I Wish to Say Lovely Things

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Praise for the writing of Adam Gnade

"These are stories of domestic drama and friendship, wild youth and radical hope." -Andrew Mears, of the band Youthmovies, author of *Kettledrum*

"Lucid, life-affirming prose from an empathetic master." -Yannis Philippakis of the band Foals

"Adam Gnade is a writer who can capture what it feels like to feel everything." -Dana Margolin of the band Porridge Radio

"Adam creates another world through his writing, one that is visceral and sharp, and helps this one make more sense." -Lora Mathis, artist, author of *Here I am In It* and *The Snakes Came Back*

"Adam Gnade is the kind of talent who will remind you how necessary it is to stay human, stay empathetic, stay true, stay punk." –Szilvia Molnar, author of *The Nursery*

"In all of his work Gnade achieves a wide range of effects—lyricism, poignant description, philosophical depth, humor, characterization—in a singular style that's born from many years of focused, intense dedication to his craft." -Bart Schaneman, author of *The Green and the Gold*

"Adam Gnade's work evokes the smell of fireworks, the rush of surf, and those moments you only recognize once they're passed—when, for a few short seconds, the world crystalizes into a place as beautiful as it is overwhelming." -Erik Henriksen, *WIRED, The Believer, Portland Mercury*

"[Gnade is] documenting the mystery and the beauty of this glorious and shit world in a sweet punk rock symphony that absolutely makes it easier to keep living here." -Nicole Morning, author of *Self-Titled*

"Adam Gnade is incredible at capturing the festering sickness at America's core, and the vulnerable want for something better." -Jon Nix, author of *The Right Side of Bad*

"Gnade's writing has enough heart and soul to last generations." —Michael J. Seidlinger, author of *Dreams of Being*

"Adam Gnade picks up Woody Guthrie's hoping machine and makes it sing his own song." -Dmitry Samarov, author of *Old Style*

"[S]napshots of the real America—wild and lonesome, ugly-beautiful." —Jessie Lynn McMains, author of *Wisconsin Death Trip*

"Adam Gnade is the king of underground fiction. Every word is truth." -Nathaniel Kennon Perkins, author of *Wallop*

Books by Adam Gnade

Fiction

Hymn California
(Dutch Money Books, 2008)

California
(2011, private edition, Double Suns, Oxford, UK)

Caveworld
(Pioneers Press, 2013)

Locust House
(Pioneers Press, Three One G, 2016)

This is the End of Something But It's Not the End of You
(Pioneers Press first printing, Bread & Roses Press with Three One G, 2020)

Float Me Away, Floodwaters
(Bread & Roses Press with Three One G, 2021)

After Tonight, Everything Will Be Different
(Bread & Roses Press with Three One G, 2022)

The Internet Newspaper
(Bread & Roses Press with Three One G, 2023)

Non-fiction

The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Motherfuckin' Sad
(Pioneers Press first through ninth printings, Bread & Roses Press subsequent printings, 2013)

Simple Steps to a Life Less Shitty
(Bread & Roses Press, 2021)

On Writing
(private edition, 2021)

Three One G/Bread & Roses Press

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"Let's talk about our friends who lost the war
and all the novels that have yet
to be written about them"
-Rilo Kiley

The Turning Wheel

August, 2022

The hills to the west—low and black beneath a tangerine sky, a tropical sunset sky—prairie dusk falling as seen from the front window of the farmhouse.

Today I slept it off on Percocet and Valium, hurt like a wing-shot dove. I dreamt gently—effortless dreams like the soft air of autumn after a month of summer sun.

Waking up, I remember my real world, the world of this summer.

Byron has been dead three weeks. I forget this sometimes and go about my day untroubled. Then I remember, and when I remember I think of my lost friend and the sea of those mourning him. I take one of his records out of the sleeve and set it on the turntable in the library of the farmhouse and I hum along.

Byron's songs are songs of winter pines and summer river shores, mountains in the springtime, a walk through autumn woods on an icy morning. Hearing his voice, I feel the brown and yellow leaves soft beneath my feet as if I am there inside the story he sings. In those moments it is almost as if he is still here. But no. Byron—dead. Myself—here, alive. These days I think of life and I think of change, of time racing at full gallop, and of loss.

I list out the structure of life as I see it to bring some order to the chaos. Something like-

-Life is a turning wheel.

-Life is a waterwheel.

-Life is shit.

-No. Death is shit. Life is far too large a thing to say "Life is" but—

-Life as I see it on August 25th of the year 2022 is a cycle of beginnings to ends to beginnings to ends, and today the seasons spin as a fortune wheel in my head—like thinking of summer in the springtime. Thinking of winter in the fall. Thinking of death—fearing death, and in your fear hoping for life. (Lying here wounded from a stupid accident ["infirmed," the Victorian romantic in me says] I hear Byron's voice—singing high, reedy, then low, cracked like a marble broke in three in the soft palm of your hand, a marble smashed by a hammer, the strips of green and yellow glass twisted together amongst the crystal clear.)

-Life as I see it is a fragile glass thing hung in the window to catch the dusk, the bronze light of sunset—dark orange, gory blood-red, a deep mustard yellow, and for a moment the yellow through the glass is brushed silver then yellow again then pale gold like white wine.

Another Percocet and I fall in and out of consciousness as the immaterial self runs from the pain of my physical form—dreaming for hot, quick moments spurting out like red lava at night from black crag rock.

I dream of Byron on stage in a dark club back in Portland—Fender Mustang guitar strapped high to his chest, leaning close to the mic to sing a Dylan cover in half-whisper, "I had a pony—and her name was Lucifer." Awake—I try to read and keep my mind off it. I pick up Baudelaire but fall again to dreaming—crimson and gold banners and flags snapping in the breeze before a medieval crowd gathered to watch a joust. Yorkshire in the pale light of afternoon. A chill in the air because in the dream it's fall, while trumpets ring out clear and pure. Dead Byron as "Knight." Living Me as "Other Knight." My armor—alabaster with gold tracing. His—black as a void you could step into like a Byron-shaped hole. Alison as "Princess #1" in golden braids and a pointed hat like an ice cream cone. Stacy Mary Nilsson as "Princess #2" in black to match Byron. Stacy—mead-drunk, swaying, then shouting his name, screaming in fury, crying, laughing, lifting her skirts, and kicking her feet side to side like a dancer in a Western saloon (and for a moment the reality of the dream is threatened with scene change). I pull my sword from its sheath and raise it high above

my head (the bright steel blade catching the light, flashing wildly), and I shriek a battle cry and laugh and I'm happy for the joust day. We will drink beer and we will fight.

I wake up and I think of Byron alone at the Old Town Trolley Depot where he set his sorrows down the last time and left the world; like Tolstoy walking toward Astapovo and his own train station of death. I think of the phone call I had with Stacy when we got the news. How she handled the situation. How she was resolved, direct, sitting in her house in Portland drunk at noon with a list of friends to call. I sit up in bed and I think of the time we watched the Pogues movie at our courtyard apartment in Golden Hill back in San Diego—Byron, Alison, Frankie, Jeremy Willis, Dean and Ethan maybe, and all of us crammed into the living room drinking whiskey and beer, a haze of cigarette smoke—laughing, shouting, making jokes, and I think of Shane MacGowan singing, "We walked him to the station in the rain/ We kissed him as we put him on the train."

I walk the empty rooms of the farmhouse while Alison is in the city. When the pills get on top of the pain, I do my best to keep up with the tasks of the day. I post pictures of Byron from my photo albums on Instagram. I message back and forth with Stacy. I take out the trash. I tell friends I love them over email and via text and in the comments because you never know when they'll go away. Mostly we don't get the chance to walk them to the station in the rain. Mostly there is no station and the train is one you don't want to be on.

When someone you love is gone from you (and gone sudden) you catalog the days you've lived in encyclopedic detail before you can move forward. You make lists and you remember what you can and you try like hell to put order to it.

I write lists all day because I feel untethered from myself and the path I'm usually on.

I take a break and sit at my glass-topped writing table in the farm's library and read Roberto Bolaño: "But no one was hearing me and I was heading back out on the dark streets of Mexico City." On my writing table—a stack of books, mason jars and glued-together cracked coffee mugs full of pens. The lamp-

light like a candle's glow, like the golden warmth of an illuminated manuscript—bronze, amber, the shadows silver, shadows haunted by the demons of Bosch, tortured by an Old Testament God. Grief is a museum of shadows—the black hands and fingers of ghosts moving. The living in this house—Alison, Frankie, me, the dogs, the cats. Ghosts—Byron.

Midnight.

Percocet.

Valium.

August.

Now in the morning it's the sound of the kitchen faucet turning on while Alison makes the cats their breakfast. The cats shout at her. Four small voices; each different from the other. Then the sound of their dishes set on the wooden table as she says, "Okay. Alright" to them.

A list describing Alison—beautiful, lovely. The face I want most to see. Also—faded black jeans (high-waisted, tight with a narrow, red, vinyl belt), multicolored huaraches (the slip-on embroidered shoes she bought in Tijuana last year, very small, "doll shoes" Frankie calls them), oversized dark-yellow sweater (this yellow is Alison's signature color she's decided), braided blonde and dark brown hair (hair straying from the braids, unintentional but perfectly so), Aegean sea blue eyes, nice smile, tired today.

I've given Frankie her phone back and now she's in the attic.

Then the sound of feet coming down the stairs and I hear Frankie walk into the kitchen and now Frankie and Alison talk in hushed tones like what they're speaking of is secret (it's not). "I didn't know that was a thing," I hear Alison say. "It's a thing," says Frankie.

A list describing Frankie—shoeless, black jeans, black sleeveless Propagandhi t-shirt, a gray wool Greek fisherman's hat that used to be mine, very pale, thin, distracted, hasn't slept yet, sad in the grips of an ongoing nervous breakdown, her life in the

illegible calligraphy of many-pronged upheaval.

A few minutes later Alison walks into the living room and asks, "Where's the beach blanket?" meaning the colorful picnic blanket we bring when we go to the lake. "It's in the tower," I say, meaning the pile of unfolded clean laundry heaped on the gold fabric easy chair by the bed. "Tower of power," she says, walking back into the kitchen. I open the Bolaño book again and the first line I see is: "I dreamed of Carcasses and Forgotten Beaches." "Bullshit," I hear Alison say in the kitchen. "What's bullshit?" I ask. "I call bullshit on fifteen minutes in the oven for tater tots," she says, and I love her overwhelmingly in that moment.

Love is the best gift you can give, and whether you mean to or not, you will give back to yourself in the act of giving. The action of loving self-propagates. It gives you fuel while giving the same to others. The love I speak of is the kind of love when you give everything away—where you spend yourself like a pile of cash you've fought all week to earn and in your emptiness you are unexpectedly rich. Love will empty your bank account and you will realize it wasn't a bank account to begin with, and you will see that when you love truly you cannot drain your reserves because in the charity of love your reserves are boundless. You will love your friend and your love will raise you back up as you start to fall down. You will love a stranger and the grace, compassion, and beneficence of this act will keep the planet in motion. You will love your lover and in that sanctity your days will be like years and your years will be lifetimes. Love will consume you and you will be safe inside this love and anything that wants to get at you will have to get through love first. You will be armored against the arrows singing through the trees by unknown archers. You will stand tall with the strength of legions at your back and no wind will push you down. Love will just eat you alive, and I hope you will let it.

August heat tonight where you move through space as if in slow motion. In August—genteel poverty. Of course there is a difference between genteel and gentle. What I want most is to be as gentle as a leaf falling from a tree in autumn, but it's summer still, and hot. Nothing is gentle this summer. This is a summer of violent men. Somewhere a man is planning to shoot

up a grocery store. Somewhere a man is hoping for regression in the name of security. Somewhere a man plots annihilation. Somewhere a man aims a rifle at someone running and pulls the trigger, and when he pulls the trigger they fall forward, their arms in the air, twisting to the side as they drop.

I wish to say lovely things.

Today I cannot.

But I'm looking for some small thing to hold onto.

Alison and Frankie are in the kitchen discussing their plans for tomorrow. Frankie says, "I just said yes because this is not my thing and I'm not thinking about it at all and I'll bring it by if they want it." Alison says, "Are you going over there for other things?" "No," says Frankie. A pause now while neither talks. I hear the dryer spinning—wet clothes in a bound-up clump turning in the cylinder then dropping when they get to the top. Spin, drop, spin, drop. "You're bad," Alison tells the dog.

I want to tell you the quiet moments are the best of all. The Siamese cat with his sky blue eyes stepping lightly across the back of the sofa to visit me and have his fuzzy head rubbed. Alison singing to herself upstairs. Scratchy improvisational music playing low on the turntable or the record has ended and you hear the muffling skip as it spins eternal. Cicadas in the trees. Gnats in swarming clouds. Grasshoppers resting in the weeds. Moths hitting the porchlight. The small details of the quotidian and another day hoping for quiet moments and rarely getting them.

Another day of making lists of another days-

-Another day waiting for those quiet moments like you wait for the mail to arrive, and then you realize it's Sunday and there will be no mail today.

-Another day and someone in your neighborhood has died and a circle of mourning forms around them. You will not see this, but for those in the circle this time is profound and will alter lives.

-Another day and a friendship is being rebuilt.

-Another day and a baby is born very close to where you are reading this.

-Another day and someone you will never meet is watching the rain fall from a living room window or the front-seat of a car or the conference room of an office building and they are wishing it would rain more often.

-Another day and a rainbow after a storm and maybe you notice it and stop for a while and think about the colors and how lucky we are to have colors like that. Maybe you see it and think nothing of it. Maybe you are too busy to notice. Maybe you are so busy you notice nothing for weeks at a time as your life rolls past unmarked by notable events or lasting memories.

-Another day and you stopped reading Ukraine war news because you just *can't* anymore.

-Another day and you are recommitting yourself to living better just like you did last week.

-Another day and the gray light of morning is like a funeral in a movie.

-Another day and someone you love is thinking of ending their life and you will never know this because they are afraid to tell you.

-Another day and you laugh at something your friend said and they laugh too and when they laugh they are beautiful.

-Another day and on a playground a child calls its friend a "tattletale."

-Another day and you drive past a billboard announcing the evils of gambling or alcoholism or texting while driving.

-Another day worried about the election.

-Another day and you hear gunshots in the night and you sit up and look out the window. You think of your loved ones and how you can't keep them safe when you are not there.

-Another day and at dusk, slumped in the chair at your writing

table, painkillers swimming through your blood, you think of every year of your adulthood and of those you know and knew and the wild exploits of being human and alive in this new century. You think of going away and returning, of Hurricane Frances and parties and jokes, of a revival and a time of sudden change, of the islands of the night, the sun westering, and the museum of shadows.

-You think of another day.

-Another day in the West.

-Another day on the prairie.

-Another day ending. Light like gold dust and molasses. Dusk. The evening heat. I will get up from this chair and see what is to be done.

Going Away

2001

My first glimpse of Portland is pine trees and a bridge over the river—industry, gray winter sky. Driving toward my new home, I'm surprised how ugly Portland is and I think, *What have I done?* The first two weeks in Portland, Frankie and I are sick with pneumonia. We lie in bed in our separate rooms or sometimes in hers and I cough, and if I cough enough I run to the bathroom and vomit. All around us are unpacked boxes, hard-case luggage from the 1960s, bedding in folded stacks. Some of this is Frankie's. Most is mine. We sweat through a week of fevers then Frankie finds me kneeling among the piles of empty cardboard boxes in my room molding doctors for myself out of red modeling clay. I've unpacked and arranged all my things in order of color. A stack of white paperback books on the desk. Black t-shirts in a heap by the door. A series of CDs with predominantly yellow cover art arranged on the floor in the shape of an X.

Frankie stands in the doorway and I look up and grin and my hands shake and I say, "These are my *doctors*." My melting brain pneumonia voice sounds like Igor saying, "Yyyes master" to Victor Frankenstein and my doctors are an inch tall with little round heads like basketballs and I'm thrilled. Sitting on my bedroom floor, I laugh and hold my doctors close to my face and talk to them in Russian which I've found I can speak now as my skull cooks and as new ideas wriggle in and out of my brain like worms and baby snakes.

Frankie and our roommate Eton help me into the back of Eton's car and they take me to Adventist Health down the street. I lie on the examination table with its light blue paper cover hallucinating spirals of green fog hissing up from jungle clearings in Vietnam while I fly over the trees sitting in the open door of a helicopter with camo makeup streaked across my face while in pain and terror I shout, "Jesus fucking Christ!" to which the poor, cheerful Adventist nurse says, "Jesus is Lord! Yes, he is!" It's all I can say. "Jesus fucking Christ" and her "Jesus is Lord!

Yes, he is!" follows each curse with a nod and a smile.

In Portland, we're almost not in Portland. Weeks before we left San Diego, our roommate Eton's mom the real estate agent found us a place, and the mailing address said Portland but the house is a few blocks from Gresham. Gresham, Oregon is not Portland. Gresham is very far from the Portland people love both in terms of geographical distance and culture. Gresham is trash suburbs, stripmall parking lots, chainlink fences, and plasma clinics. Our first attempt at Portland is a failure before we even arrive. In Portland, we're in Gresham.

In Portland, Frankie and I lie awake listening to a man screaming in the asylum next door. He shouts all night, every night and then it's dawn—the sky softening from gray-black to a cold light blue from the window across the room—and we haven't slept.

At nine, the alarm clock radio goes off. I roll over, folding the pillow around my head like a taco to stop the noise. Frankie sits up to shut off the alarm and says, "Well. Fuck. Now we're awake again. *Awesome*." "Ugh," I say. It's not a word, but it contains a catalog of pain and frustration. It's a sound that sums up these stupid first weeks in this stupid new town. "I think we made a mistake coming here," says Frankie. I settle deep as I can into the warmth of the bed and stare up at the blank white ceiling. "Yes." I say it so quietly the word doesn't have the power to leave my mouth. "Yes" drops back into my chest and I feel it there like a piece of food. I clear my throat and say it again. "Yes." It comes out as a rasp. The day does not begin well.

In Portland, our roommate Eton has money and a job and we have neither. We take a spoonful of his fancy guy peanut butter or a cup of his Trader Joe's applesauce like rats stealing from the humans in the dead of night. We rat into the kitchen and rat right out. Rat into the darkness and rat until dawn because the sun's been a no-show since January and now we're nocturnal—nocturnal in gray Portland with its gray mornings, gray afternoons, gray downtown streets, gray bridges spanning the gray river, gray houses and cars, gray skies until night and then dull city black, an ashy layer of clouds blocking out the stars.

Eton leaves for work each morning at 8am and at 8am we're still awake from the night before. We turn the stereo up loud and it's Mates of State or it's Sunday's Best or At the Drive-In and we go downstairs and laugh and shout if we're feeling stir-crazy then we steal his food in tiny bites the size of marbles and peas.

In Portland, Frankie and I sit on the stairs eating microwave popcorn from a blue plastic bowl, listening to our roommate Eton fucking his new girlfriend Annie like it's a movie we're watching.

We try to keep from laughing.

I hold my hand over my mouth and I bite my thumb and it hurts like hell, but the comedy of hearing your friends have sex is undeniable.

"Is this cabin fever?" asks Frankie.

"Yes."

And it is.

Eton rarely speaks to us and we're sure he regrets moving here. We decide he hates us. Because why? Because of course he does. Back home in San Diego, Eton booked shows at the most popular all-ages club in town and from his basement bedroom he runs an indie-rock record label with great taste in bands, design, and merchandizing. Eton knows everyone. Is loved by vast numbers. Has nice shoes and thick black curly hair.

One afternoon we drive to Powell's and sell our books for rent money and see Eton at the checkout counter with a stack of new books as tall as the sky. His record collection looks like a record store. His laugh is like a happy stream babbling in the mountains on a sunny day. We're nothing. Kids. Anonymous.

"I kinda think Eton hates us," says Frankie one night.

"I kinda think so too."

"I kinda think kinda is not enough," she says.

"Like it's beyond kinda?"

"It's beyond kinda."

Eton gets a pug. One night Frankie and I are in the living room with a fire going from a fallen tree branch I found in the backyard. The living room—ugly, modern, undecorated, its single couch up against the wall, no chairs or bookcases, Eton's life-size cardboard cut-out of a cop standing looking out the window (on his badge, the name "R. Culp"). But with the fire going it's warm and cheery and for a moment it feels like a home. On Frankie's portable TV/VCR combo that looks like a square gray box, we've got a Guns N' Roses video collection with the sound off. Frankie looks at magazines and I stare into the fire thinking of how ugly Portland is, and the evening feels fine.

Eton's pug sits between us on the floor, visiting a little but mostly staring at Axl Rose, who's drunk and possibly freezing to death, a bottle of booze in one hand, a pistol in the other, staggering across icy terrain on the screen. He's dressed like some sort of Old West medieval pirate in tights, a cape, and a bandana, and watching him feels comforting like taking a bath or counting money when you have a lot of it or coming home and eating hot food on a cold day. "Thank you, Axl Rose," I say, and Frankie laughs. "Why thank you, Axl Rose?" "I don't know," I say as I curl up on my side and shut my eyes. The bliss of heat on a winter's night when you've never lived anywhere with a winter softens me into mush while the pieces of tree branch crackle and pop. The house smells like a campfire which is a much better thing than a house smelling like a house.

Lying on my side with my cheek to the carpet, I stare at the red glowing embers as they settle and drop into the black below them. I'm halfway asleep when the pug wanders too close to the fire and yelps and runs scrambling, skidding across the living room floor then down the stairs to Eton's basement room. We hear Eton walk up the stairs, but we don't see him. Then his face is looking around the corner, the red-orange firelight reflecting off the lenses of his glasses as he says, "Did you just kick my pug?"

Within days, the line becomes a popular catchphrase. We love "Did you just kick my pug?" and say it often and soon friends of ours back home who don't know Eton or his pug are saying

it too and it becomes "a thing." One night as we sit upstairs looking at magazines and listening to a Pedro the Lion CD, I tell Frankie, "I think 'Did you just kick my pug?' is a thing now." "Yeah, it's a thing," she says, "It's official."

Frankie and I sleep late into the day and wake up after dusk for months. Portland for us is a city at night. Traffic crawling along unfamiliar streets. Rain. Taillights in a soft red blur in the mist and dark.

Rent, bills, car insurance, and registration hit all at once. I spend the last of my final paycheck from my job at the internet newspaper on rent and utilities and let my car insurance and registration lapse.

We drive around town at night with no insurance and expired plates because we can still afford gas even if we can't afford new tags.

Frankie was nineteen when we got to Portland and now she's twenty so we can't go to bars, and there is rarely money for movies or restaurants or shows. So it's driving. Talking about people we know or music or animals while driving. Listening to tapes while driving. Driving past laundromats with yellow-lit interiors and past diners in the rain and endless pine trees, and the streets are always wet and the headlights shine up off them and blind me, and I say things like, "What a confusing, ugly, crowded city," and Frankie says, "Why did we move to this stupid-ass place?" It's winter and forever-night in a city that makes no sense to us. Winter and forever-night and the rats are now vampire bats who drive to Safeway to buy four dollars in groceries with coins or spend hours after midnight lost in neighborhoods identical to the neighborhoods next to them, the dark houses passing in the rainy gloom.

Awake until dawn, I sit at my desk by the window and try to write fiction while Frankie reads all the books in the house or takes endless baths or cuts things out of fashion magazines and tapes them up on the walls.

Frankie decorates the shower with red gummy bears by sticking them up in a line where the tile meets the edge of the bathtub.

It's cheery and weird and I like it so much I feel ecstatic.

When a freelance writing payment comes in we buy furniture at thrift stores—a solid wood picnic table for downstairs, a big yellow corduroy easy chair, a CD rack I can't get to stand up then smash to bits with a hammer.

I throw the pieces of the CD rack out the second story window like I'd tossed the printer I couldn't get to print or the computer monitor after days of sudden shutdowns. In a rage, it all goes out the window. Go. Be gone. Away into the darkness. Into the stupid Portland night.

Ben Frank and his friends visit from Chicago and hole up in the room we never use because it's always cold. "The Cold Room," Frankie calls it. The Cold Room has beige painted walls, damp with the winter chill, beige carpeting, and a solitary pair of windows, small and close together like a pig's eyes with a view of the powerlines—thin black strings tight against the street-light-lit night sky. There is nothing in the Cold Room but a kid's school desk with its attached seat Frankie bought for three bucks at Value Village. The desk. In one corner. Sad and lonely. The day we buy it Frankie snaps a photo of me sitting at it, trying my best to look like a "serious writer." (Do I? I look like a starving child.) The smell of the Cold Room is a sharp, lingering mildew, but now with Ben Frank and his friends sleeping in the room it has changed to punk kid heroin filth. (The latter much worse than the former.)

A list describing Ben Frank—a tangled shock of black hair and thick-frame glasses, and because of that children out in public ask if he's Harry Potter, and if he's in a good mood he says, "Yes. I am. But don't tell anyone." Ben Frank wears highwater slacks from the 1980s and mismatched colored socks and oversize dress shoes with a brass buckle. He wears a filthy Oxford shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a tie blowing in the breeze or an ancient Ninja Turtles t-shirt as thin as green silk. Funny, elegant, sad, yearning, unsatisfied, lawless Ben Frank shouts, "Frankie! James! Fix it!" when things go wrong. He says, "Come to the Pinback show with me or you have screwed every pooch in the world." Ben Frank is a folk hero and a man of the people but only if the people are Herman Melville, Athena, Dosto-

evsky, and the members of Devo. Ben Frank isn't old enough to drink, but he's lived eight-thousand nine-hundred and ninety-nine rowdy, swashbuckling lives like the bandit king of cats.

When Ben Frank leaves the house to shoplift food each day, the other two boys fuck or shoot up. When they shoot up, they use the syringe to squirt blood at the ceiling. One of them is very sweet and quiet and the other is quiet and sly and the sly one steals from us—a cowboy hat I bought off doomed Joey Carr, a white leather belt Frankie's had forever, books, records, costume jewelry, nail polish, a Ziplock bag of safety pins, a Le Shok CD, a Jets to Brazil tape. When the other two leave for Chicago to start their first year of art school, Ben Frank moves upstairs to a second room we rarely use. This room is called "the Project Room" and it's where Frankie cuts up magazines or makes mixtapes or plays the Casiotone keyboard I got at Goodwill. Ben Frank lies in bed in the Project Room under a Mexican blanket and he and Frankie and I talk quietly about our friends and bands we like and movies we've seen. We talk about San Diego, Bauhaus, Ocean Beach, El Cotixan, the Empire Club, Clairemont, Zeus, MC Hammer, Cameron Crowe, Norse gods, Jason Priestley, the Hotel Del, school buses, heroin, the Faint, Paris, Mel Gibson, queso dip, Lightning Bolt, pirate swords, speed, Vicodin, eye doctors, the Ché Café, and the Beautiful Mutants.

We get the internet set up at the house but only use it once a week to look at our email because no one writes to us. We send letters back to San Diego with drawings or collage art on the back. Frankie and I listen to the Bright Eyes/Son, Ambulance split *Oh Holy Fools* while lying on the floor next to each other with our eyes shut. We wake up late and spend an hour doing nothing before thinking about breakfast or waste a day sitting around looking at magazines. We take three hours to leave the house or we get drunk at 5am because there are no to-do lists telling us what to do. Ben Frank, Frankie, and I have zero connections, no responsibilities, no money, no friends in town, no bedtime, no alarms, no reasons to do anything, and sometimes we do nothing for days. I try to write stories, but mostly I stare out the window of my writing room at the drizzly gray sky and the housetops across from us and the powerlines. Sometimes I

imagine reaching out and cutting the powerlines with a pair of scissors or trying to walk on them like a circus act—balancing above the streets and sidewalks while everyone in the crowd holds their breath.

Frankie and I apply for jobs at Joann Fabric, Kmart, Target, Safeway, and the outer-space-themed gas station on Glisan.

No one calls us back.

It's a relief to be denied work.

Ben Frank feeds us by shoplifting. When he comes home, we have French bread, bricks of Tillamook cheese, bags of gala apples, new books, a used Joy Division CD bootleg, and a plastic tub of raspberries or a perfect grapefruit we share three ways. Best of all—a jug of burgundy or table red brought home daily which we immediately open and drink until it's gone and until we are rosy-faced—glowing, warm, red-cheeked, pale, total goddamn baby-kid children.

When Ben Frank leaves for Chicago, I get a series of short-lived freelance writing jobs at various magazines across the country. For a while we have money and we take trips out of town. We get a rice cooker at Target and Frankie buys seven typewriters at Goodwill. We go to shows. We see the Locust and the Blood Brothers at the all-ages club which is the only place we can get in. We see Bright Eyes, Azure Ray, Crooked Fingers. We see Dear Nora and listen to their record *We'll Have a Time* for weeks. We see the Thermals, 31Knots, the Sadies, Death Cab for Cutie, the All-Girl Summer Fun Band, the Album Leaf, and the Dropscience. We eat dinner at Nicholas Restaurant—a lovely mezze platter with hummus, falafel, tzatziki sauce, dolmas, olives, saffron rice, and a big piece of flatbread the size of a car's tire we call "the big bread." We walk a half hour from the house to get pizza at BJ's and for dessert a giant chocolate chip cookie served in a baking pan with ice cream on top. We stand outside the Franz bread factory and watch the loaves ride the conveyor belt and the fresh bread smell is wonderful. We rent *Caligula* at Mike's Movie Madness whenever we have out of town guests we want to traumatize. We buy VHS tapes, MorningStar Chik'n Nuggets, bags of rice, soy sauce, and a tiny plant with pink

speckled leaves Frankie names "Robin." We buy makeup, nail polish, books and Japanese stickers at Reading Frenzy, wonderful sub sandwiches at the place where all the workers have Down's Syndrome, and endless piles of candy.

Oregon spring is like antibiotics after all the cold and gray—blackberry vines tangling the hedges, plums to steal off the neighbor's tree, and rain that feels productive rather than heavy and daunting.

Summer is mild, quiet. Sometimes we leave the house for weeks without planning to or warning our roommate Eton. At the end of August, we take the Amtrak down to San Diego for no reason except it seems nice and because we're homesick and want real Mexican food.

We board the train without tickets and arrive in San Diego on the 10th of September after a day and a half travel.

A list of headlines. September 10th, 2001-

"Fear of Recession Ignites Discussion of More Tax Cuts"

"Food and Wine Tips from Readers"

"Shootout in a Bronx Apartment Leaves Robber and Victim Dead"

"Opera Singer Loses 2 Gowns"

"U.S. Companies Sharply Reduce Orders for Tools"

"Black Families Resist Mississippi Land Push"

"Finally, Big Women on Campus"

"This College Professor Can Fix Your Engine, Too"

"When It Comes to Winning, Brilliance May Be Overrated"

"US Routes Argentina for Basketball Gold"

"Memories of Homework"

"Board Says Singer's Plane Was Overloaded"

"Abandoned Newborn is Found in Central Park"

"Israeli Arab's Suicide Bomb Points to Enemy Within"

"As Usual, Extroverts Get the Show Rolling"

"Cubs Beat Cincinnati to Break Losing Streak"

"Jeep's Manufacturer Seeks to Capitalize on the Vehicle's Featured Role in *Band of Brothers*"

"Analyzing *The Simpsons*"

"Trying to Migrate, 13 Moroccans Drown"

"Elizabeth Dole to Announce Candidacy for Helm's Seat"

"As Hollywood Uses More Animals, Concerns Grow About Their Welfare"

"Crowd Sees Queen Mother"

"Shark Turns Tables on Angler with Bite"

"A Memory Strewn Celebration of Germany's Jews"

"Religious Strife in Nigeria Leaves Bodies in the Streets"

"U.S. Basketball Wins Easily"

"Gang Leader Admits to Murders"

"Pro Football: Giants Are Aiming to Prove the Doomsayers Wrong"

Then the eleventh of September.

And the attacks.

And we stagger in the new wind.


COMMEMORATIVE
United We Stand
A Message for All Americans
President George W. Bush
September 20, 2001

Returning

2002

The man sleeping at the bus stop rubs his nose as I walk past—in my arms, a brown paper grocery bag and inside a six-pack of canned beer, flour tortillas, a block of cheddar, a round of French bread, a small tub of butter, and a pack of Camel Lights I promised I'd buy Sadie. Frankie and I are back home in San Diego. We have one section of a duplex in Golden Hill. We call it "the apartment," but it's a lovely WWI-era family home divided in two. Ours is the smaller piece, though a beautiful thing with many windows and dark wood paneling and polished blonde floorboards. To the north—built-in glass-front cabinets and a window seat with a view of the courtyard and an orange tree. It's a place of light and quiet; the sort of house that feels living, though settled, comfortable like a benevolent, sleeping god. After the awful, drab, cold Portland house "the apartment" feels like a home; the first I've known since childhood. I tell myself, *This is something you should enjoy*, and often I do, but I'm pulled in two directions. I have no feelings or I have every feeling. I think fast and clear or I'm a lifeless machine stumbling in malfunction from morning to night. Something has gone wrong with my brain. There is no discernible reason for this. It feels like a shadow creeping slowly across a boulder in a beautiful green meadow. I'm scrambled and disjointed or I'm fine, happy, laughing, ready for anything. There is no middle ground.

As I walk, the sun on my back is like a space heater—nice, comforting though mildly so. I'm sleepy. I tell myself tonight I'll make pasta or maybe quesadillas. Or both. Would that be weird? Italian and Mexican in one meal? It would be weird. Who cares. Italian and Mexican. That's dinner. Okay. Walking past a dark blue mailbox, and thinking for a second of manuscripts, I regret not writing anything apart from work this past month. Or longer? Two months? Three? At that moment, I remember I was meant to get quarters for laundry, and at the same time I tell myself it's okay not to write for months. Make a living. Pay bills. Save up. Some days nothing at all happens except work

and I end the night with no memory of the events of the day. Wake up. Shower. Drop Frankie off at her hospital job on the edge of La Jolla. Drive to Hillcrest. Write news all day. Wake up and call in sick and sleep late. Wake up on a Saturday and spend the afternoon getting ready for nothing and sleep twelve hours.

A bus pulls up to the stop which is now a half block behind me. I look back and the man still sleeps or was that yesterday? Or last week? It's Tuesday or it's Wednesday or it's Friday. I let myself into the apartment or I bang on the metal security gate to get Frankie to let me in or I walk past the apartment and go to Golden Hill Liquor for laundry change or a jug of Carlo Rossi burgundy. I walk in the shade of eucalyptus trees with their sharp, woodsy smell or past a row of shaggy palms and I've got a song stuck in my head or I think of nothing. The passage of time leaves indistinct memories and the order of things feels shuffled, irregular, disconnected from any common path. I'm reading *The New Yorker* in the bathtub while Frankie sings something from *Les Misérables* in the other room at 2am or could it be nearly dawn? I'm wine-drunk in the evening walking a little crooked back from the Turf Club and the sky has a soft, muddy, sea-violet tint like tempura paints with the city light from Downtown to the west of us at the bottom of the hill and god it's beautiful and also I don't care. I'm sitting on the little cement porch in the apartment courtyard watching the landlord's chained-up dog watch traffic. Or I'm watching the neighbor we call "At the Drive-In" (on account of his hair) do home improvement work. He's standing in front of a wooden saw-horse waist-deep in weeds and tall grass cutting two by fours in half with a circular saw. Is it afternoon? Is it June? Or July? Sun glaring off the windshields of parked cars. Walking down Broadway to 7-Eleven and I cross paths with the man selling ice cream bars and popsicles from a pushcart and we nod and he says, "Buenos." The eternal looping path—apartment to 7-Eleven, 7-Eleven to apartment. The man behind the counter says, "Long day?" He looks like Charles Manson and I imagine him telling his followers to kill me in the '60s and I'm not sure I'd mind. ("Do your worst," I'd tell them. And they would swarm in like raptors.) War news on TV. Bombs on the screen, smart bombs, suicide bombs, bombs bursting in air, bombs I want to blow me all to hell and wouldn't that be nice?

At night—artsy, boring post-rock shows at Scolari's that Frankie can't tolerate, a long and drawn-out dinner at Pokéz, flaking on plans, disappointing friends until they stop calling, promising everything and never making good on it, warm cheap red wine, bank deposits, deadlines, movie tickets for AMC-20 or Hillcrest Landmark, denim coats with band pins, mismatched socks, scarves though it's not cold enough for them, Converse with dirty laces and band names written on the sides, French and Italian fashion magazines, costume jewelry, black hair dye, skintight jeans from the Target girls' section, audacious belts, silver glitter nail polish, midnight drunk haircuts, a ruined apartment. Frankie works at a hospital and sleeps like a housecat on her days off. I write news and it's a great job and I hate writing news and I hate jobs especially the great jobs which burn up half your life. Our problems are smaller than the smallest seeds in the palm of your hand. But do they feel small? God no. Frankie has panic attacks. I'm pulled one way then the next until I think of and want death. We're worried about our clothes, about how we look. We argue. We're bored of our friends because they drink too much. We drink too much. Big deal. Biggest deal. Hello from the palace of shit.

On the one-year anniversary of 9/11, Frankie and I and her kid sister Sadie watch the news with the lights off. Blue TV light in the apartment. Retrospective analysis. Stirring orchestral strings and trumpets over a speech Bush did after the attacks. "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining." On the screen—an image of a bald eagle and behind it fireworks. "The search is underway for those who are behind these evil acts." A shot of a rippling American flag in the breeze, and across the screen the words "U N I T E D W E S T A N D" appear one letter at a time in front of the flag; the sky behind the flag lavish blue. Then the scene dissolves to fighter jets streaking in V formation like geese from the bottom to the top of the screen in slow motion, leaving bright white contrails behind them. I shut one eye then the next to switch perspective. Left eye shut—the planes are on the screen. Right eye shut—the planes fly in miniature as seen through the green glass of the half-empty wine jug on the coffee-table.

Sadie, sitting in the dark between me and Frankie, says, "Can we watch something else?"

A list describing Sadie—eighteen years old, angry, funny, straw blonde with braces, wearing what our friends call "boy clothes," big jeans, a blue hoodie like a tent, boxy sneakers from a skate company.

I get up off the couch. "Who needs a beer?"

Frankie says no and Sadie lifts her arm as a silent yes.

On the screen, a news anchor in a dark blue suit says, "—and of course everything changed and we're seeing that now in retrospect. Next we go to Gloria with our special report on the hunt for Osama bin Laden."

"I'm kinda surprised Gloria hasn't found him yet," says Frankie.

"Turn it off," Sadie says.

I sit back down on the couch and hand Sadie a can of Tecate and pop the tab on mine.

"Gloria find him yet?" I say.

Sadie puts her feet up on the coffee-table and sinks low into the couch. "*Please.* I'm so sick of 9/11."

I change it to MTV—Avril Lavigne's face huge on the screen, her teeth very white, singing, "chill out, what ya yellin' for?/lay back, it's all been done before."

"Ugh, I feel so old," says Frankie, getting up from the couch.

"Come on, twenty-one is *not* old," I tell Frankie as she walks into the kitchen.

She stops in front of the TV, watching Avril sing.

"It's older than her," she says, stepping aside so we can see Avril, who flips somersaulting through the air and slam dunks a basketball at a mall sports shop.

"I legit, like—*love* this song," says Sadie.

Frankie walks into the kitchen and I change the channel to Nick at Nite.

A list of headlines. October 30th, 2002-

"Rally in Washington is Said to Invigorate Anti-War Movement"

"Investigators in Jordan Seek Clues in Death of U.S. Envoy"

"U.S. to Add Forces in Horn of Africa"

"Oil Pipeline Forges Ahead in Ecuador"

"U.S. and France Near Compromise on Iraq"

On Tuesday I take Frankie to work then drive to the office in Hillcrest.

A half block away as I pass the Friendship Hotel I realize I can't, and I pull over at the first payphone I see and call in sick.

I make my voice sound ragged, stuffy. "I doan know whad happent. I jus woke ub feeging so sig. Is tha okay? Yeah? Thags so muge. I appreciad it."

Downtown outside the Old Spaghetti Factory, I run into Joey Carr and we decide to walk to the harbor. It's a warm, breezy day, the sky clear blue, and the city bustling with traffic, taxis, street construction, buses pulling up to stops, cranes lifting loads of rebar, painters on scaffolding giving office buildings a fresh coat of adobe pink or beige, skaters clacking across the sidewalks, a man walking three small dogs, planes overhead.

We walk fast and we talk about the war, about a cousin of Joey's who tried to enlist and found out she has a heart condition.

Joey tells me, "Hey, hold up" or he says "Wait real quick" or "Just a sec" at every secluded spot where he smokes crystal from a tinfoil pipe he keeps in his hoodie pocket while I watch for cops.

A list describing Joey Carr—dyed black hair in a mop like a Beatle, very pale, sickly, gaunt, dark circles under his eyes, olive skin approaching green, stick thin jeans and a black hoodie, shaky hands, reeks of cigarettes and booze, "NOPE" written across the knuckles of one hand in Sharpie, fingernails painted black (though chipped), nervous, talking a mile a minute, smart but inarticulate, naïve, and god he's lost a lot of weight since I last saw him. (Every time I see Joey Carr he looks more like a corpse.)

Down at the harbor we look at the Navy ships.

The bay waters sparkle with the sun in a moment of calm before the breeze kicks up then they are wind-swept, ruffled, dark blue.

The harbor is busy with tankers moving slow and gray battleships in the far-off distance and small white sailboats cutting past the bigger vessels. It's a lovely thing and I forget temporarily the worries I have.

Joey leans forward on the railing like he's going to rest his chin on his arms but snorts a bump of speed off the side of his hand.

The railing is painted dark blue, but it's begun to chip and you can see older coats of paint—bright orange, gray, white below that like the layers of a jawbreaker.

"What if we joined the Navy?" he says.

"Like us, me and you?"

"Yeah. In the Navy."

"Joey, we would suck as soldiers."

"Yeah. I guess. I'm just thinking—I don't know—thinking of doing something else."

"Other than what?"

"This. Being a creep. Being a big piece of shit all the time."

"Joey, you're not a piece of shit *all* the time."

He laughs. "Just some of the time?"

"Yeah. Just some of the time."

2003

Frankie talks my boss at the wire service into starting a weekly magazine that he'll put up money for and we'll run. She hires her cousin Alison to handle the calendar listings and that's a problem because I'm falling in love with Alison. We work and we go to bars and Alison and I hang out more and more and the problem is worse each day. I tell her nothing, but there's so much to say. Like—Alison, I loved you on that sweltering hot night last week when you danced to "Hey Ya" at the Whistle Stop with guys and girls we didn't know and I stood leaning against the wall by the DJ booth with the disco lights running a circle across the dancefloor and drank a beer I didn't want and thought of nothing but you.

After the bar, we drove to the South Park 7-Eleven in the late-night heat and I got nachos in a black plastic dish with a clear lid that steamed up immediately after I pressed it shut because of the hot cheese sauce.

The place was packed with the crowds letting out of the bars and college kids shouting to each other and sketchy hipsters and punks our age walking to the counter with cases of beer because the clock said five minutes 'til two. In the aisle across from us, a sweaty drunk copper-haired girl in pigtails wearing a filthy white tank top sang about how if you want her body and you think she's sexy something something let her know, while cars pulled in and out of the parking lot and a drunk bro in board shorts and a polo shirt walked past us and said, "Saturday night's alright for fighting" and you said, "*Yeah*, buddy" and he gave you a high-five.

It had begun to rain. The streets—black and shiny. I watched from the window by the magazines and then you were next to me with your oversized bag of tortilla chips and you said, "Ready?"

Ready.

I loved you at the Casbah show we spent fifteen bucks to get into and didn't watch the bands. It was the week of your twenty-first birthday and we were loud and drunk and funny. It felt as if we were the center of a solar system, the axis around which worlds spin.

I loved you in your pink t-shirt and how you held your hands folded across your belly and leaned forward when you laughed.

I loved you with your unwashed hair—dark blonde, tucked behind your small ears.

I loved you and the smell of your sweat that day you wore a sleeveless shirt to work and for a moment it was there then gone (something like cedar and rose) and I broke into a fever of lust.

I loved you when a black cat walked in front of us on the sidewalk and you began to chant, "Little feet. Little feet. Little feet."

I loved you with your pale glow like you'd never seen the sun or had been too sad to leave the house for ten-thousand years just like how some days I never want to leave the house for ten-thousand years.

I loved you with your endless capacity to solve problems and how it lent you a sort of indestructibility.

I loved you and the shape of your ass and wide hips in those low-rise jeans when you danced with your back to me at the Rosary Room then spun around and laughed and put your hand on my chest then turned back again and dipped low. The song was 50 Cent "In Da Club" and I felt insane.

I loved your interest in strange topics, arcane traditions, and odd cultures, and I loved your love of Victorian literature and how you grew up reading novels with dragons on the cover.

I loved it when you told me what you wanted most as a child was to be around a lot of animals.

I loved the stories of you and your brothers growing up feral

in your big, ramshackle house in Encinitas with a view of the sea, and how one day you made a game of wearing a single roller-skate while pushing with the other foot, and how you rolled down the hallway like that, holding a torn corner of your mother's wallpaper and ripping it all down as you rode.

I loved you with your anxiety which is so much like mine and how it made mine go away knowing of yours.

I loved you with your little shoes.

I loved you with your big sunglasses.

I loved you with your messy car and how it looked like you lived in it or were at least ready for anything.

I loved you with your dark circles from sleepless nights.

I loved you and I hid that from everyone including myself.

You bury love as deep as you can and you tell that love to stay there—to keep hidden. Remain in the dark or you will be seen. They will find you. Hurt you. But a true love will come back. A true love will find sunlight and air and a true love will show its face and you will remember it is a true love, and no matter how you try to hide, love tell you this: "I am still here. I am here whether you like it or not. I won't leave you alone because I know I'm good for you and you know I am too."

When I think of this I think of a line from bell hooks about how when we turn away from love "we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again."

But I turned away.

Why?

I turned away because I couldn't hurt Frankie. I turned away because she and Alison are cousins and longtime best friends, and I turned away because the three of us are a sort of new best friend triangle. Frankie and I together are serious and intense. Alison and I together are hilarious and up for anything. Frankie and Alison together are strong like wolves. But the three of us?

Invincible. Together we would survive a nuclear war without a bunker. We could drink acid rain like it's Dr Pepper. We could last out a plague. Swat away whole armies like gnats. To mess with the alchemy of that would be to waste what I've come to consider my shield against the waking nightmares in my head, my remedy against the exhausting, viperous chemicals sizzling my brain. Even on the worst, most catastrophically painful days, when the voices in my head join together as a chorus to try and end me, I'm still having fun, and that's thanks to Frankie and Alison.

So, yes.

I did.

I turned away.

It's Saturday night and I meet Joey Carr at Scolari's Office to watch Business Lady. Between bands we leave the club and sit in my Volvo so he can snort lines of MDMA. I ask him what's wrong with using Scolari's bathroom to do drugs like everyone else and he says, "I think of all the shitting that's been done in there and I—ugh, I just freak out." Joey Carr is always freaking out. Something freaks him out every hour upon the hour like a reliable machine. (In his sleep Joey freaks out in his dreams.) "I just think, *Oh my god, so much shit and so many shitting butts* then I lose my mind." Joey leans forward to snort a line off his driver's license.

I turn the radio to 91X and it's the Mexican national anthem which means it's midnight.

"*God* I love the Mexican national anthem," he says, head back, eyes closed.

I turn it up. "You know the words?"

"I always make up my own," he says, squinting out the window at a couple walking past arm in arm, the girl's dark hair blowing in the night breeze.

"Sing it," I say, jutting my chin at the lit-up dial of the radio.

"What? My fake version?"

"Yeah, do the fake version."

"You ready for this?"

"Always."

He sings.

A list of headlines. May 5th, 2003-

"Militant Palestinian Groups Dispute Powell's Report of a Crackdown by Damascus"

"Hong Kong to Set Up Research Center to Study SARS"

"U.S. to Free More Afghan War Prisoners from Guantanamo"

"Top Employer Gone, Iraqis Shuffle for Jobs"

"The Power and Light at Ground Zero"

Frankie tells Alison I shouldn't be left alone because she's worried I might do something bad. I sit in my doctor's office and I tell him I've been thinking of suicide. He asks me, "Have you, uh—" he has a hard time getting the words out. He's known me since I was a child and maybe it hurts to see this because maybe he still sees the child "—have you made a *plan*?" I tell him no. But that's not entirely true. I've planned it out every night lying in bed unable to sleep, my thoughts in an ugly whirlpool that doesn't drag you down all the way but never stops churning or lets you catch a clean breath. Sure, yeah, no plan on paper. Nothin' written down. *It's all up here*, I think as he talks soundlessly to me. In my mind I tap my forehead twice along with the words "up here." I sit on the table with its paper cover that crinkles under me and I nod yes, yes while he talks and I don't hear a word. What I hear is my own dialogue in my head which never lets up. As he talks it's like someone is turning up the volume of my thoughts until they're a screaming wail. Two

of my own voices yelling at once. Now three. Now a shrieking crowd of ghouls. I want to stick my fingers in my ears to drown me out, but I don't want to scare my doctor. I want to be polite, steady, good. I don't want to let anyone down.

Drunk to hell one night I call up the magazine's art director Dean and tell him I want to die. I talk and talk and talk before I realize it's not Dean. It's his voicemail. And the voicemail has stopped recording.

On weekends we drink.

But on weekdays we drink too.

Frankie's friends who hated her after she left Dale O'Malley for me now think she's wonderful because she's doing something everyone likes. Our magazine is the talk of the town and that feels like a cliché, but it's true (and maybe most clichés start out in some sense true). At our daily storyboard meeting I tell Frankie, Alison, and Dean, "My friends, we are the talk of the town." I try to say it in a cool, sophisticated Mid-Atlantic accent like from old Hollywood movies, but it ends up as the Bela Lugosi Dracula and Dean says, "Are you trying to talk like a vampire?" and he and Frankie and Alison laugh because why would Dracula's magazine be the talk of the town? "Whatever, though. I would totally read Dracula's magazine," says Alison, and in my mind I tell her I love her, and when I say it, my Mid-Atlantic accent is flawless.

Alison moves into our new apartment in Golden Hill so she doesn't have to drive down from North County for work. I'm so in love with her—and so *miserable*. Because of what? (Sit down, we'll be here a while.) Now where do I start? Okay. Because of the lies. Which aren't lies. Because they're unspoken, right? Or maybe those are just as bad. No, *god,* what am I *saying, of course* they're just as bad. I'm in love with Alison, but my feelings for Frankie haven't changed, and neither know the looming mountain of horseshit, pretense, and betrayal that I have become. Yeah, hey, look at this two-faced, chickenhearted, duplicitous wreck—me, James Jackson Bozic the Clown, the poison in the well, a colossal gutless fool; so in love and so fucked by guilt and fear—not to mention his own defective brain chemistry which

is souring as we speak like a glass of milk left out overnight. And because of it I want to fall into a cartoon Grand Canyon like a cartoon villain animal. I want to learn to be a blacksmith then forge the world's largest hammer and crush myself with it until there's nothing left. Or tell someone to let a piano fall on me—after which the Three Stooges will hello-hello-*hello* into the room then beat on my crushed body with baseball bats. Thinking of this, I laugh. I laugh because what the hell. Because wow life. Life is absurd like the biggest, sickest, meanest joke. But it's also funny, and funny becomes survival because no matter how sad I get I can laugh. No matter how sad Frankie gets she can laugh. No matter how sad Alison gets she can laugh. All of us. Laughing. Haha.

2004

Dean sits in his chair in the newsroom smoking a cigarette, staring at the magazine's back page layout on his computer screen. Frankie's at her desk typing. She leans close to the screen, squinting at what she's wrote, then sits back in her chair, tapping a pencil on her desk's edge to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs playing over the boombox. (Through the speakers, Karen O sings, "waaaait, they don't love you like I love you/waaaait, they don't love you like I love you/Mah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-aps/wait, they don't love you like I love you." Alison has gone out for a snack run—a case of Tecate, a bag of limes, cans of Dr Pepper and Wild Cherry Pepsi, Skittles for Frankie, 7-Eleven nachos for me, and a chili dog for Dean. Our sixteen year old intern Elliott stands at the printer waiting for a job to finish. He's mouthing the words to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs song, nodding his head to the rhythm.

I get up from my desk and say, "Hey. Uh. I'm goin' for a walk." But what I do is head down the flight of stairs to the first floor of our second story newsroom and sit up against the sharp stucco of the building. I stare out at the traffic. Cars and trucks pass. The night is all headlights and taillights and streetlights. The indistinct line of trees on the other side of the street is dark like a wall; beyond that the canyon and the freeway. Above it all, above me, us, the office, 827 Washington Street, above the

passing (and parked) cars, above Hillcrest, above San Diego, the black sky is streaked with ragged strips of gray clouds like the fingers of a god's planetary hand. I try to think of some way out aside from the final sort. But I get nothing. Nothing? Not a thing.

In the magazine we talk shit about whomever we want and the power of that feels good. We listen to the Locust's *Plague Soundscapes* in the trashed newsroom and this afternoon Dean sleeps on the floor with his head on his skateboard, a cigarette tucked behind his ear like a pencil.

A list describing Dean Francisco—tall, thin, quiet, serious. Dean wears skate shoes, jeans, a green or red band shirt, and a trucker cap pulled low over his eyes. In a Polaroid Frankie takes of Dean sitting at his desk, he stares straight at the camera and looks like a 1940s matinee idol who always plays the killer. Dean doesn't have a car so I pick him up in the morning at his place in Hillcrest. He walks out the door smoking a cigarette and we say nothing the whole drive over. I put on the radio and the station identification voice says, "You are listening to 91X. The cutting edge of rock" then a Stone Temple Pilots song comes on. I say, "No, no, no," under my breath and switch the dial to KPBS public radio where a man with a soft voice talks about the dangers of coastal erosion. Dean eats 7-Eleven chili dogs, chain-smokes, drinks beer all day, and plays guitar with a prog-rock band and in an ambient solo project. Dean is actually cool while Frankie, Alison, and I are a giant nervous wreck.

The four of us pile into my Volvo and drive up to North County on Tuesday nights to check the blueline proof copy for mistakes then sign off on the print job.

The press is tall like a metal dinosaur with its back to you. The copies come sliding down the chute of its tail, and the smell of the warm newsprint and ink is nice—a scent from an older industrial age. Like something on its way to being forgotten. Like a ghost or a thing that will soon be a ghost.

Every week, forty-thousand magazines come sliding down the chute and we grab a copy each as they arrive and leaf through the pages which are still hot to the touch. Our magazine is a

beautiful thing and even at my lowest I can see that.

On Wednesday mornings a small fleet of pickup trucks and vans delivers plastic-banded stacks of our magazines to cafes, music venues, restaurants, record shops, grocery stores, and newspaper boxes, some of which have a magnet sheet with our logo placed over the names of dead magazines.

A list of headlines. March 1st, 2004-

"Heading Back to Iraq for Round 2"

"If the Oil Dries Up, What Then?"

"The Candidates in Their Own Words: On Trade, Gay Marriage, and Haiti"

"Sunni Clerics Call for End to Attacks on Iraqis"

"Administration Denies Rumors that U.S. Kidnapped Aristide"

In the spring I'm sent on an airline-financed press junket to Tokyo along with a group of magazine editors from LA and San Diego. It's a first-class flight across the Pacific then two days in a hotel that once made it into a James Bond film. The floor below my suite has been rented by the New York Yankees. I try to imagine what they're doing in their rooms. Watching Japanese TV? Eating Japanese food? Shitting? Talking on the phone? Having sex? Sleeping, dreaming of baseball. Looking at a baseball sitting on the dresser, thinking, *I want to throw that.* I spend as little time in my room as I can because I'm here forty-eight hours and forty-eight hours is passing fast.

I walk from morning to night in the shadow of skyscrapers and under the cherry blossom trees, past Japanese kids my age with face masks because the air is so bad, past temples, shrines, parked cars, grassy lawns, official buildings, and the Imperial Palace.

I try to make myself feel something, but inside I'm blank. The

Zoloft my doctor prescribed has wiped me clean. I go through the motions. Walk for miles in beautiful Tokyo. Breathe awful air. Look at new things. All the while—empty, bloodless.

My bank account is overdrawn four-hundred dollars so I've brought all the cash I could pull together—twenty bucks, mostly coins. I buy two meals—a small can of hot coffee from a vending machine and a sweet bun full of red paste then a can of beer from a Tokyo 7-Eleven and another sweet bun, this one with chocolate inside.

At night it's sci-fi street signs and wild neons and businessmen staggering out of bars to kneel down on the sidewalk and puke onto the rain-slick black streets. The thing I relate to most is the puke. The puke and I are twin brothers. No one but our mother could tell us apart. Puke One and Puke Two, palling down the street.

"Hey, what's it like to be puke?" people ask.

"Good," I say because I have nothing else in me.

In the daytime—sunshine, wind, feeling like I'm the last robot in a world of living humans. As I walk, it's like I pass right through the bodies of those around me, as if I'm a lesser spirit on a shittier plane of existence, unnoticed by those in physical form, rendered powerless by the depression and the depression medication that are quickly winning their war against me.

In the hours before dawn I sit at the desk in my suite wearing a hotel kimono over my boxers and nurse the six-pack of beer the junket's host left in my room next to a city map and a basket of fruit; the streets of Tokyo fifteen stories below, a world of darkness and neon.

I write about the years after high school, about beach boardwalks. I try my best to sketch out the rolling sound of the surf in the late-afternoon. I think of the blazing white spot of sun over the Pacific, the offshore winds blowing hot across the desert, drawn westward by the sea and coastal air.

When what I'm writing pulls into focus and I finally feel something, I close my eyes and bow my head and type faster than I

ever have—the keys clacking like bones knocking together or tap dance shoes or hail clattering against a car roof. In the story I'm safe and the heat comes rushing back to my veins. Later, my energies spent, I lie down on the bed and turn the TV to Japanese game shows with the sound off and try to sleep, below me the New York Yankees and rooms full of sleeping tourists and vacationing families and businessmen and beneath that the cement, the island soil, Japan, Earth.

Thinking of the island and of the Earth, and with the weight of the ground below me, my thoughts cycle in a vicious, churning mess—the same images of death and ideas of immateriality repeating like a film strip looping—so I go back to the desk by the window. I write about one morning a year ago in the apartment: "We chose it for the light and for the windows and because it had an orange tree in the backyard. You could see it from the bedroom and when we were deathly sick and hungover I would crawl out of bed and bring back a t-shirt load of oranges to eat." After those two sentences, I stop and sit back in the chair and stare at the screen of my laptop and I know I have something I'll keep.

On the TV across the room, the muted game show has changed to some kind of Japanese soft porn—the girl on her hands and knees and the guy knelt behind smacking into her and all the bad parts blurred out. The scene cuts to a closeup shot of the girl's face, eyes closed, mouth open, desperate like she's in pain.

I shut off the TV, and when that doesn't feel like enough, I squat down on the carpet and yank the cord from the socket.

Without the hum of electricity, the room is silent.

I stand for a while staring at my silk-robed reflection in the black space of the television screen then I dress and take the elevator to the ground floor.

I leave the hotel, 4am, the warm glittering night, Tokyo crawling and shaking and blinking on and off.

I breathe in the night air, and I walk.

Back home from Japan, I recommit to getting better. I tell my-

self what we're doing is good and that I should enjoy it and work as hard as I can to make it thrive.

Thanks more to Frankie than me, it thrives.

The city loves our magazine. We do interviews about the magazine with other magazines and we have our photos taken looking like we're a band—Frankie and Alison and Dean and me standing next to my car in a parking lot or side by side in front of the printer table—Dean with his hands shoved in his pockets, Frankie giving a cool stare in half profile, Alison all short girl curves and a spirited bad gleam in her eye, and me—ugh, tired, dark circles, hideous, a dying, sun-fried vampire like a smashed mirror image of Joey Carr.

In some ways we are—a band, I mean. Of course, most bands break up. Even the greatest ones and maybe that's okay. You aren't disappointed in the Beatles for calling it quits because what they did will always be what they did and nothing takes away from that. I tell Frankie this when things start to get bad, but it doesn't help, and me comparing us to the Beatles is hilarious and stupid. Still, I mean it. Frankie—John. Alison—Paul. Dean—George. Me—a suicidal Ringo but as sad as I get I stay on my drum stool and I keep the backbeat. My old boss at the wire service who bankrolls the magazine is maybe the manager of the Beatles or maybe he's the record company and the record company doesn't like us anymore because we've spent too much of its money. When you spend too much of anyone's money that's when things fall apart.

Hurricane Frances

2004

After the magazine, Frankie and I move out of our apartment and go on the road; taking along the magazine's events editor Rostam, who we call "Rob," and a box of record label promo CDs to sell when we need money. It's another election year. George W. Bush stumping the Iraq Afghanistan warpath. Frankie and I fight. Argue. The three of us suffer through silent hours. The foundations have cracked and now the walls shiver under the weight of the roof. Is collapse inevitable when the weight above overpowers what supports it? Well, for now-

For now—Texas highway. Summer heat wrinkling the air. Big rigs passing with a woosh that moves our small car. CD promos we stick in the stereo and try out—Modest Mouse, Ted Leo, Franz Ferdinand, the Killers. Motels at thirty bucks a night. Dirty shower tile. White bath towels as rough as burlap.

Back on the road in the morning, the three of us in a good mood, Rostam driving, smoking and ashing into a Pepsi can, election news on the radio, armadillos moving slow in the ditch. More promo CDs—Interpol, the Walkmen, Rilo Kiley, the Polyphonic Spree, Pedro the Lion, Kings of Leon. Oklahoma nights—whiskey, gas station food, diner food, grits with a pat of yellow butter softening, waffles striped in syrup, lovely hashbrowns covered in melted cheese and smothered with sauteed onions. Rostam calls home on his cellphone and his Iranian refugee mom tells him, "When you are in the South, you watch out for Jesus people, okay?" Frankie and I laugh when he tells us this, but she's right.

We are headed to Frankie's stepmom's condo on Amelia Island, but hurricane Frances is set to hit the East Coast so we stop in New Orleans. We spend the next two days wandering around the city, drinking at strip-clubs, listening to brass bands, and waiting on the weather. As California kids, we know nothing about hurricanes. The consensus being, "How bad can it be?" so we make plans to drive into the eye of the storm.

Frankie calls her dad from a bar in the French Quarter and asks if he'll check the Weather Channel and see what our chances are. He tells her we have no chances whatsoever. If we go to Florida we will be hit by the hurricane and that instead we should head back west and stay with him in Kansas. This is of course not an option we want to hear.

A few minutes later, he calls back. "You really want to go to the island, don't you?" Frankie tells him yes, absolutely, we want to go to the island more than anything, we don't care about wind or rain or if the power will be on or not, we want the *island*. "If you leave right now, I mean right this minute, and drive east you will get to the island a half hour before the hurricane hits." She tells him yes, now, we're going now, and he says, "Make a run for the roses."

On the drive to Florida the sky is eerie green and the wind rips the trees to pieces. Big rigs lie toppled on the side of the road. Carport canopies tumble end over end in rainswept fields like plastic lawn furniture.

We make it as far as the Atlantic coast of Jacksonville, and because we took our time in a service station a few miles back we get there just as the hurricane hits.

In the gas station parking lot across from the causeway bridge to the island, the water begins to rise and soon it's as high as our tires. The causeway is under water so we turn around and find the last room in the last vacant motel. The power is out and the place is full of hurricane refugees sitting on lawnchairs under the overhang of the second story watching the storm. One of our new neighbors welcomes us with a six-pack of beer and we sit up against the stucco front of the motel and wait for what's next.

Frankie is overjoyed to share a name with a hurricane. "It's just too good," she says, and I agree, and the irony of the subject is both understood and unspoken.

That night we sleep three to a bed in our motel room as the rain sprays in wild gusts against the windows.

The next day the water level is low enough for us to cross the

causeway and get out to the island. The place is blown all to hell. Wrecked cars in ditches. Deck furniture and tree branches in the pool. The sea ragged and dark blue and wind-chopped. Checking in at the front desk, the tired-looking clerk tells us none of the regular guests can check in because the power's down, but because Frankie's stepmom owns her condo there are keys waiting for us. The clerk says that after she leaves for the night there will be no staff, no power, no food, no phone-lines, no a-c, no running water for at least the next three or four days. "You'll be all alone out here. You sure you all wouldn't rather stay on the mainland?" she asks us.

We get our keys and the whole place is ours.

The next morning, Alison flies to Jacksonville and we spend a week together on the island. We swim in the sea. Drink rum. Play cards. Listen to music. Read on the veranda. Frankie tells us all about the history of the island. How it was named after Princess Amelia, the daughter of George II of Great Britain, and at one time or another it has been claimed by five nations and eight separate flags. She talks about sea battles and pirates and buried treasure, and how Fernandina Beach just up the shore was once called "a festering fleshpot" by President James Monroe because of its many brothels. "So, basically," she tells us, "What I'm saying is we need to live here."

The island's animal shelter was destroyed by the hurricane, and the day Rostam flies home, Frankie and Alison and I adopt puppies. Alison—a little bluetick hound with sleepy eyes and long, floppy ears. Frankie and I—a red hound mutt the size of a sweet potato.

Our puppies cuddle in their cardboard box under the coffee-table in the condo. We are desperately in love with them. For a while Frankie and I stop fighting and I have hope things will go back to the way they were.

They don't.

After Florida I drive north alone; Frankie left behind with her childhood sweetheart Jude in Norfolk because we can't stop fighting and maybe this is the end. On the drive from Norfolk

to New York City I blast the radio to drown out my thoughts, but my thoughts are a scorching white-out chemical fire. I chew myself to pieces about how I'm a liar. How Frankie has loved Jude longer than I've known her and there is no way I stand a chance in the face of that. How I've lost the person who most understands me; the person I understand the most. Then the lying again—it comes back like a wave to surge up high and knock me over. Me lusting over Alison like a timid devil and how I don't have the courage to say a thing about it. Frankie is always honest even if it sabotages her. Me? Welcome to the coronation for the new king of cowards. I want to drive myself straight into the freeway divider, and maybe I would except (I look in the rearview mirror and see) *the puppy*. He sleeps on Frankie's dark green Carhartt hoodie in the middle of the backseat. The puppy. Our puppy. *Keep driving,* I tell myself. *Get to New York. Fix this.*

In New York City I stay with various friends then settle in for a few weeks with the magazine's ex news editor Jeremy Willis. I'm thrown so far off balance I need to be around someone I trust. Jeremy Willis is someone I trust.

A list describing Jeremy Willis—Jeremy quit the magazine months before it fell to finish his masters in journalism at NYU. He has no money but wears stylish, well-fit suits every day even if he doesn't leave the house. He keeps his dark, bushy hair cut short and often has a day or two of stubbly beard. His gold-brown eyes are charged with all the electricity of a thunderstorm because Jeremy is forever excited, moved to fits of anguished sadness then joyful, easily hurt but quick to forgive. He's younger than me but seems like someone from another time—a classic post-war bohemian or a cast-out from the East Coast 1950s—a talkative, passionately desperate, well-dressed kid just back from the battlefields of France, ready to gab on a mile a minute and say everything and live romantically and fast.

Jeremy and I head down Brooklyn streets together talking about the Walkmen and about a tragic Russian girl he likes and how her blog is good enough to be made into a novel. We walk the puppy on a leash I've made from tying four shoelaces together. Jeremy says, "James, you gotta let me take him out on my own some time. Girls love a puppy. They can't help themselves." I

tell him we should go find Byron, that he and Jeremy would be great friends. But Byron has no phone, and we spend most of that night in his neighborhood searching the bars for him. The next morning we climb the fence at an old, abandoned social club pool in Brooklyn that's meant to be turned into a music venue. The vast, empty pool is graffiti-scarred and cracked, and weeds grow up from the cracks. It's silent. Dead and silent, and in its silent death it's a tragedy. (My heartbroken heart can do nothing but relate.)

That night I get an email from a friend telling me Alison has a boyfriend now and that he's very nice. A good man. Polite. Steady. In the morning I learn Frankie is in love with Jude. It's not just that she loves him, but she's *in love* with him, and that's a whole different thing. She tells me over the phone and for days we shout at each other through epic-length emails and across payphone lines. Of course because I'm a spineless shit I've said nothing about my feelings for Alison and the guilt in lying about that makes me feel dizzy and feverish and evil. I'm losing Frankie and I never had Alison to begin with and I think of that fucking Stevie Nicks lyric about how she's afraid of changing because she based her life around the one she loved. Maybe Frankie and I aren't right romantically, or as right as she and Jude, but we're best friends, like twins, siblings with shared brains who know each other's thoughts and want the same things from life. And what am I about to do? Ruin it. Run away. Hide in New York City in the canyons between skyscrapers. Drink myself to death like a goddamn dilettante cliché. Everything in me screams, *Retreat into yourself and stay safe. You are weak. Go where you will not be hurt.* Standing at the payphone on Quay Street I slam the receiver into the catch until the world bursts into splinters of plastic and shards of steel and glass that hang in the air suspended for a moment then burst inward as the ground opens up and sinkholes me into the waters of Bushwick Inlet. I walk-run to Jeremy's apartment, say goodbye like I'm going to war, and me and the sweet-potato-sized puppy drive down to Norfolk to take Frankie back.

Driving west across the country we fight—*god* we fight. But we also laugh and we make plans, and while we're not where we were before maybe we're somewhere stronger. Of course

nothing is resolved. We haven't fixed a thing. Frankie still loves Jude, but now we face that together. The one thing we're sure of is we will not surrender.

Frankie and I stop for two months in Seattle and stay with sweet Tyler Monahan and his terrible Canadian girlfriend whose name, Dinah Rhea, sounds like the word "diarrhea." Halfway through our stay we drive down to Portland for a week where I record forty minutes of writing backed by a group of San Diego friends playing musical accompaniment. The record is a recap of this past year—the sad winterless San Diego winter, our Golden Hill apartment, workdays and of course work months, my brain as a shark eating itself, the fall of the magazine, summer on the road, me and Frankie, and Jude and Frankie. It's a loud, excited, shambly basement orchestra of blown-out drums and jangling acoustic guitars, quiet moments with minor chords dressed up in surfy reverb to make them ghostly, creaking noise and radio samples, and my wobbly, uncertain voice at the center of it, reading from a small pile of pocket notebooks arranged in chronological order. The morning we leave, I'm given a CD-R of the tracks. I stick it in my copy of *The Odyssey* (snug in the center where Odysseus learns he must visit the land of the dead). Then I bury the book in clothes at the bottom of my rucksack and we head north.

Back in Seattle, Frankie and I stay home while Tyler works. I turn in freelance stories for magazines in LA and San Diego so we have money to leave. Frankie writes letters and reads Tyler's books. The puppy sleeps on the couch and sometimes shits on the floor and eats it if we're not looking. It's a quiet, safe, peaceful time and though we're not sure what lies ahead, we decide we will face what comes and we will do so together.

October—the days shorten and now there's snow falling as seen from the big front window. Election results come in and the news is bad. November—and it's time to go back to San Diego. We say goodbye to Tyler and his diarrhea girlfriend and head south.

2005

After a few weeks home in San Diego we drove back across the country in a three-day run and then we were living in Norfolk with Jude. Frankie and Jude are now Frankie *and* Jude but Frankie and I are still Frankie and I. Jude and I are friends now—friends like how men are friends when they're still tough around each other and haven't yet learned to be tender and considerate. This is of course not the best way to be friends but it's a way, and friends in any sense is better than the inverse. So, Norfolk. Norfolk in the winter becomes Norfolk in the spring and in the small white house near the bay we build a life. Frankie's found a job at an animal rights group and I'm writing stories for the local paper and one of the weeklies in Portland. My CD is now in production with a label in San Diego. As part of the record deal I'll need to get a band together and tour it in the fall. The idea of performing the album sends me into a panic. I have nightmares about it. I practice the songs with Jude's acoustic guitar and they sound terrible—amateur stuff, clutzy, nothing anyone would want to hear, I'm certain of that. But all this aside I love Virginia—the beat-up row houses and weedy backlots. Late-afternoons in beach bars laughing my head off with Frankie and Jude. Thunderstorms rolling in over the sea and Frankie and I sitting on dock boards at the harbor in the heat of the day with the rising smell of tar and saltwater and oil. Floating on my back in the Chesapeake Bay one afternoon I think, "Wait. Am I *happy*? I might be *happy*." Frankie might be happy now that she's also with Jude. Jude hates the Navy, but he should be happy because he's got great pay and plenty of days off and the GI bill for college when he's out. And I'm happy? No way. Like hell I am. But it's hard to ignore. Like a light switch flicked on without warning—*snap*, sudden, I'm happy. When Jude's not at sea the three of us go to parties in Ghent and eat lunch at the Jewish deli and drink on the porch at night under the yellow streetlights. Jude and I get to know each other. We're nothing alike—until we realize we actually are. Jude and I have fun. We drink too much and we are loud and stupid at parties and none of that is a problem because we are in a land of no problems. Frankie and I have fun. We hatch plans and we scheme up ways to leave Virginia for little trips down south and we talk about the things we will write and how we will be

unflinching in our honestly and sharp as stropped razors.

I've been reading Saul Bellow's *Adventures of Augie March* all spring and it's lit a bright sort of fire in me to come across scenes like: "I saw a freight going toward Cleveland with men sitting on the boxcars, and in the flats, and in under-angles of gondolas, and eight or ten guys shagging after and flipping themselves up on the rungs. I ran too, down from the unlucky highway, up the rocky grade where I felt the thinness of my shoes, and took hold of a ladder. I wasn't agile, so I ran with the red car, unable to swing from the ground until I was helped by a boost from behind."

In Norfolk I want the crowded, busy, summertime life of *Augie March*. I want to knock around, to keep myself away from my own thoughts and push out into the streets, into the heat of it. Jude's sailor friends are straight out of Bellow's novel and they scare the hell out of me, but they're also a joy to be around. Sometimes I'm so afraid of the regular parts of life I can't get out of bed or set one foot in front of the other. Going on tour in the fall, putting a band together to support the record, the record itself existing as something other than a CD-R shoved in my copy of *The Odyssey*—it feels impossible. Talking to strangers, asking friends for favors, organizing anything in any sense of the word; I tell myself I'm not good enough for this, that I'm too immature, too fearful and anxious and incapable. So I read *Augie March* and I pledge to live like Bellow's rowdy, careless, beat-up intellectuals who are maybe not intellectuals at all. Are they adventurers? No, that's romanticism. They're just living. They're getting by, smashing through life because sometimes the only way to keep your head above the ice and stay breathing is to smash. Other times you can be gentle and quiet and walk softly on the Earth. But when life calls for that certain kind of vigorous, thrumming activity, you must heed the prompt and dance how you're told.

I read *Augie March* lying on a towel and I think of it while I sit idle in the shallows. I love it and I love the warmth of the sun after the winter. I love the quiet bay shore and the sand at Dam Neck and Virginia Beach with its silver tones and swirls of pyrite gold-black. And all that sea air and salt and wind. And the ruffled waters. The roar of life. Wooden footpaths through

lovely East Coast dunes and the pale green strands of beach grass; then beyond that the great Atlantic as long as time.

Wait. Am I happy?

Yes.

In August, Jeremy Willis grabs a bus down from New York City and he and Frankie and I roam around Norfolk together—talking, laughing, sitting in darkened beach bars to escape the afternoon heat, making new inside jokes, drinking beer at the Elizabeth River.

But then it's the end of August and Katrina hits.

We sit in the sunken parlor of the house and watch the news.

Jeremy's on again off again ex Celine lives in the French Quarter where she works in local clubs as a dancer. He spends the week desperate to get in touch with her, but Celine's phone goes to voicemail. Jeremy's a mess. Pacing. Wringing his hands. Drinking too much but unable to calm down or sleep.

I'm cross-legged on the couch in the living room with a can of Hamm's balanced on my knee making a wet ring in the denim of my jeans while Frankie sits at Jude's computer desk in the corner looking at hurricane news stories online. Jude's at sea. He's been gone three weeks.

Frankie reads aloud from *The Times*, "The waters of Lake Pontchartrain continued to rise and spill over into already flooded areas of New Orleans when two levees collapsed after Katrina tore through the area on Monday. Mayor C. Ray Nagin said in a television interview that the city was 80 percent under water, in some places 20 feet deep. As dawn broke today, rescuers set out in boats and helicopters to search for survivors. A reporter who accompanied Jefferson Parish sheriff's rescue officials on a flight over the area saw floodwaters reaching to the eaves of some three-story houses. Hundreds of people trapped on roofs waved frantically for rescue. Coast Guard and police Blackhawk helicopters were plucking them off one by one."

"Fuck," says Jeremy. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He stands in front of

the TV staring at the screen, saying fuck, shaking his head, turning the volume up or muting it, saying fuck a few more times, then pacing again. "James, I have to do something," he says. "I need to know she's alright."

"You want to go down there?" asks Frankie from the desk.

"Down there?" he says. "Could we, I mean—"

"You could," says Frankie. "You probably couldn't like—I mean, there's no way you could actually *drive* into the city. But you could get close. Maybe walk in?"

"They don't want us down there," I say.

Jeremy shuts the TV off and sits on the arm of the couch. "We drive down," he says quietly to himself, working out a plan. "We. Uh. We find her. We—we leave the car, park it somewhere, I don't know, and we walk into the city and we—we'll do whatever we can."

"I think you should," says Frankie. "I'll pay for gas. I would go in a second but without my job—"

"—we'd be fucked," I say.

"Yeah, fucked," says Frankie.

I get up off the couch and go into the kitchen for another beer but instead begin making a sandwich. Sourdough bread from the Food Lion bag on the counter. A tomato and an avocado from the fridge. Mayo. Salt and pepper on the slices of tomato and avocado. Leaf of lettuce. A few Baco's.

With the only kitchen knife we have, I cut the sandwich crossways and walk back into the living room. I hand Jeremy half and Frankie the other.

"I'm good," she says, shaking her head.

I sit down on the couch with Frankie's half of the sandwich.

Jeremy holds his half without eating. "We can't wait around anymore," he says.

"You need to eat something." I nod at the sandwich in his hand.

He sets the sandwich on his knee. "What if she needs our help?"

"It's, uh, what—like, two days from here to New Orleans?" I say. "Maybe a little longer?"

"I just searched it," Frankie says, looking at us from behind the gray-white wall of Jude's twin computer monitors. "About sixteen hours."

"James, Frankie, you guys—I have to go. I won't—I mean, I won't sit through this and do nothing."

I walk to the kitchen window and stare outside—the summer trees, their leaves shaking in the hot wind as shimmering discs, the green grass, uncut, full of bright yellow dandelions whipping side to side.

Thinking of New Orleans, I try not to cry but it comes out and I play it off—hold myself straight, wipe my eyes like I'm scratching my face.

In the reflection of the window, I see Jeremy standing next to the TV watching me.

As I begin to turn around, he starts walking into the kitchen.

"Beer?" he says, tired, wrung-out but cheerful.

I tell him sure and that if he really wants to go look for Celine I'll drive us to New Orleans.

Jeremy gets the three of us beers and he and I sit on the couch next to each other and eat our lunch.

A list of headlines. September 1st, 2005-

"Rows and Rows of Corpses, and Voices Choked With Sobs"

"Future Face of New Orleans Has Uncertain Look for Now"

"Higher Death Toll Seen: Police Ordered to Stop Looters"

"Survivors Worry About the Missing"

"A City in Ruins: Americans Open Their Hearts"

Plan is to leave for New Orleans in the morning, but after dinner Jeremy finds a photo of Celine in an Associated Press story online dated yesterday. In the picture she's dancing on the edge of a partying group in the street outside her place in the French Quarter. She's wearing a green, yellow, and purple Mardi Gras flag as a cape and her dark hair fans through the air. Her white tank top has a Sharpie slogan written across the back: "Can't Sink Us."

At the end of summer I leave Norfolk alone on a Greyhound bus and head west to Portland listening to Byron's CD over the headphones of my Discman. Byron's record sounds like something lost at the bottom of a mine or sunk under the sea. It's shadowy, haunted, and it takes you on a night journey through American music—through Nashville country, avantgarde folk, and deconstructed blues. The record is more Old West noir soundtrack than collection of songs, each track breathing into the next with a pale-dark, druggy current of noise and earthen sounds. The lyrics are terse, compact poetic hollers and sighs, something between Ray Carver and cowboy pulp novels. When the CD is done, I play it again, and this is how I spend the first day and night of the four-day bus ride.

On the bus are elementary school kids from New Orleans sent west to keep them safe after Katrina. Some of them talk about the storm or laugh and sing and stand up in their seats to comment on cars passing or horses in fields. Others are quiet. They sit with their backpacks hugged in front of them and they stare out the window and look so much older than they are.

To take my mind off it, I try to read, but the women in front of me are talking about things to dip French fries in and I'm hungry as hell and can't concentrate.

"Naw, girl. You gotsta put *vinegar* in ranch. You needa tang that

shit *up*."

"Vinegar? In *ranch*? Tha sounds *nasty*."

"Naw, you try it and tell me."

"For *real*?"

"*Yeah.* You be surprised."

In the Chicago Greyhound bus terminal I sit on the floor up against a wall and watch a beautiful, yellow-blonde Mennonite family of eight eat McDonald's from paper bags, lifting fries out of the red cardboard sleeve, eating them one by one. When you're this hungry your sense of smell becomes sharp like a cactus spine and those lovely fried potatoes—*oh god.* I can even smell the ketchup—or maybe that's my imagination filling in the blanks—the salty, vaguely sour but mostly sweet ketchup, a pleasantly bitter undertone. (When the Mennonite dad starts eating one of those mini McDonald's apple pies, I just about pass out with hunger and envy.)

Just then a punk girl my age in black jeans, high-top Converse, and a sleeveless denim vest sits down cross-legged against the wall a few feet away from me. She opens a Wendy's bag and pulls out a fry and dips it in a small Frosty.

Everyone in America is eating French fries tonight except me because I'm down to three dollars. No. Three dollars and 25 cents. On the terminal floor I find a nickel with notched edges and two scraped-up dimes and stuff them in my jeans pocket.

I'm going to Portland to set up my tour. The shows will be a recreation of the CD—I'll talk into the mic and the group I pull together will play music while I talk and that will be how I'll do a book tour without a book. I tell myself it'll be successful and that once I'm in Portland everything will fall into place and I'll have a big army of wild, reckless friends and there will be great Italian dinners and warm sourdough bread from bakeries and enough cheap red wine to make a lake of it and sail a boat around—the H.M.S. James Bozic, Terror of the Seven Seas. Lost in a half-dream of frothing blue Pacific shores and coconut palm islands, I miss the announcement for my bus and

run across the terminal with my bags when they sound the final boarding call.

From Chicago to Portland it's three days. I sleep as much as I can to ward off my hunger and I listen to Byron's CD on my Discman and stare out the window at the highway and the woods and the big white moon.

My bus pulls up to the Portland depot at midnight.

I climb down the steps and walk toward the river.

JOKER

JOKER

2006

Byron's second album was released last year. By spring it's spoken of like a piece of our scene's collective art history and musical DNA. His label is run by a famous musician who has plans to release an album concerning each of the fifty states. The record about Illinois made him a celebrity and the bands on his label rise as he does. Byron's new album is autumnal as a record released in October should be. It's stark yet quietly grandiose—a spectral, elegant thing with banjo and synthesizers and electronic drums; his voice confident, front and center, the arrangement of the instruments baroque, stately, haunting. A review in a music magazine I buy off the stand at Fred Meyer calls it "derailed Americana" and I decide that's as good a hill to die on as any. I write it in my notebook and underline it three times and feel silly as soon as I do that. An adult shouldn't be stuck defining themselves but it's a wall I'm forever bashing against. What I am? Who am I? What am I doing? Who am I doing it for? *Why* do it? Some days identity feels like a thing you grab from the air only to have it slip out of your hands and be gone for weeks. I want to know myself in terms set in stone, but every day my motivations change and my aesthetic goals and personal standards switch with the weather. Ethically I walk the same line I have since childhood, but the rest is a scatter of asymmetrical chaos and impossible geometry. So I take notes. I define and redefine and I hope for a solid path to stand on a while.

Byron's second album feels like what I want myself to be. It has a distinct personality and a consistent sense of mood no matter the shifting dynamics of the song structure. It understands what it is and that is part of its power. I don't know what I am and that's where I'm powerless. On the days when I feel a more solidified sense of self, I'm happier and I get work done and move from morning to night without overthinking. I listen to Byron's record as often as I can and when I do I feel as if there is something stronger than me speaking on my behalf. You can live through a work of art and let it define you. You carry its

flag and under that banner your sense of self is consolidated and reinforced. It will give you a strength nearing the unkillable.

Where Byron's first record felt like something dark and beautiful discovered in a forgotten cabin, his second is a statement made in the plain light of day—a public document for the current world. It has a song Byron calls "the hit," and the hit has a video, and the biggest music website in the world (the site we all pretend to hate but secretly hope to catch its attention) gives Byron's album with its hit and video the seal of approval that will make a career.

On message boards, our friends post things like, "It's so weird that he's famous now. He's still just Byron to me" and "Byron's in the newspaper today. Wait. Whaaat?" Byron has a lot of new friends and some of them are good and some not so much. In one of his songs, he sings about friends he's missing and others that lead him to bad places. When you are on the rise you meet a lot of devils and a lot of angels who reveal themselves as devils later. You meet the real angels too, but the devils are always louder (and more persuasive).

In 2006 everything begins to happen. This is how it feels—everything is happening after nothing happened for so long and after me wanting everything to happen and expecting everything to happen and trying my best while getting insignificant returns. Everything begins to happen.

The press our scene gets speaks at length about a new form of folk music, though none of what we are doing is new; just different, our own version of an older thing.

My book reading song style isn't much different than old talking blues—only there are no rhymes and I play with a band behind me unless I'm solo in which case I do my own clumsy sort of country blues picking instead of strumming chords. (The idea is that without singing the only way you can make it catchy is to play simple, repetitious guitar riffs, something to stick in people's heads rather than clunking away at a series of strummed chords.) In interviews with music websites and photocopied magazines no one reads I say some variation of how talking is my own way of singing, and that I have always liked

nontraditional vocals. Mostly people are confused. They either like it without second thought or they move quickly to something else, and there is a lot of something else. MySpace.com is where you find a lot of something else. Bands have a page where they upload a few songs and people can listen to them as often as they'd like for free. You can announce new releases, curate photo galleries, post tour dates, and send messages. At most, I look at what people are doing on MySpace once or twice a week. The rest of the time I fuss over what songs to feature while watching the plays stack up, and I worry about it on days when they don't. All my friends in bands are obsessed with MySpace because it gives you an instant platform, and if you're lucky enough that platform could become a following. I'm lucky enough and before long I have an audience, and while the shows are frustrating and most people don't like what I do, the online following grows each day.

Over email, Joey Carr suggests my first novel be called *Hello MySpace, My Old Friend* in reference to the Simon and Garfunkel song because, hey, folk music, and that's funny, sure, but it's something I can't stop thinking about and a new sort of dread comes over me whenever I log in.

This is a necessary evil, I tell myself. But are any evils truly necessary? Is there a good (if less powerful) option to a necessary evil? What does it profit you to gain the world but lose your soul through small attritionary acts of necessary evil?

Frankie and Jude are set to move to Portland from Norfolk after Jude gets out of the Navy in a few weeks. First they plan to stop in San Diego for a little while to see Frankie's mom and sisters and a little while turns into months. Meantime I live in the same basement I made my record in last year. The basement is dark at all hours of the day unless someone has the computer on, in which case the blue light feels cold, and also lonely in a way I can't quantify. I sleep on an old van bench seat across the room from the computer desk where my housemate Dale O'Malley sits to record bands.

Down in the basement you hear every door open and shut, every knock and conversation, housemates laughing or arguing or having sex, the floorboards creaking under foot. In front of the

van seat bed sits a coffee-table covered in magazines, ashtrays, beer cans, guitar cables, and crushed cigarette packs. I push all this to the middle of the table each day and leave whatever I'm reading in a pile with my notebook and a dead Nokia phone I hope to get set up once I have money.

I'd brought an old beat-up Japanese guitar with me on the bus from Norfolk and it sits leaning against the filthy couch that forms an L shape with my van seat bed. At night I stay up late practicing my talking lyrics while picking out guitar riffs or I work on the manuscript I call "the book" with a trio of saint candles on the coffee-table for light. (These are as follows: Michael the Archangel, white feathered wings spread, gold sword in hand; Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin who witnessed the apparition of the Virgen de Guadalupe; and the Portuguese priest Anthony of Padua, saint of lost things and shipwrecks.) If I have money from a freelance job, I buy a bottle of three-dollar wine at Plaid Pantry then it's a lonely party, just me and my crappy Japanese guitar, a practice amp borrowed from Dale, and "the book" in a series of journals of varying sizes.

In the morning it's gray skies that rarely leave, and now a freeze at dawn—rain and pines, puddles reflecting the dark trees and sky. Afternoon-Portland is friends in bars and strip-clubs, friends buying coke and heroin out in Felony Flats, friends starting bands and smoking weed all day instead of practicing.

In the afternoon I walk through Southeast Portland alone, past buses pulling up to the curb and the bus doors opening and people stepping down or climbing in. I pass stone garden walls covered in moss and I walk along the river with its bridges arcing up over it. I exist in a lonely, quiet world of short days growing longer, and some days there's sun and when there's sun the streets are full and there are tables and chairs outside cafes, and all the while the new leaves on the trees shake in the kind of mild springtime breeze that will announce warmer days to come.

I have a couple old friends from back home in San Diego and I like them, but I have new friends too and these new friends don't like me enough to act comfortable, and I'm not sure why they're so distant, and because of that I'm just as uncomfort-

able around them, and it's a self-consuming cycle. I have a harder and harder time trusting people's motives. My self-confidence begins to erode like sand someone's pissed on. Mostly I keep to myself. I miss Frankie and Jude and the puppy, who is now traveling with them. I miss Alison and I miss Ben Frank and Jeremy Willis and Dean and Byron. Sleeping alone in the basement I feel like I'm in the hull of a ship at night on some distant black sea. There's no romance to that. I want to come to shore. I want to feel the light of day and the solid earth beneath my feet. But what I do is drift.

After a few sunny days, the grass in the front yards lining the street grows thick and the gardens in the Southeast are spotted with colorful flowers like something from Renoir. When it's nice out, I like Portland, and when it's dark for weeks I look for things to get me through the gray. For instance-

-The spicy tofu sauce on the fries at Dot's which is good on a cold day when you can't get warm and it feels like the sun will never return.

-Neutral Milk Hotel's *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, the CD of which I listen to in the dark, lying on the van seat bed (with a bottle of wine if I have the money), and in the black visual field of my closed eyes, images bloom up—vivid, prismatic, and dimensional like something painted in shiny, wet oils, writhing, carnivalesque; my own sort of videos for the songs until I sleep and dream of them. Jeff Mangum from Neutral Milk Hotel's lyrics are a goodhearted surrealist delirium. He builds a kaleidoscopic circus with a little boy in Spain playing piano in the rain and the King of Carrot Flowers and, at the heart of it all, the reincarnation of Anne Frank, and how in his dreams she's alive and she's crying.

-A gin and tonic and shoestring fries at the Rose and Raindrop, under which there are ovens from when the building was a crematorium and tunnels where a hundred years ago men were carried off in a drugged stupor or beaten senseless then woke up at sea with a signed contract to work until the ship reached shore. The bar is well-lit in the day with high ceilings and many windows and when there's no one in the place it feels as if you've gone back in time and that the life you are living is some-

thing more important, romantic, and stimulating than your day-to-day. The shoestring fries are perfect—thin and salty, and they go well with a good, strong gin and tonic. I can rarely afford more than one drink, so I take it slow and enjoy every sip while working on the book or making plans for my UK tour this fall. Sitting in a back booth with fries and a stiff drink, my thoughts clear up and I plot and scheme and a great (and less lonely) future feels right within my grasp.

-Good bread at the New Seasons a few blocks away from the 2307 SE Taggart Street house. Something rustic—French or sourdough with a chewy crust and soft, fragrant insides. Walking back home eating a baguette, I think of the first time I lived here—five years ago with Frankie and Ben Frank for a while and our roommate Eton and his pug we didn't kick, and how bread was just as important then and just as much a thing to get excited about. Back at the house from the store, I'll tear off hunks of the bread, smooth a little butter on it, give it a shake of sea salt and a squeeze of lemon, and that's something to be glad about. On days when no one's home and I don't feel as shy using the kitchen, I'll cut the bread into thick slices and fry it in butter until it's golden brown in spots and crunchy. Best of all is when there's a jar of marinara in the fridge. I'll heat that up and dip the bread in it, and when all of that comes together, I feel like the bad elements that surround us can't touch me.

On days when everyone is home, we play music upstairs, working through arrangements of my new songs. We sit around the living room with the windows open and I talk out the sections from my manuscript I've memorized and the housemates play accompaniment. Sometimes when I'm sick of hearing my voice, I stop talking and they play on without me. I lie back on the Persian rug and stare up at the ceiling through the haze of their pot smoke (the dusty bands of sunlight from the window cutting through it as it drifts). I push all the negative thoughts out of my head and listen to the music intertwine in tangles, then drift apart again like a spiderweb stretching—holding a solitary chord, modal, droning, methodical but in the heat of improvisation, labyrinthine, and so much better than when they play with me, less constrained or deliberate, less conscious of keeping it steady for my voice and my uncertain sense of

rhythm and musical time.

When Byron comes through town on tour we go to the dreary country sports bars he likes. Byron's press talks a lot about experimental music and the current noise scene. The reviews he gets mention his beard, the '60s, and psychedelic folk, and he hates all of it; hates being that sort of person, which in a way he both is and is not.

A list describing Byron—not tall but he doesn't look short; he was frail last year and he's put on weight and now looks healthy for the first time since I've known him (like a young boxer; both the dog breed and the fist-fighter). Byron is quiet and reserved. His dark-eyed stare is gentle but wary. He's never wild or loud or insistent, but he will drink with you all night and he won't stop you from doing something stupid in the name of fun, and because of that he's refreshing to be around. Byron's exciting to be with but in a subtle way. Jeremy Willis, Jude, Frankie, and Alison burn hot while Byron holds the opposite shore. He's careful about what he says and he's quiet when he says it. There's a sweet, childlike innocence to Byron's smile, and it's sincere even if it's the only innocent thing about him. Byron's smile behind his red-brown mustache shows crooked, stacked-up teeth. His sad eyes are wide set. They are dark eyes, gentle eyes, and he has a solid and deep stare. Byron's like a doomed little prince, down on his luck, or cast out by the new king, and those of us less doomed than him feel the need to protect him, feed him, take care of that child heart he has, though we know full well he's more streetwise than us and doesn't need our charity. When I picture Byron, I see him with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his brown parka (or one hand in a pocket and the other tugging at the end of his beard). Byron—looking down at the ground, rocking back and forth on his heels a little—laughing, eyes crinkled up. Byron's a small guy with a big presence. Both lazy and driven. Smart but likes to hide it. Hard to read sometimes. Doesn't overexplain or spell things out. Hates compartmentalization or putting an easy label on something. He's improvisational in all aspects of his life, but he's a perfectionist. Likes a wildcard. Loves a chaotic soul. Admittedly self-absorbed but not in an arrogant sense; more like he's walking in a trance or stuck wandering some alternate dimension. Loves

fried egg sandwiches, diners, *Thrasher* magazine, dirty jokes, Mexico (where his parents live). Partial to cocaine, hash, whiskey, and ecstasy. Loves the ocean, just about any movie as long as it's in the theater, and chess (Byron being the only friend of mine who is actually decent at it). He likes hip-hop, the TV series *Lost*, Lungfish records, pop songs, Harmonia, mainstream country music, and NBA basketball. Reads Fante, Hanshan, and Steinbeck. (Read a lot of Kerouac as a kid but doesn't anymore.) Byron won't play his songs the same way twice. He doesn't rehearse, but he'll set up a million pedals and work through a weird noise piece all day if you want to sit in. He loves the gray area. Hates classification, assumptions, and restrictiveness. When Byron's in town you will see him walking somewhere as you drive by. If you can catch his attention, he will smile that almost shy but not shy smile, and nod his head just barely, and then he will be in the background, growing smaller in the distance. Byron, wandering the city alone. On foot. In and out of bars. Visiting the houses of girls he's seeing at the time. Down backstreets. Silent. Contemplative. In constant survey. Watchful and restrained but alert, aware—aware because there's a raw nerve in him, a burden he says nothing of except in his songs or on the phone if he's had enough to drink. This is the weight of self-annihilation, of all-consuming darkness. Inside Byron is an ache like a growing cancer and he carries death with him and because of this death he drinks around the clock, takes drugs when offered (but never buys), ruins friendships, wears out his welcome, and if you don't love him enough the tendency is to withdraw. (I have watched friends give up on Byron and in 2006, when everything is happening, I make a silent promise that I won't let him down.)

Byron and I go to poorly-lit biker bars on the edge of town, VFWs, ugly places with pool-tables and good, cheap fries and country jukeboxes. Byron wants to leave experimental music behind and be Hank Jr. and I want to be Byron. We meet up at parties and we drink American beer and talk about people we know back home in San Diego and wander around like we've got nowhere to be and all of this is good. I feel comfortable around Byron, safe in a way that's reassuring. But Byron's not like that with everyone, and for some his contrarian side is building a bad reputation. He gets impatient, rude though rare-

ly cruel (when he's cruel he will eviscerate you). On the wrong night Byron's darkness will pull you into it until you are just as dark. This is nothing new. The bad blood in him was there before people were listening to his songs. (Add booze and drugs to that and you have fatal chemistry.) You knew upon meeting him that inside Byron was a force that fought endlessly; a spirit that both hurt him and made his thoughts more beautiful. Disregarding his little boy sweetness, and without his gentle, chin-down stare as he fights to size up the world, he might be too much. But the soft side of him is stronger and his kindness makes you feel loved and at home. No one will ever call to check in on you more than Byron or listen to your problems and laugh at your jokes even if they aren't funny. (Sometimes the people who most know what it is to hurt are the ones with the largest capacity to heal others.) As unsatisfying and shallow as my social life in Portland feels, Byron's a remedy for that. He's a sure pier to tie your boat to when so many others feel like a school of sharks or a capsizing storm.

There's frost on the ground in Portland the day I fly out to Texas. I bring a cheap knockoff peacoat I found upstairs in a pile of junk left by one of our former housemates, and it's not until I'm stuck inside the plane that I realize how bad it smells. Cigarettes. Unhealthy sweat, like the body odor of someone who has been sick a very long time. But the cabin air is cold as hell so I keep it on and suffer through the stench.

On the plane I read a copy of *The Times* I picked up at the Hudson News shop by my gate.

A list of headlines. March 14th, 2006-

"The Death of Milosevic"

"Bush, Conceding Problems, Defends Iraq War"

"The Case of the Purloined, Unauthenticated Pollack"

"Korean Prime Minister Resigns Over Golf Scandal"

"Midnight Conversations With a Two-Headed Mind"

Walking back from the restroom I run into a friend from Portland sitting in an aisle seat and she grabs my arm and pulls my face close to hers.

"Oh my god James you're on this plane I ate a pot brownie like an hour ago. I'm so high you have to sit next to me I'm losing my fucking mind."

"Hi Evvy."

Evvy Huntington scoots into the middle and I take the aisle.

"James." She puts her hand on my knee, her face inches from mine, brown eyes blasted out, swimming, high. "Thank you. Oh my god. You saved my life. James. Wait." She leans away from me, her small nose wrinkled up. "Ew. Yuck. You smell gross. Why do you smell gross?"

"It's the coat."

"Your coat? This coat?"

"The coat smells gross."

"Oh. But I'm too high to think about anything gross right now so be nice to me, okay?"

A list describing Eveline Margaret Gemson Huntington, nicknamed "Evvy"—dressed in all white. White loose pants and a white silk shirt with a low neckline like something from a '70s cocaine orgy. Evvy models for a hipster porn site people used to love but have since turned against. She has large, bright, gold-brown eyes and her hair is the same color (though last we hung out she was white-blonde and the time before that vinyl-black). Evvy's just turned twenty-four, but she runs with a fast, older crowd. People with money. Guys in big indie bands whose records are on the radio. Cocaine dealers. Russian businessmen who dress in very expensive clothes and might be criminals. Heavy people you feel unsafe to be around. Her social group excluding, Evvy's a fine person to hang out with. She's well-read and knows a lot of things while caring about absolutely nothing. She's icy, fast, and savage, which is a good thing to be when you're twenty-four and much less scary than when you're older.

Evvy's older friends are not fun. They're the sort of people you might imagine have (at least accidentally) killed someone at a party in a boxy, modernist, steel-and-glass mansion and covered up the death; the kind of people you should hold at a distance or opt not to associate with.

Evvy talks fast. "James, are you going to South By? Of course. Duh. Of course you're going to South By. We're all going to South By." She says this so close to my face I smell the spearmint gum she's chewing. "I have coke. I brought it. Let's go to the bathroom. Yeah? I mean. No. Not like that. To do coke. You want to?" I ask her how she got coke on the plane and she looks at me like I'm stupid and when I make my eyes big and do a shrugging motion that means, *No, Evvy, I really don't know*, she does a wicked smile and says, "James, it's in my *ass*."

Evvy gets up to do coke in the bathroom and I look out the plane window at the great expanse of black with speckles of gold city lights below us.

I move to the window seat and rest my forehead against the plastic barrier and stare down at the city, its blinking radio tower, the grid of streets.

Evvy drops back into the aisle seat like she's fallen from the sky and says, breathlessly, "James. *Oh*. My fucking god."

In Austin I walk out the arrival doors into a wall of heat. It's a muggy springtime night, the air nearly tropical. The rancid, fake peacoat I take off, fold, and set on a concrete bench then walk through the noisy crowd of people my age with guitar cases, pushing amps on dolly carts, loading drums into the back of taxis and vans, and find Nate Houck sitting on a beat-up white Vespa scooter, smoking a cigarette and looking at his phone.

"Nathan!" I shout, arms raised above me.

"James. Jackson. Fucking. *Bozic*." He gives me a manly handshake maybe as a joke then we hug. "Welcome to fuckin' Texas!" Nate pulls back from the hug but holds me by the shoulders at arm's length. "James, you look like a *corpse*. Your tired ass needs a *beer*."

A list describing Nate Houck—ratty, stained black and white striped polo shirt, tight jeans with the knees busted out, stylish parka with a fake fur collar even in this heat. His hair—a mushroomy, greasy black mop, bangs in his eyes, which are blue and piercing. "Piercing" is a strange word to use for something soft like eyes and it's a word that's used often, and often overused, but Nate Houck's eyes are piercing. They're sharp, bright, full of the devil's sparkle. Nate Houck is trouble, exuberance, daring, and all of that balanced out with a huge, kind heart and a good sense of style. Nate moves as if wired into some great invisible engine, frenetic (though never frantic), an object in motion that stays in motion. Nate Houck is ready to do anything at any hour of the day or night because to sit still is to die or get bored or die of boredom. It's a beautiful, inspiring thing. In centuries previous, Nate would have been an ill-fated Old West bank-robber who gave what he stole to the poor or a fucked-up junkie Robin Hood or a ruthless, glamourous pirate doomed to the gallows. In 2006 he's settled in Austin by way of San Diego and lives hard—marauding, laughing, vibrantly loquacious, messy, high, drunk, not throwing caution to the wind because there is no caution to begin with and the wind must be embraced at all cost. Nate Houck and caution are mutually exclusive—two magnets shoving each other in the opposite direction while refusing to acknowledge the existence of the other. (Should caution be lent human form, caution and Nate Houck would be sworn enemies, and in the final battle that decides the war, Nate would emerge victorious.)

Evvy Huntington from the plane is danger paired with power. Nate's best friend Ben Frank is danger paired with elegance and grace. Nate is danger paired with danger. I've known Nate, by way of Ben Frank, since the turn of the century and I have yet to see him take the easy way out or go to bed early or make a rational choice should the dangerous option appear more interesting. If there's a door marked "safe" and a door marked "housefire," Nate Houck will walk into the fire—and happily. He will burn and sing.

On the back country roads from the airport to Nate's apartment, I learn he's been drinking all day and that he crashed once on the way here and rolled the Vespa into a ditch, but that

everything's fine, he's fine, the bike's fine, being drunk on the bike is fine, us not wearing helmets is fine, it's fine, it's fine, it's fine because he's invisible to Austin cops and is in fact the new mayor of Austin or maybe the head crime-boss like Shredder from the Ninja Turtles and now we're going faster and somehow he's lit a cigarette and tries for a moment to smoke it before it's ripped out of his mouth by the wind and sent sparking into oblivion.

I look back to see it spinning in space before bouncing off the hood of a car behind us.

The car swerves then blasts us with its high-beams three times—a warning or a fuck you or maybe both.

The Texas night whips past with hot air and bugs careening wildly in our view, lit bright like specks of hail in the Vespa's headlight; all around us the rich, musky smell of irrigation water. The cars wiz by and their headlights blur as Nate shouts about where we're going after we drop my shit off (a bar) and how there's this hot English girl (Rehgi) he's meeting there and don't worry, Jamesy James, you'll love Rehgi too and the whole fuckin' place (the bar, Austin, South By, and Texas itself) will be a big fuckin' wreck and so full of people you'll vomit but here we are in vomit-big-fuckin'-wreck-Austin and we're going to celebrate you (me) being here, and I won't have to pay for shit because Nate's suddenly rich but will only be rich tonight (and perhaps tomorrow) so we must (he shouts the word "must" just shy of a scream) take advantage of-

This is when we crash the Vespa.

In the middle of his sentence, Nate leans right to take the offramp and the back tire skids out.

As the scooter lays flat, sliding sideways toward the crash barrier, Nate and I spill out across the pavement.

I roll and hit the concrete divider.

For a moment, all goes black and I feel myself losing consciousness.

But then, from across the road, I hear Nate laughing and that brings me back.

I stand and check myself for broken bones.

Nothing I can feel.

No cuts.

Okay, a few scrapes.

Minor stuff.

Lit by the buggy yellow streetlights of the offramp, Nate jogs over to me and puts his hand out for a high-five—dark red blood trickling down his forehead to his mouth.

"Oh shit, right?" he says, his teeth streaked with blood.

I agree. Oh shit.

"You good?"

I nod. Good.

And back on the bike.

In the hallway of his apartment complex, Nate tells me his key is broken. Then he kicks open the door like an action movie star and holds out his arm ceremoniously, welcoming me in. "After you," he says. "Let's just, uh—" he moves a cardboard box full of vinyl records to keep the door shut. "There. A drink before we hit los bars?" I tell him sure and sit down on the couch as he strides into the kitchen with two exaggerated steps like he's moving from rock to rock in order to cross a stream.

I hear the fridge pop open and bottles clink together and then the fridge door claps shut and the tap goes on and off.

Half my friends live in apartments so messy it looks like they're either moving in or moving out. Nate's apartment is crowded with stacks of cardboard boxes, records and CDs on the floor, beer cans wherever you look, magazines in piles, a broken stereo beat to pieces with a hammer, and the hammer itself left on

top the wreckage like an art piece.

Nate drops down on the couch next to me, hands me a beer, then grabs the neck back just as I'm taking it and pulls it toward his to cheers it before letting go.

"Welcome to the best night of your life," he says.

The next day, Byron and I walk toward 6th Street sharing a can of Dr Pepper half full of whiskey. It's morning, and I don't like mornings, but I found Byron reading a skate magazine in the hotel lobby when I got there to check in and we agreed to seize the day or at least seize getting rid of our hangovers.

As we walk, I tell him about Evvy Huntington on the plane and last night with Nate Houck and I confess maybe Evvy and Nate are too wild for me. Byron tells me about his first night here, how after a show at the Unitarian church he married a folksinger we both know in a ceremony that involved her tying a braided strand of prairie grass around his wrist.

"How's married life?"

"To be determined," he says.

"That bad?"

"Wife ran off to meet some people. And there's this girl I needed to go see. So. Tragedy is I think we're divorced."

"Sorry for your loss."

"Not all good's meant to last," he says then laughs how he does where he tries not to smile all the way, but when he laughs the rest of his face is smiling—his eyes crinkled up like an old man—and you can't help but be caught in the glow of the moment.

Byron's cut his beard short since I last saw him, but it's not cleaned up. It's raggedy, the mustache longer than the rest, curving around his mouth like something from the Civil War. As if to make up for the short beard, his hair is longer. It's long in the back and short on top but more biblical prophet or medieval than a mullet—a greasy, prophetic knight.

Even on top of the world like he is now, Byron has been living hard—sleeping where he can, bumming around, getting a meal here and there. We are surrounded by gloss and fame. Byron's famous now, but there's no gloss to him; except this new confidence he has; as if he knows things will progressively go his way and he's happy about it though unconcerned with the present or the future (and the past? It doesn't exist, he told me one night a few tours ago. I don't agree with Byron about the past, present, and future, but it's a lightness that allows him to see beyond his troubles for a while and you can tell it's welcomed and I'm glad he's able to take refuge in it).

The streets are crowded and the blacktop is wet. Above us—gray sky, the air humid, the smell of rain, stale beer, fried food, and breakfast—breakfast from every restaurant and bar—burnt toast, bacon frying, fresh coffee.

"Lookin' like rain," says Byron in the soft, nonspecific drawl he has, and I tell him how earlier, on the taxi ride from Nate's apartment to the hotel, it rained so hard you couldn't see the streets outside the car with the water streaming down the windows and the glass fogging and the wipers beating back and forth.

Now the sky over the row of hotels darkens with a mass of clouds rolling in from the west—thunderheads, heavy, dark gray so as to be nearly black.

Byron and I go to a pool party at the top of the Omni Hotel. From nineteen floors above the streets, the city is quiet—the sounds of bands playing outdoor showcases and the traffic below settling to a soft cloud layer of indistinct murmur like a county fair heard from miles away. I like the sound. It's hazy, a warm, dry, papery whisper—churning, tidal, dreamlike. But I stop hearing it after a few minutes, and when it's gone I miss it.

Austin this high up smells like barbeque and cigarettes. The party has a chef in a white coat and tall white hat manning a grill by the pool and a lot of older guys in suits trying to act young. The pool is beautiful—turquoise, full of sunlight.

"Wish I'd brought swim trunks," I say.

"For real."

"I can't believe no one's swimming."

"These people? They don't swim," says Byron.

"You hating this as much as I am?"

"Much or maybe more," he drawls. "I'm kinda thinkin' fuck South By," he says.

It's an open bar so we do two shots of fancy tequila each and grab six cans of beer from an ice bucket (and stick those in Byron's backpack) then take the elevator back down to the lobby.

We hit the streets just as the sky begins to dump rain.

Walking under the awnings of a hotel, the air damp and cool now, and the noise of the rain loud on the red canvas above us, I tell Byron about how the place we went to after we stopped at Nate's apartment had a guest bartender from a deep sea fishing reality show, and how at one point before we were thrown out, Nate asked the bartender if he knew any famous whales in real life. "And he kept askin' the bartender shit like, 'Is Free Willy nice or is he a dick? Please say he's nice. It would break my *heart* if Free Willy was a dick.' The guy was *pissed*."

"Famous whales in real life is some sweet brain shit," says Byron.

"Sweet brain?"

"You know. When you're on."

"On what?"

"On nothing," he says. "You're just *on*. It's when everything you say's funny and you come up with ideas without even tryin' to. When you get weird—you get weirder than you ever imagined. You're plugged into somethin' bigger. Your cards can't lose. Always try and find the sweet brain."

"Hunt down the sweet brain."

"You got it."

Byron and I lose track of each other after his show. At dark I run into Evvy Huntington who screams my name from half a block away then runs that half block in her billowing white clothes and drags me back in the direction I came. Evvy takes us to a secret party where Echo and the Bunnymen are playing, after which the night turns into a smudge of lights and vodka shots and Evvy doing cocaine in bar bathrooms and dropping her white cotton pants to piss in every alley and empty storefront while I stand guard. She is ruthlessly hit on by the members of various big indie bands who won't leave her side.

Getting away from one of them, a loud, swarthy, drunk singer, Evvy runs into a girl she knows from Portland and I sit on the curb and sip Evvy's flask of ice cold vodka while they talk.

Paisley: "You know Amberlee got chased out of town?"

Evvy: "Paisley, no, what?"

Paisley: "I mean, you surprised?"

Evvy: "I am—a little."

Paisley: "Not me."

Evvy: "Was it because—"

Paisley: "That thing where she stole drugs from Marlon's friend?"

Evvy: "Yeah, that thing. What was his—"

Paisley: "Derry."

Evvy: "Yeah. Derry. Like he milks cows or something." Laughing. "James, you know Amberlee Martin?"

Me: "I know *of* her."

Paisley: laughing, "Girl, that shit with Derry wasn't it though."

Evvy: "What was?"

Paisley: "Remember how homegirl was housesitting all summer up in St. John's?"

Evvy: "Was she?"

Paisley: "Yeah. Like two months at this girl Carey's house she used to work with. Before Carey got the money from her mom."

Evvy: "Oh. Carey. I know Carey."

Paisley: "Yeah, Carey. But *baaad* Amberlee had a few choice people over and they fucked that place *up*. Tali sold her a bunch of speed and they stayed in there for a week. Fucked it up. For real. Like holes in the wall and shit. Like guns and jewelry stolen and—"

Evvy: "You know Carey's dad killed some dude a couple years ago?"

Paisley: "Ev. Honey. Carey's dad killed some dude and some dude's dealer and some dude's dealer's landlord. The cops know. Everybody knows. But nobody'll touch her dad. That man will scare you right out of your—" Paisley, shaking her head, taking a drag off her cigarette "—and his dead eyes? I mean, actually dead. Girl. Like *rocks*. White and black *rocks* in that man's skull."

Evvy: "I saw him once at Carey's art show and—yeah."

Paisley: "God as my witness that man is undead. You never hear him talk. Doesn't speak."

Evvy: "Hey, what're you doing tonight?"

Paisley: "Me? Goin' back to the hotel. I'm sick of this shit. I heard Phosphorescent were playin' and I was gonna go but—no, that's tomorrow. I gotta get my sleep on."

Evvy: "What? Going to bed? Paisley Crow don't let me down. I'm counting on you. Me and James here need some actual fun."

Paisley: "Your girl Paisley Crow is tired as *shit*, baby."

Evvy: "Come out—for like a sec? A tiny second? A really tiny, little, bitty second?"

Paisley: "Okay. For like a *second*."

Evvy: "Woo! Sweet. I knew I could count on your ass."

Paisley: "Forever reluctant but down to kill."

Evvy: "Down to kill like a motherfucker."

Paisley: "That's me."

Paisely Crow and Evvy do a little three-step handshake.

Evvy: "I believe in you."

Paisley: "Thanks, baby."

At a warehouse party on the edge of town, we talk to awful people which leads to talking to worse people, most of whom want to fuck Evvy or Paisley or both.

Paisley goes off alone looking for a bandmate of hers she calls "Shitty Ricki" and Evvy and I find our way back to the hotel after being lost a very long time.

Byron's at the room already, asleep next to a girl with white-blonde hair, the comforter pulled up to her chin.

In the second bed are two girls I'd seen play bass and keyboards in one of the many versions of Byron's band.

I sleep in the bathtub.

Evvy sleeps under the bathroom sink.

In the morning, which is only "morning" in that it's when we wake up (today "morning" is 2pm), Byron and I go to a record label showcase his friend Henry is playing.

A list describing Henry—taller than Byron and me. Cowboy boots, jeans, a baggy t-shirt. Good humored. Everyone tells Henry he looks like a young Tom Cruise and he hates it, but the comparison fits. Henry's songs are full of wayward kids on the road. Hearing him sing you want to go out and see the world—bum around, ride a train, get up to no good. But it's a healthy kind of trouble. Not like the dangerous might-die Nate

Houck kind or '70s cocaine orgy Evvy Huntington style. Henry's trouble is the virtuous fun-trouble of childhood and the solitary joy of wandering unknown sidewalks on sunny mornings in any American town anywhere. It's the trouble of penniless freedom, of patrolling your world, navigating the highways that lead away from (or back to) your home. I love nothing more than to drive around the country and see what I can see, and Henry's quiet songs are drive-around-the-country-and-see-what-you-can-see anthems.

Byron and I sit on folding chairs in the big cavern of the room—some kind of gray empty warehouse like an airplane hangar—and watch Henry's band.

Sitting in are a few younger kids without instruments singing harmonies and a pale, thin, darkhaired girl on banjo. The banjo player is also in Byron's touring band and she's about to release a solo record on one of the biggest indie labels around. "Ivy's a good one," Byron says. "Deep mind. Writes real smart songs. She's gonna be bigger than all of us combined." Ivy Park sits on the edge of the low stage like it's a street curb, legs crossed at the ankles, and does high, soft backups to Henry's lead while he lies on his back, singing up at the ceiling, his acoustic guitar across his chest; the kids sitting or knelt around him singing parts that are more owl and wolf sounds than human vocals. It's comforting in the way that old doo wop songs are comforting or Jolie Holland after a long, stupid day and you've finally come home and you lock the door behind you and relax and breathe after what feels like holding your breath since morning.

After the set, Byron and Henry and I walk back to 6th Street. Byron's meant to play a noise set at an experimental showcase somewhere on the far edge of town, but he's not feeling it.

"Call in. Tell the boss you're sick," says Henry.

"Naw," says Byron. "I'm doin' it but so are you all."

"Us all? What all?" says Henry.

"We just formed a superband," says Byron.

"Super," says Henry with a nod.

"James, you're gonna read your stuff. Henry, you and me on guitar. We get TC on drums. Ivy on bass. Blaze it up. Hold Steady style. Throw 'em a curve. Y'all up for it?" I tell him of course I am, without a doubt, unquestionably. "Fuckin' a. Doin' this," he says and we walk into a bar where a six-piece band plays to an empty room.

Over beers, Byron offers the plan of us doing everything today so we don't have to do anything tomorrow and the beauty of that is hard to argue with. We toast. To his plan. To everything then nothing.

The plan begins with a ceremonial round of tequila shots then ends after we sneak into a Kris Kristofferson show and are thrown out in the middle of "Sunday Morning Coming Down."

Following Henry and Byron out the door, I unlatch a small red fire-extinguisher from the wall then run past them toward the park across the street carrying it in my arms like a football.

A wind is up and the leaves shake and the branches lift and drop, whipping their shadows across the streetlight-lit grass. It's a dark-bright world of faded night-green and yellow—beautiful, but the park is full of guys in tight-fitting suits talking to guys in tight-fitting suits and older men in polo shirts handing business cards to older men in polo shirts.

"Watch out!" I hear Henry shout behind me. "They're *managers*! They're alla bunch of managers! Stay away from the managers! They're gonna *manage* you!"

He and Byron are sharing a flask on the edge of the park, laughing.

"Nope! Don't do it!" shouts Byron.

But it's a happy nope don't do it.

And I do it.

The white foam bursts out from the nozzle of the fire extinguisher in wild gasping spurts and I chase the managers around the park, spraying them when they get too close.

A manager in a dark blue suit trips on a sprinkler head and I jump over him like an Olympic hurdler, and as I'm jumping I turn back and hit him with a blast of fire-extinguisher in midair and I feel godlike.

Later, after Byron tells me the fire-extinguisher stunt was "the least indie-rock thing all week," and after we lose Henry in a crowd outside a club, Byron and I head for the hotel.

I sleep in the bathtub again because now it's funny and we get up early before our hangovers hit.

Breakfast is Lonestar beer and pizza by the slice at a club hosting an acoustic music showcase.

On the small stage, a folksinger with an awful wispy voice strums a banjo and sings a tedious, precious song about sailor's knots, the War of 1812, and John James Audubon.

"Well. Fuck it," says Byron. "New Weird America just got too new and weird for me."

"This the end of freak folk?"

Byron laughs. "I know I'm sick of bein' freaked out."

After the second beer, and halfway through the third slice, we decide to do everything again so we don't have to do anything tomorrow since we've already started doing everything today and have lost our chance at a day of nothing.

"Tomorrow your boys here are on vacation," says Byron as we leave the first bar.

"Good," I tell him. "I'm sick of fun."

"Yeah. Hate it. Don't like it," he says laughing quietly, his eyes crinkled up.

That night we meet up with TC who's in Byron's band alongside Ivy Park. TC's songs are solitary and restrained with sparse but lovely guitar parts, vocals layered over that in a ghostly, soft, honey-warm croon. TC's record is like if Patsy Cline played folk sets at noise shows, and it has been a constant, late-night

companion to me all year. Listening to TC's music is like walking alone through a dark, surreal but strangely peaceful landscape. It's a place you've been or maybe you've dreamed about it. You are most definitely lost, and in the dark there are things that could hurt you, and as you walk you are afraid of those things—though mildly, like the fear in a children's story, where you know despite all odds, the hero will return home by book's end, and because of that you can enjoy the darkness. It is an album that feels as if it were recorded in the early hours of morning before dawn—a cryptic, introspective after-afterhours album. Byron and TC are a lot alike—quiet, small-statured but with a big presence, not shy like people think but watchful, serious, and discreet.

A list describing TC—very pale, boyish, girlish (and also neither), youthful with long, brown, stringy hair parted in the middle, big owl-like glasses, a blank expression that gives way to the slightest, sweetest rosebud smile you've ever seen. TC's record is having a moment and the music press can't say enough good things about it. Everywhere we go we're stopped so someone can tell TC how the record helped them get through the winter or over a bad breakup. (What's more is people ask for autographs, which you rarely see at industry events like this, where everyone, famous or not, tries their best to play it cool or pretends to be unbothered.) TC has something a lot of people want, and when a lot of people want something from one person it can be overwhelming. It might turn a pleasant person standoffish or even mean. But TC handles it with quiet Texas grace and talks to everyone—polite, decorous, and kind to a fault.

This version of the band has TC's older brother Jack on second guitar and their sister is in the audience, and I get only-child-sad—sad in the way you do when you grow up wanting siblings but have none. A cool brother to play in a band with. A sister to watch you play. I'm happy for TC rather than jealous, but my happiness is colored with a longing that leans toward homesickness or nostalgia for a thing I'll never have. It's an illogical yearning, and I know I shouldn't give it any space, but it spins me up and once I'm spun I can't shake it.

Overcome with a million feelings at once, I leave before the set

is over and walk back to the hotel alone—the streets of Austin still packed at 1am with lines outside clubs and white taxis idling, vans double-parked, and limos with black windows, red Solo cups crushed in the gutters, music thumping from inside bars. I stare at the faces as I pass—everyone wanting something or believing some shared myth about hard work and celebrity; bands I've never heard of who are the biggest thing in their small world; singers looking to get famous, and everyone the star of the show—their show, captaining their ship, ruling their own particular realm, and how many of us know each other? A few of the people I pass are known to almost everyone here. But most of us? Little kings of small kingdoms. Faces in the crowd. Faces staring at their own streets of unknown faces—anonymous and looking for the path toward fame or the antidote to obscurity. Everyone trying to be something they're not or just enjoying the struggle around them—looking for fun, hoping to get laid, hoping for something free, hoping, hoping, hoping, narrating their own path through these same streets. Prominent or unknown, desperate or complacent, we are all the primary figure of our own tested, busy, trying, stomping, painfully bereft, lovely days—fighting entropic forces, sailing our flagship through these quick few moments we have on Earth. Thinking of this, and in the thick of the crowd, the packed streets and the busy night, I feel invisible, but then the comfort in that hits me. Why worry? The captain still sails and can enjoy safe passage whether anyone sees them at the ship's wheel. A joy in being one of the many sweeps over me, and the sadness I felt at the show lifts and I remember that I am alive, breathing, walking, still upright on my own two feet, still moving from one end of town to the next, still able to lock the hotel door behind me and sleep safely, still granted the grace to live another day, to wake up in the morning and do everything again in order to do nothing the next day.

2007

In the winter at our new place in Portland, Jude and Frankie and I watch movies. (Jude's favorite genre is what he calls "space violence." Frankie likes war movies. I like films about artists—painters mostly but also writers—and anything medieval.) We

drink and we argue about Iraq, immigration, and the police. Jude and Frankie fight. Jude and I get too drunk and Frankie is done with us. None of this lasts more than a night. Fighting, arguing, holding grudges and small resentments, who's got the time? Frankie and I don't. Jude won't let on when he's upset after a fight, but Frankie and I let on like a televised evisceration. We throw a problem on the cutting board and take a cleaver to it then push along forward in the immediacy of having so much we want to do and little resources for it but endless opportunities. We make lists and plans. Frankie gets three part-time jobs with local publishers and rides her bike between the three from morning to night. I write for one of the weeklies and for a while keep a staff job there before quitting to focus on the book. Jude works at local clubs doing sound for bands and spends a lot of time off on his own, riding his BMX from bar to Plaid Pantry to Mt. Tabor to parts unknown. At the end of the day I want to forget what I'm writing and blow off steam like a burst pipe. Jude spends a lot of the day blowing off steam and at night wants to do the same. Frankie works all day and at night wants to work more. We keep separate rooms, moving independent of each other but often crossing paths—Frankie and I during the day when we hatch our schemes and talk about publishing; the three of us mostly at day's end when the best of ourselves is spent. So, movies. Space violence, war films, artist biopics, medieval adventures.

When I'm alone, when the night is quiet, I think of the chaos of love. The triangle of Jude and Frankie and me. The triangle of Alison and Frankie and me. I beat myself to pieces in an attempt to come up with a reason why we love like we love, why we take a good thing and ruin it by wanting something else while still wanting that good thing to be there for us. Am I more apt to live like this with Frankie and Jude because of how I feel about Frankie and Alison? Should I get the hell out and go back to San Diego? I think of that scene in *Forrest Gump* where he tells Jenny, "You should go home to Greenbow, *Alabama*!" and the thought of home (at least in that moment) feels like a fix. Of course I know running home won't solve a damn thing. I have no answers and the life I've made with Frankie and Jude isn't normal but it's good in its own complicated, strange, convoluted way. (So we go ahead and live like we live.)

When it's time to finish the book, I give Frankie the manuscript and she shuts herself in her room. The pages of the book she tapes up on the midnight blue wall until it's covered like a detective's board. The chapters in the book are organized chronologically, but Frankie decides it won't work that way and sets out to rearrange the structure so it flows like a mixtape. Meanwhile I shout through the door every few hours to ask how it's going, and Jude comes in and out of the house at various points during the day and night. And the dogs sleep on either end of the beautiful teal couch with its soft metallic shimmer. And spring warms toward summer. And the leaves return to the trees.

The gray skies are now blue and when I open the window I hear the birds and the chitter of squirrels in the walnut trees and the voices of the neighbors as they work on their house. Frankie and I spend long hours talking about the manuscript and how it needs to function as a completed work then I shut myself away in my bedroom and get down to rewrites. Working late into the night, I pull out old photo albums for visual reference and I reread parts of *A Moveable Feast* and listen to Byron's records when I'm too tired to think.

Then summer and the book is done.

The manuscript is emailed to the publisher in Providence and that day I begin writing the next book.

A list of headlines. June 29th, 2007-

"Wanting the War to End Before Seeing It on Film"

"Journal Reporters Protest Over Murdoch Bid"

"Monsanto Net Up 71%; Corn Seed Cited"

"Long-Awaited iPhone Goes on Sale"

"Paris Hilton Interview"

Byron's new record comes out. It's mellow country and wasping noise, the slowest Nashville pedal steel sighing a summertime hymn, and in the midst of that, spaced-out, stoned, cosmic blues envisioned as some sort of fresh avantgarde Americana, both night-dark and easygoing. It feels triumphant and natural and the reviews are largely glowing. This one is another record to live inside, to inhabit and make yourself at home. I listen to nothing else for weeks. Knowing it exists is comforting because it makes me feel like there are other animals shaped like me out there. As long as these records keep coming I have something to base my own work around, something to shoot for or try to run pace with.

Byron comes to Portland. With him is TC and a popular electronic music guy whose work sounds like pitch-shifted squeaky voice cartoons above Aaron Copland at a rave. After the show we get drinks and they talk about the endless tours they've been on and the endless tours of last year and the endless tours to come this winter. We sit around a table in the back of the restaurant and everyone's happier than I've seen them. TC is happy and Byron is happy and their cartoon rave Copland friend is the epitome of beautiful, ecstatic joy. We talk about my book. TC wants a copy when it's out and Byron's read the manuscript and tells me it's "a motherfucker," and "a motherfucker" from Byron is high praise. We discuss boats, certain beaches, Henry's new record, the growing fame of Ivy Park, bad audiences, bad countries to play in, and critics we know and hate. It's a glorious, affirming thing to be around. We drink Mexican beer and we eat hot tortilla chips with salsa and guacamole and the night is soft and warm and soon we fade into it. I walk home alone under the canopy of trees with the moon high and silver-white, and a life of possibilities is fragrant and intoxicating like some strange flower.

I leave the country for two months to tour overseas and now everything clicks and there are people at the shows and reviews and interviews in the hipper magazines and live sessions on video. It gets to my head gets to my head gets to my head—the words "gets to my head" should be heard or imagined with the sound and rhythm of a train chugging down its track through a jagged mountain pass.

The opening band we tour England with has its coke dealer ride along with them. I sit with the singer and the guitarist from the headlining band in the darkness of castle gates or below medieval church walls and drink absinthe before the shows and say sassy shit and each night we celebrate before anything worth celebrating happens. We drink vodka in the tour van as it barrels down the motorway, and to make the most of night drives we dance standing on our seats in the back of the van to awful '90s songs or Chromeo singing about fancy footwork. We throw bottles onto the floor backstage and laugh as the glass sprays out in all directions and we tackle each other like puppies and scrap on the floor laughing. One night we climb the fence at Stonehenge and run across the darkened lawn like feral druids; security stumbling after us, the yellow beams of their Maglites splashing out across the rocks. We drink until we're diabolical. None of this feels unusual at the time.

A list describing Andrei Merce and William Erlich—Andrei and William are the singer and guitarist from the band I'm touring with. William is quiet and careful like a Hobbit but animalistic when the night hits correctly. Andrei is bright and savage and his animalism doesn't need coaxing. Together we become beasts and there's a careless, mean kind of freedom in being a beast. You pair that with the attention you're paid on a good tour and it will get to your head. You will be a monster and hilarious. You will become a devil and in your devilry you will feel deathless, everlasting. We're not vain or prideful but we pretend to be and make a show of saying the brashest, haughtiest shit imaginable to each other. There's a demonic majesty in pride and like any demonic power it's vile when you look close enough. Andrei and William and I playact as bossy young lords (though we know better) and we pretend we're wicked as the day is long and the joy in that gets to my head.

The "gets to my head" train is now clattering down the track and there is no one to pull the brake.

At the bottom of the grade where the train track ends?

The side of the mountain.

2008

Lying in bed on a gray morning I message Andrei Merce, "Well, the book's out and I think it's going to be a spectacular flop."

"How are sales?"

"Unimpressive."

He responds, "I would expect nothing less from you—you absolute piece of shit" and we roast each other over text for an hour and at the end of that hour I feel happier and ready to take what comes. I sit down at my writing table, light two saint candles (St. Hildegarde Von Bingen and Francis de Sales) then open my laptop and get to work.

Byron's latest record is fragmentary, sliced down to the sparest guitar lines. It's full of dry static and strange electronic pulses like satellite broadcasts and (though rarely) his voice, the lyrics delivered minimal, declarative like haiku. (From an email at the time he writes, "I'd like to quit this shit and go write haiku for the rest of my life.") His songs feel like some stray border radio broadcast you try to dial in—a signal that gives way to new stations as you head west, changing with the heat and the landscape. Byron recorded this one alone in a desert motel. Without all the lavish, tripped-out orchestration of records past, it's a solitary, dark, bare thing—a sort of chopped-up Western film score with Biblical undertones and a dissolving cast of characters like faces glared-out in an old Polaroid.

I text Joey Carr about Byron's record: "Reviews aren't great, but I've listened to it on a loop for days. It's like Fahey does *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Some New Old West shit."

I try my best to push new records on Joey because his musical taste has gone stagnant. The thought of him smoking crystal all day in his shitty, dark apartment listening to the albums he grew up with and rereading the same three Ray Bradbury novels is awful. The amphetamines have aged him. They've made Joey sad, muddled, ponderous. In photos from his MySpace page, he's begun to look like the hated uncle who raised him. Hair thinning, face jowly, the dark circles under his eyes like scars now. His sister Macey and I have long, circuitous phone conver-

sations about what's best for him. To this we find no resolution. He's slipping away, rubbing layers off himself until he's more a shadow than a person.

I message Andrei Merce to tell him about the record then say, unrelated, and without thinking, "I have decided to become the stupidest person in the world."

"Good. You'll do well at that," he writes.

"Y'know, it's important to have goals."

"Looking forward to tour," he types.

"Death and punishment to all those who oppose us."

"Your new nickname is the Punisher because you are absolutely punishing to be around."

"I love you too."

"I know, baby."

A list of headlines. July 3rd, 2008-

"Obama Picks Up Fund-Raising Pace"

"McCain Orders Shake-Up of His Campaign"

"Palestinian Kills 3 with Construction Vehicle"

"Bush Keeps Up Pressure on Iran"

"Sanity on Nuclear Weapons"

I do another UK tour with Andrei and William's band. After our show in Manchester, we're lent an apartment above the venue for the night—a large room three stories up with rows of bunkbeds along two walls, a small kitchen we fill with bottles of booze and stacks of pizza boxes, and a restroom the opening band christens by doing forty-five minutes of cocaine behind

the locked door.

On the top bunk of one of the beds, Andrei and I sit cross-legged, the window open behind us, a fresh breeze blowing in with the smell of asphalt, car exhaust, and rain.

Three stories below, people walk under umbrellas home from bars and come in and out of the late-night shops and restaurants. Traffic moves in a halting line, the rain causing the cars and buses to shine like metallic bugs and caterpillars.

Manchester is a gray city like Portland is a gray city, but unlike Portland it has a distinct and timeless sort of civic personality—the gray and the brick and gothic skies, the pallor of midday, dark slurry nights in the pubs, and the echoes of the Manchester scene of years past—Joy Division, Factory Records, the Smiths, the Fall—dark and busy, funereal but tough, and with a certain kind of big city vibrancy that keeps a dirge from being a bore.

Andrei and I are making fun of our friends. We're talking about so and so's ugly hat or another's bad taste in facial hair and we're doing it loud enough for our victims to hear because when Andrei and I say horrible things about our friends (or to each other) it's a declaration of love.

People are hard to read sometimes, but when you know someone enough for them to tease you that's when you can tell you're loved. Of course not everyone can take that class of love. Maybe it wears you down. Or puts the talons to your insecurities. But for me it's the best sort of love, second only to the earnest kind where no pretenses are required. (The latter is of course rare because so many of us are afraid of being vulnerable or demonstrative in our affections. We close ourselves off to keep from being hurt and seldom let more than a glimmer of how we feel shine through that carapace.)

Andrei and I are very much alike. We swagger and joke and say stupid things because half the people we know talk so enthusiastically about the importance of their work it's impossible to take them seriously. We want to laugh and be fools and make fun of our own insufferable selves. It's rare you meet someone

you are so in tune with it's like a pair of instruments playing in harmony. Maybe the sound you make is a sound some won't like (a scraping, harsh shriek like a grisly, sick bird) but in the performance of it you shut out the noise of the world and play on, happy in your antagonistic defiance.

Together we believe in the primacy of mindless humor. We joke and laugh and hatch stupid schemes and maybe no one else would care about our jokes and irrational ideas but—again, together—we're a little more fearless. Or careless. Or arrogant. (No, not arrogant; true arrogance is ugly. We're still having fun with it.)

Sitting cross-legged on the top bunk next to Andrei, who's having a beer and a cigarette, ashing out the window behind us, I point at William's pixie haircut with its wispy fake sideburns, and we discuss its shape and composition at length until he turns around and—smiling, shaking his head—gives us the English version of flipping someone the middle finger—a reverse peace sign, wagged a little at the wrist for emphasis.

"I actually like it, though," I say, quiet so William can't hear.

"What, his hair? Mate, *no*."

"I've had that same haircut so many times. All San Diego kids go through a Spock phase."

"Do they?"

"Well. No. That's a generalization. My friends do. Or did."

"You know where that's from?" asks Andrei, dropping his cigarette butt in the bottle of beer he's just finished.

"The Spock rock haircut? Yeah, it's from—"

"Honestly?"

"Oh, the British flipping off thing?"

"Dates back to archers in the Middle Ages," he says.

"I think I've heard this."

"You haven't heard it from *me*," he says with a campy, put-on swagger.

"Sorry. Tell me what you know."

"*Well*. If you were an archer captured in battle, the opposing side might chop the index and middle fingers off your—"

Upon the words "fingers off your" I shift my weight to rest against the wall behind us and fall backward out the window—while simultaneously Andrei grabs the front of my shirt and I hang halfway out, legs still crossed, arms and torso and head dangling above the city below.

Andrei pulls me back in and shuts the window, latching it closed. We stare at each other, speechless for once.

Hands shaking, Andrei takes his pack of cigarettes from the mattress between us and sticks one in his lips. He lights it and offers the pack to me with a silent nod. I shake my head. It's all I can do.

"Mate," he says.

"Did I almost—"

"You would've been *fucking dead*, mate. Down there?" he points out the window.

"Down there."

"Dead. Fucking legitimately *dead*."

I try to make a joke, but I can't. "I, uh—Jesus fuckin' Christ."

"Oh, and look who's a hero now for saving your shitty, worthless life. God I need a drink."

I can barely talk. "Yeah. A drink. Yeah. Now."

We climb down from the bunkbed and make our way through the crowd to the kitchen.

After tour I meet up with Jeremy Willis at William's place in Crouch End and we go off to Europe with my tour cash and

the money his parents gave him for college graduation. We take a cruise ship ferry across the North Sea to Holland and wear out our welcome with the sweet Dutch girl we're staying with. Jeremy does cocaine with Keith Richards' guitar tech or his roadie or some sort of assistant and tells me about it the next morning having slept zero minutes—his eyes wild and tired and dark and his hair standing up like a shrub. We walk for hours under the gray skies and eat Dutch chocolate each morning and Turkish bread covered in sesame seeds. We visit Anne Frank's house. Standing in front of the diary in its glass case, Jeremy says, "Fuck" and then I say "Fuck" and we go down to the gift shop to buy Secret Annex postcards and Anne Frank magnets.

The next morning—a train to Berlin. Straight across the snowy landscape. Dark woods in the distance and skies as plain white as milk. Jeremy and I stand at a tall, square table in the jostling club car and drink gin and tonics. The tonic water and the gin come in separate bottles with cheery yellow labels. The lime isn't fresh lime. It's some sort of powdered lime in paper packets the size of a condom wrapper. Jeremy tells me about the girl he slept with in Holland last night and how sad and stupid it was, and how while he fucked her she looked at her phone and chewed gum, blowing bubbles, which cracked loudly like twigs snapping and jangled his nerves. We watch the countryside roll by—bleak, cold, beautiful.

Jeremy says, "I keep thinking how seventy years ago people like me would be on trains just like this to Germany. But we'd be headed to concentration camps. Trains full of us."

It's a sobering thought.

I say, "That's a sobering thought."

He smiles and says, "My friend, I believe that means it's time for us to get unsober."

We get unsober.

In Germany we eat penne pasta and red sauce at a kitchen table, candle-lit, with an Italian couple our age in a flat in old East Berlin. The Italians Nico and Marco tell us stories, many of them involving an angry Swede they call "the Big Bastard."

"And I tell him, hey, you need to calm down, my friend," says Roman party promotor Marco. "But the Big Bastard, he say, 'You know what, Marco? *Fuck* you and fuck your whole Italian country and your whole Italian fucking *history*' and I walk away because? You do not say, 'Hey, Marco, fucking fuck your whole Italian everything.' Because for saying that?" He shakes his head, a sour look of disbelief on his face. "No. For saying that, I cut your throat." Marco drags a finger across his throat like he's slitting it with a knife.

Jeremy lifts his coffee mug of wine and smiles, "To cutting the throats of all Big Bastards within reach" and we drink to cutting Big Bastards' throats. Next Marco tells us a grand romantic tale of how two thousand years ago his family had been Roman slaves by way of Ghana but now they've had their revenge. He talks about cousins in Italian politics. About his brother the famous television actor.

"Listen. My friends. When they fucking smash you down, you rise back up and then—" he folds his arms in front of him with a mean grin. "—then begins the cutting of throats."

Quietly, reverently, under his breath, Jeremy says, "*Yesss.*"

Marco's boyfriend Nico leaves and returns with a case of red wine and we open a bottle each while Nico tells a long and involved story regarding an adult film actress in Naples who shot and killed his sister in an argument over money and how the actress went on the run in North Africa and hid out in the desert with a nomadic tribe for three years before surfacing in Alexandria under an assumed identity. As rough as Marco's throat-cutting English is, Nico's is flawless. He'd been to Oxford on scholarship and learned English before that from a tutor at his family's villa in Tuscany. Nico's Oxford-accented voice is buttery—soft like something you could run toward and throw yourself down and slide in.

"Ghastly thing is, the actress lived under my sister's name. She got herself a flat with it. Used it to buy a car. She was caught because a man at a shop in Cario had seen her films and remembered the case from the news. After that—well, after that she was brought back to Italy and my family—I mean, they were

relieved, of course, but devastated because—bloody hell, right? Nothing brings back a sister. Legal justice is only so much a remedy for atrocity."

Jeremy shakes his head. "Nico. My god. I can't even imagine."

"Right. Neither can I," says Nico, smiling, leaning back in his chair.

Marco makes a swiping motion in the air to dismiss Nico and his story and Jeremy for feeling bad about it. "Because Nico? What he says? It is fucking bullshit."

"It's bullshit?" I say.

"It's bullshit," says Nico, proud of himself. "I've three brothers but no sister."

Marco drinks wine from the bottle and slams it empty against the tabletop. He says, wagging a finger in his boyfriend's direction, "Nico, he is a very large piece of shit, you know?"

The next morning Jeremy and I walk for hours. It's Berlin in the weeks before Christmas—holiday markets with wooden stalls draped in green pine boughs, vendors selling sausages and beautiful cakes, steam rising from jugs of mulled wine, snowy streets, gray stone, white skies.

I fall asleep in the bathtub one night, but instead of drowning I flood the Italians' apartment. Waking up with the water pouring over the side of the bath I'm mortified. I soak it up with every spare towel and blanket from the linen closet, and once there are no more towels and blankets, I find a warm spot in the kitchen next to the stove and sleep like the family dog.

The next day we take a bus to the airport and board a plane where we're served sandwiches with dark bread on the short flight to Paris.

The morning after we lose everything, Jeremy and I try our best to reconstruct what happened. We sit in the hotel room in Montmartre; the light streaming through the wall of windows on the third story and the breeze blowing the white cur-

tains. Through the veil and chaos of our four-bottle-of-wine hangovers, we compare notes. (In this case "Notes" stands in for "memories" because it wasn't the sort of night where you write things down. Frankie will tell people that when we lived in Norfolk I'd slip off into the bathroom at parties and make notes in a little spiralbound pad. Dialogue mostly. I have no memory of this, but it wouldn't be out of character, and when it's interesting enough to take notes those are often the nights you're unable to remember. The next morning—muddled by the indeterminacy of a blackout night. But you've got proof. And hopefully something good comes of it.)

Sitting at either end of the hotel bed, Jeremy and I debate whether or not he wanted to go to the strip-club to celebrate his birthday (he says it was a mutual choice; I remember it as being his). We talk about how a) either nowhere good was open because it was an off-night or b) we settled on the first place we came across because we were cold or at least tired of walking. Was it Montmartre or had we gone south to the 9th Arrondissement like we'd spoken of earlier that day? We both recall a small, dark, empty club the size of a dive bar; the walls and tiny stage painted black—black tables, chairs, and booths, and how there were blacklights somewhere that made the skin of the girls look very tan—dark brown, black red—and their bathing suits a blazing neon like glowsticks at a rave (dayglow green, hot pink, soft purple, some orange or blue). We were there ten minutes, we agree on that, and we agree that there were no dancers on stage, just a few dark girls in bright neon bikinis with bright white teeth, one or two standing behind the bar or coming in and out of some sort of backroom behind the stage, the door of which was a heavy, black curtain. We sat next to each other on a black wooden bench up against the wall facing the empty stage and ordered beer. Canned. Whatever they had. (The brand is forgotten. We'd given ourselves a twenty-five-euro budget for the night, which was meant to include dinner after the club. I'd run out of tour cash in Germany. Jeremy planned to pay the rest of our way. With what he had in cash we'd be set until our separate flights home.) Over the speakers, harsh dance music played—harsher still because of the empty room, the drums like sheets of metal whapping together, punishing, severe, overdriven. Immediately I was given a bad feeling about the place

though I pushed it off like you never should (but often do). In hindsight it's so clear, like hindsight always is—if you have a bad feeling about a place you should leave. Don't question it or second-guess yourself. But for the most part you think, *This is probably okay and I'll just—I dunno, see what happens.* Sitting next to Jeremy on the wooden bench I thought, *Damn it, Jeremy. You're going to get us killed*, but I said, "You think this is alright?" "Of course," he said. "We're okay. Why?" "I don't know, man. This feels—" "James. It's cool. We'll just stay a couple minutes and go get dinner." "Alright." "Five, ten minutes and we're gone."

Instead of getting the beers we ordered, champagne was brought out—presented like we'd won something, a whole crowd of girls in glowing neon bathing suits (a half dozen or maybe eight or ten) came out from the hidden room behind the stage with the bottle, happy, shouting, the one in front working the cork, yelling something in a language that wasn't French (something Eastern European). The champagne was poured in small paper cones like the cups you get from an office water-cooler then handed out amongst the girls (though not to us, which was fine because I've never liked the taste).

"What's going on here?" Jeremy asked me, leaning close to talk over the music.

"It seems like they're, uh—celebrating something?"

As the girls drank the champagne, their leader (I don't know how we decided she was the leader; she looked like a leader—a small, dark general) told us in Russian-accented English, talking close to our faces (Jeremy and I leaned in to listen) "Price for bottle you order five-hundred-euro."

"No, wait," said Jeremy, standing up. "We ordered beer—two beers." He made a peace sign with his fingers when he said two.

"No selling beer tonight. You order this. You pay for this."

Sitting on the hotel bed the next morning discussing it, I tell Jeremy what I remember most from that part of the night is heading toward the door (black painted) where a very short, muscly, darkhaired girl in a neon green swimsuit stood barring the way, making an X shape with her arms and legs. This was

unquestionably bad news for us and the reality of the situation, of us being kept in, hit me like a fever or a wave of nausea. As I reached the exit the music was turned up louder and I thought, *This is how you drown out a gunshot.* Looking back as I walked, it felt like slow motion, because of course it did. I saw Jeremy pulled to the ground by four or five or maybe six girls (it was hard to tell), one of which yanked his wallet out of his back pocket and dumped all the cash onto the bar, which another girl scooped up and shoved in a backpack then ducked behind the curtain by the stage. At the same time a girl grabbed Jeremy's copy of Graham Greene's *Travels with My Aunt* he had in his coat pocket, held it up in the air for a second like a war trophy, a severed head or a cut off hand, then threw it, followed by his phone, his digital camera, and the wool scarf she'd pulled off his neck, to another girl, who slipped into the dark.

I moved back toward them (the girls, Jeremy) but my movement felt like when you're in a dream and bad things are happening and you walk so slow you're incapable of altering the events at hand. But then? Then Jeremy pulled himself to his feet and began to walk—though slow, dragging one of his legs like he was in deep sand while a girl in a neon orange bathing suit held onto his knee. The girl we'd decided was their leader came back from behind the bar and grabbed my face and brought my ear to her mouth. She (the leader) shouted that their boss (who?) had called the gendarmes and that we were going to jail unless we'd take her (the leader) to a cash machine and withdraw everything we had. "You take it all out or you are go to jail," she said. I broke away from the leader and ran the last few steps to the door and struggled around the girl blocking our way.

Then Jeremy was behind me.

"Jeremy!" I yelled over the music.

"Yes! Yeah!"

And we were outside.

We ran down the desolate main drag, certain the gendarmes (or something worse, the boss?) were right on our tail; the empty streets dark, shadowy. As we ran, Jeremy shouted, "I *hate* this

place! *Fuck* Paris! Fuck this city!" A few blocks later we passed a mural of a smiling Audrey Tautou from *Amelie* painted on the side of a building and Jeremy yelled, "And fuck *Amelie!*"

Back at the hotel we marched up the three flights of stairs to our room and locked ourselves in. "What! Just! Happened?!" shouted Jeremy, dropping to the floor, slouched up against the wall.

"We got taken," I said, sitting down on the bed. I let myself drop back and stared up at the unmoving ceiling fan. We were stunned—horribly sober, terrified about losing all our money, which like fools we'd kept in cash. Then, in a panic—and again like fools—we finished off the four bottles of wine we'd bought earlier.

In the morning, we check out of our hotel. Because we have no money for another room we spend a long, hungover day then a very cold night walking the streets of Paris, looking for vented grates to sit on and keep warm. At dawn we sleep under a tree in a park while the snow falls in light drifts, the morning gray. After a few hours of terrible park sleep, we walk directionless through Paris to kill time before our flight (tickets prebought, thank god).

I call Frankie from a payphone to see if she can wire us money.

"James, where are you?"

"Paris. We're in Paris."

"James!"

"What!"

"I can barely hear you!"

"Paris! We—" I briefly explain how we lost the money and ask if she's near a Western Union and whether she can stick some money (anything, fifty, sixty bucks) in a wire transfer.

"I can't. I'm—I'm on a boat," she says.

"You're on a what? It's really—it's loud where you are. Where

are you?"

"A boat! I'll explain later! There's this—it's a flotilla to Japan and—I'll tell you—I'll tell you later!"

"A boat? What?!" Neither of us can hear the other.

"I will tell you later!"

"Okay! Sounds good! Don't capsize!"

"What?! Sorry! I can't hear anything!"

"Talk to you later!"

Jeremy steals an apple from a market stand and we share a baguette we find in the gutter. Walking, finishing the end of the baguette, I tell Jeremy my theory about how when you travel you should have a reason—tour, moving, a wedding, a funeral, a chance to see friends or family; that vacations are decadent and empty, and here we are on a decadent, empty vacation, and we've doomed ourselves because of it. "You've got to have a reason to go anywhere," I say as we walk down a crowded gray street. "If you go somewhere just to go—that's asking for trouble."

"Goddamn it. Of course."

"See, we brought this on ourselves."

"Going to Europe on a whim like a coupla cliches. But god I wanted a vacation," he says, fishing in his shoulder bag for his pack of Lucky Strikes. "This is not a vacation. Maybe this is a lesson. Those are not the same. I'm sick of lessons. I feel like every day of my life I get another fucking lesson dropped on my head. Are they lessons? Or punishment? I don't know." We stop so he can light a cigarette. "And here—here's a big goddamn lesson about us being vacationing dumb-asses thinking we own the world. There we go and—and we fucking—we fucking blind Polyphemus."

"Right," I say. "Then Poseidon makes us pay for it."

Reframing it in a mythological light makes it feel less dire. We

talk about Circe and Telemachus and Scylla and soon we're laughing.

At Sacré-Coeur Jeremy drinks holy water from the font then asks tourists for spare change while I sit in a pew watching people light votive candles as prayers. Our flight six hours away, we lie down on separate pews and sleep a while in the fragrant warmth of the church.

After Paris it's Madrid where we stay with a short, feisty, curly-headed Spanish girl (a friend of an acquaintance). After she (the girl, tough little Gabriela) leaves to go to a club, we sit up late drinking wine with her roommate Valentino, a silent, stone-faced Argentine boy with long black hair parted in the middle, who leads us out into the street at 4am to get a hot, greasy, takeout dinner. His treat. We walk the dark Madrid streets full of people our age, and everyone laughing, drunk, smoking cigarettes, singing, making out against dark alley walls, shouting at friends across the street ("Miguel! Tronco!"), trying to hook up, waving down cabs while we move along with the crowd, tired, drunk, happy. At some point Valentino meets up with a French boy with short-cropped pink hair and the two go off together to a hotel. Do we sleep? A little. Maybe an hour. Who cares because then it's glorious Madrid in the morning—cold air and the big clear skies. The beautiful winding streets, the sprawling clutter of modern apartments and stone buildings, the empty bullfight ring we take an hour to walk to. Madrid is good we decide. Spain, a wonderful country. Not like France. Not like Montmartre, about which we make a habit of spitting on the ground each time we say the word, and that lifts our spirits. The spitting on the ground becomes an in-joke and after a few hours of it we're hysterical.

"Spitting on the ground is the most Italian grandmother thing ever," I tell Jeremy as we walk the hilly streets.

"Hey, remember that time we went to Montmartre?" he says and I spit on the ground then he spits on the ground and we're happy.

We spend the last six euros of our cash (all coins) and eighteen dollars of the final twenty in Jeremy's bank account at a tapas

bar because of the little plates of food they give you with each glass of wine, and at the end of the night we're broke but no longer hungry.

Tomorrow we fly to Portugal before heading back to the States.

Sitting at our table in a dark corner I offer a toast, "Jeremy, you lovely precognitive magician. A toast to the power of forethought." I'm very drunk and I try my best to speak clearly. "A toast. To buying tickets ahead of time."

Jeremy nods, lifts his glass above his head, shuts his eyes, and says, quietly, "We are amazing."

In Portugal it's a week until Christmas and life opens like a present with a great big red bow. Portugal is lovely—the dark, rugged Ericeira coastline and the stormy sea, vast and purple-blue, the waves whipped up to a frothy, hissing mess that's thrilling to watch, wrapped in your coat, your hair blowing wild, listening to the clattering shore of beach stones that roll in and out with the surge. It's glorious—the rushing tide, the wind and jagged cliffs like brutal castle walls, the air wet and the salt on your skin. Ramon, the journalist we're staying with, brings us to quiet, warm bars—fishermen's bars, where the two-tone walls are blue painted in a stripe below the cleanest hard-scrubbed white. Ramon and his friends throw a birthday party for both of us, and Jeremy and I decide maybe it's time to renounce our citizenship and give up on the cursed, ill-fated American experiment. Settle down in Ericeira where we are loved. Become Benfica fans and fight anyone who tells us Benfica isn't the greatest football team on Earth. We are drunk and excited and caught up, lost in the love of being human in a wide world of humans, and some of them are vile. But some are not vile, and when they are not, oh god, the world is a beautiful place where triumphant things happen, moments of goodwill, uprightness, and life-changing glory. I love Jeremy and I love Benfica, though I've never seen a game, and I love our journalist friend Ramon and Ramon's friends and everyone they know and everyone they will ever meet, and of course the lovely, fierce Atlantic ("To the goddamn fucking *sea*!" I shout, raising my glass high), and the good, dry, red Portuguese wine we're given like it's tap water.

But then going back to winter in America?

This is a hard thing to love.

On the flight home, thirty-five thousand feet above the Atlantic Ocean, I tell myself you can be happy wherever you are, that the place doesn't matter; it's your choices and your conduct, the people you surround yourself with, the way you spend your time. That's what makes you happy, James, not where you are. For the briefest few seconds, I congratulate myself on the rationality of my thinking. But no. I don't believe any of it and I feel like a dunce for failing at my own peptalk.

It's like this, you can live through long patches of time where your delusion lets you coast along as if on a gentle breeze. But sometimes all the ugliness of what makes you who you are comes into focus—your delusions but also your illusions, the lies you tell yourself to get through the day, your pride and vainglory, your decadence, arrogance, privilege, cowardice, conceit, and all of that comes crashing down like a bridge loaded up with too many cars.

I hit power on the movie screen in the back of my seat, click on "classic films," then choose *Bicentennial Man*.

As sad-eyed Robin Williams pretends to be a robot, I try my best to sleep.

2009

At Frankie's birthday party in Portland a few weeks after I came back to the States, Alison and I danced in the living room as more and more people came flooding through the front door in loud, drunken packs. Someone brought a beagle puppy in, carried high above their head like in *the Lion King*, and soon the house was full and you couldn't get across the room or leave the dancefloor to grab a drink. I looked up as a beer can sailed over our heads, spinning through the air, white froth spiraling out its mouth, and Alison pointed at it as we danced and said something to me, and I shouted, "What?!" The song the DJ played was Beyonce's "Single Ladies." When the chorus hit, we

were jammed body to body in the living room, and you could barely move enough to dance. The crowd as a solid mass tipped one way and Alison tipped with it. As she leaned away from me, I grabbed her by the belt and pulled her toward me and our bodies knocked together and she laughed and threw her head back like some kind of '80s music video or something from a movie where everything is terrible and because everything is terrible no one cares anymore and the only plan is to have fun and ruin your life as much as you can while the walls come crashing down.

I'd put Alison out of my mind as much as I could but now face to face I was sunk. Alison had dyed her hair an unnatural yellow-blonde a few weeks before her trip up to Portland and the dark roots had grown out a little. It looked great. (I didn't tell her that. I couldn't. In the early months of 2009 I tried to say nothing serious because serious led to people judging you for it and it led to overthinking everything you'd ever said and paranoia about what you'd done wrong and I knew I couldn't sink that low again.) Those quiet winter nights sleeping alone, and the profound, godawful loneliness as if all good things had been sucked out of you, like you'd been bled dry by an Old West doctor with a bag of leeches and now you were a cold, sapped husk. "You" being "me," but maybe saying "you" as a universal-you gives you-me some distance, makes it hurt less, allows a little romanticism to seep in—which is also a kind of distance. What it's like is you crack the door just an inch and the light comes into your dark room—the light of you distancing yourself from what hurts, from the pain no one wants to face because we've been facing it too long and it's just not *fun* anymore. Romanticism is a story seen from the backrow of a theater. It's you on screen in pain, but in the audience you enjoy it. You enjoy it because you're away from it. You're so far away it's like that's someone else up there, and you're in seat 6-B watching the story with the bucket of popcorn on your lap and you shake your head when it gets bad. But you don't think much about it. The funny parts—you laugh at them, and you feed yourself popcorn and take a sip of your soda and thank god it's not me up there. Thank god I'm alright all the time. How lucky I am to be still having fun, and once the credits roll I will shuffle out of this theater in the crowd thinking about nothing but some of

the better jokes in the film and that one song on the soundtrack and how the unrequited love interest looked in those colorful tight leggings and the oversized half-shirt. Oh, and the sticky floor beneath the soles of my shoes (it's an awful feeling, but it'll come off in the wet grass when I walk home) and where to for dinner? This is how you remember only the good things. As part of the audience it's a story you want to live in. It's a place and time in which you'd enjoy yourself; you're sure of that. Outside the theater it's raining again and for a moment you wonder where your umbrella is and then you remember you never had one to begin with. I am a dumb, foolish—no, I mean, *you* are a dumb, foolish, lucky romantic and you promise yourself to never say a serious thing again. You walk around the house drinking wine from the bottle in the afternoon while Frankie's at work and while *Exile on Main St.* rumbles at floor-shaking decibels or you park yourself on the chaise lounge outside and try to read but instead fall asleep. You will wake up hours later with a keen hunger for a tofu burrito from Los Gorditos. Put on a light jacket. Drink a can of Jude's beer standing in front of the fridge with the door still open. Text a couple friends. Meet at the taco truck up on Division and eat and talk about bands. You talk about bands because the most unserious thing you can think of is to talk about bands, and how if you go to the right park at the right time and sit in the grass by the big house with its tall fence you can listen to Modest Mouse practicing for tour, and here you are enjoying one final unserious spring in Portland after the last few months of winter. You and Frankie and Jude have a house full of friends—Jeremy Willis by way of Brooklyn before he leaves for New Orleans to be near Celine and die, Ethan fresh back from traveling the Trans-Siberian Railway and bound for New York City at the end of summer to finish writing his first book. Maybe things are better or easier because we all know we are leaving. Every one of us—spread to the far corners after many seasons of parties, jokes, alcoholism, strip-clubs, afternoons at the river-shore on Sauvie Island, hungover mornings, work or worklessness, blackberry picking, big groups walking to Safeway at night to buy wine or down to the AMF bowling alley on Powell because so and so's excited that so and so's friend has mushrooms or cocaine and the nights are as soft as kitten fur. We have had it so easy and we think we are so important, but we say nothing real anymore.

Besides Frankie who works around the clock and keeps an even keel, the only thing most of us have the energy to do is make jokes and go to parties. When you are neck-deep in decadence you don't think for a moment how empty it is because decadence clouds your perception. It robs you of your critical edge. And why do something when doing nothing feels so good? You are living in a place everyone wants to live and it's a good life. Right? You are really living. Isn't it fun? You and your twenty-four-hour party people are going to show the world your power. You are going to do big things and take over and make a difference. We matter, don't we? In the heart of decadence, you can get wasted enough to believe your life counts for something. You are a magician on stage and your magic trick is to think you will leave a mark on the lives of others. You tap your magic wand on the top-hat sitting on the table in front of you and you reach in and what do you pull out? Nothing. The top-hat is empty. And the audience? Rows and rows of empty seats. You were sure you'd sell the place out, but no one has bought a ticket to see your magic. What if you spend your life making plans and none of those plans work out? You shake the idea of your own meaninglessness from your head and you distract yourself as best you can. Why worry when there's a party at so and so's house this weekend? Take a walk to Plaid Pantry and get a bottle of wine before the show the movie the strip-club the bus ride across town the art gallery the dinner you're meant to be at in ten minutes the interview for the job you know you won't get and isn't it lovely with the sun finally out after all that gray? Look, the rain's stopped. We've all got so much good work ahead of us. We are going to make a difference. Aren't we?

When Ethan flies back to the States it feels like a turning point—a time to get serious. He and I walk together up the darkened streets of Southeast Portland to Devil's Point, and he tells me about his adventures in Russia and Mongolia and it's good to hear them.

He says, "I mean, stop me if this gets boring. Nobody wants to hear somebody's travel stories to places they haven't been."

"Not me," I tell him. "I love people's travel stories. Anyone who doesn't want to listen to your stories is not your friend."

Ethan and I talk using definite terms—certain of the inarguable truth of what we believe. If someone doesn't do *this* then they are *that*. If so and so does *this*? Well, *that* will happen. There is no supposition or hesitancy here. Our opinions (fast and loose as they are) become facts to us. In the heat of our otherwise harmless ontological discussions, we don't question our beliefs (like you should). Our reality is reality, and the aegis of a shared reality is comforting.

A list describing Ethan—tall, blonde, wears cowboy boots and jeans, bright-colored Western shirts with the pearl snaps. Ethan is confident, adventurous, charismatic. He and I met during the magazine days and we've kept in touch ever since. Ethan's virtuous farm kid honesty and driven work ethic runs in stark contrast to the darkness of people like Jeremy and Byron and me, and it's a joy to be around. You have the feeling when you're with Ethan that he is going to be someone. That he will take all the chances necessary and work harder than anyone and fight whatever gets in his way as he moves toward writing something great.

The next day, sitting out on the back porch steps while Jude shoots his pellet gun at the fence, I tell him and Frankie that it's healthy to be around Ethan.

Jude thinks Ethan's energy is too much

"No, it's good for you," I tell him. "Ethan's doing the right thing."

Jude shakes his head, cocking the rifle and taking aim at a knot-hole in the fence. "That's you being arrogant babies." He pulls the trigger and the pellet thwaps into the wood. "You guys have no idea what you're talking about."

Frankie says, "It'll do your sad, mopey asses good to be around someone who gives a damn about things and is trying to live better. You guys and Jeremy too. You need some ambitious farm kid Nebraska in your life."

"See. That. That's what I'm saying," I tell Jude.

Frankie says, "And James you better watch out because Ethan's

working hard and writing a lot. You need to step it up. Because he is." (Frankie'd said the same thing about Jeremy during the magazine and she was right both times.)

Ethan and I go to parties and bars. We go to shows. We hang out in the Lone Fir Cemetery on Rimbaud's birthday and drink wine funneled down a copy of *A Season in Hell* I've bent in a U shape. We sit on porches and talk and we sit on towels in the warm sand on the river shore at Sauvie Island and talk while the clouds pan overhead, fast and gathered into puffy clumps like grapes and piles of stones. We talk about how you must work every day with the energy of a dynamo, how the only way we'll get people to care is by working hard enough to make something people actually want, and not just want, *need*. Something beautiful and important people will give their hearts to and read breathlessly and see themselves in and never quit loving. We want to write something tremendous because why do anything that's not? Why not chart your course to the brightest star? I tell Ethan how I want to fill a novel with usable ideas and personal philosophy, truth as I know it, jokes, recipes, small stories like dioramas inside the greater narrative, bits of poetry hidden within prose, a novel vast and firmly of the Earth, a thing as deep as the sea and encyclopedic no matter the size of the book. I want to write a book full of "stories, thoughts, words of wisdom, and prayers" like Uncle Isak's book in Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*. My novel from last year is not that. I know it's not that, but I tell Ethan I believe I'm capable of reaching "that" someday. With a lot of reading. A lot of hard work. I read everything Ethan writes and I try to learn from it. Sometimes I'm so moved by a paragraph or a sentence or a page, I read it over and over again, or write it out by hand and put it somewhere I can see often. Ethan's friendship and writing gives me the shove to keep working and I'm thrilled he and it exist.

Byron's new record comes out and it's all Ethan and I listen to for weeks. Bookended by the two best country songs he's written, the album is a swirling, glitchy, troubled epic. Here we have Byron writing his finest stories and one-liners, truthful things that hit so close to home they hurt like a bee's sting. It's Waylon and Willie and the boys but laced-up dramatically with spacy production like some lost krautrock classic. The reviews are not

what they should be and I think that hurts him. He'll never say for sure how he feels, but the album's reception isn't near that of his early records and maybe this gets to his head. The fans love his work more than ever, but the critics are looking for something else.

A list of headlines. September 12th, 2009-

"Britain: 3rd Trial Planned for 3 Charged in Airliner Bomb Plot"

"Vaccine Supply May Miss Swine Flu Peak"

"Universal Healthcare Could Chop Up Unaffordable Hospital Bills"

"9/11 Museum to Display Photos of 19 Hijackers"

"Left Out in Rural America"

Jeremy Willis goes to our local strip-club every night because he's seeing one of the dancers—a short, wiry, intense, green-eyed redhead with tattooed shoulders and thighs who calls herself "Cub." Sometimes it's me and Jeremy and Frankie and Jude at the club. On weekends off from his new brewery job, Ethan's along. Byron moves to Portland for the fall and comes with us on late nights when the crowd's thinned out. (Mostly I want to stay home and write, but if anyone asks I'll go along.) Tonight, it's Byron, Jeremy, Jude, Frankie, and me. Jeremy is here to talk Cub into leaving her boyfriend. Cub and Jeremy's relationship is fraught and dramatic and dumb like most relationships in your twenties are fraught, dramatic, and dumb. Cub doesn't want to cheat on her boyfriend but grants Jeremy the freedom of dancer's rules—he can touch her on her terms and they haven't gone all the way, and maybe they never will, but it's good enough that Jeremy tries to get Cub to leave her boyfriend and good enough that she wants to and also doesn't want to, and Jeremy says the whole thing is feeling dismal and morbid.

Whether we know it or not, we all have one big problem that

outweighs our smaller concerns. Mine is wanting to die while not wanting to be dead. Frankie's is wanting to be respected by the boys in the group for her work but always supporting theirs instead. For Ethan it's writing the best novel he can. (Jude's problem is a mystery to us. He doesn't let on. Doesn't overshare like we do, and maybe that's heathier.) Jeremy's big problem is the twin-headed dragon of love and sex. He wants a lot of it and it's rarely the right kind and because of that (and because of life, mortality, America, the lasting effects of the recession, capitalism, talented bad role models, and his lavishly romantic nature) he's fallen into a gentleman's heroin addiction. Jeremy staggers across desolate landscape toward some deep abyss or ravine none of us understands (though we are all in a similar place with interchangeable geography). His writing for the magazine back home in San Diego was both fearless and gentle as a sigh. His work recalled J.P. Donleavy, who in his *Ginger Man* wrote, "I'm starved for love. Not ordinary love but real love. The love that's like music or something." Ethan's writing is beautiful, virtuous, and full of dirt and big sky while Jeremy's speeds headlong toward demolition like a subway train about to jump track and derail. Lately, sex, booze, and drugs have taken the place of literature, but Jeremy will come back to writing and when he does he will shatter the pavement. Whether that's in a week or thirty years, Jeremy Willis has something grand, sparkling, and combustible in his heart that will give generously when it is uncorked.

Frankie and Jude sit down at a table close to the stage and Jeremy ducks off to the backrooms to talk to Cub.

Byron and I get drinks at the bar then sit outside at a picnic table with Ondine, who was a famous hipster pinup model and is now bad into heroin.

Heroin comes and goes in our social group. Jeremy left Brooklyn for Portland in part to get away from it and has promptly found it again. Some of our friends dip in and out of it like a pool that looks pretty but is never quite warm enough; some don't leave the water and eventually drown or at best prune up but stay floating.

Outside the club, the night is warm and breezy with the smell

of Ondine's cigarettes and the sweet-rot scent of honeysuckle from the alley when the wind is right. I tell Byron and Ondine tonight feels like coming out of hibernation and being presented with all the possibilities of renewal.

"Nope. Pass," says Ondine, pulling another cigarette from her pack.

"Pass?" says Byron.

"I'll take hibernation over possibilities any day," she says. Ondine's dressed in a short silk kimono belted in front and she's barefoot, her small feet crossed at the ankles under the table. Her gray-green eyes are lined thickly in black. She blows her smoke straight up in the air and says, to no one, "God I wanna go home."

The bouncer, standing close enough to overhear, says, "Baby, you need me to call a cab?"

"Thanks, Davey. I gotta make some money tonight," she says. "Hey, where'd Don Draper run off to?"

Ondine calls Jeremy "Don Draper" because of the suits he wears.

"He's inside talking to Cub."

"What're you boys doing tomorrow? It's supposed to be nice."

"This," says Byron.

She nods. "Me too, sweetie. Cheers."

Byron and Ondine touch their drinks together in a toast.

"I think Frankie and Ethan and I are going out to the river," I tell her, scooting my chair closer to the table and resting my elbows on it.

"Where at?" says Byron.

"Frankie wants to go to Sauvie Island."

"You guys gonna swim?" she says, pulling her blonde-streaked

black hair into a ponytail, banding it tightly with a neon green hair tie.

"Hope so," I say. "If the water's still nice."

"Some dude who comes here all the time told me one of the Sex Pistols lives out there," she says. "I don't remember which one. They were—it's Johnny, Paul Cook, Steve Jones, what's the other guy?"

"Sid," I say.

"Duh. I know," she glares at me. "Come on. I mean, the *other* guy."

"Glen Matlock," says Byron as he scrolls through texts on his phone.

"Maybe him," she says.

"Naw, man. It's somebody from the Clash," says the bouncer as he opens the door for a group of girls.

"I don't fuckin' know," says Ondine. "Somebody old and British. Some old-ass man. Hey, I'm on stage in like five. You guys should come in. Keep me company."

"Alright," I say, but then the door opens and Jeremy steps outside.

"*Fuck* this," he says. "We gotta go. *Fuck* this place."

"Hey, man," says the bouncer.

"Sorry. Shit. I'm sorry." Jeremy stares out into the street, tears in his eyes. "Can we go? Is that okay?"

I get up and Byron gets up and Ondine stabs her cigarette out in the ashtray.

"Later, skaters," she says.

Jeremy fought with Cub in her dressing room and tells us about it on the walk to a trashy strip-club only Byron likes. The bar we'd just left is a hipster club. More girls in the place than guys.

Light, fun, subtly glamorous atmosphere like some punk cabaret. The second club is a sports bar with naked women. The crowd and the dancers are older. It's a biker hangout. Rough. Tacky. Here the dancers take off their clothes to bad radio country songs and classic rock while men twice our age play pool or eat burgers and nachos at the bar. Byron loves it.

We're there five minutes, Byron racking up a game of pool for us, when the bouncer taps me on the shoulder like a bad movie where you turn around and the guy hits you in the face and knocks you out. I flinch when I turn and the bouncer takes a step back.

"Hey bro. Your friend out there? Waaaaay too drunk. You all gotta leave. You gotta go now," he waves his hand palm-down in front of his neck meaning we're cut off.

Byron and I set our pool cues in the rack behind the tables and head back outside.

"He seemed okay when we got here," says Byron.

"I don't know what's up because Jeremy told me he's not drinking tonight," I say as we walk out the doors—the music from inside muffling to a hush.

I run to Jeremy when I see him.

It happens as if disconnected from any standard, linear sense of time.

The scene in front of me stutters. Drags to a slow. Breaks into a series of still frames like a handful of photos cast scattered across a tabletop.

The darkened parking lot, yellow-lit.

Cars stopped at the traffic light.

Jeremy lying on his back in the middle of the parking lot.

A group of people standing around him.

"Yo, muhfucker ain' breathin' at all," says a tall guy in a Bulls

jersey and basketball shorts as I push through the crowd.

"That your friend? Dude's *wasted*," drawls a biker in a sleeveless leather vest and a stars and stripes doo-rag, and when he says that someone behind him laughs.

I drop to my knees next to Jeremy.

His face is gray.

Eyes closed.

"Jeremy! Hey!" I shout.

His mouth opens and he draws a hard, ragged breath.

"Call 911!" I shout to the crowd behind me then slap his face.

"Jeremy!"

I look back and no one has moved.

"CALL. 911."

I say this with a voice I've never heard leave my mouth and as soon as I say it two people are on their phones.

I turn back to Jeremy. "Hey! HEY. Jeremy! Hey! Jeremy! Wake up. JEREMY." I hit him again, this time harder, and his face turns to the side, and he sucks in another breath.

My mind says, *CPR*.

But kneeling there in the parking lot the letters mean nothing to me.

What is CPR?

What do you do?

I see an image of the paddles shocking someone back to life in a film after the movie-paramedics shout *Clear!*

What is *clear*?

What do the paddles have to do with this?

CPR?

I don't know CPR.

Do I?

Something in the back of my mind says, *You took CPR. You know CPR.*

Byron squats down next to me. "James. Hey. I gotta go. I just—"

"Go," I say, and slap Jeremy again. "Jeremy!"

I look up—Byron walking toward the bus stop.

A half block away, the corner of our street.

I can see the rooftop of our house.

We're so near our home.

This can't happen here.

Not this close to home.

We should be safe from this.

"Jeremy!" I shake his shoulders. "*Fucking wake up*!"

The paramedics arrive as if they've stepped out of the air.

In the cab of the ambulance, while they load Jeremy into the back on a gurney, the driver, a big Polynesian guy, his arms and neck covered in tattoos, says, "Your bro do any heroin tonight?"

"No, I mean—he *has*—he's—he was off it. He stopped. I thought he had. But—"

"Yo, iss all good. We got him breathin' again."

"Oh. Okay. Thank you. God. Thank you."

"Your friend was ODing. If you han'nt called? Homeboy's ass woulda been dead. He had? I doan know. Three minutes?"

"He's gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, brah. He's goan be fine. You did the right thing calling."

"I didn't. I mean, call."

"Somebody did. Okay. Look, brah. You just—you sit tight and we're—we'll head on over to Adventist and get him checked in. Iss goan be okay."

I ride along to the hospital then sit with Jeremy while he sleeps and talk quietly with him once he wakes up.

When the nurse comes in, Jeremy's joking again and full of laughs. He sits up in bed and takes a photo of himself with his phone (ragged but smiling, thumbs up) then asks for her number.

We catch a taxi from the ER to the house.

The morning is all dark gold light like an artist's depiction of heaven.

In the cab, Jeremy texts various people to tell them what happened and includes the photo of himself giving the thumbs up in the hospital bed.

I lean against the car door, and after a while I sleep, waking up as we idle in front of the house, Jeremy talking to the driver about season three of *The Wire*.

"Can you believe they killed Stringer Bell?" says Jeremy, shaking his head.

"Naw, man, I cain believe tha shit. I's like, Whaaat?"

In December I leave Portland for Kansas.

2010

It's wintertime in Kansas—ice forming on the inside of the window glass like lace, like white starfish as small as spiders. I sit in the red plastic Adirondack chair by the wall of windows in my solarium bedroom and stare out through the ice, through the snowflake patterns and spiderweb lines. With a notepad in my lap I write about home fifteen-hundred miles away and about Alison and the stillness of the ice and about friends I miss and love. I think of Pasternak's Zhivago hiding from the soldiers in the ruins of the country house and how the ice formed on his windows and how he had nothing left but love. I read in Pasternak: "The wolves he had been remembering all day long were no longer wolves on the snowy plain under the moon, they had become a theme, they had come to symbolize a hostile force bent upon destroying him and Lara and on driving them from Varykino."

A list of months-

-March. I'm reading Proust under a pile of blankets in the attic of the farmhouse while Frankie and Jude fight downstairs. And about what? Money. Love. Mostly love. But money comes into it and when money comes into it there are no solutions and the fights last hours, cycling, returning to the same arguments, the same defensive statements. Frankie wants a certain kind of life. Jude wants another. Reconcile that and they'll be fine. But to bridge the gap has them at an impasse.

-April. The grass in the field is green and new, and there are leaves on the trees. Not many. But leaves nonetheless, and it's exciting after the long winter. Some small victory as life returns. I shave the awful winter beard from my face and cut all my hair off until it's a quarter inch long and bristling. The hair I toss outside for the birds because I'm celebrating the thaw, the water running clear and cold—a revival and a sweet resurrection. Spring is here and I am alive and thankful. Frankie and I

put in our first garden right outside the house so we can see it from the window. It's small, ten by ten, and most of the plants die before they have a chance to grow, but we're excited about it, and we make plans for a huge one next year. "Every year we should at the very least double the size of the previous one," says Frankie and I say, "Yes. Definitely. Good idea," and we take a trip to Home Depot to buy seeds.

-It's May or I've lost track of time because there is no schedule, just hard work and rest—beautiful, quiet, peaceful rest. Frankie and Jude and I put up fences and clear brush. Frankie gets two farming jobs on opposite ends of the county. We visit Frankie's dad and stepmom in town and have big meals together. I write every day and try my best to enjoy the beautiful world around me. The stillness and the rainstorms. Candles guttering out on a windowsill in the cherry-black dusk. Sometimes while working on the new book I don't sleep that night and push forward until sunrise—until the cold blue-black night turns to a small orchid dawn.

-Then June. Summer thunderstorms that shake the house and rattle the windowpanes. Lightning tracing in long, thin, jagged fingers of bright pearl across the gray sky. After the storm—bats lift and drop in zigzags through the purpling dusk.

A list of headlines. July 20th, 2010-

"In Thrall to Technology: Can We Unplug? Should We?"

"At Maxwell's, Deer Tick Delivers Raw Country and Rock"

"Remarks About N.A.A.C.P. Leader Cause Feud Within Tea Party"

"Lindsay Lohan Starts Her Jail Sentence"

"BP is a Central Issue as Cameron Meets with Obama"

From a letter to Andrei Merce: "Hello you awful piece of shit. The fact that you're not here proves your worthlessness. I miss you. I love you. It's been way too long." To Ethan: "I've got a

good feeling about this new thing I'm writing." A letter to Joey Carr says, "I wrote for eighteen hours straight and I feel fine. I hope things are fine for you as well. Tell Macey hi." To Jeremy Willis I type an email saying, "I send all the love in my heart from Kansas to New Orleans. I'm so glad you're still alive." Jeremy, who went to New Orleans to die and be near Celine, has instead found love with Ella, and in their love a reason to live. That's a twist.

A list cataloging the end of summer in Kansas—on the white tile floor of my bedroom is a Daniel Johnston t-shirt (from when he left his merch in Leeds. It was the day before I played a festival at the Brudenell with Andrei and William's band. Daniel's manager told the venue to let the bands take what they want because Daniel was headed back to the States and might not return. We took all we could carry—shirts, CDs, records, tapes, pins, stickers, posters, tote-bags). By the mattress on floor—a CD-cassette-clock-radio boombox plugged into the wall. Next to the boombox—a Will Oldham mixtape. A Joanna Newsom CD propped up on the windowsill like a painting next to a mason jar of marbles. On the floor up against the wall by the door—a pair of cowboy boots (brown, dusty) and a pair of Converse (black and white with a few fraying holes the size of nail heads in the side, the rubber peeling). In the corner—my brown parka in a slumped pile. Next to that—a switchblade from years ago on top a wooden cigar box, and inside the box, my social security card, passport, and a stack of photos from the magazine days, a Civil War belt buckle (small, rusted and without detail), and a gold plastic crucifix on a rosary (sky blue beads). On the wooden end-table by the bed—a mason jar of red wine and now you see the sunlight through it as it casts a ruby shadow on the table-top. Outside—a chicken coop with five bantam chickens pecking for bugs in the dirt.

Frankie and Jude's boy Willy is born a day after my birthday. There is snow on the ground in the parking lot of the hospital. I take a photo of the top of my boots and the white snow and the brown and yellow leaves below that.

Then I walk to the front entrance, the sliding doors opening in front of me, a Christmas tree in the lobby, its colorful lights slow-fading off and on.

A list of reasons to live—Willy.

2011

Willy's first year Frankie and I take turns watching him while the other works. These are sweet days, some of the finest I've known—standing in the kitchen by the window, holding him, singing the Brahms lullaby with my own words, "lullaby and goodnight/and I love you completely," rocking side to side until he sleeps. I kneel next to his crib and watch him play with his stuffed donkey or his plastic animals, smiling at him as he babbles at me. Carrying him in his travel bassinet with the toys that dangle from the loop of the handle; humming along with the twinkly little song it plays until I come up with lyrics and sing them while we walk from the house to the car or from the bedroom to the kitchen, "Willy is a baby. Willy is a baby. Willy is a baby. Willy is a pup. Willy is a nice man. Willy is a neat man. Willy is a sweet man. Willy is a pup."

A list describing Willy—very chubby like a sweet, tiny sumo wrestler. Bald. Blue eyes the color of a robin's egg. A smile that makes you smile. Willy—dancing in his crib to the Jealous Sound while Frankie films him with my digital camera, and he's holding the wooden bars in his fat little hands, smiling so big it yanks your heart in two. Willy laughing—and when he laughs I laugh, and that's what true joy is. (Happiness is fleeting like colored dye dispersing in water. Joy is something you have forever; something you can reinhabit after you're sure it's gone.)

A list of headlines. May 2nd, 2011-

"The Death of Osama bin Laden"

"Facebook is the New Leader in Social Log-In Sites"

"Life in Limbo for Japanese Near Damaged Nuclear Power Plant"

"The Flip Side of Tilapia, the Perfect Factory Fish"

"Military Tests Apps and Other Digital Training Tools"

I walk in the fields with Willy wrapped in a blanket like a little country ham and I tell him the names of the things we see.

-Goat

-Sheep

-Mulberry tree

-Fence

-Cat

-Barn

-Water spigot

-Farm light

-Propane tank

-Chickens

-The farmhouse. "Your house, Willy. Look. That's where we all live. It's ours. Yours. That's your home."

-Jeep

-Truck

-Driveaway

-Mailbox

-Telephone pole

-Road

-Grass (and a pale gray snakeskin in the grass, thin and papery)

-Momma. "There's your momma, look. Willy, look. Your momma. Here she comes." I point at Frankie as she shuts the front

door behind her and walks toward us.

2012

The day after the Fourth of July, Frankie and Jude's boy Johnsy is born and something's not right. He's unhealthy, yellow, and because of that he's put in an incubator. My whole world begins to crash to the ground like you've dropped a stack of plates in slow motion, and those plates fall and smash on a loop, which means the breaking never stops and the dropping never ends. Jude sits next to Frankie's hospital bed while she sleeps and I hold Willy in my arms. We stare into Johnsy's glass box as he lies there with a sleeping mask to protect his baby eyes from the light. He's so little and helpless. I can't stop crying. If Johnsy doesn't make it, how would I survive that? How would the world ever be okay again? It wouldn't. This is a thing you don't come back from.

But now the triumph of Johnsy. Small and strong. Willful. Defiant. Beautiful.

I can't stop looking at him. Sleeping in his crib while Willy plays with his blocks on the bed. Sitting in his highchair next to Willy's, smashing his food with a yellow plastic kiddie spoon into creamed nothing.

A list describing Johnsy—fine blonde hair like the silk of a cornstalk. Big dark blue eyes and a winning smile. Serious, mostly. Stern. Eyes narrowed, staring.

I say, "*Do the mean face*" and he does a mean face and *grrr*'s and everyone loves it.

Johnsy is a warrior and a tiny circus strongman.

While his brother Willy is shy, artistically prone, and inward like me and Frankie, Johnsy is bold, a trailblazer like Jude, desperate to do what he wants to do.

When you truly love someone, you want them to see their dreams fulfilled and you hope to god they'll navigate life with-

out disappointment. Of course a life without disappointment is impossible. But love often feels like it can defy the far-fetched, that it can put pause to entropy, and set right a broken compass.

I want Johnsy and Willy to have the best possible life and I decide this is the most important thing I have ahead of me—to steward that, to fight for them at every step.

For once, writing feels less important. Love is large and chaotic. You must learn it and know it in order to do it well. You need to be there, to take the correct path when presented with a fork in the road. Writing acts as a root system that dictates, feeds, and perpetuates identity. It serves as an anchor point and an axis. The action of loving (and the receiving of love) shakes all that up. Love is a runaway car ride and it's a thrill.

I've begun writing a novel based on Joey Carr's life, on his drop into the darkness, and his parents' tragic fate. The book is assembled from hours of cassette tapes we made years ago—tapes of Joey telling me everything he knew while in the generous mania of amphetamine abuse.

Writing the love story of his parents, I put in what I feel about Alison and I hide it in fiction. In the sections concerning Joey's father's love for him, I write about my love for Willy and Johnsy. I name the book after a series of bedtime stories my dad told me when I was a kid and I insert the idea in the book that Joey's mom was told those stories by her father. *This is fiction*, I tell myself, but it's true to Joey and it's true to me.

Byron's newest comes out and this one is a rock 'n' roll record; his band a country roadhouse combo—strutting, letting it bleed, having fun or too much of it. This is the record that sounds like how Byron wants to be seen after years of misrepresentation. It's a thing from the interstates, the honkytonks, and the bad motels. It feels like Bruce Springsteen when Bruce sings, "Well, if she wants to see me/you can tell her that I'm easily found."

In October I fly to Portland to do a book reading at Powell's and stay with Byron's best friend and on again off again sweetheart Stacy.

A list describing Stacy Mary Nilsson—tall, loud, wild, talks a lot but will always listen. Big sad-laughing eyes and a stylish tangle of auburn hair. Stacy's a photographer and carries her camera everywhere. Her photos are moody and atmospheric. Polaroids of ragged friends in desert landscapes or standing waist deep in blue waters. Faded self-portraits with BB guns, cans of beer, and cow skulls. Photos on Tumblr of her and Byron in quiet moments. Scenes from their day to day, their stormy but true love. It's a Western American world of boots, motels, tattoos, trains in distant fields, sunburnt knees, gauzy curtains, motorbikes, buckskin, dirty campsites, and a lot of hair. Stacy's photography has a beautiful stillness, but in life she never stops. She doesn't rest, won't let you rest, and you either keep up and love it or you won't last a day. Stacy gets drunk and throws things and talks shit to people and gives you compliments that are heartfelt and considered. She's the sort of person who hears what you say and years later will bring up something you told her and will have thought deeply about it ever since.

If you can be reckless and survive your recklessness and enjoy each moment of that particular danger you are a rare being. Stacy is like an ace motocross star flying off a ramp to launch out into the clear blue sky and sail true over a row of idling Mack trucks. She will wind up safe, laughing on the other side, pulling a beer from outer space then punching a hole near the bottom of the can with her pocketknife before popping the tab and shotgunning the whole thing. She's a one-of-a-kind combination of smart, introspective Iowa-bred sweetness and rangy, dirtbag, outlaw trouble. For most of us, the contrasting forces would be at best paradoxical, at worst deadly. For Stacy, it's only rock 'n' roll and she likes it. She will send you a wild text about last night, saying something like, "You would've loved Saturday. This guy that I always protect for some reason was in a fistfight with this dude. So I push the guy off of my friend and flipped him off and got kicked out. And as they were throwing me out, I kicked open the back door. Totally joking and broke some dude's camera that was harassing my friend all week. It was pretty funny actually. Everyone got super rowdy. But we were all just having fun. They were not having it. But now I can safely say that I've been kicked out of a bar just for flipping someone off" and then before you can reply she'll send a follow-up text

summing it all up and in turn articulating her philosophy: "Rock 'n' roll is here to stay bro."

Each morning in Portland, I awake to the sound of Stacy cracking open a can of beer to start the day. She tells me this is something she learned from Byron—good-time bad habits. Portland is gray and drizzly and we walk down treelined streets with moss on the sidewalk and overgrown gardens, bikes on porches, cats in the autumn blackberry bramble, the smell of weed from Craftsman cottages.

Stacy says, "I don't fuckin' know, man. People never understand me. I think I, like—scare 'em or something." We stop at the corner and wait for a city bus to pass. I ask her what she means and she says, "I get mouthy and I just want people to have fun, but it seems like they don't want to. I don't know what people want. If you don't want to have a good time, I mean, what's the point? What are you even doing? I wasn't always the crazy Stacy Mary Nilsson people know. I was a shy kid."

I tell her anyone who loves and understands rock 'n' roll should love and understand her because she's what rock 'n' roll is.

"I'm rock 'n' roll?"

"You're hella rock 'n' roll, Stacy. Are you kidding me?"

She stops walking and looks at me, tears in her eyes. I ask her if she's okay and she tells me she loves me and we agree we're going to be goddamn maniacs tonight. After the quiet two years in Kansas, being back in Portland feels good. The fun got old when I lived here, but now with a little distance it's like enjoying your favorite meal after years of being so over it you wanted anything but.

For the next three days we go on a laughing, hectic, violent, hilarious bender. At my reading I'm deathly hungover. I throw up in Powell's restroom before I go on and I run back there once the signing is over and puke again. After that I sleep for a while in Stacy's car while the rain drums down. That night, we empty the house of liquor and I teach her how you can say "fuck you" into a harmonica and the music will sound just like the words fuck you if you extend the F and the vowels a little. "Ffffuuh-

hck Youuuuu." We sit cross-legged on the sticky kitchen floor and laugh until we cry then say fuck you into the harmonica once more and we're back in hysterics.

The mornings are dark and chilly and it rains from noon until late at night. We watch TV shows on Stacy's laptop when we're too hungover to move and any sensitive part makes me cry and then we laugh because the sensitive parts are not worth crying over. I'm a raw, pitiful nerve—a busted microphone struggling to catch a signal. I feel ridiculous and vulnerable like I'm on an operating table with my chest cut open and my heart beating in the cold air—steaming, glistening red and on view for anyone to see. I tell Stacy this and she's quiet and serious for a moment then she breaks into laughter and then I'm laughing too and like that I feel safe again.

When Stacy goes to work at the Mexican restaurant across town, I sleep in or spend a few quiet morning hours in the basement. Her basement room was once Byron's room. The next room down is the room I stayed in for a few weeks after moving out of our Franklin Street house before I left Portland for Kansas. The place is full of memories—domestic scents I once knew and loved (musky incense in the living room upstairs, the burnt pizza crust smell of the oven heating up, the lush coconut scent in the shower when I try to wash out my hangover). The room I slept in is now a storage space, but the mattress is there and the plywood walls are still painted the dark, muddy green I liked so much when I was here, a green you felt you could step right into and exist in some new forest world.

Stacy comes home each day with a case of beer and sets it on the dining room table where I sit with my pen and black and white composition notebook. She cracks one open, hands it to me, opens one for herself, and we decide upon a toast.

"Alright, JB, what we drinkin' to?" she says, a little more of the rough, squawky Midwest to her voice than usual.

I tell her, "Us, of course" and she fuck yeahs drinking to us without saying fuck yeah; it's a nod and something close to a wink that's not a wink but more so a look—a happy, loving, dangerous look that tells you fuck yeah but also says I am here

for you and Let's fuckin' do this and I won't let you down.

At that moment, in my head, I say, *Stacy, I won't let you down. I will smash the wicked mountains with a six-mile-long karate chop rather than let you down. I will kick the severed heads of your enemies like a soccer ball to the moon.*

Stacy is in her wild mid-twenties, but you know by the way she handles her wildness that this is not a phase she'll grow up from or mature out of. This is who she is and what she needs and who she shall be until she ceases to be. There's a power to that—a sort of temporary earthbound immortality she has that allows her to navigate between bombs dropping with a smile and a shoulder bag full of canned beer and a desire to live intensely, and celebratorily, and to scrap for it—to work hard every day serving customers at the Mexican restaurant and hustle side-jobs for rent and beer money while believing and caring about absolutely everything. If anyone embodies the tough, large-hearted, knockaround spirit of Saul Bellow's *Augie March* it's Stacy. With Stacy I think of Bellow by way of Augie telling the reader how he goes at things as he has taught himself, "free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent." There is not a cynical nor pessimistic inch of Stacy Mary Nilsson. She's a joyous flame-headed Viking at full-sail. Into the harmonica we say, "Fuck you" and our "Fuck you" is an affirmation praising the goodness of robust activity. It is a negation of perfunctory life, chickenshit cowardice, and dispassion—a statement of love and a desire for sweet times and for good and easy laughs.

On my last night in town, we stay home and play records. We drink beer, wine, and vodka, and when the night becomes morning, we talk quietly in her room. There is no silence and there are no gaps between stories. She talks then I talk. I have so much to say it feels like its own kind of violence, the expulsion of it, the digging out, and the presentation, which is inarticulate, confessional. We are very drunk and we have been very drunk for days.

Stacy stands by the record player in ragged denim short-shorts, beat-up cowboy boots, and an oversized hooded sweatshirt

with paint stains down the front. She has a great, careless, almost boyish style, a ragged, youthful glamour like a character from Twain or from a Rolling Stones song. She sways side to side listening to a Golden Ghost song—waiting for the track to end so she can lift the needle and play it again. This is when I notice the sky outside is paling from black to gray-white.

"Oh shit. It's morning," I say, nodding at the high line of basement windows under the place where the wall becomes ceiling.

"Wanna call it?" she asks, her voice hoarse from drinking and shouting, and the way she says it it's evident she does not want the night to end and that she will think less of me if I do.

"*Fuck* no," I say, sitting up in her bed (a mattress on the floor). I reach for another beer. "A thousand times, no."

"Hey, man," she says happily. "Tonight won't end until we *say* it ends."

"Stacy Mary Nilsson, I choose the *night*."

"James, I think we packed—what?—like, a *year* of friendship into three days? I think we'll be friends forever."

This is a toast without saying it's a toast and I crack my beer open and raise it toward her and say, "Cheers to friends for life."

She lifts her beer and says, "Motherfucker, *this* is how you do a friendship," and when the song ends, she lifts the needle and plays it once more.

A list of headlines. October 1st, 2012-

"Whistle-Blowers' Lawyers Donate to Obama Campaign"

"*Times-Picayune* Publishes Last Daily Issue"

"Suicide Bomber on Foot Attacks Joint Patrol in Eastern Afghanistan, Killing 19"

"Pussy Riot Hearing is Postponed in Moscow Court"

"Political Ads Flood *Dancing With the Stars*"

Back in Kansas the leaves change.

Farm chores at 7pm. Darkness a half hour later.

The leaves fall from the trees in a windstorm on a gray, cold morning and now the trees are bare.

Melancholic sweet afternoons in the farmhouse sitting on the floor while the boys play with their Hot Wheels and Matchbox cars.

Now threadbare sweaters.

Now apple pie for lunch. (A fall-scented candle on the kitchen counter.)

Now Halloween candy and five pumpkins on the floor up against the wall waiting to be carved.

Deep silence in the gathering dark.

Farm chores at 6pm now and we set the clocks back. The skies are blue-gray like bruised skin in the afternoon.

A fire outside before dusk. Cold nights. Seeing your breath in the morning as you go about starting the day.

Farm chores at 5pm.

Then winter and Christmas.

Johnsy's first Christmas is Willy's second and it's the sweetest I've known—the living room of the farmhouse decorated by Frankie while we slept. A stack of presents under the small potted tree and colorful slow-fading lights strung around the room. On a card-table I didn't know we had are plates with pistachios, peanut butter cups, dates, homemade spritz cookies and Mexican wedding cookies, dry-roasted peanuts, apple chips, dried mango, pretzel sticks, Skittles, mini candy canes, hummus, and assorted crackers. In the oven—homemade cinnamon rolls for

breakfast. It's festive like a humble but wonderful Victorian Christmas—the decorations silver and gold, dark red and metallic blue, and on the boombox in the corner, Conor Oberst sings, "O, little town of Bethlehem/How still we see thee lie."

We are nearly broke but you wouldn't know today with the bright-lit tree and the carefully wrapped presents with their shining bows and paper tags with our names written on them. Willy. Johnsy. James. Jude. Frankie (though, here, "Frances").

Outside the snow falls silently, the fields white and smooth, the sky ash-gray with clouds like dark shadows passing.

All Christmas week the snow in the fields is a soft sky blue at dusk and in the morning the bare trees are stark black, shining wet like burnt steel in the sunlight.

When the windows freeze you can't see out of them and it's like living in a snow cave. I sit up in bed and pull the covers around me and breathe out a billow of steam. I have an ache in my heart that won't go away and I am substantially, significantly happy.

A list of reasons to live—Willy, Johnsy.

2013

A list of New Year's resolutions at the beginning of 2013—Finish the Joey book by Valentine's so Frankie can do edits all spring. Get the money together to go to Jeremy Willis' wedding in New Orleans in October and do another UK tour by the end of the year. Pay off as much of your debt as you can. Dress better. Sleep eight hours a night. Drink more water. Beyond that I want to stay home, write, take care of the boys and live quietly.

It's a warm spring and a mild summer—the garden in the lower acres bustling with life. Blue jays in the old pear tree shriek a wild ruckus. Our chickens peck for bugs in the weeds, kicking the dirt behind them like soft little bulls. Tomato vines reach up for the sun; their good ripe sweaty smell, rich and sharp in the air.

In July the clover overtakes the grass then the garden is bordered by a sweet-smelling field of it. On the mornings when it's my turn to do farm chores, I walk down to the garden, let myself in through the red painted steel gate, take off my shirt, and lie on my back in the cool, fragrant clover—the sky above arching with white puffs of clouds headed east to Kansas City and St. Louis or west to Lawrence, Topeka, Denver, the Rockies, the desert, San Diego, the sea.

A list of headlines. July 5th, 2013-

"US Military Deaths in Afghanistan"

"Mapping *Game of Thrones* Sites"

"Resume Shows Snowden Honed Hacking Skills"

"Derek Waters Explains His TV Series *Drunk History*"

"Demoting Democracy in Egypt"

Jude has gone to Washington to live with a friend. Frankie and I trade off taking care of the boys or sometimes we each take one and they play while we work or we both work in the same room and take breaks to play with them. After dinner I go upstairs to the attic where I sleep now that Frankie and the kids have the solarium and settle in for the night. Open a bottle of red wine. Light a saint candle on the end-table by the bed. Write until dawn.

I think of Alison during this time though I try my best not to. The way I push these thoughts out of my head is by writing for hours at a time. (Like anything, it works until it doesn't.) In the morning I walk up and down the stairs to the attic for exercise until I'm too tired to think. That works too. I drive to town and run laps at the abandoned school track with its crumbling blacktop. That works if I push myself hard enough. Running slow, the dark green woods all around, and the cicadas buzzing a hissing drone, I think of Alison and my thoughts cycle like

a turning wheel. I imagine us together. Going to the movies. Driving across the country. Slow-dancing in the kitchen. Lifting off her shirt in a moonlit room. The smell of her hair. Her hands working the clasp of my belt. Running faster, I think of nothing but the pain in my legs, the pain in my lungs. I run until it hurts because then pain is all I can think of. When I get in shape, my body no longer hurts, then running and trudging up the stairs no longer helps.

Autumn comes and now you put on a sweater in the morning for farm chores. There's a chill in the air, but not enough to be a frost. If there's a frost this early, we'll lose everything we've grown. So you watch the weather. You pay attention to the extended forecast. You plan for the worst.

If a frost warning is announced, you pick your crops before dark no matter how ripe they are. Green tomatoes can be canned, fried with batter, or used like you would tomatillos. Unripe squash goes to the chickens. Kale will survive a minor frost. So will cabbage. The herbs that don't overwinter can be pulled up by the roots, bound with yarn or twine, and hung to dry in the attic. Our peppers I'll dry slow in the oven or on a baking sheet in the sun. Those are as follows—poblanos, anaheims, jalapenos, and serranos. The poblanos I'll use in everything. Not sure about the others. Those were Jude's. His last crop before leaving. Sentimental, I promise myself I'll do something good with them and maybe send him a dried batch (though I know I'm too flaky and scattered to follow through).

In September we get our frost and Frankie and I and the boys go down to the lower fields to pick what's left. I'm in my grandpa's denim coat and a gray knit hat. Frankie has on her Carhart farm coat and overalls. Johnsy's in his little multicolored wool Scandinavian toddler sweater buttoned only at the neck and a knitted Viking helmet Alison made him. Willy wears a brown toddler Carhart jacket (also a gift from Alison), red pants, a Peruvian wool hat which ties under the chin, and a headlamp banded over his little pale brow. They play pirates and cowboys while we work. Frankie fills an orange plastic Home Depot bucket with green tomatoes. I use a stainless-steel colander to harvest basil for pesto.

We talk about publishing while we work.

"Ethan needs to get his book off print and demand," she says. "It's too good for that."

"I think after his deal fell through with Grove he was, like—done."

"I get it. I do. It's just—it's such a great book. It deserves more."

"It really is."

"Can you see them?" she asks. Frankie stands up from the pepper plant at the end of the row. "You guys okay?" she shouts over to the boys.

They're somewhere under the pear tree at the corner end of the field hidden behind a stand of ragweed and tall grass.

"Yes!" shouts Willy.

I kneel in front of a pepper plant and begin pulling the last few serranos off. The air is colder than when we came down here. The sky above us is light gray with darker gray in patches and it's a low sky and that adds up to cold coming.

"You hear about the Russian meteor?" I ask.

"Ugh. You know that shit freaks me out."

"It broke up in the atmosphere and the pieces rained down with somethin' like thirty times as much energy as Hiroshima."

"You would've been in heaven hunting down those space rocks."

I laugh. "Yeah, I hadn't thought of that."

"Anyone get hurt?"

"Lots of injuries. No deaths, thank god. I'd like to have seen it though. I mean, from far away."

"Nope. I want nothin' to do with that," she says, standing up again and stepping over the row of pepper plants to the toma-

toes. “Kansas is close enough for me.”

Just then the wind picks up.

There’s an icy chill to it that strings your nose when you breathe in.

“Yup. It’s coming,” I say.

“If you get the boys inside, I’ll finish up.”

“Okay.” I cup my hands around my mouth and shout, “Willy! Johnsy! Hey guys! Let’s go inside! It’s gettin’ cold!”

“Here they come,” she says.

The boys emerge from the center of the tall grass; their little toddler clothes merrily colored against the green and gray and brown.

“You good out here?” I ask.

“Yeah. I’m good out here.”

I turn and head toward the farmhouse.

In September I’m asked to play a few shows in the UK set up by a festival company. The organizers buy my airfare from Kansas City International to London Heathrow and give me an advance toward the show. The advance I use to pay off some of my credit card debt, buy a good stock of groceries, new sweaters for the boys, then a Greyhound ticket to Jeremy Willis’ wedding in New Orleans. After that, the money is gone.

In October I say goodbye to Frankie, Willy, and Johnsy, and board a bus to Louisiana with a messenger bag carrying a change of clothes, five books, three gala apples, a black and white composition notebook, sixteen dollars in cash, a flask of whiskey, a tarnished silver spoon I found buried in the fields, and a jar of Maranatha almond butter.

The Greyhound bus trip from Union Station in Kansas City to New Orleans takes thirty-two hours. We stop in Columbia, St. Louis, and Mt. Vernon. We pass tan-brown, dry cornfields

with red barns and mobile homes next to rundown gray farmhouses. We stop in Evansville, Madison, and Clarksville (where in the song the singer told his love to take the last train and meet him at the station). Southern jungle passing by the line of bus windows. Vines consuming houses and pulling them to the earth. Autumnal light—hazy, golden. We stop in Nashville, Manchester, Chattanooga, and Atlanta. We cross rivers where on the banks sit ruins of old tumbledown shacks then a train camp with traveler kids watching us, their pitbull mutt dogs rising from the weeds to bark soundlessly. A girl with a shaved head pulls up her black, sleeveless shirt to flash her pale chest at us and then we're around the bend. We stop in Columbus, Opelika, Montgomery, Evergreen, Mobile, and Biloxi.

In New Orleans it's tropical heat and sweating brass bands dressed all in white playing in front of bars. I walk alone from the bus station to the room Jeremy rented for me at Marquette House, and I fall in love with the city just like I fall in love with it every time I'm here. The iron wrought balconies and the streetcars. The people talking and laughing on corners. Families together in yards. Men working street construction. A group of crust punks sitting up against a purple clapboard building in the shade playing ragtime on banjo, saw, and washboard. The strands of old Mardi Gras beads pressed into the cracks in the sidewalk shining up at you like gems. New Orleans is a riot of sensations in October—food cooking, music from bars, a sea of voices, the smell of cigar smoke and spilled liquor, and far off the calliope music from the steamboat *Natchez* like some antique dream of old America. (River shore America, port town America—a ghostland of obsolete industry and work and sun; the wooden plank footboards of ships a hundred years before I was born pulling up to river piers to unload a hull of bananas or coffee or rum.) I feel tired and threadbare and anonymous, and in the heart of that I'm glad to be alive. Glad to be walking the streets as I sing to myself to the beat of my sneakers. Singing feels like regaining lost ground, healing wounds, fixing the broken shit before new shit gets broken.

That night there's an open bar at the wedding. I sit at a table by myself and drink old fashioneds and eat enough food to fill a warehouse. My sixteen dollars went to a sweet potato

po'boy and a bottle of red wine earlier so that means I'll need to eat enough tonight for the next two days. That in mind (and overjoyed with the idea of free food and booze) I decide to get serious—plates of fresh fruit, perfect French bread, various snacks, old fashioned after old fashioned.

Jeremy and his bride Ella dance in the tealight-lit courtyard to Harry Nilsson singing about Oblio and Arrow and I watch and drink and eat. When Jeremy looks over I raise my glass and nod and he nods and smiles and *god* he looks happy.

After the reception I go out with Jeremy and Ella and we talk about the crazy times of the years after the magazine which sent us off to different corners of the map.

I tell them, "I love you guys so much! I can't believe I'm here."

"It would be wrong without you," says Ella.

"Wrong. Weird. Not acceptable," says Jeremy, while lighting a cigarette and sipping his drink, and somehow waving to someone across the bar.

"You guys are gonna make me cry," I tell them.

"Cry, it's okay," says Ella. "You're among family. Crying is acceptable."

"This deserves another drink!" shouts Jeremy. "Old fashioned?"

"God yes," I say.

"Good, wonderful," he says, bowing his head and raising his cigarette high in a salute.

The night is warm and lit by flickering gaslight lanterns casting their yellow glow on the white clapboard outside the bar and I feel weightless. This beautiful port town and these lovely friends. On some nights it's easier to laugh, easier to talk loud, easier to smile, and put all your problems aside. I tell Jeremy and Ella this and they beam at me. "Beam" is a weird word to explain a smile, or maybe a lazy word, but when Jeremy and Ella smile together it's truly beaming and they are beautiful.

Drunk and happy I decide to run the hour's walk home to my room, and drunk and happy I shout the names of the streets as I pass, "St. Claude! Franklin! Dauphine! Pauger! Bourbon! Carondelet!" In the morning I wake up on the bottom bunk with a crushing hangover and a badly sprained ankle. I spend the day in bed; furious with myself for losing time spent in this great city. I text Joey Carr, "You hear Lou Reed died?" and a minute later Andrei texts and asks me the same thing and for a while we trade insults regarding each other's deaths.

The Greyhound ride home is long and quiet. I have three apples, an orange, a box of Saltine crackers, and half a baguette I took from the hostel's kitchen, and I live off those for a day and a half while I read *Crime and Punishment* cover to cover then start back again at the beginning: "On an exceptionally hot evening early in July a young man came out of the garret in which he lodged in S. Place and walked slowly, as though in hesitation, towards K. bridge."

Fall has hit the Midwest in the time I've been away and now the autumn trees flash by the window—the sunlight pale-blonde, chilly, and the leaves catching the light, shimmering like metal fish scales. I sit by myself in the middle of the bus and watch the scenery and eat Saltine crackers while I plan out next year.

A list of plans for 2014-

-Tour.

-Make money.

-Not be so broke all the time.

The last thing I want to think about is going anywhere when I'm away from home like I am now. I want to hide out. Take care of the boys. Write. Find domestic pleasure in washing dishes, sweeping the hardwood floors, doing farm work. But 2014 needs to be a year of movement. I have to make money. Pay off debts.

We pass through pine woods—dark on either side of the road. Then a bridge, and under the bridge, a stream—the water black and silver with the reflection of the trees and sky.

2014

Walking down the snack aisle of an interstate gas station. Coolers of drinks—iced tea, soda, juice, Red Bull, Monster, Rockstar, bottled water, and beer. A very small magazine section with copies of *Penthouse, Hustler,* and *Barely Legal* tucked behind the *Guns & Ammo, Us Weekly,* and *Soldier of Fortune*. Newspapers with headlines about Obama's NSA reforms. Weed pipes, rolling papers, hats with the embroidered logos of football teams, cigarettes, cigars, lighters, chewing tobacco, incense, herbal tablets the size of horse pills claiming sexual enhancement, mini bottles of 5-Hour Energy, novelty candy in plastic dispensers in the shape of baby bottles or stock cars or handguns. In a glass case next to the rolls of lottery tickets sit camo-patterned pocketknives.

I walk down the snack aisle in Fayetteville, Arkansas. I walk down the snack aisle in Ogallala, Nebraska. I walk down the snack aisle in Crescent City, California. I get a bag of rye chips and a can of Dr Pepper in Shreveport and Greenville, Memphis, Newport News, Revere, San Jose, Provo, Arlington, New York City, and Tacoma.

A list of headlines. August 20th, 2014-

"Russia, Iran and Egypt Heckle U.S. About Tactics in Ferguson"

"Michael Cera, Kieran Culken, and Tavi Gevinson to Open in *This is Our Youth*"

"Obama 'Appalled' by Beheading, Will Continue Airstrikes"

"Chaos in Ferguson is Fueled by Tangle of Leadership"

"Canada Idol Contestant Acquitted of Aiding Terror"

Now Los Angeles. Warm, clean streets in Echo Park with cactus gardens and yucca plants in yards. A hipster bar at dusk in Los Feliz and the amber light through the rows of windows while people drink Mexican beer and talk quietly. Hazy sun on

the beach in Malibu with the wind up, a surfer in a black wetsuit with a red surfboard walking back from the ocean to his car. Warehouse after warehouse after warehouse passing as seen from the car window then lines of palm trees; the salmon pink retaining wall of the freeway blocking out the sun as it sets.

Leaving LA, I listen to Byron's newest album. This one feels like odds and ends. Some of his finest songs sit next to frustrating electronic experiments or what feels like aimless demos. It's less a coherent album than disparate songs set together with no apparent design. The experience I have with it is complicated. It's the work of my friend, and in parts it's more like him than anything he's done, but it seems like the result of diminishing powers. In the press photos for the album, he's badly dressed, chewed up looking, fresh-shaven and the years of drink showing on his face. It's a hard listen and harder still to admit I don't like it, and like it less because in its good moments it's the best he's ever been.

Driving north. Ventura County, Santa Barbara, Goleta, Gaviota State Park, the Santa Inez Mountains, Santa Maria, Pismo Beach, San Luis Obispo, the Santa Lucia Range, the Salinas River, Atascadero, the farmland and vineyards of Paso Robles, and on into the Santa Clara Valley.

I'm sitting on a driftwood log at the seashore that hugs the coast of Monterey Bay when a horse runs past along the waterline with a young girl on its back, sitting high in the saddle, her ponytail bouncing with each step. The ocean—bright aluminum like it would be hot to the touch. The sun—a burning white disc behind the horse and the girl, and I see them in black silhouette.

I look back down at the postcard sitting on the closed book in my lap and I write, "Dear Willy and Johnsy—" Purple spots swim across the white cardstock where the sun fried my vision. I close my eyes and they're in the black too.

Driving—pine forest and blackberry bramble flashing past the car. I listen to radio news about the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson.

In an Oregon gas station's newspaper rack, some of the headlines call the reaction to Michael Brown's death "protests" and some call them "riots."

I grab a copy of *The Times* and read a story with the headline, "Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling with Problems and Promise." The first paragraph: "It was 1 a.m. and Michael Brown Jr. called his father, his voice trembling. He had seen something overpowering. In the thick gray clouds that lingered from a passing storm this past June, he made out an angel. And he saw Satan chasing the angel and the angel running into the face of God. Mr. Brown was a prankster, so his father and stepmother chuckled at first." Later in the story: "Mr. Brown's friend said he swung after the officer grabbed his neck and was shot after running away, hitting the ground with his hands raised in surrender. He was hit at least six times, twice in the head. His 6-foot-4 frame lay face down in the middle of the warm pavement for hours, a stream of blood flowing down the street." The final sentence is about a post Michael Brown made to Facebook the night before his murder: "Everything happen for a reason. Just start putting 2 n 2 together. You'll see it."

A Time of Sudden Change

2015

There's a fire in the metal ring outside the farmhouse and a jar of the moonshine that has fruit in it. We talk and drink and eat moonshine strawberries, and when she gets up to go inside to use the bathroom, I tell her I love her out loud as soon as the front door shuts. I try to say it simply, quietly. I love you. But it comes out loud, and twice. "I fucking *love* you. I fucking love you, Alison."

When she's back outside I collect an armload of sticks and arrange them around the embers then drop a handful of dry leaves on top that were left over from fall; leaves that have gathered beneath the walnut trees in brown layers. They catch fire and crackle merrily and she says, "Oh. That's nice."

I say, "It is," which is dull and obvious. But there is no need for false pretenses or to act cool. This is how it's always been with Alison. When we're together it's right, easy, and steady, and the combination of that lets me know I'm safe, and what a weight off to be *safe*. Under this protection I don't feel bad about myself, and feeling bad about myself is something I'm very good at. Half my day is spent second-guessing any good thing that has ever happened to me. I wake up wanting to shred my life to ribbons and I lie in bed each night talking to myself like I'm my own archenemy. But with Alison? All that ugly inner dialogue goes away without the slightest effort or thought. I not only stop thinking of myself, I stop hating myself. What I think of is her, Alison—of fun, conversation, the past we share, her laugher, our inside jokes, the sound of her voice, her hair (in two dirty-blonde braids now), her clothes (tight jeans, oversized t-shirt, black snow coat because it's winter), her hands (small, very smooth, delicate), her feet (in something like Converse but not. Keds?), bare ankles showing between shoe-top and pant-cuff. I think of the way her ass looks in those jeans and I think of her face and pale cheeks and how soft her lips would be to kiss, her mouth on me, the weight of her breasts in my hands. I think of sex and push it all as far from me as I can.

Sitting close to the firepit, the heat on our knees, we listen to Miley Cyrus songs on her phone, and sometimes we sing along and make up our own words. I stick the tip of my green rubber farm boot into the fire for a moment as I sing in a death-metal voice about how Miley came in like a wrecking ball. For a while we say nothing and it's okay. The quiet, cold, dark night. The fire crackling and the good smoky, acrid smell of the wood burning. I tell her about a dream I had a few days ago where I stood on the shore of a black lake at night, the moon high and its reflection on the water like a soft, trembling ghost (but a nice ghost, gentle and unthreatening). In the dream I heard a voice in my head that told me to write down the following words upon awakening: "In you are many ravens and many mines; the birds' wings beating like a charcoal drawing, smudged, flickering."

"What does it mean?" she asks.

"I don't know. Ravens, birds, Poe, night, mines, miners, underground. I'm sure there's something to it. I mean, in the symbols of dreams."

"It's pretty," she says.

I shout to myself: TELL. HER. YOU. THINK. SHE'S. PRETTY.

But I chicken out.

"What happened after that?"

"In the dream?"

"Yeah."

"I walked into the lake."

After the fire, in my bedroom, we're very drunk. It's cold in the house and we have one blanket in the room. She tells me that we should share the blanket, that we'll sleep in our clothes. "But I'm just warning you," she says. "I'm a cuddler."

"It's okay," I say. "I am too."

We're under the same blanket, but it's still cold and then she moves close until I'm spooning her from behind and begins to rub up against me.

I grab her belt and turn her to face me, and we stare at each other in the moonlight.

"Okay," she says very quietly, and she sounds happy to say it but almost shocked or surprised.

I say, "Yeah?" and she pulls my face to hers and we kiss slowly then not so slow.

As we kiss faster she tries to work the buttons on my shirt, but she can't get them quick enough so she tears it open and the metal buttons scatter across the floor in the darkness like a handful of pebbles.

"Sorry sorry sorry," she says, as she kisses then bites my ear, her breath damp and boozy and thrilling.

"Yeah, no, it's okay," I tell her, because it is, of course it is.

She yanks my belt out from its loops and it whips off and hits the window.

"Did that—" she starts to say.

"Don't worry," I say.

She kicks her jeans off, but they get stuck at the ankles which makes her laugh. "Shit, shit," she says. "I think I'm stuck."

"I got it." I pull her jeans the rest of the way off and toss them behind us.

Like the belt, they hit the window and we laugh and she says, "Oh hell."

I sit up and slip her underwear down and she arcs her hips to make it easier.

She's beautiful in the moonlight streaming in through the windows.

"Yeah?" I say.

"Yeah," she says.

In the morning, my hangover thumps in my skull like a beating drum inside the metal frame of a car.

We talk quietly.

Alison reminds me her boyfriend is a great guy, that he's wonderful, so kind, and that her boyfriend is now her fiancé and that I am not him and this can't happen again.

We hold each other for a long time then we start the day.

Alison, when you fly home to San Diego, I send love letters via email for a week. Sometimes you take hours to respond, and in the time between sending each message and receiving your reply I can do nothing but sit with my phone in my hand awaiting the notifications.

In my letters I say you'll be happier with me, that we have always had fun, and that I can give you a life your fiancé cannot. I don't trash talk him because he's a good man and there's nothing to trash talk about, but I try my best to show you the life you'll have with me will make you happy. I tell you I'm in love and in lust with you and I have been for years. You are hesitant, but then you tell me the same things I'm telling you, and because they are the same things, I know what we are doing is right. Our emails get dirtier, more confessional, vulnerable, open. We make a plan. You'll come back to Kansas for a week and we'll see how it goes. You buy a plane ticket, forward me your flight information, and I write it down in my notebook and circle it once, then twice, then so many circles it looks like a ringed planet, a scribbled Saturn.

You fly back to Kansas on a cold morning in February, and we spend a week in bed. We make each other come over and over again and in every way we can think of and we drink too much wine and sometimes we argue, and when we argue you cry because your fiancé doesn't deserve this. At the end of the week you leave and when you are gone I send more love letter emails and yours come minutes after mine are sent.

I fly out to California and we drive your car loaded with boxes and suitcases back to Kansas. It's hot in San Diego and Arizona is warm, but by New Mexico it's winter again, and in Texas we drive past snow in the ditch and frozen lakes, the sky a bright gray that hurts your eyes.

We take our time getting back. We stop when we want. Eat at diners. Pull over to see weird rock formations or historical sites or take pictures of each other in front of murals or funny religious billboards. When I drive you touch me until I have to tell you to stop or else we'll crash and when you drive I unbutton your jeans and pull up your sweater and do the same.

We buy snacks in gas stations, and while you drive I tear open bags of pistachios or twist the cap off a bottle of Pelegrino for you and each small act feels like a statement of love, like something bigger than its own minor deed.

We drive and we talk about things like-

-Cher

-Madonna (we decide Cher is much better)

-Italian food

-The Gideon bible

-The trolley

-Rolled tacos

-Swami's

-Various Californian cults

-Climate change

-The Hari Krishnas

-The Bhagavad-Gita

-Sigmund Freud

-and Dan Deacon

We listen to Dan Deacon's new album with its thick, grandiose wall of sound, the euphoric waves of synth cresting tall as the sky while we drive past hardscrabble farmland, mobile homes with dark windows, ruined gray barns, gray brick grain silos, wrecked cars in dried-up fields, and bare trees.

In Kansas, you and I and Frankie and the boys live together. At first it's good then it's very hard. Over the phone Frankie fights with Jude who is now her ex and she fights with her new partner, the journalist Lee Michael, via text (Lee in Washington, DC, Frankie here, each coming unglued and trying to help the other). We have no money. You and I drink too much and Frankie doesn't. There are bats in the dusk and that's good. The boys are healthy and happy and that's good too. The rest is a fucking mess.

A list of headlines. June 1st, 2015-

"ISIS Gains Syrian Area Near Border"

"Caitlyn Jenner, Formerly Bruce, Introduces Herself in *Vanity Fair*"

"Prices Are Down, but Saudis Keep Oil Flowing"

"How to Find that Vintage Cast-Iron Pan"

"Hillary Clinton Focuses on Drug Addiction After Learning Scale of Problem"

In August, you leave for California because it's all too much. You stay with a friend who has a weed business in Sebastopol and go running each day under the plum trees by the railroad track. We talk on the phone for hours. You send me photos of what you see during the day and I send you photos from the farm. At night we send each other racy texts until we both come. All day I work as hard as I can to earn us money. When people are buying books everything is fine. On the slow days I worry myself into knots. Sleeping alone I feel cleaved in two

like a hewn tree.

When you come back from California, Frankie and the boys get an apartment in town, and I help them move in. You and I fight. Frankie and I fight. You and Frankie fight. You and I learn to talk to each other. Or we try. I'm angry and scared and I love you profoundly. Frankie wants to die. Summer is quiet and sad and it feels as if it will never end, like pain that doesn't ease with time, ache in constant sustain. The truest thing I can say is I am happiest with love and without conflict. This is a year of love, but it's also a year of conflict. Right now we are never safe.

In the fall, Frankie and the boys move to Michigan to live with Lee.

Saying goodbye at the Kansas City airport is the hardest thing I have ever done.

Before I leave them in front of the line for security, Willy gives me an orange Lego man riding a brown Lego horse. The Lego man wears a knight's helmet and holds the receiver of an old-fashioned phone in one hand and a little white drinking cup in the other.

"Who is *this*?" I ask, my eyes full of tears.

"This is me when I am a grown up," says Willy quietly, a few weeks shy of his fifth birthday, brave, but tears streaming down his face.

Then Johnsy gives me a Lego man too. A scuba diver.

"A underwater guy for you," he says in his little gruff voice. There are no tears from Johnsy and I'm glad for his strength which is a strength I don't have.

I hug Frankie.

And I hug Johnsy.

And I hug Willy.

And I turn, and sobbing now, walk to the sliding glass doors of the exit.

2016

On New Year's Eve Alison and I take a bath together at midnight with a bottle of good tequila from Costco and a small glass bowl of lime slices set on the bathtub edge. We wake at noon, the blankets kicked to the floor, dried come on the sheets between us, with no memory of the past twelve hours. Outside a quiet January rain falls—a cold, listless silver-green drizzle, the sky dark with black clouds over the woods. I roll over and kiss her shoulder and she asks, "What happened?" We're drinking too much is what happened, but what I say is, "Good morning. You sleep okay?"

A list of headlines. January 10th, 2016-

"*Girls* Creator Lena Dunham Visits Iowa to Support Hillary Clinton"

"Golden Globes 2016 Red Carpet: See the Looks"

"Donald Trump Ramps Up Attacks on Ted Cruz's Eligibility"

"Super Bowl 50 Commercials Are Expected to Have a Lighter Tone"

"Bernie Sanders Makes Strong Showing in New Polls"

In July we drive across the country to Portland so I can do a reading from the Joey book now that it's out and we stay with Stacy Mary Nilsson in her new apartment full of cow bones and sheepskins and old cameras. Stacy and Alison and I swim in the cold Washougal River with the thundering falls and slick rocks and we drink red wine in the morning. The week in Portland is a disaster in the best kind of way. I'm reminded of talking to Byron outside the strip-club about Stacy the night Jeremy nearly died. I'd known her from the internet, but we hadn't met. I asked what she was like and he said, "She's a mess."

"Oh yeah? Like good or bad?"

"In the *best* way."

The last day in town Stacy and Alison and I wake up in Stacy's bed, a mattress on the floor piled up with blankets and furs and heaps of Stacy's clothes, shoes, and a few beach towels. Stacy rolls over and says in her ragged, hoarse morning voice, "See that fan?"

The ceiling fan spins above us in the morning light.

"Your fan?" asks Alison.

"That fan," says Stacy, and she grabs a cowboy boot from the floor next to the mattress and chucks it at the fan.

The blades hit it and the boot flies across the room and knocks against the wall.

Stacy sits up in bed, her hair a red, tousled snake-nest. "You wanna know the best thing about boots?"

"What's the best thing about boots?" asks Alison, lying on her side between Stacy and me.

"There's always two," and Stacy throws the second of the pair at the fan.

"Okay. I got this," says Alison, and she throws one of her little sneakers at the fan and it hits the blades and the shoe spirals off behind us.

Lying in bed, we throw all the shoes we can find at the fan. My cowboy boots. Various sneakers. A pair of shiny gold high heels Stacy says she doesn't remember owning.

"When you see a fan you throw shoes at the fan," says Stacy.

"It's what you must do," says Alison.

Worried of the hangover to come, I tell them I need to sleep a little more, but it's decided we'll go somewhere and get a nice, greasy breakfast before we leave.

As Stacy shuts the apartment door behind us, I realize I'm still

drunk because I'm not hungover yet and that today is going to be long.

At the top of the stairs that lead to the first floor and the street, Stacy decides to lie flat and slide down on her belly which doesn't work.

"Do I look like spaghetti?" she shouts as we stand at the top of the stairs watching her try to slide down, feet first.

"Sure?" says Alison.

"You do," I say, though she doesn't.

"If I look like spaghetti *tell* me I look like spaghetti!" shouts Stacy and we tell her she looks like spaghetti.

The drive from Portland to Kansas is sweet and easy. We sleep in the car or in cheap motels and when we find a place to swim we swim. We pull over and hike down to roadside creeks that trickle lazy around the rocks and collect in yellow sand pools. We swim in a rushing stream in the high desert with a slumbering freight train on the south bank above us shading the water. At the calm, silent, dammed river, dockside above Twin Falls, we lie drowsy on the old wooden planks, the band-saw of cicadas rasping in sharp waves, rising with the dry heat. Alison asleep next to me, I read from Louise Erdrich: "Love won't be tampered with, love won't go away. Push it to one side and it creeps to the other." I close the book and put it behind my head as a pillow and soon I'm asleep.

Later, a flat expanse of rock and scrub brush passing quiet by the window, low hills smoke-blue in the distance, I tell Alison I think the universe is pointing us in the right direction.

"Like *us* us?" she says.

"Us," I say, "You and me. Things feel good. I mean, these past two years—or year and a half or whatever were—"

"Not easy," she says.

"And they're still not. But maybe we're about to catch a break?"

"I hope so."

"Only thing I need to do is make sure I can visit the boys up in Michigan as much as possible."

"We'll figure out getting you up there," she says.

"I need to make more money."

"Let's get you back on tour."

"If I can do a month on the road soon that'll keep me settled for fall and winter."

"Then that's what we'll do," she says.

Back home we follow the news as Gene Wilder dies then Leonard Cohen. It's been a theme all year. David Bowie, Alan Rickman, Harper Lee, George Martin, Phife Dawg, Merle Haggard, Prince, Morley Safer, Patty Duke, Ralph Stanley, Guy Clark, Mohammad Ali, Anton Yelchin, Kenny Baker, Elie Wiesel. I joke that 2016 would be a dumb year for us to die because no one would remember thanks to all the big stars dropping left and right.

The day after Leonard Cohen dies is the election. We drive to the Baptist church out in the country to vote for Hillary Clinton even though we can't stand her. That night Alison and I sit up late with Frankie's mom in town watching the results come in. The race still undecided, we drive back to the farm. In the morning we wake up to a new world.

2017

Joey Carr, who is now on disability after a bad fall at the Amazon warehouse he's worked at since Christmas, moves in with his sister in Atlanta the week of the inauguration. Not a writer but in need of something to keep his mind off the news, he drafts a series of science fiction stories. I tell him I understand. I feel like a bottle of soda shook up and opened and left to foam out in the hot sun.

Joey tells me about his stories over the phone while pausing to smoke crystal. His love of speed has consumed him. Joey's mind is full of black holes, tunnels with dead ends, stab-marks, worm paths.

The first story Joey wrote is about a rich man living inside a hollowed-out mountain in the Nevada desert. The story itself was lost after Joey's car was stolen with his computer in it (he'd been sleeping in the Amazon parking lot before moving in with this sister). He gives me a synopsis which is in fact more like a retelling with extensive director's commentary. He tells me how the rich man's soldiers kidnap thousands of people and perform horrible experiments on them involving cannibalism, vivisection, and various esoteric glands drained of their vital essences. The story is told from the perspective of a young man who is taken by the soldiers along with his elderly parents while camping in the Valley of Fire. The young man ("the boy" Joey calls him) describes the halls of the mountain as dark and shadowy with high vaulted ceilings, spiraling mine shafts, torchlight licking the walls, and great fathomless pits. The ground floor passages are filled with shopping centers—gift shops, bars, Starbucks coffee kiosks, jewelry stores, Best Buys, Banana Republics—and all of the product is free because that lets the rich man take what he wants from the people without complaint.

The boy finds a short sword in the rubble of a forgotten hall and takes only that while the people (some carted through the halls legless, bandaged, bleeding from the eyes, hands cut off, skin horribly burned) fill shopping carts with clothes, shoes, expensive bottles of alcohol, laptops, big screen TVs as long as doors, makeup, perfume, and new phones.

Joey says the boy knows his destiny is to kill the rich man. He hides the sword but keeps it nearby should the occasion arise. Meantime he stays out of the way. Eventually the rich man's doctors take the boy's parents and he doesn't see them again. (The doctors are dressed in shiny purple and gold jumpsuits and owls masks. They are rarely seen in the story. Instead, their work is seen. The results of the experiments.)

One day (though you can't tell day from night this deep in the mountain), the rich man decides it's time to show his face. He

takes a black glass elevator down to the main hall of the shopping center and the people gather in awe—talking amongst themselves, speculating on what he'll look like, excited to see their benefactor after so long in the mountain hall.

Surrounded by his elite group of bodyguards (who wear yellow jumpsuits and black wolf masks), the rich man tells the people that he has discovered the cure for death and that now he is going on a press conference tour across the American West to tell the world about it.

At that moment, the boy is grabbed from behind by the man's soldiers, who Joey says are dressed in black jumpsuits and bright red pig masks. (Joey stops the story here to tell me that in the morning the soldiers wear pink pig masks. In the afternoon they change to red masks. At night they wear black pig masks and with their black jumpsuits they are nearly invisible in the darkness of the mountain hall.) Joey says, "So the soldiers in their black jumpsuits and red pig masks drag the boy to a white panel van, where he's strapped into the front passenger seat and told to wait. What they don't realize is the boy has the sword tucked into the back of his coat, bound to him by a scarf tied across his chest in an X shape."

After a short speech to his captives about the benefits of loyalty, the rich man drives the white panel van out of the mountain's gateway while the boy sits in the passenger seat contemplating his fate. They drive through desert wasteland past the ruins of cities scattered across endless sandflats. On the radio—country music, advertisements for used car lots and health cures, religious zealots, preachers shouting about unbelief and spiritual warfare. After a few hours, the boy breaks the silence and asks the rich man, "Why me? Why bring me?" As he drives, the rich man tells the boy he's been brought along because he knew of his (the boy's) intention to kill him and that he plans to parade him around the country as a trophy—the one person left alive who could have killed him. (Joey gives emphasis to the words "left alive," implying that there were others who might have been capable of handling the task before.) The rich man tells the boy that by grinding down the amputated limbs of his captives, he has created a medicine he calls "the Blue Serum" and that the Blue Serum is designed to cheat death but only for him

because it is made specific to the rich man's DNA.

For a moment I drift off and wake up to Joey describing a press conference (the first in their list of stops), the rich man telling the story of his life's work (leaving out the doctors' methods). Then, sitting in front of the room of reporters, he begins to drink the Blue Serum. As he drinks, and as he talks, his body begins to grow, and the boy sits watching in horror while the rich man rises up from behind the table as a frightening, distorted giant, his body swelling unnaturally.

After the press conference, the boy walks out the double set of doors while the rich man crawls through the doorway on his hands and knees. Outside, walking together, the rich man now towering above him, the boy asks him about all the people left behind in the mountain. What'll become of them? Won't they give up the secret?

The rich man tells the boy that the people have all been paid off in cash, and because of that they'll be happy to keep silent.

While Joey talks, I have to remind myself not to tell him the Trump metaphor in his story is obvious and heavy-handed. Sometimes you're just happy your troubled friends are still alive.

As they walk to the van across an endless mall parking lot, the desert sun wrinkling the air above the blacktop, the rich man's body continues to grow, and soon he stands high above the streetlights around them.

Then the rich man stops walking.

He stares down at his hand, which has now swollen horribly to look like a baseball mitt made of flesh, the skin graying, darkening.

As the boy looks on, the fingernails of the hand drop off and fall to the pavement then the hand bursts into a spray of red gore and is gone after which the arm itself breaks open, splattering the boy with hot, dark pulp.

The rich man's body continues to swell and burst piece by piece, right arm, feet, knees, legs, the torso with its awful, bloated head

dropping to the ground. When the torso is gone, all that's left is the rich man's head, which lies on the hot asphalt like a massive gray pumpkin.

The head stares up at the boy, its flesh cooking into the blacktop with a smell like grilling steak.

"Well?" says the rich man, and the boy draws the sword from inside the back of his coat and stabs it straight down through the top of the rich man's head.

Before we get off the call, Joey tells me two epilogues to the story.

In the first epilogue, the opening of the mountain fortress is shown with a group of dazed, bandaged people walking out, shielding their eyes from the sun, paper money blowing all about their feet with the rich man's face on each bill.

The second epilogue is set in the year 4,017 on a dark night after the fall of civilization. Around a fire sits a ragged tribe of people described much in the way of the dazed, bandaged captives walking out of the mountain hall in the previous epilogue. A very old man is reading to them from a black, leatherbound book while they listen attentively, the firelight orange on their dirty, gaunt faces.

Printed in small gold-embossed text across the cover of the book is *The Path to Blue Serum*. It's a transcription of the rich man's speech at the press conference.

Then, without warning that he is going to change the subject, Joey begins to talk about money he owes to people he doesn't like.

Soon I have to go and he tells me he has to go and we hang up.

2018

When Alison feels out of control or overwhelmed, she does something different with her hair. As the country spirals into chaos and uncertainty, she shaves the sides and the back. A few

weeks later she does Viking braids. Around Valentine's Day she bleaches it all blonde then a week later dyes it blue and now we can't go anywhere without strangers complimenting her hair. She's lovely in blue—radiant like a snow-cone on a hot day when a snow-cone is the only thing that will keep you from losing your mind.

In March, Alison and I fly to England. My London show with Andrei and William's band and the next two dates are sold out and I tell Alison it feels like tidings of good things ahead—a month of shows, so many chances to sell books and merch, interviews with podcasts and magazines penciled-in, live sessions booked, the kind of opportunities that are growing scarce back home while half of America tucks inward like a hedgehog.

As the far-right chops down our sense of security like a clear-cut forest, hacking away at years of progress, a lot of my friends in the States have given up everything in favor of survival. They aren't going out at night or buying books or setting up shows. They're trying to get through the day with their lives and sanity intact.

You don't plan parties when your house is on fire. You either split for parts unknown or you fight that fire with every ounce of water you've got. Tough luck for those who try and hold a middle-ground. Carrying on as usual is like stepping in front of a speeding train and hoping for the best.

Of course your problems don't go away just because you go away, but the London show leaves me with hopes so high I'm thrilled to be alive—*alive*, here, living, standing on terra extra firma in this moment, pushed forward with a sort of manic, jittering pulse that leaves me buzzed on the possibilities of what may come.

Over drinks at the Oxford show's afterparty I sit in the back of the pub with Alison and Andrei Merce and Andrei's partner Vika and our American friend Katey Perilac, and I boast and brag and make huge, dumb, big-mouth claims of illustrious greatness dead-ahead.

"A drink to slaying our enemies and rising from the repulsive

gore in victory!" I say, holding my gin and tonic over the table.

"Repulsive gore?" says Vika, laughing.

"I'm up for repulsive gore," says Katey, a young filmmaker from Richmond, Virginia who has shot videos for Andrei's and my projects. "If slaying our enemies means repulsive gore? I say let's do this shit."

"Then begins the cutting of throats," I say.

"Mate, you are out of your *mind*," says Andrei, sitting next to me.

"He is," says Alison.

Katey Perilac lifts her drink high and says, "Okay, then a drink to being out of our minds and *still* slaying our enemies."

"See?" I tell them, satisfied, sitting back in my chair. "Katey knows."

"Right. I'll drink to that," says Andrei, lifting his glass.

"Me too," says Vika, cheerfully. "That's a cause I can get behind."

"Well. If we're all in this together," says Alison, with a nod.

"Oh hey! We should get in a *fight* tonight," I say.

"Who should?" says Katey.

"All of us!" I shout joyously, pounding my fist on the table. "All of us fighting! This whole place! Imagine how that would look."

"Be careful what you wish for," says Vika, nodding at a group of older men, holding their pints, staring at us from across the room.

"*Fuck* those people!" I say.

"Yeah, no, *those guys*?" says Alison. "They'd be happy to fight. Should I go ask 'em?"

"Oh god no," says Vika.

"Yeah, big ol' no on that," says Katey.

Andrei laughs and says, "Let him fight."

"Let him fight!" I shout.

Outside the club while we say our goodbyes I tell Andrei to punch me in the face.

"Mate, no," he says. "You don't want that."

Katey laughs and says, "Uh oh."

"Hit me!" I shout happily.

Then I spit in his face.

Andrei wipes my spit off with his sleeve and with the other arm thwacks a hard right to my jaw.

I drop to my knees laughing.

The next morning Alison and I are sick with pneumonia.

Two days later I'm forced to cancel the rest of the tour.

That evening we fly from Liverpool to Hungary because the sixteenth century Turkish baths below the hotels are meant to work magic with sick lungs.

I have four grand in cash from the first few shows, and that will carry us through the month without worry.

It's snowing in Budapest when we arrive. We walk each morning from our Airbnb in an old Soviet courtyard down streets once Nazi-occupied and now graffiti-scarred and crumbling.

In the morning, or the early afternoon if we've slept in, we take the beautiful, sloping river bridge over the Danube to the west side of town with its medieval castle overlooking the gray scatter of rooftops and streets.

We spend hours in the vast, cave-like pools with their turquoise

art nouveau tile walls and dripping marble columns with gleaming teal and gold inlay where it's quiet and where the water steams a gentle fog around us.

We breathe in the wet, humid air and we float in the blue-lit darkness, talking about what we will do next, our plane tickets home three weeks out, and all shows canceled.

I cough into the palm of my hand and show Alison the blood I've spat out.

"Should we worry about this?" I ask.

"We should."

Back in the apartment we sit under piles of blankets on the couch and watch American TV shows dubbed with Hungarian voices.

We get woozy drunk each night off Hungarian wine because when we do the body aches go away.

In a numb, sick, wandering daze we buy red wine and groceries from markets as wide as a kitchen—druggy electronic music throbbing over the speakers while we walk the narrow aisles fighting to make sense of the canned goods.

"It all looks like glump," says Alison, handing me a can with a faded paper label showing a bowl of something brown and indistinct. "Looks like diarrhea."

I laugh. "No, glump can be good."

"Yeah, I guess," she says.

"Seriously. Some of my favorite food is glump. Chili's kinda glump. Lotsa soups are glump. Pea soup. Curries can be a little glumpy. Sometimes refried beans look like glump."

"Yeah, but what's in *this* glump?"

"Glump is in the glump?"

The ill, roaming days lead to silent, black nights.

In this sunken world of fever flush and darkened baths, stone stairs twisting down gothic bathhouse hallways and blood-red Hungarian wine, it's easy to forget life in America—the muddled, warm, blurry world here stands in contrast to the jagged, vivid world back home with its police killings and new fascist militias and a screaming Donald Trump jabbing his finger like a short, dull knife. The country we left felt perched on a cliff's edge awaiting the sort of fall you don't survive.

In Hungary we decide we'll tell anyone if they ask that we are Canadian. But no one talks to us or looks our way. People keep their heads down. They run from bus stop to doorway, and they stay indoors as the snow falls, the icy wind tearing through the gray empty streets.

The apartment is low-lit, warm, and comfortable like the den of a fox. From the owners' bio on the Airbnb site, we learn their names are Dorka and Nandor and that they have a baby called Vazul, and we decide they're Hungarian vampires.

Alison says, "I *love* Dorka, Nandor, and Vazul. I wish they would adopt us."

"I would become a vampire if Dorka, Nandor, and Vazul would let us," I tell her.

"I feel like we've gone to Geneva to take the cure," says Alison, pulling the gray wool blanket up around her head like a cowl. "It's so strange to go to a place just to be sick in it."

I tell her I'm sure there's a metaphor there but that I'd rather not know what it is. I reach for my coffee cup of wine on the low table in front of the couch. There are red candles on the table and they flicker and for a moment the room feels like a monk's cell.

"Yeah, no, for sure," she says. "Ever since Trump? Life has been way too metaphoric. But if we could stay here?"

"I would."

"Be vampires?" she says. "Drink vampire Hungarian wine? Go to the vampire baths every day?"

"And eat a steady diet of glump," I say. "Maybe we get jobs in the glump industry."

"Work for Big Glump? Sure. I'm in."

"I would work for Big Glump without hesitation."

"But we can't. Stay here, I mean," she says.

"No, we can't," I agree.

Back in America after a month away we're still sick with pneumonia. I sit at the wooden table in the front room and light a row of saint candles because the morning storms make the farmhouse dark. I write. Send emails. Keep up with deadlines. Schedule out the next tour. Or try. Mostly I stare out the window at the gray light or read *The Times* for hours with a cat on my lap. I can't keep away from the news because it feels as if we're courting implosion.

Joey Carr's sister moves to Mexico City, and after a few weeks alone in their apartment in Atlanta, he packs his things and follows her there. Friends across the country march in protests. Mass shootings dot the landscape like little fires burning in larger rings as they reach out toward each other. The police kill another black man and nothing is done about it. These are not singular events. They loop in a deep, infinite churn, a meat-grinder that never stops its work because there's always more flesh for the wheels.

A list of headlines. May 25th, 2018-

"Trump Pulls Out of North Korea Summit Meeting With Kim Jong-un"

"Would You Go to a Republican Doctor?"

"Trump's Crackdown on Students Who Overstay Visas Rattles Higher Education"

"Why Is Elon Musk Attacking the Media? We Explain"

"Russian Military Supplied Missile That Shot Down Malaysian Jet, Prosecutors Say"

When the coyotes come at night I fetch the shotgun from the hall closet and unzip its padded case. The gun is a Savage Stevens 320 pump-action 12-gauge I bought at Cabela's a few years back—dull matte black, short barrel, pistol grip, composite stock—a cruel, blunt, snub-nosed thing, and not a thing to love, but a gun is a tool like any tool. The part of me that wanted to own this gun is gone. It came into my life before there was a new shooting every time you looked at the news, before America lost its mind for guns, or before it was so vocal about its obsession. I grew up with guns and always liked them. These past few years have cured that.

I slide the shotgun out of its case, kneel down, and set it across my knees. From the pouch stitched to the side of the case, I grab a handful of Remington shells. The shells have brass caps at the end of the red plastic tubes, and they smell like gunpowder. The scent brings back the years hunting with my father in the desert fields of the Imperial Valley. I haven't shot a bird since middle school, and I don't plan to again if I can help it, but there's still some sort of residual excitement in loading a gun. It's an excitement I don't like, and like less each time a new mass shooting is announced. *This is just a tool*, I tell myself as I carry the shotgun through the kitchen and mudroom then out the front door into the darkness.

Listening for the sound of the coyotes I walk away from the farmhouse.

Beyond the wire fence dividing the upper fields from the garden and pasture it's very dark, the flattened dry grass in front of me silver in the moonlight.

The first coyote call is answered by what sounds like dozens more. They're very close. You can't see them. You seldom do.

When on a rare night you catch a glimpse of one, it's as if they're running through the air rather than across the ground they move so light on their feet.

But you never see the pack.

From the sound, they're in the woods near the pond in the acres below ours.

I fire three shots in the air, each spaced from the one before it by a few seconds, after which the sounds grow distant until the night is quiet again.

In the summer you hear frogs, crickets, cattle in the fields past the woods, cicadas rasping in the heat. These are all good sounds; the sounds of a peaceful night where you sleep easy, which is rare lately. It's fall now and at night in the fall there are no frogs. You'll hear cows in the far fields but never cicadas. In the fall there is a great quieting in the country, as life burrows away from the cold months to come.

I squat down and pick up the warm 12-gauge shells from the grass, the moonlight shining off their brass caps, and walk back to the farmhouse, propping the gun on my shoulder like a rake or a shovel.

Inside the house, after I've cleaned the shotgun and put it away, I go into the front room where Alison is looking at the news on her laptop.

"Is it bad?" I ask.

"It's bad," she says.

2019

New Year's Day I'm in bed with my phone looking at photos of the immigrant children's prisons at the border while Alison sleeps on her side turned away from me, a tousle of blue-dyed hair and two fraying soft braids, the thick, gray blanket pulled up high. Outside it's pure white. A New Year's Day snowstorm—the wind blowing wild flurries.

Over text I tell Willy and Johnsy I love them, that I wish they were here, and that never a day goes by when I don't miss them with everything I have. (They text back—a smiling cat emoji

then a line of red hearts.) They've been away four years now and the time weighs heavy this morning—all that I'm missing, their own memories of living here beginning to fade. When I think of Willy and Johnsy there is an ache in my heart and tremendous love. Both of which make the other more painful. I visit when I can, but that choice is not up to me. If I had my way I'd be up there once a week; every holiday, every birthday, every school play and recital. This is a dream I have and it's a dream I know will never come true. So I stay in contact. I visit when it's okay. And none of that is enough. I feel them slipping away from me. Another few years like this and they won't need me.

A list of headlines. February 20th, 2019-

"Has Republican Resistance to Trump Collapsed?"

"Democrats Want to Tax the Wealthy. Many Voters Agree"

"Is America Becoming a Four-Party State?"

"Trump to Tap Other Military Money for Wall Before Emergency Funds"

"Jimmy Fallon Gets in Costume to Roast Bernie Sanders"

I spend much of 2019 driving to and from bookfairs.

Late one night outside Lexington, Kentucky, en route to Chattanooga, Alison sits in the passenger seat and looks up motels for us and reads the reviews.

"Okay," she says. "Here's one that—oh my god."

"What's oh my god?"

"Oh wow. No. Wow. I'm reading you this. It's for Grand Belle Inn outside Chattanooga. The review is—it's from Layna N., of Fort Walton Beach, Florida. Listen. Mind you—one sentence, no punctuation, all lowercase."

"Okay," I say, turning down the radio.

The highway is dark. Black woods on either side. The centerline dividing the lanes bright white in our headlights.

"Oh man. Whoa. Okay." Then reading: "'it was our last resort once we got the room clean an painted i got very sick staff infection i cannot begin to explaine the pain i was in went to hospital got meds within a week i started seeing ghosts not just 2 or 3 many an the maintance man very creepy he stalked me i thought i was loosing my mind called police more than once reported what i seen my boyfriend started getting weird an angry we got in a fight the police locked him up an i was left alone in a strange town an a demonic motel so i said to self an god almighty ive got to stay sane help me god this is the truth what im saying i seen a dead man every night he would try to break in the kitchen window an a old old lady was hanging in the doorway of the kitchen i could tell more but not enough room please i beg anyone do not stay at this grave yard'"

"Holy shit. Is that for real?"

"I mean, it's real to Layna N," she says.

"You want to stay there?"

"*Fuck* no."

"Good. Yeah. Oh my god. I'd rather sleep in the car."

And we do.

A week later on the interstate south to Springfield, Missouri, Alison and I make stupid jokes the whole way down.

"Where do Pokémon go when they visit Kansas?"

"I don't know. Where?"

"Topeka Chu."

"Oh my god no."

"What does Shamu call its shit when it's fake?"

"Like Shamu from SeaWorld?"

"Yeah, what does Shamu call its shit when it's fake?"

"When Shamu's *shit* is fake?"

"Yeah."

"What."

"Sham poo."

We come up with business ideas. A list of them-

-A Batman-and-Robin-themed ramen shop called Batman and Ramen.

-Cheeses of Nazareth. A Christian cheese store.

-An idea for a parlor game—Celebrity Sketch Artist. One player draws a card from the deck and on that card is the name and face of a celebrity. The player with the card puts it facedown then describes the celebrity's face from memory while the other players draw what they think the face on the card looks like. At the end, the artists reveal their drawings and the player who pulled the card shows them the face they were drawing.

"Can you imagine how *ugly* Brad Pitt would be if you drew him from someone's description based off their *memory*? Oh my *god*," says Alison.

"Ugly as sin," I say then do a stupid, mindless rhyme for no reason at all. "Ugly as sin. Let the right one in. Dumb as dirt. Everything hurts."

I tap the brakes and slow as four Mennonite children cross the highway together carrying blue and white Igloo coolers.

The boys are Willy and Johnsy's age and wear bright yellow straw hats, green wool coats, and black pants. The girls are taller but maybe the same age and wear green wool skirts, long black coats, and small white caps to cover their hair.

"It's a good look," says Alison.

"Should we start dressing like Mennonites?"

"We're basically Mennonites anyway," she says.

I ask her what she means and she says, "I don't know" and we laugh.

Being stupid with someone you love is one of life's best pleasures.

Alison points out a road sign for a business up ahead.

"Smoked Meat Paradise. Ew. Yuck."

"Is that like a god thing?" I ask.

"Paradise? Like heaven?"

"Yeah, like you're sending the animals you eat to heaven?"

"That's fucked up," she says.

"I'm sure it's just paradise for the people eating the smoked animals."

"Ugh, either way that feels bad."

"Yup. Not my kind of paradise," I say.

"A shitty sad paradise."

"Senator, I served with paradise. I *knew* paradise. Paradise was a friend of mine. Senator, you are no paradise," I say referencing an old vice-presidential debate both Alison and I know enough to joke about endlessly.

A list of notable business signs seen while driving-

-Sugar Foot Barbeque

-Frontier Bag

-Long McArthur

-Jesus Barn

-Sioux Chief Manufacturing

-Branding Iron BBQ

-Wizard Lawn and Landscaping

-Off the Wall Firearms

-Hobbytime Firearms

Alison points out the next exit is a town called Humansville and I tell her that if you were to visit the town (and you *shouldn't*) the residents would look as human as anyone. But. BUT. You could just *tell* that they're not. Maybe something about the eyes. About the way they hold your gaze—a stillness or an emptiness, and while they might look just like you and me they are something else, something older.

Alison looks up Humansville, Missouri on her phone while I drive.

"Wikipedia says the town was named after James G. Human," she says.

"*He* sounds fake."

"Yep. Like an alien posing as a human or something. 'Oh, nothin' to see here, folks. It's just me, James G. Human. Just a real human like everybody else doin' human things and foundin' my human town for more real humans to come live in. We're definitely not aliens. So don't even ask.'"

Thinking of Humansville, a chill runs down my spine and I feel dark for miles—though happy to be dark, a cozy pleasure and a comfort. It's the 24th of October; a week 'til Halloween. There are severe autumn woods on either side of the road. Dry red grass, rust-colored after a rain. Gray slate bluffs with streams of water trickling down them. Pines and the skeletons of oak, walnut, and maple. The sky heavy with rainclouds.

Driving, Alison looking at her phone, I think of the ghost stories, fantasy books, and medieval folktales I grew up with. As much as I love fantasy, I want to write about life in our times. But when my mind is still, when I'm satisfied after working, I

think of ghosts, demons, time travelers, witches, talking animals, elves, mysterious lakes as still as black glass at night, and what horrors lie beneath those waters? Who and what are the spirits that haunt these woods we drive through today? I believe in nothing supernatural, but I would like to. If something mythic turns out to be real I will gladly believe in it. Of course we fall back on romanticism during times of conflict and uncertainty. But what if the only times we live in are those of conflict and uncertainty? When life is shit how do we live without living in shit? These are all questions not answers, but sometimes the questions we ask ourselves are the only earthly mysteries we have left to solve, and maybe that's okay. There is a power in the unclear and the ambiguous, in having something to dig for, and in *not knowing*. Because if everything is known? What a sad, plain life. But a life of mystery is a life of magic. In times not far from ours, people not unlike us believed that lambs grew on trees, that there were tiny demons inside cabbages, that elephants and dragons were mortal enemies, and that drinking the blood of gladiators could cure epilepsy. Were they better off not knowing? Was their experience with reality more substantial, more important, more rewarding because of the mysteries it held? Maybe we have lost something in killing our gods and monsters.

We drive past fields bare and yellow, and beyond that the black veins of undressed trees, the sky darkening toward a cold autumn dusk.

2020

In February I fly to San Diego and read to a packed house at Verbatim Books while Dean from the magazine days does guitar accompaniment. I go out to breakfast, lunch, and dinner with a variety of friends. We hug, shake hands, and talk inches from each other in loud, crowded bars, humid with all the bodies around us. We drink and shout and I feel foolish, ecstatic, stupid with love for my friends and for strangers and the ground we stand on and the roof over our heads and the dumb music the DJ plays. Jeremy Willis and Ella have moved to town and now live a few blocks from the old Golden Hill apart-

ment. Together we do shots, shots, shots, and we celebrate our friendship and I'm thrilled to be living in this moment. Then a cramped flight home and a reading at a bookstore in snowy Kansas City. I bring a mason jar of whiskey because I'm feeling under the weather and I read from my new book while a friend plays guitar drones to back me up. We stay late talking to people after the store has closed, white drifts of snow falling quietly outside.

"You're sick?" says a girl who came to buy the new book.

"Maybe a little?"

"Oh well. Sorry. Can I get some of that whiskey?"

"Yeah, for sure." I hand her the jar.

"I think it's hilarious you brought whiskey here in a jar," she says, unscrewing the lid.

"Fits perfect in this pocket," I tell her, pointing at the side pocket of the red quilted coat that was once my grandfather's.

She takes a sip and hands it back and I give it to Alison who drinks a little then wipes her mouth with her sleeve, smiling.

The virus hits and within weeks it's shortages, isolation, and a growing death toll. Frankie and the boys are sick up in Michigan. I can't breathe while I know they're ill. All day I read the news and look at Instagram and Facebook and wait for texts and calls. There are no tests for this virus and no treatment. People go into the hospital and sometimes they never return. With the country on lockdown, you can't travel to visit your loved ones when they're sick. So I wait. I keep my phone close. And I worry myself into the ground. The boys and Frankie are in bed for weeks. There is absolutely nothing I can do and the powerlessness of that makes it feel as if the world truly *is* ending like people are saying.

When they recover, it's slow.

The virus has left its mark, but every small sign of renewed strength is worth celebrating.

They're not out of the woods, but the trees are beginning to thin.

Alison and I are evicted from the farm and every day it's a battle to find a new place while our exit date draws closer. We put on masks and tour rundown farmsteads and old doublewides with our real estate agent. We pull over to take photos of phone numbers on "for sale" signs along the roadside. I write letters to friends and tell them about the search. I make a map of a place we fall in love with and send it in a letter to Andrei Merce, but before he gets the letter we're denied the loan. I email Joey Carr about the sourdough bread Alison is baking and how great the house smells when it's in the oven and he tells me he's reading everything Phillip K. Dick wrote in chronological order and has decided to write a sci-fi novel. He says he's been shooting speed and writing every day in the small dirt yard of his rooftop apartment in Mexico City and that he's never felt better. His sister has gone back to Atlanta, but she's left him enough money to stay at least a year. I call Ethan and we talk about the virus and how we're coping with the uncertainty. I do Zoom calls with Willy and Johnsy every few days. I send them postcards and packages with toys. I reconnect with old friends like Ben Frank and Evvy Huntington and Nate Houck. And I talk to Byron who'd been calling and leaving boozy sounding voicemails all week. "What's up you 858 motherfucker. Byron. Pick up the phone. Call me. Laters. Lates." "Bozic. Pick up your damn phone." "It's Byron. M'in San Diego. Callin' you. Leaving another fuckin' message. Call me or not."

Sometimes when your defenses are down or when you're not in fighting form, talking to your chaotic friends can be too much. They give themselves to the world in a way that you don't. They need a lot from you; even if it's nothing tangible. When someone is unpredictable, you have to be ready to talk to them. They're not safe and well-contained. Anything could happen and because anything could happen the tendency is to shy away, to seek easier interactions even if those might tend toward the insincere or less substantial. Sometimes upon seeing Byron's number pop up on my screen my initial gut reaction is, *What now?*

I call Byron back at dusk on a Sunday and walk the fields south

of the farmhouse.

He picks up on the second ring. "Jaines Bosic, y'lovely piece'a shit. Whus up?" He's slurry, his voice heavy with drink.

"Hey Byron. Sorry I didn't call earlier. I almost never have my phone." This is a lie and it comes out before I can stop it. *No.* I always have my phone. I see every call as it comes in, every notification.

"Whatevers, man. Y'know we all good. Where you at?"

"The farm. Outside. Walkin' around. Got a mason jar of box wine. How 'bout you? Man, it's good to hear your voice."

"Yeah, you too. Me, I'm just, like, fuckin'—like fuckin' sleepin' on the streets here in SD and—got a couple—like, Four Lokos some dude gave me. Here at m'bus stop. Fuckin' bus stop chillin' and shit. Fuckin', like—like, tryin' not to catch Covid nine-hunnered and niney-nine—" he laughs "—fuckin' Covid fuckin' niney-nine hunnered thousand."

"Sleeping on the streets?" This is news to me. I sit down cross-legged in the grass under a tree.

"Yeaaah. Bummin' aroun' and I's like, I doan think I'm cut out for rehab. I think I'm done. Done with—with that. I, uh—last week I's up at this place in East Coun'y and I met this dude—I say this alrehy?"

"No."

"I met this dude looked pretty familiar. Some rehab muhfucker just doin' it like me. We got to talkin' and turns out muhfucker was in fuckin' Ariel Pink's band when we played together like twenny thousand years ago. He was all, 'You're familiar' and I was all, 'You're familiar' and that was that and we get talkin' about that whole—that whole crazy time. Crazy fuckin' like—crazy fuckin' world. I doan know."

"So you're out?"

"Outta rehab? Yeaaah. Just got out of that—of that part'cular one. Not doing *that* again. This is just me now—goan back and

forth 'tween the bus stop here and fuckin' and—like, fuckin' chillin' at the trolley depot and my lady's house and—like, Mexico. Oh, uh, I finished a record."

"Oh nice. When's it coming out?"

"Never? Man, *I doan know*. I'm done with the fuckin' phys'cal product or whatever. It's all just—it's just fuckin' ego bullshit, man. There's this one—there's this label in Brooklyn wansta do it. But fuck, man, I doan know. I might, like—might like stick it up on Bandcamp or whatevs and be, like—done with it. I'll send your ass a link when we hang up. Remind me. Before we go. Doan let me forget."

I walk for a while as we talk then sit down under the tree again. Byron gets darker the later we talk and at one point he argues with someone at the bus stop. He's very drunk now and I've poured my mason jar of wine in the grass. The slur in his voice makes it harder and harder to figure out what he's saying as he talks about how he's burned bridges with people we know by staying with them too long and about the South by Southwest we went to so long ago. We talk about that trip and that year, about Henry and TC, about how famous Ivy's project Saint Ides of Allen has become, about the people we knew at the time, the shows we went to, and before we hang up he tells me he loves me and I tell him the same, and we never speak again.

The grocery store shelves are desolate. Alison and I drive to Overland Park listening to NPR news about the life of George Floyd and stop at the 888 International Market.

A shopping list—rice, tofu, fresh and dried mushrooms, flour, flax seeds, chia seeds, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, kalonji seeds, frozen mock ham (in a cylinder the size of a Pringles can). We buy miso paste, soy sauce, pho noodles, ramen, jasmine tea, mushroom powder, toilet paper, paper towels, and the last package of Clorox wipes. Rice is limited. "One Bag Per Family" the handwritten sign says.

A list of headlines. July 5th, 2020-

"Assessing the Real Coronavirus Death Rates: Live Updates"

"Migrant Workers Who Fear Virus But Toil On"

"China Dominates P.P.E. Manufacturing"

"Prince Andrew Sought Washington Lobbyist to Help With Epstein Case"

"The Fullest Look Yet at the Racial Inequality of the Coronavirus"

"Seattle Protester, Summer Taylor, Dies After Being Struck by Car"

"Chicago Gun Violence Spikes and Increasingly Finds the Youngest Victims"

"Trump Falsely Claims '99 Percent' of Virus Cases Are 'Totally Harmless'"

"Massachusetts Detective Is Fired Over Black Lives Matter Post"

"Trump's White Version of History"

"How to Keep Music (and One Another) Alive"

"English Pubs Reopen, Dividing a Border Town"

"The Last of the Baby Boomers Get a Word In"

"Trump Hosts July 4 Event at White House as Coronavirus Cases Soar"

"Kansas G.O.P. Official Removes Cartoon Comparing Mask Order to Holocaust"

"With Department Stores Disappearing, Malls Could Be Next"

"Mexico's President Is All In for Trump"

"The Week in Business: Shut It Back Down"

"Chilling Word for Renters: 'Be Out Tomorrow'"

So we try our best. We wake up in the morning and put on nice clothes even if we're not leaving the house. We make plans. We wear masks everywhere we go. We stay in touch with those we love. We hope this will end and we can go back to the way it was. We hope to see those we love as soon as we possibly can. We hope and we hope and we hope. And us here, scattered stars across a lonely solar system, cast so far from one another, waiting for that first new dawn and the sun to come back to us after so long away.

2021

Things are not good up in Michigan so Frankie and the boys come down for the spring and summer and we shelter in place at the new farm. "Shelter in place" is all over the news. Experts advising you to shelter in place. Online debates regarding how long we will shelter in place. I like it, though. The phrase. Shelter in place. There's something quiet and soft about it that appeals to me on a very direct level. Shelter in place. Okay. We will.

In the mornings I help the boys with their remote school between bookwork. I'm surprised at how easy I can jump from the story I'm writing to fourth grade science or third grade geometry. Helping Willy with a social studies essay, I think of all those brooding authors in their cabins and locked offices. All those shitty, stern men and the rules imposed upon those they lord over. I have always believed that you should be able to work in the rumble and the noise of the world, bombs dropping and car alarms going off, basements flooding, bills to be paid, the phone ringing like an air raid siren, knee-deep in the dirt and squall of life, humanity shoulder to shoulder with you.

Writing while sitting across from Willy working out math problems on his tablet or taking a break mid-sentence to look at Johnsy's art project, I feel I am finally in the best place to work. In and of the world. It takes all the precious out of what I'm doing and (I hope, I believe) makes it better.

I've had this phrase in my head since Covid hit. "The islands of

the night." All of us spread across the map. The darkness of isolation, and here we are as small bright lights in our walled-off realms. Not all of us are fortunate enough to be with those we love.

In the afternoon, the rooms of the farmhouse are dark with the springtime rainstorms. I'm never alone and that's okay. April is here. The spring birds are here. Saturday night—darkness, white candles, gold-hue lamps, a meal I take an hour to prepare. Alison, Frankie, and I talk after the boys have gone to bed about the Capitol riots and the sentencing of Derek Chauvin and the first few months of Biden. I go outside and stand on the front porch and see the galaxy of light above. The Milky Way, which in the Babylonian epic *Enuma Eliš*, is fashioned from the severed tail of Tiamet, a primordial saltwater dragon, after she is slain by the storm-god Marduk. Stars pinwheeling a spiral, and the light those stars shine on planets. And back inside.

Sunday morning—Alison and Frankie laughing in one of our attic rooms as I walk downstairs. When I reach the bottom of the staircase, Johnsy who will turn nine in July, looks up from his drawing at the dining room table. "Hi," he says. I'm happy to see him. Surprised, because sometimes in the briefest moments I forget we're all here together, and when I'm reminded, I feel quiet inside and my worry lifts up out of me. I smile and say, "Hi" and walk past him into the library to get my phone where his brother sits doing remote school at my writing table. Willy says, "Can you help me with this?" I sit down across from him at the table and I help.

Spring 2021 is a wet season of surprise rainstorms and thunder rumbling in the heat of the afternoon. Wind that knocks trees down in the field. Rain flooding the basement through the cracks in the foundation. The memories I have of their visit are elemental—weather memories, electric sky, burning sun and the unexpected snow of early spring. I remember driving rain, and the quiet after a storm or the relentless prairie wind that eats at your skin and grinds you down.

On Easter morning, Willy and Johnsy dip hardboiled eggs in Paz vinegar dye with brass wire holders. Lifting from the dye—pale yellow eggs, red eggs so light colored as to be nearly pink,

spring violet, mild green. Frankie, Alison, and I set up Easter baskets for them the night before—candy, fruit, and Lego sets nestled in strips of plastic grass.

We take trips to Clinton Lake to swim in the warm, green water. I push the boys on the tire swing and we set up hammocks under the walnut trees. On rainy days Alison makes cardboard robot costumes for the boys and I build a navy fleet and three train cars from cardboard boxes they can sit in. Alison face-paints masks on them with her makeup—a tiger for Johnsy, Willy a robot. There are endless peanut butter and jelly sandwiches made, Lego creations, trips to the creek in town where the boys write "I was here" on the sidewalk with pieces of dusty red brick in place of chalk. Frankie and Alison and I cook veggie dogs, Beyond beef hamburgers, and s'mores on the back deck, and the boys and I watch rainstorms from the overhang of the porch with sheets of water ghosting across the field in silvery walls. We play cards and boardgames, and we make Sculpey clay monsters to finish in the oven.

Near the end of their visit we adopt a pair of rescued donkeys I name Andrei and Holmes after my friends Andrei Merce and Jackson Holmes-Phillips. Frankie works on teaching the donkeys to be comfortable around people and she and Alison build a fence behind the barn to keep them out of the fields by the house. It's a time of heat, sunburn, ticks in the weeds, fireflies, lemonade, Sandy Bull records, army man wars in the grass, singing, drawing, a garden put in by Frankie and Alison, Covid vaccinations in town, heavy news from all around the world, holes and trenches dug, lawns mowed, cookouts, trips to town with masks and bottles of hand sanitizer, sometimes fights because there are so many of us in one place, often sadness at the events of the day but through it all good times, quiet nights, and Alison goes to the university on her pandemic schedule and the boys do school online and Frankie runs the garden and I work on my book.

A week before the boys' flight to their dad's place in Oregon we have an early birthday party for Johnsy at Buffalo Bill Cody Park with cousins from town and purple frosted cupcakes Willy picked out. We open presents at a picnic table and have Nerf gun battles in the hot grass before a storm sends us back to the

farm, the sky darkening and the slate gray clouds churning wild, boiling, rolling in on themselves. Back at the house, the storm hits us, rain marching across the field, thunder shaking the windowpanes, lightning flashing in thick, hot white jags across the sky.

When the boys leave for Oregon, Frankie stays a few more weeks then goes back to Michigan. Halloween rolls into Thanksgiving. By Christmas the snows come. People are buying books and when people are buying books everything is easier. I don't have to tour as much or hustle every minute and plan each hour of my day and worry all night about bills. I buy Christmas presents and I send Priority Mail packages of new toys to Willy and Johnsy up in Michigan and I feel like an adult. Then New Year's Eve, the end of 2021.

A list of headlines. December 31st, 2021-

"Officer Whose Bullet Killed a 14-Year-Old Girl Wanted to 'Change' the Police"

"California Man on Deadly Mission to White House is Arrested, Officials Say"

"Colorado Wildfire Burns Hundreds of Homes and Forces Evacuations"

"As At-Home Tests Surge, Doubts Rise About Accuracy of Public Covid Counts"

"Putin Warns Biden of Complete Rupture of U.S.-Russian Relationship Over Ukraine"

Tonight on New Year's Eve I am thinking of distance. I am thinking of this line from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, "Because of my brother I stray through the wilderness." I am thinking of the islands of the night.

January 1st, 2022

The shooting began when the new year hit. Alison and I went out on the porch in our farm coats and listened to the gunfire. I wrapped my arms around her, and she put her hand on my chest, and we stood silent for a while—the night dark and the wind strong, a sea of stars above us, stars so bright and the sky so clear it felt like you could reach out and pluck one from the field of black.

After midnight, Alison and I made wontons to celebrate the new year. We sat opposite each other at the dining room table; a white dinner plate between us with a square of wonton wrappers, and next to that a teacup full of water, a plastic tub of Tofutti cream cheese, and a bowl of soy breakfast sausage.

A list describing the process-

-Dip a finger into the teacup of water and damp the edges of the wonton wrapper held in your opposite hand.

-Next you swipe up a grape-size bit of cream cheese with your finger and dab it in the middle of the wrapper. For variety, do some with both sausage and cream cheese, some with only sausage.

-Then fold the wonton wrapper in half so it makes a triangle and tuck the edges over themselves to seal it shut. (Each package makes sixty wontons, which may sound excessive, but I've never had trouble eating my half.)

-After you're done assembling the wontons, you fry them in vegetable oil until golden brown and crunchy or (the way I like them) until the cream cheese begins to bubble out the sides.

-You're meant to let them cool, but I like to eat them hot; dipping them in Chinese mustard or soy sauce with a little horseradish stirred in like you would wasabi.

The first two weeks of January were as cold as they've been

since I moved to Kansas. Alison went to the university Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. I wrote each morning from ten on through to the evening. When I felt it more than usual I'd work until late because I knew the things I'd write would come fully formed. On those rare days, the sentences would be clean, bright, nothing to labor over; ideas and stories packed with pain and love and the problems I'd troubled myself with at the time; narrative informed by the weight of my own history, but also light as a breeze, as the sound of a stream trickling over rocks. On the bad days, the words fell onto the page like bricks and sat there lifeless. Nothing good came of that, but I worked through the bad days just the same as the good ones and got what I could from them. Taking breaks, I read Goethe's Italian travelogues, Adolfo Bioy Casares, and *The New York Times*.

A list of headlines. January 25th, 2022-

"For Ukrainian Soldiers, a Nervous Guessing Game on the Front"

"War May Loom, But Are There Offramps?"

"Threatened and Beaten, Afghan Women Defy Taliban with Protests"

"A Shrinking Band of Southern Nurses, Neck-Deep in Another Covid Wave"

"As Lia Thomas Swims, Debate About Transgender Athletes Swirls"

Most days I would end work an hour before Alison got home and spend that hour cleaning the farmhouse. I did this because Alison was unhappy at work. The idea being—make a good, warm, safe, happy place to come home to; floors swept, dishes done and put back in the cupboard, laundry cycled (and folded if I had time), saint candles lit maybe, nag champa incense burning; all things tidy and in their place but lovingly disordered because Alison and I are not prone to tidiness. The house was an

orderly mess of books left in piles on the floor in the library—Victor Hugo, Huysmans, Zora Neale Hurston, Yeats, Eve Babitz, a Taschen book on Rothko, Harjo, Chaucer. A wine bottle half-full and left out from last night on the dining room table or a cutting board with French bread crusts and red grapes. Papers in stacks on the end-tables with unopened correspondence and more books on the bench seat of the table—Brautigan, Frank O'Hara, Anais Nin. Books on the high-back Chesterfield chair opposite the couch—Durrell, Nate Marshall, Marie Calloway, Leroy V. Quintana. Clean, messy, chaotic, well-ordered—a good house. The kind of place I knew (I hoped) she'd want to come home to.

When you love someone, you respond to them. You take in what they put out like you're a satellite dish or a metal detector—and you take it in even if it's not something they say explicitly. Of course everyone complains, because it's human to talk about the small things that hurt us (especially when the bigger things are harder to articulate or deal with), but Alison is cheerful and up for anything, and she shoves down the bad. Capable people are often that way. Alison loves to figure things out, to learn the workings of machines or concepts. When set to a task, she will weigh the variables, look at the problems at hand, and she will learn how to finish the work, often relying upon improvisation if research fails.

Being around someone who knows how to do things is healthy. It's exciting like watching an expert fireman in the face of a blazing inferno or a bird of prey hunting in a vast, winter field or a painter at work—deliberate, engaged, at home with the canvas. But the problem is when things don't work for a period of time long enough to feel like opposition, a person like Alison might take it harder than one used to failure.

When my plans fail, which is often, I move on immediately and think of the next step. Alison, who is used to succeeding by brains, empirical evidence, and sheer effort, has a tougher time with sustained adversity. So, I clean the house. I make sure the kitchen feels like a sunny, healthy place. The bedroom—beautifully decorated and secure as a bear's cave. Rugs pulled back into shape after the cats have spent a day kicking the hell out of them or tunneling along their edges to lie in wait for each other.

Recycling carried down to the barn. Counters wiped clean with a rag. I want her to come home and think, "Yes, this is good. This is my home. It's where I should be. I will stay here and I will know I am on the right track."

The land with its small white farmhouse we bought at the beginning of the pandemic, the life we're living, all of this is good. I know that it's good, and I know she likes it, but I'm also aware that if I were taken out of the equation she'd rather be back home in California. I understand this because some days I'd rather be anywhere but here. These hard winters, that ceaseless prairie wind, the isolation and bad politics—it's a lot sometimes. So I try to compensate for that; to remind her of the good things we have, that this is a life worthy of her love.

Every time the wind picks up and howls whistling around the outside of the farmhouse and she says, "Argh, I *hate* the wind," I know she means it in a very true, substantial, fundamental way and I know I have work to do—that the world I build for us must be better, sweeter, more livable. (Which is to say nothing of the world she builds for me. The interiority of each of those worlds will stay interior and will only present itself environmentally or in our actions.) Still. This much I know—at some point we will leave the farm and go back to California. Our parents are getting older. We will return home and take care of them. We'll leave the farm, and the farm, our farm, will be no more. I have accepted that, but I want to stay as long as I'm able. I want to stay because of the silence at night and the canopy of stars, the vast landscape, the fog in the mornings, lightning bugs in the tall grass at dusk, frogs in the spring, V's of snow geese heading south in the winter and the honking song they make—all of it speaks to me in a voice that's both my own but also much bigger. Of course I know that this voice is my response to what I see and feel, to the world around me. But what we see and feel is powerful too. Just because it's me saying the words doesn't mean it's not the place dictating them, guiding my desires, informing my aesthetics, shaping something approaching a worldview or even a philosophy that says: you must stay here because this place has given you meaning and meaning is important regardless of whether the place is perfect or not.

Today is a cold, clear, sunny Saturday. We had a good snow-

storm last week and now the fields are white, though broken in patches with dry grass, gingerbread-gold in contrast to the blue-washed ivory snow. It's a pretty thing to see from the couch by the window—the sheep and goats walking in the spaces beneath the Chinese elms, the branches of the elms black against the gray, reached skyward like veins.

Up closer—along the wire fence that divides our property from the road—the donkeys graze, heads down, eating what's left of the grass. Along the white picket fencing just outside the window, a group of chickens, red like clover honey, peck in the black dirt left wet by melted snow. The sun has come out from behind the clouds now and they walk steady, purposeful, heads bobbing forward. They are hungry, methodical—a herd of small raptors led by their rooster Joe with his beautiful purple-black tailfeathers pluming out behind him.

In the living room, the dogs Pumpkin and Bella (old and gray-faced now after a decade of country life) sleep on the plush bathmats Alison bought at IKEA in blocks of sunlight streaming in through the windows.

Across the living room, and through the bedroom door, two of the housecats lie asleep in the half-darkness, cuddled together in a pile, one black, the other white with brown patches like a cow. (The black one with yellow eyes sits up suddenly, looks side to side, then begins to lick his friend's face.)

Alison has gone off to town to get shelving for her office upstairs. This being a Saturday there's no rush to get things in order by the time she's home. I sit on the couch by the window and drink jasmine tea from a white cup on a matching saucer. The green iron teapot sits on the end-table next to me with an old tequila bottle now used for water. I drink jasmine tea and I write. I mean, I write *this*. This you've just read. About January. About making a home. About writing this.

When Alison gets home, I'm still writing. She opens the front door and I ask how it went.

"Good," she says, stomping the snow off her boots on the gray and black mat just inside the door. "I got a couple things. I al-

most bought more, but I think I need to go up there and see if I need anything else. I also got those 365 brand vanilla wafers we like."

"Oh nice."

"I made banana pudding, remember?"

Last night she did.

"Right. You working on the upstairs stuff today?"

"For a little bit, yeah."

"When do we eat banana pudding?"

"In about five minutes." I ask her if you have to let the cookies sit in the pudding to soften up and she says, "You can let them sit or you can just eat them." She goes into the kitchen and takes the pudding out of the fridge. "Oh, it's *very* banana-y smelling," I hear her say perhaps more to herself than me.

"How was it at the store?" I say this louder just short of shouting because she's farther away now.

"Not a lot of people had masks. But there weren't too many people, so they were easy to avoid."

I tell her you never know with a place like Target.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Target was one of the safer places to go. Now it's just like anywhere else—some in masks, most not.

"Yeah," she says, loud so I can hear. "Which reminds me. We're going to have to get more N95s before you go to Michigan."

"Was it cold?"

"It's not too bad except when the wind blows. Then it's cold. My car was blowing around on the road." She comes back in the room with two bowls of banana pudding and vanilla wafers stuck in the pudding like a group of people in a hot tub and we sit and eat. Me—on the dark brown Chesterfield sofa, cross-

legged. Alison—on the high-back matching chair next to it.

I ask her, "Isn't there another pudding you put vanilla wafers in?"

"You can also do—just, like vanilla pudding with slices of banana in it."

"Okay, I was thinking of that. How much pudding is left?"

"A lot. You want some more?"

"I think I'm gonna wait a bit. Need to eat a little *food* food first. Gonna try that cashew brie thing with the French bread. You want some?"

"Ooh, yeah," she says, and I get up off the couch and go into the kitchen. From the kitchen, I hear her talking to one of the cats, "Kitten what are you doing? Why are you cute? What business do you have being cute? Do you have a license?"

I take the French bread out of the cupboard and the brie out of the fridge and I make our lunch.

At the end of January I took a visit to see Frankie and Willy and Johnsy at their farm up in Michigan while Frankie's partner Lee Michael was at Sundance. On my last day we drove to town to get groceries. At dusk the snowstorm began and we drove to Costco as the flakes fell in white drifting flurries, the wipers knocking side to side, the light blue and gray and black like a moody, smudged oil painting.

As she drove, Frankie and I talked while the boys sat in the back in car seats playing Minecraft on their tablets.

Frankie said, "The first time we got tested it was a drive-up thing with a big line through a parking lot, and the workers were in hazmat suits. I was like, 'What are we *doing*?'"

"All that early stuff—the uncertainty was the worst. That's what I remember most—just not *knowing*. You'd be on the highway and you'd see those electronic billboard things with the black screens on the side of the road, and the gold digital read-outs flashing, 'Wear a mask,' 'Stay at home and save lives.' That was

terrifying and you—yeah, just didn't know."

"You didn't," she said, nodding, hands on the wheel. It was dark now and the map on the phone mounted to the dash had sent us along a detour. "Where are we *going*?" she said quietly. She dragged a finger down the screen to look at the list of directions.

"We lost?"

"I don't think so," she said. "It's just a different way."

"You know Jesmyn Ward's partner died of Covid?"

She shook her head a little. "I didn't."

"Who's Jesmyn Ward?" asked Willy from the back.

"A writer," said Frankie. "She went to Michigan where Papa taught."

"It was early in the pandemic. Like when you guys got sick. He went into the hospital, and she couldn't visit him, and he never came out."

"God, that's horrible."

"She did a piece in *Vanity Fair* about it. I'll send it to you if I can find the issue."

"Okay."

"I'm pretty sure Alison and I had it around the time you guys did."

"In March?"

"Yeah," I said, looking out at the black and the snow, the dark fields passing, an Amazon warehouse as a long block of indistinct gray then a gas station bright-lit with red neons telling you the price of regular, $2.21, midgrade, $2.46, and premium, $2.90. "Alison and I were super sick but like—I mean that was when you weren't able to get tested. We—our whole area was deep in lockdown so you couldn't go anywhere, even if you

could find tests, and you're hearing all this—this horrible shit about bodies in cold storage, people in coffins stacked in shipping containers, funerals delayed, bodies waiting for burials that wouldn't—y'know, that wouldn't happen anytime soon."

"You guys okay back there?" asked Frankie.

"Yeah," said Willy. "Johnsy's almost asleep."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"Willy, I'm *not*. Don't lie."

"Guys, come on," said Frankie. "Seriously. I *can't* right now."

"We're okay," said Willy. "I'm just listening to you guys talk."

"You still playing Minecraft?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

When Frankie and I first met more than two decades ago, we were carefree even if we thought we had the troubles of the world pushing down on us. We were kids, babies. Alison and I met a few months after I met Frankie. She was still in high school. Frankie was eighteen, just graduated. We were "sad people," though we'd never say it like that. All of this feels so distant now. Being that kind of person. Feeling doomed in a vague sense you could never fully articulate but nevertheless *felt*. How we lived in a world filled with death and pain like the world is always filled with death and pain but we stood outside of it, drifting along without the true horrors of life touching us. Our conflicts—all interior, youthful, minor. At some point you wake up and take notice. Or the world wakes you up and shows its real face. Life is always a monster and you can ignore that monster for a while, but it will make itself known.

We took a right into the mall parking lot—the Costco sign glowing red in the distance with the snow falling all around, and cars pulling into and out of their spaces, and closer in the

people dressed for the blizzard pushing carts full to the top with bulk groceries.

"Guys, get your masks on," said Frankie.

"We're going in?" That was Willy, in reply.

"Yeah, we're going in. So masks on."

That night, I told Willy and Johnsy a story. Under a pile of kid-size blankets on the bottom bunk of their bed, my feet hanging off the end, Willy to one side of me, back to the wall, Johnsy to my other, we talked about me leaving and we talked about the movie we watched earlier and then I told the story.

The night before I did the first half of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*—the birth of Gilgamesh in Uruk four thousand years ago, two-parts god, one-part man, and how Gilgamesh became a tyrant in Uruk and how Aruru the goddess of creation made the beast man Enkidu so Enkidu would keep Gilgamesh in check.

I told them about the fight and the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu after the fight and the adventures they had, and of the death of Enkidu and the sadness of Gilgamesh, left alone without the friend he'd loved fiercely, the brother so beloved.

Telling the first half of the story the night before, in the darkness of their bedroom, the house quiet, I knew I'd made a mistake. What came after the death of Enkidu? The death of Gilgamesh. Willy had just turned eleven and Johnsy was nine—nine and a half—and a tragedy, though timeless, is a lot to lay on a pair of kids already saddened by two years of plague and uncertainty.

So, after that I did the story of Perseus and I used the version from *Clash of the Titans* because that could be told in a hopeful away, and I promised an end to the Gilgamesh story the next night.

I'd thought up a new ending, a better end, while we ate dinner a few hours earlier—Frankie and the boys and me at the dining room table with what Willy called "emotional pizza," which

were pizzas he'd made because he was sad I was leaving—and also sad at the state of life, the world, his world, of everything.

Our emotional pizzas (also known as "depression bites" he said) were ciabatta rolls cut in half with marinara, Miyoko's mozzarella, thin-sliced tomato, black olives, and Italian seasoning, baked in the oven.

Sitting at the table, eating the emotional pizzas, which were the expression of a little boy's worry, pain, and love, the story came to me suddenly and in full, and three hours later, after a Pixar film on the couch, after cleaning up and after brushing teeth and dressing for bed, we began the second half of the story.

"You guys remember last night about Gilgamesh and Enkidu's great adventures and how the gods punished them for their wild ways by making Enkidu sick and how—"

"Why didn't they kill Gilgamesh instead?" asked Willy, cuddled up to my side, arms wrapped around my arm.

"It's not fair," said Johnsy to the other side of me, face against my shoulder.

"The gods aren't fair. The gods are cruel and vindictive and they make *mistakes*."

"That's like the Greeks," said Willy.

"Right, like the Greeks."

"Keep telling it," Johnsy said.

"Okay, you remember finally Enkidu dies after being sick for twelve days?"

Johnsy, sighing, "Yeah."

"Yeah," said Willy.

"Enkidu died and Gilgamesh was very sad with his friend gone. But before he died—I didn't tell you this last night—*before* he died, he promised Gilgamesh he would go to the Land of the Dead and come back as a ghost with the secret of how to be-

come immortal so that Gilgamesh, who was, as we know, one-third man, and because of that, mortal—so Gilgamesh could live forever. Now Gilgamesh—sad, mourning, alone in the desert for months, wandered the wasteland. While he walked, he came up with a plan. As soon as Enkidu returned from the Land of the Dead he would use the secret of immortality to become immortal, but he would also use it to make Enkidu immortal so then he'd always have his friend with him. You guys awake?"

"Yeah." Willy.

"Yes." Johnsy.

"Finally one night—late at night, late, *late* at night in Gilgamesh's wandering he saw fog in the valley below him, a great fog, misty, gray, moonlit, and from the fog there began—a light began to glow from that fog, a purple light, and as Gilgamesh walked from the desert hills down to the valley, still sad, still mourning because his friend was not there, the light grew brighter and then the light emerged from the fog, and the light looked like its own fog, a dark glowing purple and green foggy light moving toward Gilgamesh and out from it stepped—"

"Enkidu," said Johnsy, quietly, but happy. "I imagine him like a He-Man character."

"That's pretty right on. I imagine him that way too. Well, it was the ghost of Enkidu, and Enkidu's body was neon green and see-through, like see-through plastic, glow-in-the-dark see-through plastic."

"Scare Glow," said Willy.

"Like Scare Glow. Right. So, Enkidu steps out of the fog and the fog drifts off into the darkness and Gilgamesh—he's *so* happy his friend has returned and they just—like *hug* each other and they *laugh* and Gilgamesh says, 'My friend, my brother, you have returned,' and Enkidu says, 'I have returned from the Land of the Dead and I have brought you the secret of immortality.' Enkidu, who is very tricksy, just like Gilgamesh, tells his friend how he stole the secret of immortality from the Queen of the Dead, but that to harness the magic of the secret they would

need to slay the Mastodon of the Sky, a terrible creature who created all the bad weather of the world."

"Global warming," said Willy.

"But way before that. Thousands of years ago but, uh—same general idea. So, yeah, they would need to travel through the wasteland and climb the Ladder of the Heavens up to the clouds and fight the Mastodon of the Sky and once defeated the Mastodon of the Sky would give them the key that unlocks the secret of immortality. *So*, in the Land of the Dead, tricksy Enkidu stole the secret of immortality, which was kept in a small clear red stone, but he also took two important objects. One—a map to the Ladder of the Heavens, a map no one could see. It was—um, it was like a—*memory*. Once you took the map you knew the way. It was, like—like *inside* you then and you saw the way in your mind. Two—the second object was a lantern, a red Edison lantern."

At the farm store two days before, I'd let the boys pick out one gift each. Willy, lover of plants, chose a tiny purple succulent in a black plastic pot. Johnsy, with his engineer's mind, picked out a red metal and glass lantern the size of a pear, an "Edison Mini Lantern," the label said.

I put the lantern in the story because when you're telling a story, a way to get kids interested is to bring in something tangible from their lives, something they can relate to. A glow-in-the-dark Enkidu which was like the Scare Glow Masters of the Universe toy they loved so much, and the lantern, the Edison lantern from the farm store.

I wanted them to have things to connect with in the story because sometimes a story is not just a story. You tell it because you want to give the person listening a part of yourself, or you want to tell them a truth they can carry past the telling, a tool they can keep and use when needs arise.

Time spent with Willy and Johnsy had become a rare thing and I felt desperate to give them as much as I could while I was there. In the middle of a pandemic, and after four years of Trump, shootings, and division, we were all hanging on by the

smallest thread. Back in Kansas I had little impact on the boys' lives. I called whenever they could talk but that wasn't often or enough. Here, face to face, I had to make up for lost time. The story needed to be something bigger. It might be another year before I saw them again. I had to make this count.

I continued. "So, Gilgamesh and Enkidu traveled on—on for *days*, weeks, days and weeks across the wasteland until they reached the Islands of the Night. Now the Islands of the Night was a place where the sun never shined, where it was always night, and night with no stars—black, black, *black* night. Totally dark and you could see nothing. Not even your own hand in front of your face. So, as Gilgamesh and Enkidu got closer to the Islands of the Night, the days grew short, dark. Soon when the sun rose it barely shed light and they walked along in the dimmest, *palest* murk. One morning the sun didn't come up at all and they were in the night. They had reached the Islands of the Night, and because it was always night, they walked in pitch blackness with Enkidu's lantern held out in front of them. But even with the lantern—even *with,* they only saw a foot or two ahead as they walked, and they walked *so* slow, slow because who knew what was out there in the darkness."

"Scary, that's scary," said Johnsy, yawning. "Too dark."

"Too dark," repeated Willy.

Too something is a Johnsy thing. As a toddler, any food he didn't want, regardless of what it was, became "Too spicy." If there was something he'd rather not do, it got a "too." A few years ago, during a visit from Michigan to Kansas, Willy and I sat on one end of their grandma's sofa reading a library book about the Mariana Trench, the deepest spot in the sea. Willy, he was six, Johnsy, sitting at the other end of the couch staring at a *Duck Tails* cartoon on TV, had to have been four or just barely five. I said, "Hey, Johnsy, come read this book about the Mariana Trench with us" and, without looking our way, he quickly chirped in his high little kid voice, "Too deep." So, "Too dark," here in the context of the story, was sincere. Johnsy was caught up in it, in the drama and in the danger of the moment.

Lying there in bed I told them, "They also walked slow because

they were on a chain of islands and when they reached the waters, when they reached the *sea*, they would need to swim. They swam with the lantern held up in front of them, swimming in the blackest water with who knows *what* in the deep, the world around them dark, the skies dark, the water dark, and once they reached the next island they would get back on the land and keep walking. Often they wanted to turn back. Gilgamesh and Enkidu had no shame in that. They knew it was natural to have doubts when things got hard, to want to quit, and to be afraid, but they believed so much in what they were doing that ending their search was not an option. So, they swam and then they walked, the lantern lighting their way. They walked for days, for weeks, slow—slow because they didn't want to stumble upon anything unexpected or fall into the water, and they walked and swam and walked and swam and one day, or night because who knows which it was, they began to smell something *foul* on the breeze. Foul like underground things. Soil and rotting mushrooms and mold. Dark things from deep, *deep* inside the Earth."

"Yikes," said Willy.

"As they got closer they saw red lights. A dozen beady red dots in a cluster like pepperoni on a pizza." Both boys laughed at this and then I did too. "But they were *eyes*. The red glowing dots were *eyes*. There in the darkness, they came upon a great black spider the size of a house, lit only by the red dots of its eyes and the pale light of the Edison lantern."

"*Oh god*. I would be *so* scared," said Johnsy.

"Shhh," shhh'd Willy.

"It's okay. Yeah, it would be scary. The spider—he was very tall, he towered over Gilgamesh and Enkidu. He, the spider, said in a deep, raspy voice, he said, 'Whoooo daaares disturb Rannacor, God of the Spiders?' and Gilgamesh replied, 'It is I, Gilgamesh of Uruk, and with me, Enkidu, man of the beasts. We have come to your land to find the Ladder of the Heavens.' The God of the Spiders' many eyes flashed in the darkness. 'What business have you with the Ladder of the Heavens?' and Gilgamesh said—he said, 'We have come to kill the Mastodon of the Sky. May we pass?' The God of the Spiders was silent for a while

then he rose to his full height in the darkness before them and his eyes—his dozen eyes narrowed into mean—into *mean*, dark red *slits*—and he said, 'the Mastodon of the Sky was sent to the Land of the Clouds as punishment six years ago for taking away the sun and changing the Islands of the Light into the Islands of the Night. He spread darkness across my land and because of that my islands are a sad place where no one will visit and I have become lonely."

"Oh that's so sad," said Johnsy, rubbing his face against my shoulder like a cat.

"Rannacor said, 'You may pass, my friends, and I wish you luck. For your journey, I bestow upon you the Luck of the Spider.' Because as you guys know spiders are good luck. 'May it aid you in battle with our shared enemy. I give you this secret as well—when climbing the Ladder of the Heavens you must maintain a steady pace. Slow your course for even the *briefest* moment or speed up in the slightest and the Ladder will vanish and you will fall—surely to your deaths. Climb steady, my friends, climb sure, and you will reach the Land of the Clouds.' So Gilgamesh and Enkidu thanked their new friend and onward they went, walking through the darkness, swimming once they reached the sea, walking again. Until—weeks later, *months* later, in the horizon to the east they saw the first light of dawn. Just the barest, *smallest*, dimmest pale light but brighter each day as they walked. Soon they saw day ahead of them, though still in darkness themselves, and then one morning—one morning they *had* a morning. The sun rose and they felt the light of day on their faces for the first time and—and it felt *so* good. It felt so good to have the light shining down upon them. Even Enkidu looked less like a ghost and more like a man made of strong, hard, clear green crystal, and the friends rejoiced, 'The day is here! The light has returned!' Gilgamesh and Enkidu walked through the day and through the night and on the 6th day they reached the Ladder of the Heavens which stood in the middle of the desert wasteland and reached far, far, far up into the sky and beyond that the clouds. Now all around the foot of the ladder lay the swords and broken pieces of armor from the heroes who had attempted to scale the ladder. Amidst the—"

"Oh I would collect *all* those swords and armor," said Johnsy.

"—amidst the swords and armor lay the bones of the heroes who had tried to scale the Ladder and slay the Mastodon of the Sky. The heroes who had fallen from the sky because they'd gone too fast or too slow and hadn't kept a steady pace like Rannacor warned. So now Gilgamesh and Enkidu climbed. They climbed steady and they climbed sure and though they were tired they pressed on. They climbed through day and through night, and sometimes in the night, great black birds would swoop and dive and attempt to knock Enkidu and Gilgamesh from the Ladder, but they climbed while fighting them off and they climbed as the dawn came and they climbed as night fell, and one day they reached the Land of the Clouds. Up at the top of the ladder, they stepped onto the clouds—clouds which weren't soft like cotton candy or vapor like our clouds but solid as a path, solid and sturdy, and along the road of clouds Gilgamesh and Enkidu walked on. Soon they came upon a great golden throne in the distance and on that golden throne sat the Mastodon of the Sky who—he had the body of a man and the head of a mastodon. He wore fur boots and a fur loin cloth and across his chest in an X shape stretched thick chains of steel he used as weapons and armor. He had tusks—great, long, curving ivory tusks on either side of his trunk. The Mastodon of the Sky's specialty was weather disasters. Like the *worst* weather, and I don't mean—not rainstorms and snow, because those are good things. I mean tornadoes, hurricanes, hailstorms that destroy crops, heat waves that bake the earth. Those were all from the Mastodon of the Sky. Now, if the Mastodon were a nice person—if he were *nice* he would give the world all the good, *regular* weather it takes to sustain life. He would send the rains in the spring and he would send the snow in the winter, the sun in the morning to heat the soil and help the plants grow. But the Mastodon had a mean, twisted, *evil* heart, and because of that he sent down weather that would kill and hurt and destroy. The Mastodon sent the killing weather down from his throne on the clouds. For six long years he had been a scourge of the Earth. He had brought death and misery and famine, and he spread misfortune like a sickness. As Gilgamesh and Enkidu approached the Mastodon he stood up to his great, terrible height, squared his shoulders, straightened his back and—he was much taller than Gilgamesh and Enkidu—and he said, 'Who invades the home of *God*?' You see, at this point the power had gone to the Mastodon's

head, and he considered himself God among gods. 'You men who come to the Land of the Clouds will suffer the fate of all other mortals who face me,' and the battle began. The Mastodon swung his great chains, lashing at Gilgamesh and Enkidu, knocking them down again and again, and Gilgamesh chopped with his axe and Enkidu sent bolts of clear, purple energy from his hands, and the battle raged on. Were either hero alone, they would be no match for the Mastodon of the Sky, but together they were able to defeat him. Stunned by Enkidu's energy bolts, the axe of Gilgamesh buried deep in the center of his chest, the Mastodon fell back on his throne, breathing his last. Enkidu said, 'We have come for the key to the secret of immortality,' and the Mastodon laughed a bitter, cruel laugh. 'Fools,' he said, his voice beginning to fail him, 'The secret of immortality is for Gods alone. The living die and the dead live on in the hearts of the living' and with that the Mastodon slumped forward from his throne, fell into the clouds below him, and vanished. At that moment Enkidu understood what he must do. 'Gilgamesh, my champion, my love, my friend through many battles, I will stay and sit on the Throne of the Clouds, and I will bring the good weather to the Earth. You must return to the world and live your life. I cannot. I will send the rain and the sun and if the weather becomes evil like before, you will know I am making war with some great foe up in the clouds, but be certain I will fight what may come and the rain and the sun will return again. When you see the rain and the sun that give life, you will know I am here and you will be with your friend.' So Gilgamesh said farewell to Enkidu in the clouds and climbed back down the Ladder of the Heavens and returned to his life in Uruk. When the good rains came, and when the sun warmed the Earth after the cold of night, Gilgamesh knew he was with Enkidu and he was glad to be with Enkidu and like that he lived his days."

2022

The last week of summer I'm in the back of my rental car at an interstate rest stop. I pull the thick, black blanket I bought at Target a few hours earlier over me then tuck it around my head as a hood to keep out the cold and I disappear like a magic trick. I'm a pool of liquid black in a black car with black tint windows on a black Minnesota night—safe inside a void. Drifting off to sleep to the sound of idling semi trucks, I think of Byron's final song on his final album released a month before his death. It's a magician's story, a man late in his career, an old pro, and what will he do for his next trick? He's a magician so of course it's only natural that he will disappear. And he did—the magician in the song, and Byron too. Of course a magician comes back from his disappearance. The trick is incomplete without a triumphant return. Byron's magic show is over. The curtain falls. Lights out and the ballroom darkens. But the audience? They stick around.

In the back of the rental I think of a show Byron did at South by Southwest in 2006 where at the end of the set the band dropped out and he played just the softest guitar part, mantric, rhythmic, cycling a quiet trance, hypnotic like an act of mesmerism, dangling out on the breeze, a thin and trembling strand of sound while his band stood motionless in their places watching him, waiting for the end. Standing there in the hot Austin sun next to Byron's manager, I watched the crowd hang on every last reverberation as the piece grew softer, quieter—nothing but a subtle, pretty thing left bare for you to hear. It didn't dance for your attention and it didn't struggle to please. That small guitar part was Byron at his best—lovely, fragile, purposeful, uncompromising.

In the morning I'm woken up in the back of the car when my phone vibrates hard on the console between the front seats. I pick it up and it's a text from Jeremy Willis: "James. I'm so sorry. I found out about Byron when I was checking your Instagram last night. I didn't know him like you did, but I knew him,

and I know what he left here for all of us. I'll keep it close. I don't want this to sound silly, stupid, or flippant, but I can't help thinking about the last night the three of us were all together and where I went that night, and where you brought me back from. All of it makes me remember one of my favorite David Berman lyrics, and it feels right in this moment: 'When they turn on the chair/something's added to the air. Forever.' I love you. Stay safe."

The night Jeremy spoke of—the night we nearly lost him in that strip-club parking lot—is in my head all morning as I drive to the next tour stop.

It gets me thinking of a conversation Byron and I had a few months before I left Portland.

It was the fall of 2009. Frankie and Jude were off in Kansas already. I had a month left in town and Byron and I were headed back to the house from Plaid Pantry where I'd bought us a couple bottles of wine and a bag of Ruffles. In the front pocket of his light blue sleeveless hoodie he had a small bag of cocaine a friend had given him.

Byron rarely spoken unguardedly about his music, but tonight he was both drunk and high enough to get to a vulnerable place he didn't often go.

"I don't know, man," he said as we walked. "If this doesn't work out for me, I got nothing."

"Yeah, me either. I put all my eggs in one basket."

We crossed the street—a black Subaru Outback slowing to let us pass.

I waved at the Subaru and the driver inside nodded and gave a peace sign without lifting his grasp from the steering wheel.

Up ahead, the streetlights were out of order and we walked in the near-dark past Craftsman cottages in rows, shadowy porches, concrete steps dark with moss, ornate wooden columns supporting attics or second stories.

On one porch, a girl our age sat on a wooden chair in the darkness, smoking, watching us, the light of her cigarette moving from her mouth to her lap.

"Glory or—" Byron made a motion like stabbing himself in the chest samurai-style then laughed quietly. "I'll be homeless if I can't pull this off," he said.

This was partially a joke, not a funny joke, but a dark thing said lightly, a heavy statement delivered with enough "fuck it" to feel careless. That aside, Byron meant it, and in a way he was right. But he wasn't entirely right. His music did work out. He had what every artist wants, and what most will never get. Byron's audience came immediately to him upon the release of his first album. His songs were well-loved by critics and fans and his sense of musicianship lent him a credibility hardly anyone else in our weird folk scene had. Byron could've kept touring. He could've kept releasing records. He didn't because while he had that rare and sweet gift of song, he also had that dark consuming thing inside him a lot of our friends have, and as the darkness grew stronger it began to threaten the light of Byron's talent. When Byron stopped working (or chose to step off the ride he was on) the dark pushed out the light and when the light was gone so was my friend. Alone. Without those who loved him. At the Old Town Trolley Depot.

I'm meant to be in Portland in a week to play talking songs for Byron's memorial show. It's a tough thing to square yourself with—the idea that you are heading toward a funeral for someone you loved. Meantime, I play shows to pay my way across.

I'm touring in support of an English band with songs on the radio. The shows are all sold out, the crowds hanging on every word Lana sings. Watching them play after my set is over each night, I'm thrilled to witness a band at the height of its powers. They are an intelligent fury—a windstorm of feeling and anxiety and truth, and in its articulation? Literature. Existential dread. Hope. Anxiety. The urgency of love. Subtle humor. Everyday British life. Human connection.

I'm sitting on the floor in the back of the club while the band does their soundcheck. The empty rooms of the club (the halls,

the bar, the stage, the pool room) darken with the fading light, which is soft gray through the high row of windows—gray the color of fog, a mousy gray like felt you'd cut out and make into patterns for a hat.

The view to the street is blocked by show posters taped to the glass and because it's the first day of fall I think of construction paper holiday decorations taped to windows—orange pumpkins, black witches, bright white skeletons.

The sound engineer in his booth leans close to the mic and asks Lana how she feels. He means the sound. The vocals and guitar in her monitor. How does she feel about the sound.

Lana sits cross-legged on the stage, her guitar strapped on, a paperback copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in her lap. Rubbing the back of her close-cropped head, she says, "How do I feel in *whot* sense? Like in *general* orrrr—" and I laugh too loud, but then the sound guy laughs and then the band laughs and I don't feel so bad.

Lana shakes her head and laughs again, maybe embarrassed, and the sound guy says, "Sorry, sorry, sorry."

"No, I'm fine," she says, closing her book and standing back up. She adjusts her guitar strap and looks side to side at the band. "Y'alright?" Nods. Thumbs up. The keyboard player looks down at her phone and squints at it then turns and walks off stage. The drummer taps a cymbal, once, soundlessly while the bass player takes off her strap and follows the keyboardist.

The sound guy says, "If you're good, I'm good."

Drive. Think in spiraling repetitions as you chew over a thought that has been bugging you. Write when you're stopped. Buy food in gas stations. Look at the big plastic jug of pickled eggs on the counter at a service stop and imagine opening it and dumping a blue slushie inside. Look at pink cowboy hats on spinner racks and oversized belt buckles with turquoise or pearly abalone inlay for sale at truck stops. Talk to strangers if you have to. Ask questions. Get advice.

Getting advice about restaurants in a new town feels like par-

ticipating in some storied, ancient ritual. Where is the well that is safest from bandits? In which valley will we find the biggest herd of mammoths to hunt? Where's the best slice of pizza in Chicago? Is anywhere that's not gross open after last call?

Lana stops by the merch table and offers me a styrofoam to-go container from her dinner.

I say thanks but decline because I haven't eaten anything but an apple all day and eating in the club before the show sounds awful.

"You sure? It's quite good. A curry—aubergine, tomatoes, rice, okra." She says "tomatoes" like "tah mah toes" and okra like "awk ra" and it's charming and I smile and reach out for it.

"Sure, I love okra."

"Good. You'll like it."

She hands it to me and then Jeremy Willis and his wife Ella step into the doorway across the room and show their IDs to the bouncer. Lana heads off to the green room and I get up and raise my arms with victory fists in the air and shout, "JEREMY AND ELLA!"

Drive. Suburbs then stripmalls then woods. Green fields moving in the breeze like some kind of dance. Desolate plains. Prairie under the shadow of clouds.

On the edge of town—billboards reading "Trump 2024, Take America Back," pro-life billboards, billboards for hotels, gas stations, gun shows at convention centers, class action lawsuit lawyers, and car dealers.

I find a café to kill time before our show and it's full of people on dates. The men talk. The women listen. I try to write a postcard to Alison, but the voices of the men blend together and overtake me. "I basically live in the moment. I just want to do research on Native Americans like for free and be like I'm giving back, like a gift from me. Jesus was a freakin' *socialist*. I'm hoping that works out and I'll build a tiny house RIGHT THERE. I'll just go with the weather. Did you kinda grow up

in the hood? I can tell dangerous situations. I've been watching politics since 2008. Why would I want to end my story because life is too hard? I have to remind myself new ideas are always suppressed by blowhards. You don't have to LEAVE. He's obsessed with proving God doesn't exist. I have friends in the CIA. I kinda low-key fuck with that, though."

Alison, I wish you were here so we could comment on what we see then get in the car and drive in silence or talk for hours when we don't want to stop (talking, or driving). I wish you were here because we understand each other and because sometimes nothing makes sense even when it's beautiful. This is one of the many powers of love. Another good thing love gives you is context. It brings order to chaos and in that way love is both a curating act and its own sort of creation. It lends direction where there is none and it shapes a world. Love builds you a house to live in and it gives a name to that house and it tells you how to live in it and provides you with a list of what to do while you are there.

I sit in a diner with a plate of hashbrowns and eavesdrop on the people behind me.

The girl tells the guy about two of her friends at work. One is called Ashley Parker and Ashley Parker has been at the office three years. The new hire is called Ashley too but since she's new she's nicknamed "Horse Ashley" because she has a horse. The girl talks about how Horse Ashley loves a young adult detective series called *The Adventures of Echo Lexington*, the newest book of which is *The Judge, The Jury, and Emily Fang*. In my pocket notebook I write, "Emily Fang. Good name for a goth band."

I sit in my car and eat. I sit in diners and eat. I sit behind the merch table and wait for people to buy things. I sit on the hood of my car and watch the river piers at dusk and think of home, and a line I love from Faulkner: "How often have I lain beneath rain on a strange roof, thinking of home?"

Rainy Nebraska. Waking up in the car after a cold night at the rest stop, the glass speckled with clear dots of water that shake in the wind but don't drip down. Stare at them and what a beautiful thing to see, what a quiet moment, out here alone on the

interstate in the first week of autumn.

It's colder the farther west you go. This morning, waking up, I saw my breath in the backseat of the car. Waking up alone, cold, hungry. Also—happy.

Autumn in Wyoming. Gold dappled hills. Steel gray skies and dark pines. Raindrops spatter the windshield in a solid downpour until you can't see in front of you and you're forced to pull over at the next offramp, the yellow glow of a gas station bright in the center of the gray and the streaming water.

In Somewhere, Wyoming I pull off the interstate after dark and go to the Cowboy Café. That's how I explain it in the group text I call "the writers group." I tell them I'm in "Somewhere, Wyoming."

Kenny Nathaniel texts back, "Rock Springs?"

I say I have no idea—that maybe I'm outside Green River on the 80.

The Cowboy Café is across a gravel parking lot from a gas station and all around that darkness and high desert rockland and the sound of the interstate. Inside, along the far wall, is a bar counter with a rangy looking cowboy hunched over a plate of spaghetti. Everyone else sits at the opposite end of the room like they know something's wrong with him and that the smart thing is to keep your distance.

I sit a few tables away from the cowboy and place my order with the teenage girl who comes out of the kitchen with a stack of napkins for me.

I order the apple pie and fries and she asks, "Won drank?"

I tell her, "Sure, yeah. Water, please."

"Yuh won ahce?"

I shake my head. "No, no ice, please."

"Be ry up," she says.

I text the group, "Oh. There's something on the menu called Cheddar Munchers."

Kenny texts back, "My kind of place."

The room is very large like an old banquet hall or an Elk's lodge and the walls are mostly bare—white or maybe beige—with a few paintings of horses and desert sunsets, all by the same artist and all for sale. The painting I like best is the close-up profile of a horse staring sad or maybe bashful at the viewer. The horse is only ninety dollars. I think for a moment of the tour money burning a hole in my pocket. At the Chicago show I sold all my books and tapes and walked out with a thousand bucks in cash and a Venmo full of transactions. Surely I can reward myself with the bashful horse.

From the kitchen you hear the shuffle of some old, slow country song—snowy drums brushed over pedal steel and horns like one of Byron's songs.

Ethan texts, "I tried looking up the Cowboy Café to see where you were and there's at least three in Wyoming. Kenny, I would have also guessed Rock Springs."

I pull my wallet out of my back pocket, set it on the table, and take a photo of it—brown and tan leather, braided stitching on the edges. Carved into the leather is the image of a horse nuzzling a foal; around them, giant flowers as a decorative border. The wallet is from Willy and Johnsy, a thrift shop gift, and the possession I love most because they were so proud to buy it and give it to me, and because it is a beautiful, sturdy thing, the only wallet I plan to own for the rest of my life.

I text the group. "If my wallet created a restaurant it would be the Cowboy Café."

Kenny, who is also on a book tour, writes, "I went to one in Jackson Hole the other morning."

Ethan texts, "I stayed at an outlaw-themed Best Western in Rock Springs one time and I'm pretty sure the restaurant in the hotel was called the Cowboy Café."

The fries are salty and hot and I eat them with ketchup and mustard—and fast. The slice of pie is one of the best diner pies I've had—the crust soft, vegetable shortening instead of butter the menu said, the filling sweet but not too.

After I pay my tab, I stand in the parking lot and look up at the stars—the soft canopy of them, not many but bright.

I think of what Marcus Aurelius wrote about stars eighteen-hundred years ago: "Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars and see yourself running with them."

Across time, across history, the stars and us.

There is something beautiful and lonely about looking up at the stars. I like it quite a lot, but don't do it often. Why? We're driven through the day. Pushed by our goals and to-do lists and the fear of not paying bills. Where I live, the stars are the best you could ever hope to see. No light pollution from the city. So dark you can't see in front of you when you get away from the farmhouse. But how often do I look at the stars? As often as I stare at the moon for no other reason than to see it or watch the sunset or stay up to see the dawn. Not enough.

As I climb into the cab, an orange and white cat makes a low run across the parking lot then stops and looks at me.

I snap off my seatbelt and get out of the car.

Under the heels of my cowboy boots, the gravel feels like ice, like snow, something fragile you would ruin if you stood there too long.

The cat stands completely still, watching me.

"Hello little kitten," I say. "C'mere, buddy."

The parking lot cat sits, then licks its shoulder dramatically, turns, and runs back the way it came.

Driving through the mountains the next morning, the sun warm through the glass, I ask the future for this list of things-

-Give me rest and companionship and sweet, quiet, slow mornings.

-Give me the capacity to love without conditions.

-Give me glory paired with self-awareness.

-Give me days with no ache in my heart.

-Remember the work that we did. All of us. Especially those who fell by the wayside.

-I ask the future to be gentle.

-I mean, that's what I want most of all. Be *gentle* with us. Go *easy*. Treat us kindly because the last few years have been anything but kind and we are tired. We are worn thin like a thread stretched to the limits of breaking.

-Thread, please don't break.

-Let us stay a while in the warmth of morning.

I get lunch in a diner and on the placemat I work through a list of things to do in order to be a better person. I write: Be generous, capable, loyal, trustworthy, passionate, compassionate, earnest, stable, and slow to anger. Don't stress, never yell or nag. Be conscientious, kind, present, active, tough but gentle, resolved to fight. Keep a stiff upper lip but be emotionally available. Always check in. Be honest, honorable, consistent in your ethical code and personality. Be selfless, helpful, up for anything socially. Be fun, daring but not reckless, considerate, wholesome, healthy, supportive, energetic, flexible, down to earth. Keep in touch. Be a listener, confident, real, and not guarded. Be easygoing, classy, not tacky. Be serious but funny. Don't say anything you don't mean or believe. If you don't have an answer for a question say that you don't. Never complain unless for humor. Be unworried. Give solutions. Be spontaneous. Always look to grow intellectually, acquire knowledge, and help those who need it. Be patient, hardworking. Act out of love. Be weird, lighthearted, direct. Take advantage of the short time you have here. Always rise, and always read well. (Of course doing all of that is impossible and often we're monsters, but

the idea is to try.)

In Utah, I get a hotel because it's too cold to sleep in the car. For the past two days people have been ordering the hell out of my new book thanks to a video someone put on the internet. I have made more money in these forty-eight hours than I make in half a year. Paying for the hotel I feel guilty—guilty for spending the money, for being fancy.

Earlier, waiting for the tank to fill at a truck stop, while a gray rain fell over the fields and low rockland, I wrote the group text: "I keep seeing these orders come in and it's great, but here I am sleeping in my car at rest stops every night. Maybe I need to be fancy and find a hotel. Get a good hot shower."

I'm supposed to talk with a famous singer in the morning about Byron's memorial and I keep hearing him (the guy I'm meant to talk to) singing about how he drove to New York in a van with his friend and how they slept in parking lots and didn't mind. When I think of that I feel tough again and I know I'm better off unfancy.

But a shower. A hot shower after sleeping in the car this long sounds beyond nice.

I text, unrelated, "Frankie, bring a coat to Portland. If it's anywhere near as cold as it is here you'll need it."

Frankie writes, "I'm in San Diego with a jean jacket and no money. We borrow or thrift stuff when we get there."

I reply, saying, "I'm gonna spend some of this internet book money and get us a couple Goodwill coats."

To which Frankie replies, "That's some real Lost Generation shit right there."

My hotel is on the other side of the mountain pass near Ogden. As I'm pouring my bath, I get an email from a screenwriter in LA asking about television rights for the book everyone's buying.

I power down my phone, pull off my dirty checked blue and

black cowboy shirt with the busted-out elbows, drop my boxers, step out of them, and ease into the steaming water.

Waking up in the hotel bed, I see the white walls in the darkness and the big, black TV screen and I think, "What did I *do*?" Maybe a good goal in life is to get to the point where you never again wake up thinking, "What did I *do*?" Or maybe a good goal in life is to get to the point where you *always* wake up thinking, "What did I *do*?" I'm not sure which is best. Maybe you do both. Maybe one without the other is either too much chaos or intolerable boredom. But if you have both chaos and boredom, do they cancel each other out like a double-negative? If boredom and chaos cancel each other out what does that mean? Does that mean *life*? *Existing*? No, existing is defined by the highs and lows of chaos and boredom. Life is not life without peaks and valleys, fluctuation, polarities, and variation. But how do you live wild and safe at the same time? I want to be stirred up like a dam about to burst and I want quiet like the softest golden dusk—the dusk when everyone says, "Oh, isn't the light pretty right now?" I want the wild and I want the good quiet.

Driving—every car on the road is speeding past me.

Driving—a restaurant billboard in Utah wasteland advertising something called "Brigham's Bacon Bombs."

Driving—my phone on my right thigh. I get texts from friends I haven't heard from in ages and the texts say some variation of, "Oh my god your book went viral?!" It feels like things are changing—moving faster than I've expected them to move. Stacy Mary Nilsson texts me from Portland about Byron's memorial show and how she wants to arrange something just for the real friends and now people are upset with her about it. Frankie texts to say her flight has landed in Oregon. Willy texts from the number he and Johnsy share to say, "We miss you. How are you?" I pull over on the side of the road, turn off the engine, and text back, "I miss you too! I love you! I'm good. What are you up to?" I sit in the quiet car and wait for a reply.

Alison, I went to the river we loved in Idaho, but it wasn't the same without you. It felt like a photo of something beautiful rather than the beautiful thing itself. In the distance—a dog

barking. The water—dark and ruffled by wind but still because of the dam on the other side of the desert hills—the rocks the color of dusty roses, thickets of bright yellow grass, and along the shore on the opposite bank a wall of green cattail reeds moving in the breeze. I text to tell you where I am then you reply and ask if I'm going to swim and my reply that "As warm as it is here the water's cold but I might anyway" sits unsent. The symbol for the internet signal at the top of my screen turns from a little ramp shape to the universal sign for no, a circle with a slash through it.

After I swim a while, my heart hammering in my chest from the cold, the dock is warm beneath my back, and the wind dries my hair. It's so silent I can hear the water dripping off me and falling between the dock boards, plicking the surface of the river. Lying there I'm reminded that part of love is thinking of all the things you want to tell someone when they're not around. Love is making plans for the future and including the one you want to be with in those plans. Love is feeling chopped in two or diminished beyond your powers when you are alone and walking the Earth lost, forever looking to return, and love is when they draw you back to them when you're so far away. And when you're away? You're always headed back. No matter where you go between leaving and returning, as soon as you leave, you are heading back home. You do what you came to do, but the true north of love pulls you to the one you love and your job isn't done until you are back where you started. Love at its truest is longing when you are away and feeling safe when you are together.

Driving again—radio stations, static. Empty road. Mack trucks pulled to the side. High desert.

It's two days before the funeral.

I am thinking of Byron.

Driving—I promise myself to never let Byron down.

I say it out loud, "I won't let you down, Byron."

Driving—the world passing by, time passing, life passing, and I'm still here—a little more alone now without my friend, but

still moving and there are good things to do and places to go and love left to give.

To be here is worth the pain.

Alison, I am not there with you and god how I wish I could be.

Driving again—the hills to the west, a train in the distance in the shadow of a plateau.

I wonder where you are and I wonder what you are seeing and whether you are thinking of me.

I decide not to think anymore and stare-

-at the train

-and the plateau

-and the hills to the west.

When I think of those I love I see a map of the world and the map is black with thin lines of white defining the borders. On this dark map I see spots of gold where we are.

There, look—a spot of gold shining up from the black in Kansas where Alison spends a quiet Sunday alone in the farmhouse.

In San Diego, another gold light—Frankie at her grandparents' place before flying to Portland for Byron's funeral.

A third light is just a few hundred miles from me as I drive west. This is Willy and Johnsy at Jude's place in Bend. (After the funeral, Frankie and I will drive them back to Kansas. Then we will all be living in one place. Frankie would rather be in Michigan just like Alison would rather be in California. But together is good and I'm glad to see what's next.)

Sometimes on the worst days it feels as if the gold lights have all gone out, that the map sits in perpetual darkness. This is the darkness of fear, isolation, strife, ache, loss, disagreements, personal wars, social implosion, the darkness of now, of these past few years.

Often we are waves pushed to shore by unknown forces. We are knocked about, uprooted, spilled into new streets, disappointed, cared for with the deepest of love, sent spinning into the far-off like a rock hurtling through space.

But tonight?

Tonight I can see us.

The Islands of the Night.

Waiting, trying, loving, hoping.

Our lights shining gold in the deepest pitch blackness.

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About the author

Adam Gnade's work is released as a series of novels and audio books with musical accompaniment (self-described as "talking songs") by Three One G, Bread & Roses Press, Hello America Stereo Cassette, and the Numero Group. *I Wish to Say Lovely Things* is his seventh novel and the third book in his "Home and Away Quartet," which includes the novels *After Tonight, Everything Will Be Different* and *The Internet Newspaper*.

Books by Adam Gnade

Available from Three One G and Bread & Roses Press

Locust House

In *Locust House*, Gnade writes about his homeland in the tradition of regionalists Louise Erdrich and Willa Cather. Gnade's Southern California is a place of border clash, of a glimpse of stormy sea from atop coastal hills or rollercoasters, of ratty beach apartments and punk shows.

"*Locust House* is so dense, so angry, and so honest, and so everything that we need today to survive in the world." –Szilvia Molnar, author of *The Nursery*

This is the End of Something But It's Not the End of You

Like Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy, and Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, this is the story of a human life, kindergarten to adulthood, ratty beach apartment to bohemian party house, feverish basement to ramshackle farmhouse.

"[F]reewheeling and wild, tender and warm, funny and a little bit sad, and altogether something you won't soon forget." — Juliet Escoria, author of *You Are the Snake* and *Juliet the Maniac*

Float Me Away, Floodwaters

A pocketsize novel concerning modern farm living, wayward country punks, and the New Old West, *Float Me Away, Floodwaters* is a documentation of life on the margins of society, in the places forgotten by the city—the honkytonks and interstate campgrounds, the ghosts of cattle-towns and the desolate strip-malls.

"This book reads like a prayer that we can all somehow stay afloat in this country deluged with sadness and pain." —Bart Schaneman, author of *The Green and the Gold*

After Tonight, Everything Will Be Different

Existing in the space between *Trainspotting* and *Like Water for Chocolate*, Adam Gnade's self-described "food novel" frames each chapter around a meal. *After Tonight, Everything Will Be Different* takes place in San Diego taco shops and rundown beach apartments, on the amusement park boardwalk at 3am and in cars bound for Tijuana and drunken glory.

"Anthony Bourdain meets Roberto Bolaño." -Nathaniel Kennon Perkins, author of *Wallop*

The Internet Newspaper

The Internet Newspaper is about working at the online version of a daily newspaper during the weird, clumsy, well-funded early days of the internet. Set in Southern California in the year 2000, Gnade's book shows an America that does not exist anymore—an awkward, wild, innocent place that has since given way to fury and regression.

"There's an old saying that goes there are decades when nothing happens and weeks when decades happen. That's represented fantastically in this book, set across four days in the early 2000s." -Happy Saturday Records

Like a child born of the bell hooks classic *All About Love* and Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, Adam Gnade's latest autobiographical novel takes a good, hard look at love in many forms—romantic, platonic, love of place, of chosen family, of destiny and purpose. Structured in large part as a book of lists, *I Wish to Say Lovely Things* is a big-hearted look at what it is to stay loving and gentle in a violent age—a graceful, philosophical, clear-eyed beacon with which to light your path through this painful, exhausting, and tremendously magnificent life.

Praise for the writing of Adam Gnade
"Lucid, life-affirming prose from an empathetic master." -Yannis Philippakis of the band Foals

"Adam Gnade is the kind of talent who will remind you how necessary it is to stay human, stay empathetic, stay true." -Szilvia Molnar, *The Nursery*

"The king of underground fiction. Every word is truth." -Nathaniel Kennon Perkins, *Wallop*

"Adam Gnade is a writer who can capture what it feels like to feel everything." -Dana Margolin of the band Porridge Radio

"Adam creates another world through his writing, one that is visceral and sharp, and helps this one make more sense." -Lora Mathis, *The Snakes Came Back*

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