hey—” I yell after her, but it’s too late. The patter of her feet fades. A slamming door echoes in the wake of her disappearance. I follow her path into the living room. Checkered curtains drape windows that face the backyard of the house. Sunlight struggles to pass through the thick cloth. An oversized, wrap-around sofa takes up most of the room. The couch faces a large television with wood trim. The television sits on the floor, quietly playing an infomercial.

“You guys want something to drink?” asks Jade.

Becca asks for some water, and I parrot her request.

The hallway my sister ran down is dark, and I cannot see the bathroom door from where I stand in the dim living room. I listen, but I cannot hear anything either. Jade leaves the living room through the other end. I hover in place, waiting for my sister to return. Becca senses my unease and looks at me with what appears to be sadness, but could be pity. She looks at Jade, clearly wanting to follow her, but she remains frozen, like me.

I hear a door open, and mumbling voices. The voices grow louder, and through the dark tunnel of the doorway I see three shapes emerge. One of the shapes is a gigantic man, nearly the size of the hallway itself. The man’s hulking arm is extended down his side, holding the much smaller arm of a much smaller form. Behind the man is yet another small form, trailing closely behind the leading two. The footsteps of the profiled people ring loudly in my head.

The man emerges through the doorway to face me in the living room. His hand completely covers my sister’s hand as he holds it above her head at an awkward angle. Another little girl with a blank expression stands obediently behind

my sister and the man. My eyes sharpen and my fists clench. I grind my teeth as my jaw muscles draw taut. My sister looks at me, uncomfortably. She pulls her hand from his unyielding grip, and walks toward me eagerly. The ogreish man follows her with his eyes, not yet acknowledging me: he betrays a weakness immediately. As my sister reaches my side she takes my hand. His eyes move naturally from her to me. His power of observation is limited. His eyes blankly move over my body while his mind travels in a different direction. He is not worried by my presence, a mistake on his part.

I break his chain of thought. “Hi, my name is Jacob.” I step toward him and extend my hand. He glances down at it, and then at me, as if I have just materialized in front of him. His oddly soft hand takes mine. He squeezes unwillingly, as though he were in a rush to be somewhere and I have just interrupted him. His hands are large, but weak. Layers of soft tissue cover pliable bones. His stomach stretches a thin cotton t-shirt that hangs above his beltless blue jean waistband. His bare feet are small and probably provide him with little balance or speed.

“Hi, Becca,” his slippery hand slides from my grip as he waves impishly at Becca.

Becca smiles falsely. “Hi Harold. How are you?”

He leans back and rubs his belly as if rustling up the words from deep within his torso. “Well, you know how it goes, just movin’ and shakin’.”

His voice is nasally and much higher pitched than it should be. He steps toward Becca with exaggerated animation as if grandstanding at a circus. Everything about this man reeks of waste, and I instantly hate him. The familiar warmth of aggression sedates my edgy nerves, focusing my eyes on his movements. My sister watches me

as I size him up. Becca hesitates as Harold approaches her with his arms extended. She remains rigid as he squeezes her body close to his, leaning back to lift her into the air. She keeps her arms close to her sides, slowly pulling away, but he notices none of this and continues to smile mindlessly.

He is stupid and clumsy. He releases her and she steps back from him, nearly to the foyer from which we entered. Harold looks back at my sister and me, then at the little girl who is now standing directly behind me. The little girl is only a year or so younger than my sister. She stands there wearing her pajamas and holding a stuffed dog made from the patches of a quilt. Much like her mother, her eyes are lifeless, staring blankly ahead. A flicker of resentment glimmers deep within her stare.

“That there is Leslie,” squeaks Harold. “She just woke from a little nap. Didn’t you, princess?”

The girl nods her head submissively. Her face makes it clear that she barely apprehends her world. Sounds and sights appear in front of her, but she does not recognize them. She struggles to keep track of where she should be focusing her attention. My heart breaks at the sight of this broken soul. My sister moves closer to the girl and says, “I like your dog. What’s its name?”

“Patches,” says the girl.

“That’s a pretty name,” my sister replies.

Harold attempts a booming declaration, but instead, only a high pitched whine escapes his mouth, “Jade! Let’s get some lunch out here!” He pauses to look at everyone in the room, his eyes lingering on my sister. Harold says, “You’ll be staying for lunch, right?”

Becca looks at me uneasily, then says to Harold, “Well, we really need to be getting on our way. I’m going to grab

my boxes first and then we'll see if we have enough time to stay for lunch. How's that sound to you, Jacob?"

I look abruptly at Becca, then back at Harold as he once again stares at the girls, oblivious to my wrathful countenance. "It's your call, Becca," I reply without taking my eyes off Harold's monstrous form.

I sit on the couch next to my sister, Leslie, and Harold. A clamor drifts from the kitchen as Jade prepares something for lunch. Becca goes to the garage to look for the boxes she came to retrieve.

The walls shrink.

Harold hands me a remote control to the television and says, "Here you go, son, flip through this for a while. You should find something that does it for you."

I put the remote down next to me and look into his eyes. I say, "I'm not your son. I'm fine without television."

He ignores my rudeness, and starts trying to edge in on the girls' conversation about the stuffed dog named Patches. He moves off the couch and onto the floor, next to the girls.

"I like his eyes," says my sister to the little girl.

"Yeah, they're my favorite too," says Leslie. Her response is the first semblance of awareness.

"My favorite part is his tail," Harold says, trespassing upon their conversation. His fat body slithers toward them like a snake stalking a rat. Both girls ignore him and continue petting Patches.

"I can draw a picture of Patches for you, if you want," my sister says. Leslie nods her head, a pleased expression emerges on the dead surface of her face.

Harold interrupts the girls again, "Well, then, let's go back and get your crayons and paper, Leslie. You can come,

too.” He pulls himself off the floor and beckons the girls toward the dark hallway and the rooms beyond.

“I have my stuff right here,” says my sister fussily, springing to her feet to grab her bag. Harold frowns.

My legs begin to shake involuntarily. I fidget with the remote control to keep my hands occupied. My sister pulls out a pad of paper and two or three colored pencils. Leslie scoots around to sit next to her. Harold drops to the floor again, sneaking behind the two girls as if he were interested in the drawing.

His fat lips are wet, his breathing labored. He crawls on all fours, lifting his head above the girls. He hovers above their scalps. My sister stops sketching to look at me. Our eyes meet. She searches for an answer I can't give her, but she smiles nonetheless. Sometimes I wish she didn't have so much faith in me.

Harold moans, “Ooh! Ah! That's pretty.”

My sister ignores him. Leslie looks briefly at Harold, who smiles and pushes his lips together, making a smacking sound. Leslie stares through him.

I tell Harold I don't think the girls need to be crowded.

He glares at me and hisses, “Excuse me, son?”

I cock my head. I speak calmly despite the hot anger percolating within me. I say, “Harold, I already told you that I'm not your son. And, I don't think the girls need to be so crowded while they play.”

My sister continues to draw, but her eyes gravitate toward mine. I keep her in my periphery, but I stare at Harold. Leslie continues to watch my sister draw. He lifts his oversized body and lumbers over to me. He leans his face close to mine. His breath smells like sour milk. He places his hand around the top of my knee, using his body

as a shield from the girls' line of sight. He clamps his fat fingers into a claw shape and begins to squeeze the soft part of my knee, above my knee cap. The pain is real, but bearable. He looks into my eyes and says, "Excuse me, son? Come again?"

His grip tightens. I deepen my breath, then place my thumb between the knuckles of his middle finger and ring finger. My hands are much stronger than his, and I feel his grip weakening as my thumb burrows deep into the crevice. Pain floats to the surface of his face. I smile.

I squeeze my thumb deeper into his hand: the cartilage and bone bend beneath the pressure. I whisper, "I know what you are." I relax my grip and he pulls his hand back, shaking it slowly. He remains unfazed by my words and decides to pretend our encounter never happened. He slides back on the floor, next to the girls. My sister continues to draw.

He exudes childlike foolishness. He giggles at the way my sister draws a bushy tail for the dog's portrait. Both girls ignore him. My muscles tighten and I grip the couch in an effort to refrain from kicking him in the side of his plump head or stomping his spine into the ground. From where I sit I could kick his windpipe without stepping off the couch. I hear Becca enter the house from the garage, but she goes to the kitchen to speak with her cousin. The faint sounds from the kitchen struggle to escape the oblique angles of the home.

Harold tries to guide my sister's hand as she draws, but she obstinately retreats from his grip.

I stand up, but I don't move. "Harold, don't touch her!"

Harold looks irritated. With much effort, he stands. He yells past me, "Jade!" I hear dishes drop on the kitchen

counter. The sound of rustling feet becomes audible in the outskirts of my mind, but for now, my attention is dedicated to Harold.

The energy in the room changes quickly upon Jade's arrival. I see my sister's eyes: they glaze over, but she remains calm and pulls Leslie toward the hallway. She places an arm around the scared girl. Without warning, Harold swings an open palm at my face, but I step back and easily avoid his feminine slap. He groans with frustration, then throws his weight forward, his arms spread wide. He's much larger than I am, so I have no hope of changing his momentum. Instead, I duck under his arms, sliding past him.

Becca enters the room and shouts, "Stop it! What the hell is going on in here?"

Harold steadies himself. I immediately tell Becca what happened, and how he was bothering the girls.

Harold shrills, "Get out! Get out of my house!" His breathing becomes disjointed as if he struggles to hold back tears: a disgusting sight.

"Now, Harold, just calm down. We've had a long day of traveling. Jacob's just tired and a bit under the weather. I'm almost done. I just need to get a box of books from the attic." She pauses to let him catch his breath. Becca continues, "We're leaving. Jacob is sorry. Aren't you, Jacob?" Her widely opened eyes are focused sharply on me.

"Sure. Why not?" I say, which seems to calm Harold. His fat fingers are so swollen they look webbed.

His chest heaves. Strings of saliva drip from his gaping mouth. Is this really what life has become? Are we all this abhorrent, and no one notices?

"J-J-J-Just take that boy out of here. He's scaring the girls," he says to Becca.

“Okay dear,” Jade says. She walks toward me, pulling my elbow toward the kitchen. I gently pull my arm free from her impotent grip. Harold doesn’t notice my resistance to Jade’s efforts; he has already turned around to pull Leslie into his arms, comforting her from the commotion. She is petrified in his arms. His left hand sits underneath her bottom, and with his right hand, he rubs her spine and pets the nape of her neck. All the while he watches my sister, but she watches me closely, oblivious to Harold’s gaze. He stops patting Leslie then gestures for my sister with an outstretched arm. She retreats a few steps backward, into the doorway. He now stands between my sister and me. He puts Leslie down on the couch, and reaches for my sister with outstretched arms. Her eyes remain patiently fixed on me.

My thoughts cease: clarity. I lower my shoulders, charging Harold. I hit him with my full force, and we slam into the wall. His sheer mass makes it hard for me to drag him away from my sister. He bounces into the wall, stumbling backward then falling on me. His heavy body crushes me. With great effort, I push him off me and spring to my feet. I kick him in his ribs, then step back. He writhes on the floor, sucking for air. I resist the temptation to enjoy watching him like this. Instead, dread fills me. I feel as if the scale has tipped: an avalanche has commenced. I look to my left and see my sister confidently watching me. The walls press against my back, trapping me in this moment.

In my head, I hear a voice. “It’s okay, Jacob. It’s almost over.”

Harold lies on the floor, sniffing and wheezing. I refrain from a second kick. Becca and Leslie stare blankly at me. I am a ghost in their eyes, but I have made these choices.

They are mine. I stand proudly before the world. Proud of who I am, of how I am.

Harold crawls away from me, lifting himself to his feet using the corner of the couch. Furious, he hisses, "Jade, call the police! He assaulted me in my own house. You saw him. Go on, call the police!"

Jade remains frozen, paralyzed by the circumstances. She looks at Becca, who says, "No, no, wait! We're leaving right now."

I stuff my sister's colored pencils and sketch pad into my duffel bag. "I'm sorry! We're leaving right now." I shoot an anxious glance at Becca. Jade remains frozen, not knowing who to obey. Harold stares with disbelief at Jade's disobedience. He screams at her again, commanding her to call the police. "You don't even care! Fine, I'll do it myself." He stomps toward the kitchen.

I ask Harold to stop, telling him again that I'm sorry. He ignores me and heads into the kitchen, out of view. I run after him, but when I turn the corner a piercing pain greets my face. I reel back, wincing and covering my right eye. Through my open left eye I see Harold holding a large picture frame in his hand; a pleased grin on his face. He reaches for a phone that hangs from the wall, next to the dusty outline of the picture frame. I rush him again, but this time he is more prepared and uses his size more advantageously. Instead of moving him, I hit a wall of soft, absorbent flesh. He grabs me in a bear hug, shoving me away from the phone. I stumble backward several feet, but I don't fall.

He has already dialed the numbers before I can rush him again. This time I pull my body close to his, wrapping my legs behind his ankles, causing us both to fall. He smells acrid. I swing my head forward, through the few inches that

separate our faces. I connect with his nose and hear a pop, followed by a squeal. Blood begins to flow freely from his nose. The fluid appears brown against his pale pink skin. He releases his grip on me to cover his his face. I hop to my feet. I grab the phone, which now dangles from the line. "Anyone there?" I ask. No one answers.

I slam the phone into the holder and scamper to the living room. My sister holds her bag in one hand, and Leslie's hand in the other. Leslie's eyes remain deserted, but she reciprocates my sister's grip. I kneel in front of Leslie, taking the girls' joined hands. I look deeply into Leslie's eyes until she sees me. I tell her to stay strong. "None of this is real. Just stay hidden until it passes." I close my eyes and squeeze both of their hands: hide this broken spirit.

I look at my sister and say, "Come on, we need to go. Where's Becca?"

Becca comes running in from the foyer, a cardboard box in her hands. "We need to leave! Now!"

"Believe me, I know," I think.

XV

Becca accelerates through the turns. I feel the tires pulling at the hot pavement. A muted screech resonates throughout the car, humming like a choir of sinister voices. We continue speeding through the neighborhood until I ask Becca to slow down a bit.

“We need to get away from here before the cops come. They’ll take us both to jail,” she says sharply.

“I’m really sorry, Becca. I don’t know what happened.”

“Don’t worry about it, Jacob. That creep had it coming. But you better believe he’ll call the police and try to rat us out. He’s like that.”

“Yeah, I figured as much,” I say. We slow down as we approach the feeder road that merges onto the interstate. Becca fumbles through her purse and pulls out a cigarette. She pushes the open box toward me, glancing down at them briefly. I take one. Becca pulls a lighter from the console and lights her cigarette, then, without letting the flame die, she lights mine. The smoke burns my throat as I pull it deep into my lungs, but the nicotine calms me.

I look back at my sister. “Are you okay?”

She makes a face at me and pinches her nose. "Smoking is gross!"

I smile. I take one final drag from the cigarette before tossing it out the window. The smoke pours from my lungs, but the cloud fades quickly in the open air. Scenery rushes by us in the form of blurred colors, muddled forms. A perpetual mirage coats the road ahead of us. The engine roars as we merge onto the interstate.

Becca says, "I'll get us to the train station downtown so you two can buy tickets for San Antonio. After you guys get on your train, I'll head out, too" Becca looks at me as if she expects a certain response, but I simply stare back at her, exhausted to the point of delirium. "We're not out of the woods yet. Your dad probably called the cops, too."

"I doubt that. He probably wouldn't want to get mixed up with the police, at least, that's my guess."

Becca flips on the radio; the rough sounds soothe my frayed nerves. Over the music, she says, "We're almost there. After we get your tickets, let's find a place to eat those brisket sandwiches."

"Yeah, I'm starving," my sister says from the backseat.

The train station in Houston is a dingy, fort-like structure that sits underneath the elevated intersection of two major interstates. The interstates spread north-south, and east-west, to dissect the city into quadrants. Becca pulls into a parking spot. As she kills the engine and unbuckles her safety belt I grab her hand and ask her to wait a moment.

"What is it?" she asks. I reach into my duffel bag and grab one of the rubber bands of cash. I pull some bills from the band, then stuff them into her hand.

"I need you to buy our tickets, and, also, I just want you to have some of it for helping us."

She stares at the money, then at me. “Jacob, I can’t take this. This is too much money. And . . .” Her voice drops to a whisper, “Where did you get this kind of money?”

“I stole it from my dad. There’s a lot more of it back in Wharton.”

“Jacob, this is the kind of money people don’t lose.” She seems to be stopping herself from saying more. Her demeanor changes from concern to a mixture of compassion and pity. “Well, it’s too late now, I guess. It looks like you two can afford some first class seats out to San Antonio.” She forces a smile, and pulls her cash-stuffed hand away.

Across the street, a bright orange and pink bodega advertises Mexican food. People eat cheerfully under the umbrellas that adorn the scattered tables in front.

Becca says she’ll go in and take care of the tickets. “Jacob, why don’t you take your sister over to the taco stand and get us some cold drinks.”

“Yeah, I can do that,” I reply. I help my sister out of the car and take her hand to guide her across the street. At the taco stand I order three sodas and take them to an empty table facing the train station. I sit down to pull out our sandwiches. I peel the aluminum foil off two of the sandwiches, handing one to my sister before I take the other for myself. The people around us are mostly day laborers and construction workers, but there are also a few nicely dressed business people; probably ordering food to take back to their air conditioned offices high up in the sky.

The meat is tender and savory. The texture of animal flesh has always interested me: layers of life-giving tissue. I ask my sister how her sandwich tastes.

“Delicious,” she responds between chomps. I crack open my soda to wash down a mouthful of food. The bubbles tingle my mouth, throat and nose refreshingly.

Across the street I see Becca come out the front door of the train station. The light and heat stun her, and she takes a moment to adjust herself before she spots us. I wave to her through the ruckus of the crowded street.

With each step, her hips swing subtly from left to right. Her legs flow like waterfalls from her torso. Her curves stream in different directions, all at once, yet in perfect harmony of movement. My nerves sing with desire. A part of me would abandon everything for the chance to press my naked body against those curves, to once more feel her mouth over mine. A part of me wants to conquer her, to bend her to my will. I know I could have this. She knows it too.

She crosses the street to join us. When she arrives at the table, she hands me an envelope. "Two first class tickets to San Antonio, leaving tonight at eight." She smiles widely. "Now, where's my sandwich?" My sister hands her the bag. While Becca fishes out her food, I give her a soda. She thanks me and begins eating.

"It's really good," my sister chirps, her cheeks spattered with barbecue sauce.

After we finish our sandwiches, Becca suggests we find a place to escape from the heat. "How about a movie?" she asks.

My sister squirms gleefully. "Please, can we?"

I shrug my shoulders. "Why not?"

Becca looks at her watch. "Well, let's see. It's about one o'clock now. We should be able to catch something, and still have plenty of time to make the train. There's a theater right around the corner. Let's go see what's playing."

The cinema is only a few blocks away, toward downtown. The song on the radio doesn't even have time to finish before we park.

Bursting with excitement, my sister informs us that she thinks movies are better than books. Becca leans toward her and says, "Movies are great, but don't think movies are better than books just because they're faster. They're just different. They're both nice in their own ways."

I'm not familiar with any of the movie titles, but Becca seems to know them all. She looks disconcerted as she examines the titles and show times. "Hmm . . . this one is about a crazy person escaping an insane asylum, this one is about a stalker, and well, crap, what is wrong with movies these days? Jacob, I just don't think any of these movies are appropriate for all of us." Her eyes glance down at my sister, who seems more interested in the pictures and lights on the box office board than finding a movie to watch.

Becca's face brightens with a new idea. "Hey, I know this really nice park next to Buffalo Bayou. It's right around the corner from here. There's a nice little restaurant across the street from it where we can get some ice cream, and then hang out, down by the water. Plus, I'd rather talk, than just sit quiet in the dark. Who knows when we'll see each other again." My sister snaps from her daze and a look of concern crosses her face. Becca puts an arm around her. "Come on, let's go. I have a blanket in the trunk that we can sit on. And there are some nice trees down by the water. We'll be able to find some good shade."

Her eyes fix upon me. I say it sounds goods to me, and we head to the park.

We park the car just off the busy road, in a narrow, long parking lot carved into the top of a hill. The bayou is basically a small river that sits a little over fifty yards from the road, and about another fifty yards below street level. From where I stand I can see a sharp bend in the bayou's path. The water seems to be running at different speeds across its

width. From here I can look down upon the tops of several oak trees. Their branches spread like flower petals.

The restaurant Becca mentioned is on the opposite side of the street, but she parks the car on the bayou side. She pops the trunk and pulls out a large, colorful quilt. “Should we send Jacob across the street to get some yummy snacks and drinks?” she asks my sister.

My sister smiles and nods her head without casting a glance in my direction. Her eyes are hiding something from me.

“What do you want, sweetheart?” Becca asks her.

“What are you having?”

“Well, I think I’m going to have an iced tea.”

“Okay, that’s what I want.”

I nod my head and walk to the crosswalk without saying anything. My sister was definitely trying to hide her eyes from me, which means she knows something she doesn’t want me to know. But I already know what she knows; although, I could be misreading her again. I have lost my understanding of her.

The sun moves imperceptibly across the afternoon sky. It seems to be resisting its fate much like I resist mine. But I am no sun. I am a stone sinking through the ocean. The sun no longer stings my face, instead, it refreshes me. My world suddenly vibrates with a cooler energy. The colors radiate at a truer frequency, or maybe my senses have finally become attuned to their proper frequency. I feel the blood push steadily through the conduits of my body, nourishing the tissue that momentarily holds my passing soul. I am a net of trapped energies, materialized for a few brief moments. But everything moves toward dissolution: the entropy of life.

A solarium provides customers a sense of outdoor dining, while in the comfort of artificially cooled air. When

I enter, a blast of dry, cold air hits my face. To my left, there is a counter adorned with menus and uniformed cashiers. The place serves mainly hamburgers and fries, but it is furnished better than a typical chain restaurant—some sort of hybrid, I suppose. Hungry faces chomp away on their hamburgers and sandwiches, chattering amongst each other about the weather and other trivialities. I order our drinks, and while waiting, use the restroom.

After paying, I take my food from the counter, grab some napkins and straws, and leave the refrigerated building. When I pass through the door I hear a voice say, “Thanks for coming.” I look back to see a cute girl, about my age, smiling and watching me closely. I pause for a moment to take her in. Her eyes look familiar and bright. Her hair is long. I smile at her, nodding slowly before continuing to the park. However, the image of her face remains burnt in my retinas like the flash of a camera. It radiates a blue glow on my sight.

The blue face speaks to me, “Keep moving!” I continue walking, but the face overwhelms my vision. “Don’t look back! Keep moving.” I ignore her, but she continues to speak. “This is your last chance. You must keep moving forward. Don’t look back!”

I feel my body walking, but the searing image of her face blinds me. I ask her, “How much more time? How does it end?”

A white light pushes its way through the blue face, like sunlight viewed from the bottom of a pool. She replies, “It’s beginning now, but the end is still yours. You’re close, Jacob, but you need to let go. You can’t fight it.”

I feel my body stop walking, but I remain blinded. I’m unable to see outside my head. Anger returns, heating my

blood. I say, "I'll fade away as I see fit. But not on your terms; not here, not now. This is mine."

The floating face smiles gently, phosphorescent tears well in her eyes. Her face begins to dissolve in the surrounding light, but as she fades she tells me that what has worked in the past, might not work for me in the future. "Either way, Jacob, our paths will cross again."

As my vision moves from the fog of my mind to the brightness of the afternoon, a deafening screech numbs my ears. I look to my right and see the grill of a pickup truck barreling down upon me. There is no time for me to move, so I stay still. The truck swerves to my right. The passenger side mirror nearly crushes my face, but I remain unscathed. The truck continues to swerve from one lane to the next, nearly losing control before slamming on its brakes. I sprint across the street before I can see what the driver does next. I run down the hill toward the meandering bayou waters, but my momentum overtakes me. My legs can barely keep up with gravity's tug and I begin to tumble. The top of my body falls forward at a much faster pace than my feet. The drinks go flying. I roll, but the grass slows me and my body easily absorbs the motion. Even when I stop moving, my vision continues to tumble. Up the hill, a spinning figure shakes his fist at me. The sky silhouettes him as he bobs like a floating cork. His profile recedes into the blue sky, disappearing from the trembling horizon.

Behind me, Becca laughs deliriously, slapping her knee with delight. My sister fights to repress giggles. The sight of them brings a smile to my face, cooling my simmering adrenaline.

"Did you miss us that much, Jacob?" Becca manages to say as she gasps for breath. My sister stops her chuckling and comes over to pick up the spilled drinks. Surprisingly,

one of the iced teas has survived. The bottles of water have rolled down to the bank of the bayou.

"You came storming down that hill like you saw a ghost," Becca says.

"I'm glad you think it's funny. Don't worry. I'm fine." I get to my knees and brush the grass off my shoulders while I wait for my vision to stabilize. The girls have already made a nest in the shade under an oak tree. I walk over to the quilt and sit down next to Becca. My sister follows behind, clumsily stretching an arm around the bottles of water and the surviving iced tea.

Becca has finally calmed down, but she has a huge smile on her face as she says, "Seriously though, are you alright?"

"Yeah. Actually, it was kind of fun. I imagine that's what surfing will be like in California; except, the wipe-outs are probably a little smoother in water."

I lie down on my back, staring up at the shards of sunlight as they pass through the oak tree's canopy. An easy breeze blows over us, rustling the elastic branches above. Beyond my feet, the stream works its way down to some place far beyond. My sister places the drinks next to Becca, then heads to the stream's bank.

I warn her to be careful near the bank, not to get too close to the water.

"I won't," she replies.

I watch her for a moment. She bends down to look at a patch of flowers. I lay my head back down and continue staring up at the swaying branches. Becca lies next to me; the bare skin of our forearms touch.

"It's nice down here, isn't it?" she says.

I tell her I agree.

The light diffuses through the leaves like thinning smoke. In this natural kaleidoscope, I recognize a pattern.

The distorted light matches perfectly in every direction, and from every angle. There is symmetry here. The light speaks a language of one word—the first word, the word that set the world in motion.

“Jacob, did you ever try to work things out with your dad? You know, by talking through stuff. A lot of times that helps,” says Becca.

“It’s not like that with him. You can’t break through to him.”

“Fair enough. I wish you didn’t have to deal with all this shit.” She nudges me with her elbow, then asks, “So why do you think things can be so hard for some people, and so easy for others?”

I turn to face her, only inches from her mouth. I momentarily forget what we’re talking about: her features assault my senses. I say, “I don’t know. I try not to think about it. I just try to mind my own business.”

“Yeah, that’s about all we can do, right?” She pouts her lips as she stares at me. After a moment, she continues, “So, what do you want? I mean, if you could have anything, what would it be?”

Her eyes glance down at my lips. I say, “I’d have some space that was mine. A nice big piece of land where I could just rest; someplace safe for my sister, myself, and you too, you know, if you ever wanted to come visit.”

She smiles and turns the rest of her body to face me. The subtle change in position creates an even stronger magnetism between us. She whispers, “Well, if I came to visit you, what would we do?”

“This,” I say.

She places her hand over mine, squeezing it gently. “Jacob, do you think if you were a little older, or maybe if

I were younger, and things weren't like this, you think we might have fallen in love?"

"Yes. But, who knows?" She pinches me softly, and giggles like a little girl.

"Jacob, I'm really worried about the two of you. I mean what're you going to do when you get there? Where will you stay? I don't want to be a naysayer, but there are just so many things running through my head about you guys. Can't you just call your dad and tell him you made a mistake and that you're sorry and you're coming home?"

I shake my head, no. I tell her I've already crossed an invisible, yet very real line. "I've made a decision and I've got to see it out now. I can't go back. He's out there stewing; right now, while we sit here. It's already consumed him. And there's nothing I could say or do to change that. If we go back, we're dead. And if we would've stayed, he would've killed us one way or the other: physically or mentally."

I pause for a moment, staring past her, into the trees. I take a long, painful breath before continuing. "You know, when my mom died, I felt like the universe abandoned me. For a while I felt bitter and angry at whatever powers are out there. But I realized that the resentment itself was the real killer. It was like a hot coal I couldn't let go of. I thought the anger would provide some warmth for the coldness I felt, but, it just burned me. So one day I just let it all go. I said, fuck it. The resentment still lingers a bit, but at least now, I feel like I'm living."

A breeze passes over us; it almost feels cool, refreshing. "But now, I just can't shake this feeling that my time, here, in this freed state of mind, is only very short. The energy is just too overwhelming; beautiful, but just a little more than I can handle sometimes. And it's getting harder. Whatever grasp of reality—you know, what we see with our

eyes—well, whatever grasp I *had* is slipping away from me, bit by bit. And it's only getting worse."

"Jacob, maybe you're just plain crazy? I mean, seriously, doctors can fix that."

"Yeah, but I guess it doesn't really matter now, does it?"

I smile and glance down at my sister. She tightly grips a handful of white flowers that I don't recognize. Her arms rest by her sides, motionless, as she stares at the passing water. As though she knew I were watching her, she speaks without turning around to face me. "Jacob, where does this water go to?"

"I think it goes down to the Gulf of Mexico, and then out to the ocean."

"And then after that? After the ocean, where does it go?"

"Well, after that it just kind of drifts around the earth. Some of it turns into clouds, some to rain, and stuff like that."

She doesn't respond. She just continues staring at the passing water. I return my attention to Becca, who is now looking at my sister. Becca says, "She's a sweet girl."

I agree.

"Jacob, do you want to know something?" Becca says, her eyes returning to me. "I think under different circumstances, maybe in a different world, you and I would have fallen in love. You make me feel smart for some reason, even though I'm not that smart at all. And really, you're much smarter than me. But there's just something about the way you are that makes me see things differently. And, I know it sounds weird, but you make me feel like I've never felt before. It's like you remind me of something I forgot a long time ago."

I smile at her, and tell her how all this time I had imagined she just liked me for my looks.

Becca laughs, brightening my world. “And your modesty, Jacob. I like your modesty, too. But no, seriously—you are going to be quite the handsome man. Some girl out there will be very proud to have you as her man.”

“Hey, why don’t you come with us, instead of going to New Orleans? I’ve got enough money to last all three of us for a while. You know, until we figure something out, or find jobs, or something like that.”

Her brows furrow as she rolls on her back again; farther away from me. I gaze down at her eyes, which now look upward and away from mine. “It’s just not that easy,” she says. “I’ve got to start my life over again. I’ve been living stupid for the past year or so, and I already have a job waiting for me there. Plus, I’m getting older. I need to start thinking about settling down. In New Orleans, I’ll have a chance at a steady job, maybe save some money, and go to school or something.”

I knew the answer before I asked it, but it still hurts more than I anticipated. I look away from her to listen to the melancholy trickle of the bayou. It’s as if the sounds around me had been frozen in the hot air, until my sadness melted the humid glue, releasing the noise.

Becca moves her hand through my hair. My eyes close, but the warmth of her hand glows behind my eyelids. Her hand soothes the pain she has caused me, but it’s only superficial. No anger exists in this pain, only a deep pull that sucks the air from my lungs. My lungs keep moving, but there is no life in this breath, only postponement.

“I mean, Jacob, you know how things are. They’re always more complicated than you think. I can’t run away. I’ve been running away from something or another my

whole life. Now, I gotta get myself right. I shouldn't even be doing this, with you guys."

I roll onto my back and open my eyes to the kaleidoscopic world of sunlight through trees.

"You know what I mean, Jacob. Don't be upset. Maybe in a little while, once I've settled down in my job and everything, you and your sister could come see me in New Orleans. You'd love it: pretty girls, good food, great music, and there's something about it that's just hard to explain unless you're there."

"I like that idea," I say. Hot tears cut across my face. The salty fluid nourishes my dry skin. "I hope our paths cross again, Becca. But even if they don't, I'm glad I met you. You were brought into my life for a reason. I don't know why, but you were. I know it."

"Yeah, I think you're right," she says, continuing to pet my head. Down by the water, I hear my sister giggle at something, but sleep overwhelms me. The sensations around me become distant and one. Becca's eyes protect me, her hand heals me. And this is a gentle darkness that welcomes me.

XVI

Things are brightest when you first wake. My eyes adjust slowly to the new light. Becca and my sister crawl on all fours, examining something on the ground near the bayou's edge. Too lazy to investigate further, I ask them what they are doing.

"It's some sort of bug, but I've never seen one like this. Maybe you should come take a look at it," Becca says.

"It's pretty," says my sister.

I tell them I'm uninterested. "My stomach feels off. I just want to sit here for a bit."

"Okay, but you're missing out on the freak show," says Becca.

My sister nods in agreement, but I stay where I am. I need to adjust myself to this new light. The sun is farther down the horizon and no longer peers through the oak tree's canopy.

I ask the girls how long I was asleep.

Becca answers, "Oh, I don't know, about an hour or so. We've been walking up and down the bank looking at all the cool stuff: flowers, bugs, and a few turtles."

“I thought I saw a snake, but Becca thought it was just a stick,” says my sister.

“You guys should be careful. You never know what kind of poison that bug might have. Nature is tough,” I say jokingly. Neither of them laugh. They just keep poking around on the ground.

From down here, I can more easily see the different speeds at which the stream flows around the bend. The water on the far shore moves faster because it is less obstructed, while the water closest to me catches the protruding bend of earth and has no choice but to slow. The current drifts lazily toward a destination I cannot see.

Becca gets up and walks over to me. She lies down next to me and says, “You passed out as soon as I touched your hair. It was like a light switch. You feel better now? Did you have sweet dreams?”

“I’m alright. Actually, I’m finally starting to feel better,” I say. “But no, I didn’t have any dreams, just rest. Sometimes, when your mind won’t shut off, it’s nice to just lay there and sleep.” My sister heads toward us holding a mashed handful of flowers. I continue, “Plus, it’s always a nice surprise, to wake up from that nothingness, into this . . . somethingness . . .”

“We should probably get to the train station, Jacob. It’s getting late,” says Becca.

“Yeah, we should.”

We pack our stuff and head to the car. The stream meanders along as we leave its banks. The ride back to the train station seems much different than the previous one. Everything seems slower, like time is trying to stop just for me. It’s as though the car were stationary and the world moved slowly around us.

When we pull into the station I see a cop walking through the parking lot. We grab our bags and try not to make eye contact with him. We walk briskly into the lobby, our backs to the cop. As we head to our train's platform, Becca grabs my arm sharply.

"Jacob, look—" she says in a frightened whisper. I follow her eyes to a poster with two pictures: one is of a little girl with a goofy smile, one is of a ragged and tired looking teenager. Above the pictures is a big: "MISSING—SUSPECTED KIDNAPPING." Becca's fingernails dig into my arm.

"We need to get out of here," she says to me.

I look around and notice the cop has followed us into the train's lobby. He watches us closely. My paranoia is obvious, drawing even more attention to us. My heart begins to pound and I feel sweat beading above my eyebrows. Just as I dart toward an emergency exit, the cop looks calmly away from me and walks in a different direction.

"Okay, let's get out of here," I say.

We hurry to the car, avoiding eye contact with everyone. My sister follows closely, hopping in the back seat without a word. Before Becca can get into the car, I stop her. I nod toward the back of the car. She follows me to the back and pops the trunk, pretending to look for something.

Panic blinds me. "You're right, Becca. This shit is never going to work. You've got to take my sister to New Orleans with you. Here, take this money and take her with you. There's a lot in here. I'm going back to Wharton to get some more money from the barn, then I'll meet you in New Orleans." I shrug my shoulders, not knowing what more to say.

Becca's eyes begin to fill with tears. "Jacob, I don't know if I can take her, even with the money. What about the cops? What will I tell people when I get there? How do I even

know she wants to come with me? I can't do this. I'm in over my head, Jacob. I could get into some real trouble now."

"Those are just details, Becca. They'll work themselves out. She'll go with you because I'll tell her to," I say assuredly. "She knows Wharton is not a safe place. She's not stupid. It's only a matter of time out there on that farm, with him. Plus, I have a plan."

"What kind of plan? What are you going to do, just walk in the front door and ask to borrow another duffel bag full of cash? Jacob, use your fucking head. You're not thinking."

I pause for a moment before replying. I examine her, absorbing her whole presence. I say, "I'm not going to talk to him. I'm going back to kill him. I know where he keeps the money." I lean forward, lowering my voice. "He must have over a million dollars in that barn. I've seen it with my own eyes. That bag is only a fraction of what he has in the barn. If I can just kill him—"

Becca slaps my face. She grabs my arms angrily, trying to pull me closer to her, but my resistance pulls her closer to me. Her body feels tight and soft against mine. "Jacob, you have to listen to me! You're not going back there. You'll be arrested or killed. Plus, you're too damned scared of him. I know that. How the hell do you think you're going to kill him?"

I speak my words quietly in her small ear. "With a gun you're going to buy for me. I'm going to end this. There's no other way. Trust me."

I look over her shoulder to see some people leaving the station. When I look back at Becca, my cheek brushes against the side of her face and I realize that she is hugging me, not trying to restrain me. I slide my arms around her body. We embrace. A peace passes through me like light passing through empty space. It fills every fiber of my being

until abundance alone abides within me. She speaks in a language older than words, but my body recognizes the ancient message: you are not alone.

I tell Becca we need to get out of here.

With her head still resting on my shoulder, she nods. She asks where we should go.

“A gun store,” I reply.

She whispers into my neck, “Okay.”

We get in the car and Becca pulls out of the parking lot rapidly, but quietly. I thank Becca once more for help, and I assure her that this is the only way. At a stoplight, she glances at me, but says nothing. She looks angry, but it’s really something else. “Becca, do you know where to get a gun this late?”

“Any pawn shop around here will gladly sell a gun to a girl with a handful of cash. Those greedy bastards only care about money. And hell, Jacob, this is fucking Texas. What do you expect?”

I can’t read her expression, so I stare silently at the passing landscape beyond her face. I wait a while before speaking again. “After I get the gun, I’ll take a bus to Wharton, and then I’ll meet up with you guys in New Orleans. Do you think you’ll make it there tonight?”

She doesn’t answer. Her lip quivers and her face betrays a repressed anger. Her breath passes hurriedly through clenched teeth, the sound hisses as it escapes her dry lips.

“Becca?”

Through her clenched jaw, she squeezes words out. “We’re not splitting up. We’re going to Wharton . . . together.”

After she buys the gun, we head immediately to the interstate, retracing our steps back home. Silence engulfs us.

And so it begins.

XVII

As we head back to Wharton, the glowing moon follows the car with an inquisitive stare. My sister fell asleep a few hours ago, but neither Becca nor I have spoken in nearly an hour. Instead, we drive to the sound of warm, humid wind. The familiar air eases my troubled mind.

We are already well beyond the strip malls of outer Houston. Now there is nothing to see but the open coastal plains. Some of the fields have crops; others lie in nicely manicured columns of fertile ground. The fields wait patiently to yield a bounty. The dirt columns blur into a series of rapidly cascading dominoes as we pass them, except for a single fixed column that follows my line of sight: steadiness within motion.

As we get closer to Wharton, I once again get the sensation of being stationary while the world moves around me. I tell Becca I shouldn't be more than an hour or two. "You can drop me off where you picked us up the other night. I'll cut across the fields to the house from there. Just drive someplace where you can fill up on gas and get some food for the trip. If I'm not where you left me in two hours

just go off without me and I'll find you guys later. You can't sit around and wait for me. No matter what, don't come to the farm."

Becca shows no sign of having heard me. Her hands grip the wheel tightly. Still looking forward, she says something quietly under her breath. I lean toward her and ask, "What'd you say? I didn't hear you."

She whispers, "He deserves this, right?"

"I don't really know, Becca. Who am I to say? I'm just doing what I think needs to be done. That's all I can give you."

"If that's really how you see it, then I believe you," she says. "If you say it's the only way, then it's the only way. I trust you. I'll be here when you get back."

I grab her hand tightly. "Becca, I love you. I'm not asking you to say anything, in fact, please don't say anything. I just wanted to get it off my chest."

Some of the tension leaves her face. A tear falls down the side of her nose. It accumulates at the end of her nostril, then drops from her face. Her hand reaches out for mine and I take it. I press its warmth against the side of my face and close my eyes. The night air covers us in a pocket of intimacy. I breathe deeply, focusing my mind. I stop time to stand still in this moment. There is only this, here, now. But this is all I need. My soul feasts on this moment, until I can hold it no longer. Time creeps back through the windows, washing over us once again. I release her hand, and sink into my seat.

I ask Becca for a cigarette. She hands me the box and tosses a lighter in my lap. The tobacco smells sweet. I light it and take a deep drag. A heaviness weighs on my chest, but the tracking moon lifts the burden and smiles down upon me. My breath is measured, but hot tears escape my

eyes like a breached levee. I puff my cigarette one final time, enjoying the deep burn of the hot smoke before I flick it out the window. The orange glow traces a parabola through the darkness.

On the horizon, I can make out the black wall of the oak forest. I tell Becca to let me out here. "Give me two hours. If I'm not here when you get back, then you've got to leave without me."

I look back at my sleeping sister, but I don't wake her. I send her my best wishes. Becca stares blankly at me without saying anything. Her hands rattle against the steering wheel. I leave the car and step into the darkness. I cross over my neighbors property and head toward the field named Abraham. I need to pass unnoticed through Abraham, over Isaac, and eventually to the back of the barn, through Esau.

The night is quiet. I move swiftly and with ease. My mind races ahead of me, forming a plan I don't yet understand. I've built a puzzle with no solution. I hurl myself toward this cliff because living requires a leap beyond the edge. For too long I have clawed at the world around me, trying to grab something real to stop my fall. But there is nothing to grab, no substance. The fall itself is the only reality I've ever known. So I embrace the falling; not knowing if there is a bottom, or when I will hit.

The earth rises beneath my feet, pushing me closer to the sky. I slow to observe the barn and house from here. The lights are off in the house, but the barn is well lit; a burning glow permeates its cavities. A brooding spirit wanders the recesses of that lonely skull: my victim, my dad, my self.

I cross the ravine next to the dirt driveway, entering Abraham's borders. I lower myself, keeping a sharp eye on the barn as I move parallel to it, across the field. For the

most part, I am safe now; the house blocks the barn's view of Abraham. As I enter Isaac, I become more exposed to the barn's gaze. I continue in a circular direction to cross Isaac, maintaining a safe distance from the barn. I stop to get a better view of his castle.

The barn is brightly lit, and through a second floor window I see a pacing figure. It stops near the window, but I am too far to tell which way the figure faces. From the field, the silhouette is simply a dark pupil in the skull's fiery eye.

When the figure leaves the window I continue my trek across Isaac and onto Esau. I now see the wall of hay bales behind the barn. I sit for a moment to gather my thoughts, and to finger the pistol's grip as it protrudes from my waistband. I pull the gun out and open the revolver: six bullets sleep snugly in their coffins. I close the revolver and feel the heaviness of the machine. I'll need to be close when I fire this gun. I've only fired a handgun once before, and it wasn't as large a caliber as the one I now hold. I have six chances to end this story; and one chance to start a new one. I tuck the gun back into my waistband, and continue through Esau, keeping my distance from the hay bales.

The dry dirt under my feet is rigid at first, but soft and cool as I step through the baked layer and into the soil beneath. I reach the end of my arc, and must begin my approach. I hesitate, steadying my breath and mind. There is no other way but forward, closer to the edge.

I step toward the hay bales. When I reach them, I touch the hollow spindles and feel their crunchy texture against my fingers. They welcome me, but cannot help me. I peer around the last bale to see that the back gate is open. There are no new vehicles and everything appears as it has always appeared; at least, as it has always appeared to me. I watch

the windows for a while to see whether the shadow will reappear.

I decide now is as good a time as any to move. With the right side of my body nearly touching the wall of hay bales I rush toward the barn, gaining momentum like a spiteful wrecking ball. Halfway to the barn, the pacing shadow moves through one of the back windows. Before the figure reaches the next window I dive into a crevice between two bales. I wait several minutes before I dare to check the windows. When I finally move, I crawl through the crevice toward the Esau-facing side of the hay bale. I climb the bale to investigate the windows. They are empty so I climb down. This side of the wall feels much safer. A wail from the oak forest urges me to flee, but I ignore the exhortation. There is no way but forward.

I push my way back into the hay and peer cautiously out the other side. I dash forward until I am very near the front gate, and then duck into another crevice. I listen; the buzzing from the flood light rattles the night air. I creep forward to the back entrance. When I reach the barn I press my body firmly against the wood frame and continue listening. The lights buzz. I step into the barn, the inner lights cast an orange glow upon me.

I hear the hollow sound of my dad's steps, and then nothing. A few quiet moments pass, and then I hear his steps above me again—then silence.

I circle the room until I find an alcove underneath the stairs where I can hide. I sit and listen for a pattern to my dad's movements. The smell of burnt sweetness wafts down from the rooms above. I hear an uneven and infrequent bump; not quite footsteps, more like tapping. The tapping continues, but there is no pattern; only the

tapping sound . . . and something else. I still my breath to hear the other sound more clearly.

Finally, I recognize the gurgling of his throat.

Emboldened by the familiar noise, I step out of my nook to head upstairs, tip-toeing silently. From the bottom of the stairs I see only the top quarter of the door frame. As I climb the stairs, the frame lengthens in front of me until I see it in its entirety, from the floor to the apex. The yellow door is slightly ajar. I close one eye to more easily peer through the slit. Through the crack I see my dad's profile in the chair; the left side of his body faces me. A syringe rests loosely between his limp, tangled fingers. His arm dangles, motionless. As quietly as possible, I nudge the door open with the barrel of the gun. The door hinges creak, but he doesn't move.

His torso expands and contracts in union with his somnolent breath.

Power prickles my skin. Sweat drips down my forehead, but surprisingly, my hands are unflinching. My muscles remain alert. My palms tighten around the pistol as my finger glides over the smooth trigger. My dad still hasn't shown a sign of consciousness so I drift to my left, in an arc, to face him. His legs are completely extended, acting as support beams for his slouched torso. His eyes are slightly open, but I see only white. I am close enough to distinguish two types of gurgles: one is a nasally, fluid-filled sucking, while the other is a guttural rumbling.

I position myself directly in front of him, then cock the hammer with my thumb. The barrel points directly at his slowly moving chest. My finger strokes the trigger, but a dizzying sensation wounds my resolve. The lights seem to flicker, but I cannot be certain. My strength fails me, and my hands begin to tremble. The floor saps the strength

from my legs. I feel myself prostrating before this sleeping god of fury. I drop to my knees, struggling to keep the gun pointed at his chest, but my head sinks heavily between my weakly outstretched arms. It falls below the gun in a sullen bow to the source of my angst, my hope, my life.

“Jacob.” I hear my dad’s voice within my head before I feel the echo in my ears.

I raise my head with new resolve, keeping the barrel trained on his chest. His eyes pierce deeply, stinging pleasantly. He tilts his head as though he were uncertain as to who stands before him. I can’t take my eyes off his. Our eyes are locked in the cold space between us. He sits motionless, as if cast in bronze.

“Jacob,” he says. “You can’t kill me. My blood runs too thick in your veins.”

His voice bellows in my head. It incapacitates me. I become the statue as he straightens his torso, dropping the syringe to the floor. He leans his sharp face toward me.

“Jacob,” he says slowly. “You’re broken, and only I can fix you.” He smiles. “*You* can’t end me. You can only become me.”

His words are the keys to doors I had not seen before this moment. He is a dark light that brings forth a dark truth. He says, “I created you. I wanted you to be a part of me; to know me. But you were afraid.” He pauses to regain his breath, then says, “Did she comfort you with her lies?” He chuckles to himself and leans forward in his chair, nearly within reach of me. He extends his middle finger and slowly touches the end of the gun’s barrel. His long middle finger traces the barrel’s opening. My arms grow weak. Entranced by his power, I lower the gun.

“Did you find another way?” he asks.

Without hesitation, I nod my lowered head and reply, "Yes."

He says, "I've hurt you. But only because I am preparing you. Jacob, demons roam these fields, and soon they will need more life." He pulls his finger away from the gun's barrel and points to his temple. He stares wildly into my eyes. "I hid from them until I realized they weren't trying to hurt me. They saved me. They taught me that there is no deliverance: only survival."

He slides out of his chair, onto his knees in front of me. He places his cold, sweaty palm against the side of my face. I close my eyes, and look inward. His hand is a black tumor, attached firmly to my cheek. Through the darkness of my inward stare, a soft red glow drifts up from the abyss, rising toward the black hole upon my temple. I watch the vaporous movement of this light-smoke: wisps of charged nothingness, floating through the empty space within me.

I feel him place his other hand on my shoulder. It slides listlessly down my arm and onto the gun. I open my eyes to see him examining the gun, his body open to mine. I pull the gun against my chest, but his hand follows without letting go of the barrel. I shake my head free from his spell, ripping the gun from his languid grip. He doesn't resist. Instead, he laughs to himself once again. I roll back to my feet and stand above him.

Speaking down to the floor, he says, "Jacob. *You* are my continuation."

"No, I'm not."

He slams his fist on the floor. I feel the anger stirring to life within him. He springs toward me, but my shaky trigger finger is faster than his lunge.

A crack pierces the air. The gun recoils violently in my hand. My eyes close. When they open, I see him lying

on the floor in a fetal position. I move to face him. He's clutching his stomach. His eyes are closed. The muscles in his arms ripple. I point the gun at him again, but before I can pull the trigger I notice tears in his eyes. He is neither sobbing, nor breathing heavily. Neither whimpering, nor sighing. Tears simply pour through his clenched eyelids. I lower the gun.

In a hushed tone, he says, "I've lost." He opens his eyes, but his stare is vacant. He says, "Jacob, where is your sister?"

I ignore him, but after a moment he speaks again. "This was mine. All of it."

I tell him I was never his. I was always my own.

"I made you. You are mine. You are me." He points his long, bony index finger at my head. "Kill me. Do it. Then you'll see what it really means to be the god of your world."

"Is that what you did? Was it worth it?"

He coughs, then says, "Yes. To exert your will upon this world. To watch it bend to that deep, driving will, is an ancient pleasure, afforded only to gods."

"You aren't a god," I say, not necessarily believing the words as they leave my mouth.

His eyes open and a crooked smile crosses his face. The tears have washed away a layer of dust, creating the impression of raccoon markings over his eyes. He continues, "A pleasure so powerful, so lush." His raccoon-eyes bulge beyond their sockets.

"But that pleasure has hurt so many," I say.

"Only those too weak to taste and eat." He wheezes on the floor before continuing. "It's their punishment. Punishment for not accepting what's been given to them. People who don't understand it, don't deserve it."

“I don’t want those things, or that knowledge.”

“But you do,” he says confidently. He releases his grip on his bloody stomach, reaching an arm out to me. My reason and my heart rip at each others’ throats. To kill him would be the death of me too.

I never wanted any of this. Nonetheless, it is.

My dad looks to the floor, mumbling, “It will be . . .” And then—Bam!—His body slams into mine as if the space between us had instantly contracted. I hear the crack of gun fire, and see a cloud of dust. My neck recoils, and my head bounces as he slams me against the plank-wood floor. A sizzling charge surges through my body: pain, then warmth, then numbness. The air escapes my lungs like a popped tire. My vision wobbles but I keep my eyes open and trained.

My dad lands on top of me, straddling my torso. He pins my arms to the floor. He smiles as he swoops toward my face, his raccoon-eyes rabidly probing mine. A consuming rage fills both black pupils. The darkness draws me in.

I inhale, pulling precious oxygen into my blood. My lungs remind me that, although I cannot move, I am still alive. I stare back into the darkness with prying claws, my claws. I empty myself into the void. Now, you are mine.

With his right hand he grabs the syringe from the floor, then examines the fluid-filled cylinder through the light on the ceiling. “Jacob, where is your sister?” He looks down at me. I try to move, but my arms and torso are too heavy.

A snarl escapes his mouth. His upturned cheeks bunch and wrinkle upon his sturdy jaw. He reaches a hand across my body and wraps his rigid fingers over my arm, squeezing it tightly. I see the veins swell and rise upon the surface of my skin. He draws the needle near one of the rivers, then plunges it into the rivulet of blood. I feel a prick, and then a ripple runs across the surface of my skin.

“Tell me where she is!” he screams, but his rage is an impotent sound. I ignore him. I feel a flame that sears me, but my resolve on this matter is unwavering. He can see in my eyes that I won’t speak about her again. I cling to that knowledge with an unyielding grip. The nauseating dizziness sets in: find a center Jacob, find a center.

“Tell me where she is and I’ll save you,” he says. He points to the syringe in his hand. “I dosed you hard. You’ll need some Narcan to get out of this one. I’ve got some over in the drawer. Just tell me where she is and you’re fixed.”

He pauses, then screeches, “Tell me!”

He continues on in this manner, but his voice becomes drawn and incomprehensible to both my ears and my mind. The distorted sound waves form an elusive symphony. My eyes fall from his stare as if freed from his spell. I see his neck, his heaving chest, and finally, his bloody stomach. But whose blood is whose?

I feel his hand touch my chin, lifting it gently toward his face. My vision rises: goodbye bloody stomach, hello heaving chest, and then our eyes lock. Shards of noise fill my ears until his voice reconfigures itself into a frequency I perceive.

“Never mind your sister, Jacob. I’ll find her,” he says. After a long pause, he tells me that I have done this to myself. Sadness seems to tinge his words. His voice crackles and grates like a scratched record. “Jacob, *you* made it crumble.”

To forgive him would be my soul’s release, the chance to continue my journey; while to refrain would be to suffer longer. I walk my own path, but I often find myself in valleys with hills too high to see beyond.

He searches my eyes, and places a hand behind my sinking head. “Jacob, you are the sun. The people in your

world orbit you. They depend on your gravity for their safe passage. Your pull is their destiny. Jacob, everything passes, but not this . . .”

I absorb his words. I see his thoughts clearly, urgently. I see the pieces of his mind. I force myself to tell him he has it backwards. “A deity lives within us, yes. But you built an idol to yourself when there is no you, no me.”

The drug swallows my mind. Waves of pleasure lap upon the shores of my mind.

Maniacally, he whispers, “You’re finished.”

An astigmatism blurs his mind’s eye, the energies are bent askew, missing the focal point. I struggle to muster, “There’s nothing to finish.”

His voice assaults my face. I think I feel him shake my body, but I’m not certain, so I just smile and let my vision blur. The emptiness of this moment is curiously pleasant. I feel warm. My eyes are open, but I see nothing.

The world is moving.

No, it’s only me. I’m floating from this place of wrath and tears. I smile. I hear his voice in the distance, and it slowly pulls me back to the noisy shore.

I blink my eyes, trying to focus them. I hear nothing. I look down upon my body as he straddles me. I feel wet, but warm. He towers above me, swaying powerfully in a circular motion while spewing misdirected hostilities. His elliptical swaying becomes more pronounced with each pass. He throws his head back to stare at the ceiling. His head sits at the bottom of a vortex, ever more unstable.

Finally, like a crumbling pillar, he tumbles. His head hangs droopily next to mine, his hair brushing the side of my face. I feel his heaving chest on mine. His breath diminishes, like the distant rumbles of a fading storm. He mumbles something, but I can neither make out his words

nor see him fully. His head eclipses the light above us, shrouding his face in shadow. As if intentionally keeping me from my blissful slumber, he says, “Not yet.”

A growing vibration builds beneath me: a crescendo of hope fills the room. My dad’s eyes release their grip upon me as the sound grows louder. Suddenly, Becca floats through the door: a soft yellow glow radiates around her. Our eyes meet.

My dad pull his body from mine as he reaches for the gun that lies next to my shoulder. But somehow my arms respond to the signals I have been sending them all along. I wrap my right arm tightly around his torso before he can reach the gun. A crushing blow crunches something in my mouth as he snaps his sharp elbow into my jaw. But my jaw is not my arm. I keep it locked around his writhing torso. I press my cheek against his back to avoid his flying elbows.

We embrace.

Becca streaks toward us. She leaves a trail of radiance as she glides through the room. My dad breaks free from my grasp and lunges out of my reach. I slump back to the floor, spent. I hear the rattle of metal, and I see Becca freeze in place. My dad steadies himself with his weak right elbow. With his left arm, he raises the gun. I can do nothing to stop him. I lie paralyzed behind him. Becca stares only at me, as though there were nothing else in her world. Her eyes gaze steadily through the fluid glow that engulfs her.

I close my eyes as I feel a rapid acceleration, followed by an impact in my chest. I wrap my arms around myself to catch my breath, but my embrace catches something beyond me. I open my eyes to see that I once again embrace my dad from behind. He flings his head backward, but I see his movements before they happen. I avoid the blow. I have dislodged his elbow and we now lie sideways on the

floor. My arms are wrapped around his body, directly at the elbows, preventing him from pointing the gun accurately. Becca runs behind us, out of the gun's range. Behind me, I hear her fall to her knees. She grabs my dad's flailing wrists. He desperately fires a shot, but Becca and I both remain committed to our task. The gun goes off again, but this time the recoil loosens his grip and Becca pries the gun from his claws.

I slide my arms higher up his torso, to his neck. My left forearm tightens around his throat, while my right hand shields my face from the thrashing of his fists and head. Several sharp blows land on my head like asteroids pelting a cursed and lonely planet. But I close my eyes and remind myself that I am not my head: I am no longer here.

My grip tightens as the blows become more erratic, the flame consumes me. I feel his neck muscles succumb to my suffocating clamp. His wind pipe closes, and his body stops fighting. A gurgle escapes his mouth.

I feel a soft hand on my head as my vision fades. Behind my eyes, a hazy, orange-red glow nourishes me. My body goes limp as my arms loosen around his neck. The wetness covering me, which only moments ago brought me warmth, now makes me shiver. I open my eyes to see the carnage I have created: an expanding circumference of blood, with us at its center.

Becca continues to touch my head, lulling me to sleep. I hear her voice, but I can't make out her words. A cloak of warmth wraps around me. Becca's voice becomes clearer. "Jacob! Jacob! Come on, get up!"

I turn my eyes to face her. Her symmetries and proportions defy critique: the universe rests within her eyes. I point to the desk behind me. Though I can't feel my face, or even be certain I am speaking aloud, I say, "The keys!"

I trace my finger across the ceiling's artificially illuminated horizon, pointing to the door where the money and drugs are kept. "Money. For you. My sister. Please take her . . . keep her . . . but fast . . ." My words are depleted, and I can speak no more. She places her moist cheek upon mine, her sobbing chest presses against me. Her energy envelops me like a sturdy cocoon. She kisses my face. I close my eyes.

I spread my palm over my dad's chest. I can't speak so I think, "I'm sorry." I don't know whether he hears me, but I no longer feel my breath.

An inward vision appears as my sight transitions from one world to the next. I see myself resting on a floating raft, near the shore of an unfamiliar beach. I hear wind blowing, but I feel nothing. A black wave pulls me deeper to sea, but as I drift farther from the shore a blazing sun appears. It races along the coast in a blur of speed. The light is familiar and strong. The globe charges over the water, toward my drifting bark. As it nears me, I reach out my hand to touch its brilliance.

A blinding flash erupts in front of me as my sister emerges from the light. She stands above me on the raft. She glows with a hot, bright light, nearly too painful to look upon. She extends her hand, which clutches a bundle of small white flowers. I try to reach up for them, but a heavy weight pins me to this board. She leans over me and places the flowers in my hand. I close my fist tightly around their stalks. Their fragrance instantly brings me a new peace.

She speaks to me in a much deeper and older voice than I have ever heard from her. "Jacob, take these poppies. They'll make you sleep. Don't be afraid of anything you see from here on. When you wake, you'll be in a new place. I'll be there too. You might not see me, but if you listen closely,

you'll hear my voice. Stay close to my voice, and we'll find each other again . . . just like you said . . .”

Sleep overtakes me. But before I fall under its sweet spell I see her eyes: an illuminated tear falls from her face. I watch it fall to the wood planks upon which I lie, and then there is nothing.

THE END

