

OUT WITH THE BUZZARDS

WRITTEN BY: SLEDGE ADAMS



For the first time in history, for those that really know the truth on a sort of thing, the world went back in advancement. A true depression of intellect, and of technology. A reversion to simpler times. Quietness. Of the unspoken. And what from that? The ignored. The forgotten. The fringe.

After the fall, that mark'd famous time of our history, society hindered such a regression. But the fall was not the end. It was only the beginning. We continued to sink. To sink into the depths of this barren grimace. This place we are to enter unto now. A round circle aimed to fit through this pegged hole we call... The Square. That is the setting before you, this warning marker not dissimilar to where you currently reside — In each corner of The Square exists a person to exit, ones with Vision. With stories to tell and the vision to do so. Visions of truth. The truth to see such a backwards track, such irregularity to form. The Vision to see that a course correction is needed. And a given ability to do just that. In this, the first of Visions to come, you will witness a chance. A chance for humanity to correct itself. To bring the train back onto its needed tracks, before it is too late.

Here, in the fourth generation after the fall... or is it the fifth? A truth muddled by all sources. This, generations after the fall. From the very center of The Square. In the dirt, a desert of soil that once grew, stands a seed. Will it take root, or tumble on, barreling amuck as all the other muckish things do? The garbage. The rabble. The other pieces of dirt. What say you? What say I? Shall we bet?

No need. Here exists the story, an exodus of the first with Vision. An attempt, and beginning to save us all. Do you believe it? You will.

Preface
Part One
Part Two
Epilogue

*NOTE FROM ADAM: ***This PDF includes only the finality of Part One. Any Illustrations are merely Rendering. No portion of the type font, nor creative elements herein are intended for publication. Thank you in advance for reading. XO*



PREFACE (Pre-Birth)

What do you think of when you think of life?

Unless life itself is too much to take on at once. Let us think of one life then. Singularly, your own, or there is nothing more to be observed personally than of this. So...

What do you think? What do you see?

Does this *vision* involve death? "The end". All beginnings have them. Do you see it? Yet stretched out before you? A truth? The fire breathing within must come to a halt one of these days.

Does that end bring about certain actions? To prevent? To exhaust?

Or when you think of life — do you only see the beginning?

?

The buzzer rings, it is time for me to go. To leave the void. To arrive. I leave everything I knew here in the expansive space of Nu. I have no choice but to leave it behind. I enter, ripped from a safer home, to the truth of the life I will come to know as my own. An unsafe home, in an unwanted circumstance.

But I will not let it take my power.

I will not let that define MY life.

Origins

(once) upon... a time... as all fables go, BONG. I am. As one fire dwindles: The match strikes. I burst forth with flame. Dimmed for many years to come. Yet, as I breathe: I am alive.

I am here. In this world.

I have arrived. But I will not fully form for some time. For consciousness awaits its fate. In the childish delusion of fun and games.

Once upon, an origin.

Very well, you shall have your origin story, but you may not like its inception. More on this in a moment, I for one, am not ready. I must acknowledge the middle. That meddling so-and-so.

If you are in the time of in-between, the middle, I wave, for I too am there. Hello.

What have we made of our time spent here thus far? On earth... In this Square...

I often feel like a round peg here. Do you?

What have we done with our time? Have we spent it with any them, him, or her? Have we spent it well? Have we been cherished? Have we cherished any one?

Now, think more personally, dig deep, what about the one you always carry: yourself...

Are I affecting? Are others affected by me?

When we —yes, you and I— think of life, does it come like a flicker? All together too fast?

Memories competing for attention? Here with an instant, gone in a flash?

AHHH, does it come to you all at once now? Pulsating. Is your heart soothed by it, or is it beating too fast? Do you sweat from it? Are you yet overwhelmed? Is that exciting? Does it illicit a life worthy of being lived? Or is it a cue to get off of the train? A need for its end?

Is life old to you?

Or are you Nu to it still?

How very meta.

But let us sink further into ourselves. Is this the life we wanted to live? That you wanted to live?

I ask myself too of this. Once you finally come into ownership of this life. The tangibility of it.

The ownership of self. For before its grasp, you can only but wonder where you were before all of this. Pontificate. Be lost in the unknowing. But this, this life you are in possession of, you own it. No one else has it. No one but you.

Before you came into life does not matter here. It never really did. Wherever you were, whatever luck or misfortune gave you the circumstances you've been given is both relevant and irrelevant. It was, now you are arrived at is.

Perhaps, there is a chance for you still, here, in the life you've yet known. Is there? A chance? Do you dream of it? Of that thing? What is stopping you from achieving it? Your potential? Your destiny? That which is your true *vision*.

Life. One life to live. How will it be, from the middle, differed, grasped, cultivated, owned and lived?

This is what I think about on the way to school, on the bus, in each breath when I feel alone. My lonesome thoughts fill me with: life.

Life. Here it is. We have to begin somewhere. That origin story, you so desperately wanted. Perhaps not out of desperation, so much as of curiosity. It cometh—

Silence. A void. Then light. All encompassing. Wherever you were, you are here now.

BANG. Life is soundless, riddled with noise. But make no mistake life is but a light. And it shines (for a non-specified amount of time). It's here and then it's out, whoosh, like a flame.

Blink and you could miss it.

Candle burning, candle yearning, candle turning, candle what do you sew?

WHOOSH. Sweet and flavorful like that of a spice for some, flavorless and all ashen wick for others. The wick of your life can get cut short, it can burn out on accident, blown out by some wind, perhaps intended for another upon a cake of hosted candles, or of a directionless wind.

Whatever the means that extinguish your candle, whether by force or circumstance it's going to run out at some point. It will one day burn out. So what am I doing? What do I do now? And you, as well. While living you have a chance to burn hot and to shine bright. For life is simply that: a flame. A fickle flame.

Oh how it glows. Mesmerizing. Hot to the touch. Enchanting. Terrifying.

Feel it. Note how your light is shining now. Do you feel it glow within? Pulsating.

Come closer. Between the pulsing heartbeat, do you hear? Yes. YES.

Come closer. Feel that? That is heat. Fire. Intensity.

What fuels yours? Is it a person? A job? A task? A calling? Any combination, you fortunate soul.

Or is life a bore? Are you chore'd by life? One task to the next? Without a settling rest?

If life is such a bore, such a pain, if the flame is too hot, if the wick proves too thick, then why does your life happen? Why do you exist? I have, on occasion, asked myself this.

You may back away and ponder. But don't forget to breathe. The fire needs oxygen to provide more thoughts within. To keep it glowing.

Deep breaths. Or shallow. Just keep breathing as you continue to think. To blink into existence.

(Inhale. Not so bad, is it? Breathing in. Life is freeing)

(Exhale— Not too hard, or Light extinguishes).

The funny thing about a fickle flame is how quickly it may relieve itself, how fast it grows into the dark unknown. All that remains now is a memory of, ash... dUSt. Then onto the next. Where to? The Shadows?

For, you see, life isn't too long. Often, it is too short. Seldom is it just right.

I'm aiming to turn my own around. I breathe in, and aim next to where I'll blow.

Which light may I extinguish along the way...

?

What is your first memory? Mine is watching my Mother's hand roasted over an open flame by my deadbeat Dad. I was four. Did I have memories before this? Or did I officially come into this reality upon seeing this? I have too much time and none at all to reflect upon this. Most children are given beautiful, rose colored glasses as lessons. Fairy tales. Divine. Robin Hood's a plenty (my favorite). As we all love fairy tales in the Square. They are bullshit. Warnings in the subtext. Hope for the bold. As much as I love them, I must write my own. Received / contrived? You judge. I know my truth and wrote it as best I could. It begins as such:

My fairy tale (conception) — Warning, it is the origin you wanted. So desperately. But one you may not enjoy.

Mother and father had sex. Where are my manners, I must write in style expected, but be warned, what I say next will be jarring.

Once upon a time, an adoring teenager with uterus, but 2 years beyond the age I am now, was raped by an older teen with penis at their high school dance. Yes, he is parent for he penetrated another. But that doesn't make either parental. Neither wanted a child. Neither were ready in any sense of the word. Least of all the home to the child, the uterus.

None of that matters here. It is law. Refuted points within the Square. For births are mandatory. No matter the circumstance. Ever since the Fall.

But how was this birth to be a family? How was this violated young body, with one not punished? Neither praised. Just expected. And accepted, immediately.

How after such, was a relationship developed? Circumstance. Legality. Precedent.

It goes without being spoken, but a phrase that must always be uttered: this is expected. Man + Woman with baby = Family

It happens regularly. Behind it, families are built. Backed by. And so, I live.

I was not planned.

I was not wanted.

I am the product of rape.

Ripped from wherever I was, I came to be.

I was not planned.

I am not wanted.

I am not safe here, on this untenable farmland just outside of Comfort.

But it does not matter. None of it matters. Their responsibility is to ensure that I get here. That is the extent of their parental obligation. For once I am here, then I am left to my own devices to continue, or not.

Take morality to your own bed. The Square cares not. There is nothing illegal about my existence, my origins. If legality be a moral ground.

It is not.

My beginning, the procreation, the mere inception of me could have been joy filled. Perhaps some are. But mine was not. From inception, to light's lit—my wick has always been ashy, and highly processed syrup. My wick has been puckering, winds blowing most abreast.

Yet, I persisted.

I am here, regardless of the plan and want.

Happily Never After.

I am here. Now what? That is all that was expected of me. To arrive. To be nothing, is most likely. To be miserable, a carbon-copy, or just abused for the lack of capability to do so—that is the expectation.

But I will shock even myself as I come into my own, for I will truly be.

You just have to have the *vision* to see it.

Expectation is a wicked thing. Look around! Nothing here is of life. Only the wick's end. This is where life comes to die.

If you have but a sense of a humor, look out: Upon a barren land, in a loveless relationship. Mother, who must have been fun, childlike at one point. Now squandered. Lifeless. A zombie. And Dad who was... as he is, endlessly. Consistent. Angry. Enraged zombie. Do not pity me. I am granted the gift of alone time. How I love to wonder upon my own. There I live. There, I can truly be. Such sights. Such beauty. Even here in the ash, the rubble. I can dream.

I could lie and tell you I am happy go lucky at all times. That I beat to my own drum loudly, no matter who is watching. That I make music... but you cannot make music when there are no instruments. When the ears surrounding do not wish to hear a beat. When there is no air to breathe in before music outpours and omits.

That is my reality.

Yet I hum. When I am alone, I soar. I sing. *I can be. I can continue. I can make music.*

Music hums and cascades through me. I do love to listen to music. We have a radio and a singular TV, with a handful of options upon each. They are Square sanctioned programs. Highly cyphered through, but that is not the music I refer to. I refer to the universal cadence. The wind makes music. The dirt, the birds—you cannot remove that from this world. No matter how desolate and decayed it is. The world still has music to it! The winds are of such a musical nature. As they rip, unexpectedly threatening to split the Square down the middle—oh how sweet. From the soft to the spiraling, swirling clouds. From the fog that usurps all landscapes. And above all, the birds. The birds, birds, birds! How I love the birds. Above and around us at all times. They are not scared of the winds. They sail them. They are wild. Musical and free. This is the music of my life.

How it must be to feel the scores of each note upon their wings. Beating. Strumming. I hum along as they flap, dive, and beak.

Sure. I guess, given the nature of my inception and the disinterest of my upbringing, I am “an optimist”.

Watch as an optimistic child plays, in the rot. In the decay. With twigs upon land inherited to be tilled. But charred and blackened as is all the villains fate.

My first memory is the music. At 4, I heard the music of the wind, and upon their backs granted me the knowledge that I might not be alone for much longer. For on their very breaths came the sentence of my Mother, “I am pregnant.”

Music. It crescendos around me, as the wind swoops behind and lifts me to this knowing. This secret. I am not to be alone for much longer. As it is said over and over, repeating its beauty to me. The wind whips it deliciously into my ears. Ricocheting to me this musical cascade on tufts, such beautiful, perfumed winded lavender, the likes of which I could not ignore. Birds soar and greet me. Around and around they spin with each joyful, each “I am pregnant” thought of this “I am pregnant” pregnancy. Things will be different. This Nu baby will be loved. And—

My first memory!

As joy fills my lungs, I jump to see where the noise of “I am pregnant” is coming from. To whom it is spoken. “I am pregnant.” Where could my Mother be, as she speaks? I flap with the birds, I rejoice with their musicality. We must all celebrate. I jump, and jump, without the ability to see, and that is the wind assists — it lifts me. I hover in the knowing, to find:

Through the slit of the never-quite-closed main bedroom window, a sight I wish very much to unsee. An important one, therefore un-deletable, as the brain keeps such things. To mull over and to be processed, forevermore. I saw Mother speaking. I saw her repeating this. “I am pregnant.” Over and over, but it was not with joy that she expressed these joyful wordings.

Forced to speak by a brute. A beast. My Dad. He was torturing her to say it again, and again. Burning her hair. Then her hand. And in this moment, my “optimism” changed. The winds holding me long enough to see. Breathless, I am unmoved. A witness. I come in to be.

At 4 years of age, the winds shifted. There, in a deadened field, I saw the truth. For the first time. I knew of my fate. And I went from rejoicing a shared life, of selfish desire for company, to fear. Fear for that baby. Fear for competition of resources. Fear for my Mother. But never fear

for me. For, everything within me, all of the wind there was within my lungs, was in and all around me. As I met the winds surrounding and blowing through me—I felt the desire to scream.

All within and around escaped, until there was no wind left.

I fall hard unto the ground, colliding with the death of earth. The death of this idea. The death of childhood.

As a child of silence, the sounds escaping was felt by only those within the orchestra alongside me. Of the wind, and especially within the birds most towering. For there rang a truth most piercing. In my silence, this outpour of wind, they screeched, squawking.

The birds stopped playing their music and howled, screeching. They said but one thing.

Uniformly, they cawed, spinning wildly: run. RUN away. RUN.

Had I listened to the impulses, to the shifted wind, to the birds surrounding and warning me,, perhaps there would be much less to say here upon the pages before you. Perhaps happiness has less to write upon. Perhaps happiness has less of a legacy. But I'll not know outside of speculation. For at this moment, I am stuck watching my Mother's hand burned deeply by a beautiful, fragrant lavender candle. S-Mothering this memory, cutting an imprint of deep burn into the recesses of my mind, almost as deeply as it is unto her hand. All because of the soon to be Nu wick in our collective "lives". This new flame. All of this sorrow for a baby.

And the threatening potential death of optimism within me. NO.

The music sounds. I cue those around me, the wind and the birds. All here in the backyard. I will not let this defeat me. I will continue, changed, ever growing, adult now. I see. But I will remain true to myself.

At four, I became five... six. I became seven and also eight. I became a full blown adult, more so than anyone can be trained. I am. I am made to be, me. Alone. I will be.

All of the truth here spoke loudly, reflects too loudly, upon the origin of my own story.

Unplanned.

Unwanted.

Alone.

This candle before me, both internal and of lavender, is a sight into my own inception. History repeating itself, as it too often does.

I jump. But I no longer jump for joy. No. I stop jumping for joy and I start jumping out of rage.

That is the wind I ride upon now. That is the shift from this fated day. My first memory. And I will not stop jumping for many, many years. I will not stop jumping for rage until the rage seeks wrath upon its aim. I will not stop jumping for rage, until rage has its fated, necessary day.

Rage.

Rage, rage, fucking rage. It is arguably the AGE of it. R-AGE. For I am twelve now. And by any measure of a thing, it would be said that rage un-gilded is to be. One can be trained to behave. But as you see, there was no teaching me of this. So I am all encompassing, a ball of pure and ultimate rage.

I am the epitome of it.

I have fire within.

But only you and I know of this. For on the outside, I am shy, perhaps. I am silent. I am socially reticent.

Shifting tides circle, collect and pool at me, every day. They have waited to begin their chance at what I will be. Without any training, I condition them to be what I need. I tend to the raging embers, I poke at their fires, and I never let them escape. I keep them in the belly of my fire-pit. Stay there. Stay warm. Stay safe. For once they are let out, who knows if everything will burn down in its wake? Yes, I know better than to let this rage out. *It is not your time. Not yet.*

I reflect upon this often. My origins. Perhaps too often. How and why was I brought to this world? It surely was not with the expectation for greatness. Though we all have the potential, I guess. I was born into circumstances through a cycle of abuse. Expected abuse. I say

expected, given context clues for this was learned behavior my father possessed. Sometimes when he is in a drunken stooper, I can hear him softly choking back memories of his own abuses that he has endured. That which he mirrors, and now perpetuates. A cycle of abuse. This is and was all acceptable behavior, wherever in whence he came. This is indoctrinated behavior. This rapist. Any watcher would note this was deserving of only one thing now: to change. To be cutoff. To be put to end.

Behead the snake.

Stay quiet fire. Stay in your place. Today is not your day. But make no mistake, stay lit, for I will be the change if I have to use every splinter of my own flame to burn it to the ground myself.

This ends with me.

This stops here.

No more.

One day...

Mother's been gone 5 years. All that is left is R-AGE. The outward and the inward rage: Dad and Me. He's of the age of expression. Allotted rage, without consequence. I am subject to the quieted fires within. But make no mistake, they are stoked.

Such potential. I could be all things.

No one has said this to me. I should scarcely believe it. The audacity of self to see such potential. And yet I can feel it in my gut. I will not peak at this. I will not be extinguished.

No one has said this to me. No. Least of all my father. For with it solely being he and I here, little is expressed. Nothing of a positive, encouraging nature. Yet it persists. This feeling. I feel it within. It billows through me. It hugs me with each raging pulse. Like the wind, with every ounce, and every fiber of my being: this I could be. Potential. I have hope for such. To be! To have a reason to exist. To fulfill this potential.

Yes, I could be all things. I might even prove myself right upon this. Even when dealt out this low, wayward stack of cards, watch on for I can and maybe even I will build a house of cards powerful and mighty. Even from this. I will stack my cards high. And knock many houses down from up on high. Fear my quieted reckoning. Shudder in my wake.

Hear me roar. I am not much one for loud sounds, or any sounds, truly. In a family as stifling as this, you learn quickly how to hold your tongue. To diminish your sound. To listen more than you speak. I may never speak again.

Yet it persists. My rage stays inside, stays within. Stays boiled down. But it always simmers.

Listen. STSSSSS. Can you hear it? Perhaps that is the inheritance of a cycle of abuse. Holding ones tongue and then lashing out upon anyone you can get your hands on. To claw. Who cares to be heard? To be seen. To be felt. It's all one thing: to have control. We all desire this. The upper hand. A hand in it to give.

Where we, outward and inner rage differ is that I know right from wrong. I know who my exact target is. It won't be just anyone. This R-AGE has a purpose. A point. And that is why my house shall be plentiful. Shall be built! Stacked high, and solid.

Throughout my approach towards adolescence, I have had my rushing—and at times reassuring—doubts. But throughout the rollicking rolling waves of ideology, of rolling feelings, I always sit with this boiling, simmering rage. STSSSSSS. It never leaves me. Not for one second.

And it rustles on to say: I could be all things. You trailer trash kid of death-like land, rotting. You rotten scrap of food. You—YOU—YES. Even I could be all things. STSSSSSS. I say this, like a mantra, to calm myself, to reassure. It is my one companion. At night, it tucks me in. I could be all things. And in the morning, it gives my feet rise, to plant sturdy upon the ground. I stand tall, I do not sift. I could be all things.

I could be all things, even villainous.

I saw a flicker of it. Here on the anniversary of her leaving, I note this latter possibility. It haunts me. It scares me. I am ashamed of it. Of myself. And I... I regret my actions. I regret this potential.

Standing tall 5 years to the day she left, I am faced with the lie (?) I told myself. For I told myself it was an accident, but now... I'm unsure. You see, I'm the reason she left. I'm the reason it's only he and I here.

This is my fate. Alone with rage outward, and no means to express it.

I'm the reason because... of this fire inside. My temperament. I scared her off.

Mother left the fourth of June. It was a Tuesday. A seemingly insignificant day.

Mother went to town to buy the frozen processed bread. For fresh produce is beyond scarce these days. It exists mostly as a myth. Most of the money in this land goes to a war we will never discuss, out of bounds from the Square, which none of us shall ever leave. We are trapped here. Here, with our processed foods, and our stale, cold bread. Thankful we have any crumb to nibble upon at all.

She said she would buy the bread herself. But what Dad failed to see is that she had brought with her luggage, as well. We do not have much in the way of possessions, but I've calculated that she packed enough for a trip. To where? She packed the essentials. And essentials are all she possessed. Even those essentials weren't really enough to get by with, but nevertheless they were packed.

At a quarter to three I watched my Mother leave.

And a rise within me grew as soon as she did. For I was never to see her again. I was not quite 8, yet considerably older.

Context, and perhaps a bit of circumstance:

The interminable thing, well the issue is, that she was about to give birth. Due any day. A threat most imminent. For giving birth under the dome of the Square is a most dangerous labor.

Under any circumstance, that is the measure. But under an abusers roof, it is a fate worse than death. It is insufferable, so I would imagine. You almost pray that the baby, wanted or not, dies under the doctor's work. For to bring them here... We had been down this road before. When I was 4, and all too grown up, she had lost that baby. To, what only can be described as, his relief.

There may have been other losses. Mother was quite anemic. But if there were more, I was not of knowledge upon them. I was more concerned with my own light. Selfish. But this particular baby was coming. Almost at full term, she took the essentials. Of herself and of the child yet to come. She had but one dress sewn. Making room, but not getting too attached to the idea of a thing. I never saw her sew it. Perhaps an indicator that she indeed been pregnant a time, or two... or six, before this. How could I not notice another bump, upon her stomach(?), between 4 and 7, the clock did not chime for her to give. But at my 7th, this one seemed to stick. This one kicked with such life force, I thought she had cooked up a little satan. A true Heiman brother, for which is the heritage I am to live.

Kicking and kicking, already from within. Clawing. Already it was a terror. Imagine what it would be once it escapes. This scared her.

I could see it in her face. Her posture. Her gaze. The way she began to stare at him. And then... at me, too. Somewhere in that last month, that May, things changed between her and father.

She began to find her backbone. Her spine. Her protective instincts. A Mother bear came out, unlike anything I had seen before. Mother seemed without rage. But it turns out we had more in common! She was an inward, such as myself. And with that fated May-day, she became an outward. Somewhere she would stay. R-AGE. R-AGE. So much fucking rage.

And that difference, perhaps by the ignition of this omnipresent switch, caused a course of difference between us as a pair. We no longer took to one another. Though always unwanted, previously Mother had at least acknowledged me. Had made me feel as safe in her eyes as I could. Made me feel seen. But that May-day, she began to view me differently, too. As... weak (?), as other. As different.

I began to attempt an outward appearance, finding every inconvenience a nuisance. My very existence to be a disturbance upon this flaccid earth. To trip would not simply be to collide, it would cause a cataclysmic and seismic venture. I would curse at the ground. My R-AGE, was of frustration. And misplaced. Nature deserves better. I began to kick at things. To hit things. To yell in my all too silent way. And she saw it all. She watched. Not out of spite, nor coaching.

Not even would she look on with curiosity. No, she watched on without batting an eye. Determining what I was. What I would be. Instead of a hand up, I would be greeted with a glare most horrific. She was through with me.

I never had the impulse to hurt an animal, and had no neighbors to play with. Nor cousins to fight with. But the gestures I made, and some of my impulses of staring, were a forewarning. I was seen as “calculated”.

“What are you thinking up (concocting)?” Mother would often ask. Not out of curiosity. But to wager her own safety. The baby’s safety. To see how alike my father I am. To note the use of my newfound outward R-AGE.

One night, as she stood up to my father. After drinking away what little spare money we had left, he passed out in an old truck with jerry-rigged plow upon back. And in the middle of that very same night, she found me with a box of matches, attempting to set his car ablaze. I burnt two of my fingers quite badly in the process. It didn’t matter. I was determined to end him.

I struck and I struck and I struck each and every match.

That was June 1. Three days later, she would drive away in the very vehicle I had attempted to rid us of. The one I had so failed to burn down, to the dis-May of my own two crispy little fingers. Un-flenching, I was upon each strike. She watched on. She did not help. She evaluated. And I guess what she found, is that I was too late. I was without saving. I was not good for her and the new baby.

She left because of me. To where? She wasn’t close with any family. None that I knew of, anyway. I knew no one outside of this home. It was just us. This forced family. This unwelcoming lot.

We had a telephone beside the small television set. But it never rang. With the exception for bill collections and the Square Newspaper proposition.

To where? We aren’t a social bunch. I was impulsed to say social family, but the hierarchy isn’t much of the familial sort at all. Best to stick to the facts.

To where? Mother didn’t have a lot of friends. Nor extended family. Nor any one to turn to.

Stick to the facts. We lived in the house father grew up in. A trailer that’s floors weren’t all the way straight. If you set down a ball, it would roll all the way from the sink to the front door.

Father tried to fix this once, with a cylinder block wedged underneath a portion of the trailer, but it only made matters worse. Note the carpeted hole three steps beyond the front door, where, if you’re not careful, your foot will go straight through it.

To where? Certainly not to his family. I am glad I never met his parents. He often states, “if you think I’m bad, you should have met—” And I’ll leave it at that. For, I am truly glad I never did. I am glad they are but a memory for him. Before I’ve any memory of it, his parents were here. Somewhere. I feel them looming. Looming in the non-where. I think I could be sensitive to such things, but this house feels neither warm, nor lived in. Like me, the house just is. Before me, there is an almost nothingness to it. Good. No remnants. No shadows. Nothingness. With both sets of parents not in the picture, his having both expunged, disappeared, whatever, and that is good.

To where? It could not be her family. Her family wanted nothing to do with her upon my birth. Forced to have me. Forced to live with this opportunity and this curse. Forced to go it alone, without a care what happens to her... or me. None of us mattered. This was our punishment. For her gluttony. For her insatiable, satanic desires. As if rape is desirable. So, she most certainly would not be welcome to that branch of the tree, less it be via a noose.

Her family. Unlike Dad’s, live in Comfort. They still exist. I pray I never meet them. Imagine how awful that would be. Tempting. Tempting to know just how bad they are, just how awful a face composed of such could be. All of the nerves attached to such a face, beating back into such a cold, calculated heart. Family. HAH. They live just somewhere in town. Not a great distance away. Just inside the wrath of Comfort. It is but a 15 minute drive from one end of this to the next. Somewhere in there. Those overseers. Those that punish by leaving a pregnant 14 year old to the rubble, to the waste of an abusive, forced marriage, on a land un-tillable—that is a shunning of the worst kind. No one benefits from this.

No wonder she had such R-AGE.

But... to where? And without me (?), I get it.

Her family, I think I know about where they live, for there is a section, I present the facts: for, if there were ever a tractor pile up on the way back from coming out of town, at the beginning of grade 1, for example, that she would avoid. An entire section of town existed that we never drove past, no matter the reason. No matter if the road flooded, no matter the storm: dust, high winds, tornado warning. No reason was enough to go down and through that section of town. No matter the cost of time and resources, no matter the repercussive beating at home that would await her, she would avoid it. She avoided that section. That potentially quicker way home, and for what? Because she wanted to avoid someone. Somebody. What fear that must be. The lengths she went to avoid an entire section of town. They must be alive still. They were when she drove me that 5.5 years ago. Maybe they are not. Perhaps it was some memory she avoided en route thereof. I will know one day. I will go to that section of town, but before I do, I know she did not leave that fated June 4 and head towards that sparse of land. No.

To where? What if they are dead. Is that a good thing? On these conditions of these here parts, the life expectancy is low, at best. If you survive the pregnancy and the birth. I suppose they are all dead. The whole lot. Her father having worked in a plastic factory, toxic. And her Mother, a mystery, whom probably rotted out long before I took my first breath. Perhaps that's why she was kicked out. Glad she'd ruined herself, so that he wouldn't have to look at any reminders of a Mother she was invariably too much alike. All speculation, but do the math.

She, Ethel, was known to be quite a spit fire. According to my own mom.

My Mother inherited none of this. So she thought. But in that last month, I could see it within her. Long since suppressed. What if Dad bonked it out of her? What if that is her true essence? What if she was so alike Ethel... it scared her very father, before me?

What if I am the cause of its end?

Before May, I never saw my Mother raise her voice. I never heard her much less defend herself. There's not much a point in trying against a beast. So much R-AGE, unless you're willing to fight to the death. Perhaps she had learned that the hard way. I imagine she had. By the time my memory serves me, I had adjusted to seeing zero effort from her. In the generation before me, I imagine that is perceived as weak. But to me, this is a tactical survival skill. Sometimes to fight only prolongs an end.

To where?

To where?

TO WHERE? I hope she finally was able to drive by whatever she was avoiding as she left. To face it. I hope that she faced that, with her new outward R-AGE. Faced it head on, and then continued to wherever it is that she went. Good for her.

June 4th, my Mother had developed a backbone and she had had enough. My Mother and her essential suitcase, walked her and that baby out of this house, out of Comfort's grasp, and straight out of my life. My chance at family left with her that day. And in the shadows of her absence crept a truth: Dad. I would now be the subject of his intentions. I, alone.

Why was I left, you may ask? But you already know the answer.

When I struck those matches, over and over. I think she could see the dangers within me. The quietness always stirring. An explosion brewing. In that moment she could see the determination of my R-AGE. For she had been watching from the window. Always watching. It was no swift lighting spree. I was trying to formulate lightning for hours. Boxes and boxes of matches. With my first year at school happening, I took note of opportunities. Yes, I had been collecting the little matchboxes, stealing them, if you will, from the pipe smoking janitor at school. A couple at a time. Not entire boxes, just a few here and there. Then I got more clever, more bold. I would steal from wood piles. And then in the store directly. Small matches. But a couple bundles at a time. I would stow them in my shoes. Which in-effectively broke them some times. So, I stowed them in my caboose. Anywhere but my pockets, out of fear that they be asked to be turned outright.

The Square makes an example of thieves. Above all else punishing, thievery is the worst kind. Do not steal in the Square. So I didn't. I hid my evidence. I did not steal. I was never caught. Never would be.

Watching from the window, she watched me strike match after match. Box after box. Intended lightning. It must have been a frightening sight. A child with so many secrets, so many boxes, under your very nose. So many threats, in the silent: STRIKE. STRIKE. STRIKE.

Me, a natural idiot, as it had been previously thought. A mute. An absolute rage-less sort of specimen, sitting here, pre-meditated, striking blow after blow. Intentional. See, I was a late bed wetter, even at 7, sometimes still I had the usage for diapers. I bring this up, because diapers, resourceful things! They had mostly helped in this case. Anyone that's ever worn or seen one knows that a diaper knows how well it keeps everything just so in its place. Making for the perfect utility to carry each and every small match box. Why, I could fit 20 at a time! Delicious. What a calculated win.

And I compiled them all within a corner of my closet for months on end, that area that no one accessed, awaiting the perfect storm. Awaiting to set fire, to R-AGE. To put an end to his wickedness.

Here it arrived on that night of June 1. A night without too much wind. And enough liquid courage (for Dad) to finally do so. He hadn't taken a hand to her in weeks. Not even tried. I hadn't forgotten. I did not let this distract me from the plan. I waited for him to take to drink. It was inevitable. Like clockwork, he did. Of course. Predictable.

On that night, when he did, as his hands began to shake, I knew I would have my time. The R-AGE he seemingly had escaped returned. Days before the planned birth, he hit her. Not so as to leave evidence, not the black black and blue, but he hit her. "You don't scare me." She yelled at him. And it smacked him harder than any punching hit. "That's all you've got? YOU DON'T SCARE ME." He stood, shaking, and grabbed a large darkened bottle for that bottomless, quenchless taste, and passed out in the front seat, before he ever could get the truck started. He just sat there. The idiot. Knocked out, completely. Perfect.

I saw an opportunity here. And I'll be damned if I don't utilize it. STRIKE. STRIKE. STRIKE. It had become custom for me to clutch a knife, no matter the food substance, and I found myself tonight in particular, doing so. That is what I focused on as I struck each match. How I had waited for this. Waited, from that belly emptying dinner table, sitting across from my dreaded dead weight of a Dad, holding a knife, just waiting an opportunity to lunge it into him, if it came down to that. No, no. Keep your eyes on the fire within. Keep your eyes on the fire you'll make. Oh what a beauty it will be. STRIKE. STRIKE.

Tonight, I could feel that he was going to misbehave. Even before he hit her. Even before her yelling. Even before the grabbing of that fateful, delicious bottle. All integral parts to what leads to me here. I held that knife tightly in my 7 year old hands, just within my lap. Not that it would do any good. But I liked the idea. The power of it. I'm a planner. I have always had a fondness for the backup plan. None of our knives are sharp enough to do any real damage. So what. It's the thought. They can barely cut through the processed slops we roll around on our plates.

Admittedly, it is more of a rake than a blade, as we push and pull the meat across watery starch, hoping it will disintegrate. It never does. I held onto that raking knife when the striking began. And I waited. It took everything within me not to utilize it. Wait for the strike. STRIKE. STRIKE. I knew better than to make use of it. This was not the moment. You have to get to that moment. You have to see this plan out. Do not deviate. For mama always said, "no use in bringing a knife to a gun show." And I do not have one of those... guns. Those devices aimed at one purpose: to kill. How convenient that would be. Too easy. STRIKE. Then I wouldn't have need to strike so many matches, perhaps.

Everyone used to own a gun in these parts. But they were outlawed after the attempt upon the capitol, in our second war announcement. After the Fall. STRIKE. STRIKE. STRIKE.

This is a land of born and bread killers. Of genocide. And now of survival tactics, day by day. Everyone could be a killer, still. Everyone seemingly intends to be. I think. Why not? STRIKE. That is why I hold the rake that doubles as a knife. I have a killer instinct. STRIKE. STRIKE—Mother saw this. She had been observing. Mother saw all. She saw the knife. And now—she had seen my premeditated bundles. My thievery. STRIKE. ST—That was the last strike. And immediately, I went into over-reflection.

I am hyper-sensitive to the details. They rush upon me now.

Rewind. We are back at the dinner table. I could not help myself. I want to help. I want to be more. I want to do something, to be useful. Not yet 8, and already the self-appointed figurehead of the house. I want to course correct. It is instilled within all inhabitants, all "citizens" of the Square. Kill or be killed. A truth doesn't always need to be spoken. Take it from a mute. It can be known. I knew it. You know it.

And though I am but her little bird, as she used to call me, I flew tonight from one opportunity next. As he hit her, she saw me holding the weapon and whisked me away. "Shoo." *Fly away little bird. Flit away. You and that useless contraption.*

I went to my room, as she looked in horror at my pathetic rake knife upon my 7, going on 47 year old husk of fingers. Unable to protect in anyway during the flailing.

I hid.

I looked on at my matches. I waited. I bid my time. And as the striking went quiet, after a bottle crashed. I heard his big mistake: another bottle was grabbed. Perfect. Delicious. I heard him remove himself from the house. And I heard and the front door swung off its top hinge, as it always did when it opened. It didn't close all the way. It was wide enough for a small little bird to flit through. It would be.

I could hear it all: his stumbling about the yard, I could hear him half kicking at, half stumbling upon the abandoned and rusty rubbish bin. I heard the old truck door open. He had forgotten his keys. Was Mother holding them? The calm was setting in, just before the storm was to begin.

Would he re-enter? Would he finish her now, grabbing with death defying claws to reprimand the keys? A question hung in the balance. And with it, he lingered there with it. Just outside. If I peeped my head above the window sill, I could see what exactly he was doing. Whether he was drinking, or plotting. Whether he had fallen, or was falling. I could not look above the window sill, out of threat to re-launch it all again. Un-observed, is best with him. And as we waited for the question to be answered, it is as if the very wind itself waited with us.

Then, an answer. The bottle fell. The one he had been holding, outside. He was out like a light. Only two were awake on this desecrate, cursed land. As Mother was left to herself, alone with nearly born child and I with a move to make. I must not be rash. I must not be shoo'd again. I must be plotted. I must be patient. For I've one attempt to finish. One. This cannot be stopped. This is fate. Momentum. As she takes note of the need to tend to her lacerated face, I wait.

As she stands, then falls, I wait.

As she crawls to the wall, lifts herself with much determination, I wait.

And as she did enter in the shared bathroom inches of sheet rock from my closet, I took the first move. She will be fine. It has been a long time since she has come to this. But she has suffered MUCH worse before. And tonight, she had the dignity or bruising his ego. She had stood up to him.

My turn to bruise it further. To squelch it. To burn him out. I collected my shoebox of matches. And reminded myself not to move too hastily: I waited.

She didn't cry. Mother was not a cryer. But as the tap turned on, if you listened closely enough, it could be made out: soft sobs. I could hear them. The kind where the mouth moves in much exaggeration, as you try to allot the breath to catch up with its movement. Catching ones breath, more than tears, that's all that it was in there. She would be fine. And I would make sure this never happened again. I waited.

I'm sure this would soon be washed away. Though not forgotten about, Mother would repave with this foundation, so that none of its cracks are even visible, again. Mother may not appear a fire cracker. But she is stoic. Stiff as a board. She will get through this day, yet. I— pause.

I had the desire to hug her. But we were not the hugging sort. And it wouldn't be effective. Not in this moment. For one, I've other plans. I'd be too distracted. And for most importantly, I didn't want her to be embarrassed that I saw her in this way. To know she had made her face wet. She went to great strides to maintain what little bit of pride she did have. To witness would only further upset her. I move. It is time.

As the shared bathroom cabinet, just above the commode, opens and with the fumbling grab upon a faded, no longer color-less rag, I walk out of my room. I have waited long enough. Slipping into the hall way. A fallen lamp highlights my path. I move along the light path, thankful for it.

As the tap turned on, Little Bird flitted out of the door and into the darkness. Past the kicked rubbish, towards the old truck. Something that had been for so long, the ground seemed to open up slowly to digest it inch by inch over time. I move over the broken bottle to peer upon a completely unconscious, for lack of a better word Dad. That father-less figure. I open my shoebox. And I STRIKE.

I strike.

I strike.

I strike.

I strike until I think I am going to strike out.

I do not know if it is the tears within me undoing the will of this fate, betraying me as I attempt and fail to do what is the sole intention of these little wooden sticks, or perhaps the humidity of the box in which they are placed, but my little 7 year old nubs cannot produce light. And yet I move again.

I strike.

I strike.

I go through each and every box. Leaving a bundle of sticks in my wake.

Fortresses, grand toy army's could be built with the sticks I've used here. Wooden log cabins, much toy-full play.

I break one on accident. Keep going.

Then I break one on purpose. I am tempted to make a mess. To cause a scene. To scream with such fucking utter R-AGE. Instead, I center myself. I bring myself back to my purpose.

I focus on my intent. I strike.

And I strike.

I look into the closed eyes of this Dad, and I strike.

I wish to put an end to this. I strike. I wish to murder. I strike. To set him ablaze. STRIKE.

I wish for newness. STRIKE. Out of the ashes, let a Nu rise.

I strike.

I strike.

And—I—I... see her watching.

I am on my second to last set of matches. From my bedroom window, she sits upon my bed, and watches.

Is she awaiting for it to work, too? STRIKE.

In this moment it feels she had hope that it would be the end. Do it. She is compulsory to say. Did her lips move? STRIKE. That way we can begin our happily ever after. STRIKE so that this nightmare can be put away. Can be put to bed. Can end. STRI—But that is just the reflection I see from the dirty window of Dad's dirty, rusty truck. It is but an illusion.

As I turn around, I see the truth. Sobs. My Mother is crying. Incapable of moving, she is much need of a leave. She begs to escape. She is stuck. She is in pain. And I've added to it. And yet —one more time, I strike. ST—

The light is lit. But I do not move. I—

Stand for too long and the fire burns my fingers.

As I put it out, she is nowhere to be seen. That was my chance. The last match. It didn't work. She is in her room. And I must resign to mine.

You idiot. As I, defeated, begin to walk back through the unhinged door, it begins. In the darkness, on that fated June 1 night, a wind picks up. Little Bird has failed. Little Bird is not a killer.

I wish desperately to scream. To fly high above and to set fire to all of this encampment, this prison. This failure.

But the wind has other measures for me. Wait. It is not time. *You are not a killer. Not yet.*

In three days time, 5 years ago, to the day, June 4, Mother will leave. And it will be only me left here. Fate (?) for deep down, maybe I already knew this. Knew of my failure. Knew of this wake. Maybe I dreamt it all. Whose to say?

To where (?) do I go from here? Before I can answer. Before I can sooth my grubby little burnt fingers further, I pass out. And it came to pass in this way, whether of fate, or out of force from what I've done, me, the Little Bird with straw that broke the Mother's back—forcing her out. Far and further still away from Comfort.

I stand at the precipice on this anniversary, reminiscent at all that I've done. All that I could have changed. And know that none of it matters. For acceptance is all that can be granted. Nothing can be changed. I am not a wind. I must go with it.

Here, at the place I stood and watched, in three days time, that June 4, through that same little crack on that blasted unhinged front door where my Mother left me. And purposefully chose to not bring me along. To wherever it is she went.

Did not bring me along, for she had seen strike one of the knife. Strike two, strike three, strike four. She had seen strike 116, and strike 117. She had seen me want so badly to kill. She had thought back upon my silent reproach, my plotting, if you will.

Mother had seen it. Mother had seen who I really was, the potential of all that I could become. And Mother had hoped I would succeed. Mother needed me to succeed. When I failed, Mother did something else. Perhaps her own backup plan. Perhaps on the spot. But no matter what, I had struck out.

And for these reasons, Mother knew she had to leave.

And Mother knew that the future did not hold place for she and me.

As I stand in the doorway, I wonder, and I hope that Mother is safe. If you are alive Mother, if you are alive sibling, I hope that you are... many things. Most of all, more happy.

Goodbye Mother. This is the last I will think of you for now.

Love,

Your Little Bird

Without a Mother

Tainted, ejected from the nest.

Unable to speak for even oneself.

If spoken, unheard,

Unwanted.

Fate, un-earned.

But yet a persistence,

A possible,

Inevitable listed.

Towering, I shall grow to be

For I am no more ugly duckling.

I am to become the bird of feast.

No swan, no delicate, a growth a Nu.

From this dry kingdom I shall scour over you.

I shall dissect and dissolve all decay.

I, former Little Bird—

DEVOURING

Any and all that get in my way.

I shall be out, yet close as the Shadow.

I shall leave nothing,

And perch from my tower.

Beware and enjoy

Before I'm up and away

Out with the buzzards.
CA-CAW — is all that's left in my wake.
CA-CAW
CA-CAW
CA-CAW



PART ONE

Fire (Ignites)

12,
It strikes.
And a resounDING signal: gives.
I am. I alone.
I am alone.
Happy birthday.

Purgatory, are you here? Are you my new (?) home? Have I been here all along? Homestead, I feel. I am: alone.

Underneath my bed, I've tucked a notepad. These are the musings, the scraps I wrote upon it. Things that were intended for some paper about the heroism of our country's foundation. The lies (?) we have been fed about the events of the Fall. Things that never were sent in for a grade.

Schooling was a safe haven for my head... at one point. An escape. It was, honestly. Aside from being bullied, what is that in this day and age? Like breathing, it is. So, it's nothing. An escape, still. I love to write. I profess a love beyond no measure than to the words that pool within my head. On paper, they can live beyond anywhere my lips blockade and dam from coming forth. School. I could've been really good at it. And yet I never delivered as I could have. CHECK. Add it to the list of failings upon me.

And now, seven years into it — schooling, I must reflect. Always, reflective. How could you not when the clock chimes so loudly? DING. DING. DING. DING — to 12.

Perhaps I took some sick pleasure in failings of school. A descent. A de-crescendo, if you will. For any shortcomings, brought me more time in that sacred, prison-like space. More time after school.

This brought me more time away from him. More punishment there, and a broader target upon my back once back into this "home." Anything was easier than under this roof. This "home." By all accounts I did not thrive at school, despite my initial intents. I love a distraction. What better than the observations of others? Of clashing opinions? Of the future Square citizens? Most an imprint direct of their advisors, their "parents". An open window to what society already was, and would rigidly continue to be. Fools. On autopilot, fascinating.

By 11, I'd made it a habit to not do well in school. As 12 strikes, I've made it my identity. This is my form of rebellion. For school, the safest of havens that it is, is a lie within itself. So, why not lie? Fit in: fail. DING. DING. DING. We have a winning idea!

At 11:11, mid-lunch, I made a wish, to do what I'd sought out finally on 7's hopeful end. And I made a pact, that at 12, in history, I would try again. Remember who you are. Remember your potential. No more failed attempts. No more STRIKES of failure. For this time I would not just try. I would finish. I would do it. I would bring an end.

Or be ended.

Ended by this? Him? HAH. I will not be discontinued by such a beast, such idiocy. This hack. This autopilot drink, after drink, repeated cycle of venom. I will be brought down by no less than a scholar, at least a carbon existence of some merit. Hit me. Beat me black and blue. Do your worst, but my words will remain where you cannot reach them. Un-heard. Un-spoken. Always.

I know my place. In his eyes I am a punching bag. But what he does not know, is that this bag is not stuffed, it is a sponge. I absorb each punch, each shifting blame, and each STRIKE. I absorb, they fuel my flame. And I tend to them more than the bruises given unto me. Questions are never asked in the school place about the owner of such a marking. No one cares. They're routine. It is routine for me to be hit. And once a bruise exists, that only makes way for more bruises, and more hits. Marked, I am a target for bullies. Easy to place blame, isn't it? "I didn't do that to them! They already had it." *Ugly. Deserving of it. You asked for it.* And I always deliver to the audience's needs. For I am always there. Always in the way. Always.

It's only me here now.

Little Bird. Little Sponge.

DING. DING. Knockout.

I see stars, or what I imagine stars to be. It's difficult to make them out through the thickened fog upon the Square. But I've heard word of what they are. I can imagine. And sometimes, if I'm hit hard enough, I think I can see Achilles' and his heel. I think I can see Taurus' raging bull. Or the Dipper. I sip from its trough. I am comforted by the bull and its rage. I hope and desire to find the exact point, the heel, so that when I strike, it is complete and enDING.

I see the stars. They do not threaten an end. They are a welcoming gift on this day.

12! How lovely. Glittering stars, each a birthday's showcase. Blow them out. What is it that you wish?

I am. I alone.

I am alone.

Purgatory, are you? Here.

Forward, I will bring an end.

DING. Final wish. Final say.

I could've been a singer, I've suddenly thought. If only I'd strength to my voice. No, it's true! I would've been a perfect candidate for the Square's many talent shows. Famous. Reviled! Beloved. Envied, even. If only I had a voice.

A simple thing. I could've wished for it, on this day. But there's always next year! For now, Little Bird will resort to writing! To the scraps. The paper. My bits of comfort, me and the rubble.

At day's end, I hope to dream. To see Purgatory... To see its gates. Are there? Or is it never ending? That sounds much more daunting. Do I even believe in such a place? Perhaps, but not as it has been explained. And I know that in dreams, I will not see such a place. The *visions* I see, that I witness, are not of such a place. For this is the true Purgatory. THIS is the deciding place. In a world filled with such murk, as it preaches its black and white, this is the existence of absence. This is the mirth. This is that swamp of gray: Purgatory.

And a question lies in the reality of this, it tucks me in, with my notes, as I question much on this birth-day. How can it be that this is how one is meant to live, if it weren't a testament, a holding place? Is it by intent? Error? Fate... (?)

Thankful, I decide I am of the Purgatory, for if it cannot be merely black or white, then anything is possible. We can color vividly within the parameters of such a space.

I could fly. I could sing, even. I could be, anything. I will bring an end to this way. Purgatory, I've come to, but my intent is to diverge into another way. What do you think of when you think of life's intent? Is it planned out for you? Pre-destined? Or is it a pursuit you bring to the table? Is it your desire, albeit selfish (?), or are you confused upon which is which, and who's to give.

This is my idea. This is my possibility, and the stars I cannot see are its limit. The universe screams for more. It begs me to try. But I do not believe it has pre-destined for it so, thusly. Otherwise more people would try.

When I lay me down to sleep, I know the *visions* of others like me, coming into their own possibilities, will be along with me. Will run wildly. Will be free.

Our little light's too testy, that they must exist in a skyless light, otherwise we threaten to compete and even outshine even the stars. Call it narcissism, or cockiness, but it is my intent.

Pure, driven light. I will prevail, Sir Purgatory. Sir place of neither, and yet either, in your murky, foggy grey. I write for us all with the *visions*. What are their names?

What is your name?

Perhaps I am in denial, total and write from hell. You must take arms with the possibility of this! Perhaps I am mad. Not in just anger, truly, richly mad. How exciting. Perhaps all of you programs are sent to test my deliverance through a virtual, visual game of some kind. Something upon a screen! Now there's a thought most maddening. A game upon a screen! Yes, strap in, and be tested. What will you do next? Poked, prodded, stripped, hit. Bruise after bruise, the game never glitches. Never lets up. What will you do here in hell? Will you grow worse? Is this your end?

TESTING. TESTING.

Hello. Are you? Are you here to test me?

Then again, am I really here to ask it?

No, no. What a laugh. Purgatory, this is.

At night I see a Snowglobe. People trapped within it. I see a clock, and the constituent trying to set back the track before it. So many like me, I wonder if I'm mad... and grow mad at a lack of proof. Especially for one—whose name is so close. So near. I wonder what to do. This—K—K is all I can make out. And once its wet my whistle, I yearn for more. I grow blind to hear it. I need, I desire. I must!

K. And it is squelched by birds. By sounds of white noise, by... water. Rollicking. A threat upon the surface, and much tension. A place. A hideaway. This rising shore. These... these waves! K—a threat is coming for you, dear K. I know not who you are, and cannot warn you.

I try in my dreams. But there, I am only witnessing. I feel it. A cosmic shift around us all.

Something is coming. Something Nu. Light, full. Potential. And on its back, a Shadow, hovering. Waiting.

K—be warned. Whomever you are. I mustn't overheat my brain, in this visual on-and-off screen game. I switch the channel, I leave it a *tide away*. I leave with the final hope that you too have the *vision*. The knowing of such. It is your own potential to deal with, your own fate.

At 12, as the birthday rings out, I flip the channel. I *switch* to an easier view: singing. And how glorious I am at it.

No. Stop the foolishness. These questions without answers. I have pinched myself until I nearly bleed above the scabs. I exist. I exist! I must... if you read, for I wrote. Little bird, remind yourself. You are here.

I must... trUSt. I mUSt trUSt.

I have little faith for much stuff. And yet one thing is most certain. One thing remains: me.

Alone.

I alone.

I am alone.

This portion, this statement may be the sole thing I do not wonder about, but I wonder if everyone is in on a "joke". I'm not known for my voice, my song, nor to be of comedic timing. Perhaps I shall try it one throng: I live just outside the reaches of a town called Comfort. Isn't that ironic? As so, perhaps even as funny as our existence?

Mine of abuse, and rape, on desolate unfruitful land. I told you I'm not one for jokes. I will stop going back, this is what happens when you too often pontificate. I don't want to focus on the horrors of my inception—of Dad's telling upon A's the sluts of this world. That all women are sluts. That Mother, A., was the queen of all sluts.

I don't find this to be alarming, nor true.

I'll leave it there.

That's what's best to do.

I look down as I've intended to write this down, I've cut into my thigh again now.

More marks. To go along beside of more scabs.

I pinch myself into quiet. Famous. Reviled! Beloved. Envied, even. Such a beautiful voice I have.
For the first in a long time, I smile.
Such a good night.

The summer of youth has long since faded, and all too soon. Winter sets in outside on this barren land earlier than projected. No excuses, I am off to school again. To prison. An escapist tradism from one prison to the next. I will survive. One foot in front of the other. Mother would often say, when I was overwhelmed, "Count your steps." And I do. Always in knowing precisely how many measured steps it takes to any given point of exit. This, the second year of middle grades. As I am officially one-third of the way through now.

I stare into the mirror, amping myself to resolve the question of uneasiness, how to get from point A to point B. To the exit. Those (roughly) 23 steps. There are always new obstacles, new un-patterned blockades. How to get into the hallway and out of the door without disassembling. How shall I today? How shall I survive? Counting my steps (?). I've a window but it has been welded shut. So that will not work.

Little Bird is too large now to squeak through the still un-hinged opening, unannounced. Through the hallway, there are a series of things to get through, inconveniences more than outright issues: cereal, pickings of me, perhaps hitting, a slap, the resemblance of the bag, and onward to leave.

I'll walk the 23 steps (?), give or take, out of the door from bed side exit, always right side up! And onward further down the 3 mile pathway to the bus stop. I hope by the end of these calculated and literal steps that I won't be too late. I hope I do not miss it again. Never, ever. At step 15 I make the deviation and enter into the kitchen. Just eat the cereal. Keep your head down, but alert. But it's not just cereal now is it... (?)

"Your hair—" A sentence that didn't need to be finished. The trailing off speaks volumes upon the lumps. A sentence that plagues the back of my mind, through each follicle, relentlessly. A source of several scabs upon my unyielding and thickening thighs yelps, throbbing for attention, a diversion from the soon to be migraine from hitting.

Even in trying not to tense-up, I do. My body betrays me in this way, always reactive. *You fool. You weak idiot.* Come on Little Bird, grow a spine. Toughen up. Grow a—in an age when I am supposed to be growing more hair, specifically facial hair, I am losing it in mass. It began at the peak of my head, and has not stopped. *Your hair...* This sentence that trailed off lingers. It is the reason I avoid the mirror. I will not look upon myself, but the stare continues. He is staring full on at me now. Try though I might to relax my body and to just eat the damn cereal, I cannot. I am all too aware. All too ugly. All too balding, and boring and flat. It is a simple task. Why can't you just eat, and be out the door? I search within the confines of this bowl, a place I knew that would not give answers. But I continue. To focus. To count each spoon and each dip. Sooner or later, this will be empty from spoon to mouth. A control factor. Then I can be out. focus on this rather than the anxiety, than the next steps, than the inevitable hitting, than the staring that never ends. I await, something is coming. And often when felt, it awaits me as it lingers.

Scoop another spoonful in. Do not shovel it. Les't you a desire to choke, or be choked by him. Scoop. Maybe he'll hit me now. Scoop.

He did not. Another scoop.

Just when I begin to wonder if the pressure is off of me, it happens. A striking question.

"Did you hear me? Is that how you're going to school? With that hair?"

There are no such things as stupid questions. But rhetorical ones could be listed as such. For if you are not to be answered, why be asked? I ask this rhetorically, you'll note. Deflecting for my body betrays me, further evidence that no brave face can hide that I am terrified. That I am scared. Play dumb. Be the common fool. *You are a fool. That is all that you are.* I am supposed to remain stupid. Less than. I am desensitized to be nothingness. Little bag-boy, sponge. And

in truth, I may be all of this. My head hurts to contemplate so much. So early. With so many steps left to take. How many are left, I question as the spoon is nearly done.

BLACKOUT.

What sparked the next move? Was it my lack of answering?

Was it the slight relax within the shoulder blades? He had noticed something. I must force myself to stare into the mirror again, and to practice so that I am not so swiftly found out. You must stay focused. Alert. But instead I remain betrayed by this *foolish* body: rigid and tense. I look up to respond, with a mouthful of cereal, but it is too late.

My head is slammed into the bowl. Pressed in and grabbed by the thinning hairs in the back of my head. There are words muttered, but I'm not listening to them. I am focused on the smells of overly processed and overtly dry powdered corn. The hints of what sugar could be. The staleness of the plate. And then the oils of my disgusting prepubescent skin. Thankfully this is but a muted plastic bowl, and without any reflection for me to see myself in. For I have less than no desire to see me this early in the day. And even less desire to see my posture in this way. Rigid. Tense. Defeated. *Fool. Weak.*

When there are words again audible, I focus on another sensory. Focus (?), *focus on the smell.*

The feeling comes first. *Focus on the smell.* The feeling of the hair is not so great. But the feeling of the wind as it wizzes through and past my ears, spooling to collect each sound, each musical guest, could be engulfed delectably so. How musical. Make it a game.

As soon as I can find some escapism, some enjoyment, another feeling comes in and proves further why to feel is not ever the goal, and never the focus. *You should have focused on the smell, you small fool. You weakling.* The feeling of being slammed back into the bowl again, not so great. *I told you so.*

It never lasts too long. He's had his fun and now he's gone. Cereal is complete... if I can clean it up in time, I won't be late. 16 (?) steps. 3 miles. Mustn't let the congregating land roaches have their happy plate. Not this plastic processed corn. Go and find some maize. A grain. Something true. You are better than this. Better than me (?).

Clean quicker. So that you can make it to the bus in time.

The hand of the clock indicates that I've 41 minutes to track the three miles. But not even, as I know that that clock is six minutes slow... I've got to have a much more strident gate.

Having this individual drive me to the foreseeable bus stop is out of the question.

To ask the bus to drive the three miles closer to me, also out of the question. Impolite. Out of touch. It is a gift that they come this far at all, as I am second most out of Comfort. Beyond the district. *Do not be selfish. Stay in line.*

I've tried to ask both, unsuccessfully. Neither would've worked. More blackouts. More pain.

Shall I remind you of the plastic bowl? The flying corn? The neck pain?

Best to stay in my lane. Cleaned. I walk. The finish of task two is approaching. I can make it.

Though I do not own a watch to gauge my time, in approximation with the recent rays of what can only be perceived as our closest star's direction (sun?), I am in good timing still. It is not yet over the horizon. Not yet. There is still time. If it begins to peer over and to tempt me still, I must pick up the pace. If it comes out, I must do the thing I do not enjoy doing: run. Overly exert myself. Keep up, consistent pace.

It threatens to do so just as I am at the last stretch of this walk. This hike. Damn it, it's out. And therefore I do, for I must, pick up the pace.

I am at a gallop. A run.

I can smell tires and grease. It is going to beat me.

RUN.

I don't want the other wolves known as children to see this shedding sheep run. To sweat. To struggle, nor pant. None of it. I must appear a wolf, even if it's in sheep's under-clothing.

I wish, I so desire to appear normal in this exact moment, as hair falls from me. Such betrayal. I can feel myself shedding. *Choke back the tears. You ugly, balding fool.* I've not got a confident stride anywhere within me now. Not one single pace. I hate running. But they mustn't see this.

They mustn't smell it. For they can a mile away. They mustn't see me in this way. *No more*

weakness. Be brave. *Act as if you are.* Be brave Little Bird. And above all else, RUN. Just keep running. If I don't make it, I can face a hellscape of restricted options.

A, returning to sender. No. Just flat out. Going home in the hopes of avoiding him altogether is a slim to none chance. There is no worse torture than sitting silently in my room until the sun completely fades. The singular upswing, as I starve hollowly, if (and it is a very big if) I can manage to get into my room unnoticed in the first place, is that I could journal if this occurs. I love to journal. I long for it. And I hope it is never discovered, most precious of things that it is. Nothing gilds me into calm and collectiveness as much as those scraps of pages do. There, tucked within my closet, my one safe space. It is a rebellion, daily. For the pen to parchment can be a dangerous task. For these thoughts to be spoken, there is nothing more dangerous than that. To be found out, to have evidence of these thoughts, it is the worst possibility.

Thankfully his hearing is not as heightened as mine. I am thankful upon this, for if he ever hears me writing, he will find it. And he will put an end to it once and for all. He will break my hands completely unusable. He will make it so that I can never write again. Thankfully, he's never found it. To go home, I would not dare to journal. Not until night. Never until the drunken stoop has veiled him. If he merely finds me during these other prison hours, this daily sentence, that is danger enough. No. A cannot be.

B, I can play hooky. At first glance this sounds ideal. Freeing. But to be in the city of Comfort, perhaps it is this way across the Square, alike, but particularly within the confines of this city—you are a threat. There is always an aim. To meander, to be aimless, you have an immediate target upon your back. Otherness. Homeless, immediate. No. B cannot be.

Neither option is ideal, for I will become hungry at some point. And to be hungry even from one meal threatens the very existence of balance. Eating is not a guarantee. I often go to bed hungry. I often awake nauseous with appetite that will not be filled. At least with school there is the provided lunches. A gift. We are to be grateful for it. Whether they do it to keep us going, knowing full well it is most children's only meal, and the best course of action for us to grow further and to become the needed consumers the Square needs, is inconsequential. I don't ever have the strength to think deeply upon this. For I am at least fed upon this. This is what keeps me coming back. Keeps me there, even when I know the "history" we are being fed changes year over year, becomes more blatant, more whitewashed. More desperate in its approach to brainwash. LOVE THE SQUARE. YOU WILL LOVE THE SQUARE. BELONG TO THE SQUARE. FORM SIDES, YOU THAT ARE ROUND. BECOME A SQUARE PEG. NO DIFFERENT. NO QUESTIONS IF YOU WISH TO BE FED. And I do. Nothing speaks louder than the stomach.

I am grateful, and often look forward to my processed food. First comes a sugar high, then ultimate crash. So used to it I am, that I barrel through a steady haze, denser than the fog that shrouds us from the stars. These bland meals, that are arguably staler than the cereal of corn I had this morning. Blander. But "filled with nutrients", according to the Square's leading scientists. What they lack in color, with their distasteful opaque state, they "more than make up for in nutrients" and texture. Protein scratches the tongue, and the invariable vegetables puff and gleam. If you were a clown, a meal within the confines of Comfort High may prove too carnival, too insane. EAT. KEEP EATING. CONSUME CONSUMER. GROW. KEEP GROWING. Most of us have stopped growing, reaching our peak around this age. Some will grow 1-2 years more from now. But there is always the hope that we will grow outwardly. Grow a belly. Not look so emaciated. If I prayed, I would pray for that belly, something further to hold onto. Some fat to keep my bones safer at each whacking, striking take.

You get used to the food. I only mention it in the event that your school provides a chance at more. I've long since grown accustomed to it. It's not as if I'm eating rodents, or on the street eating god knows what. Rubbish. In the bins. Avoiding the eyesight of citizens that might tell upon you. Tell to the Eyes of the Square, the Guards. You don't want to face them. So you eat. You eat the styrofoam. And it's not so bad, not really.

As I run, hoping I make it in time, I daydream. I visualize walking up to a counter of food, a... a buffet! And taking my pick of whatever I want. Nodding, and skipping certain trays. To hell with

it, I'd try a little of everything. I'd be a glutton. Perhaps it's good that each plate is the same. Without choice, we cannot become selfish. Without certain choices, we can focus. We can "enjoy."

Of course that is a bountiful wish, to order. There are no menus here. TAKE WHAT YOU ARE GIVEN. CONSUME. BE GRATEFUL. EAT. EAT EVERY BITE. NEVER LET IT GO TO WASTE.

When in fact, many have lost sight of the truth, that which trims with the weight. We are not grateful. We are takers. Pitiful. HERE, TAKER. TAKE. TAKE. TAKE.

I wish I had two nickels to rub together. I wish that was my special power. That I could rub them together and multiply them a million times over, so that I could run away. I think as I continue to run. Just a few more paces. Focus on this thought, this wish, this dream. Do not let them see you sweat, Little Bird. Run away. I wish so desperately to go a place of else. That somewhere. Does it exist? I'd like the chance of knowing if every city is truly like this. Or is it so blandly resigned to us here in the middle?

RUN. Make change! Multiply. Run towards the food. Run from home. Run away! This gives me a bit of boost, the amount needed to persevere, as the wind is leaving my body. A boost as I approach the chipping, rusty old bus. *You call that running?* No. I'm not much of a runner, anyway.

Give up... I am so tempted. If I play hooky, I could—maybe I could get away with it. Maybe I could be more clever than the others have been. Those that were snatched and never came back. In this cold? I am not equipped for the weather, for the time, my stomach—there's no chance. *What makes you think you're more cleverer than the others? Huh? You'd immediately be snatched. Foolish Little Bird.* Yes, I would be resorted to steal. At some point. To steal shade. To steal warmth. To steal those rotting, potentially hazardous scraps. I cannot afford to get sick. Eat the processed foods only. The freshest you can find. Stay out of trouble. Keep running. Trouble is always around. And it is trouble I would most certainly find.

Talking myself off of this ledge is a daily struggle. For one time... I didn't make it. After having asked twice to be driven out to the bus stop, after a particularly bad beating, after having received a double bruising blush, I walked, and with every step knew I would not make it in time. That it was already gone. I walked, and I walked all the way into the town Square, hiding in its alleyway. Once school is started, the doors are sealed shut. There is no going in. No way past the Eyes of the Square that barricade.

My eyes deceived me, but not the foaming dog I had a run down with in town. No, he was ready and waiting with eyes upon me. It could have been a coyote. A wildebeest. A mythical Robin Hood sort of creature, usually my favorite. But off paper, it was most ravishing. And it wanted me. Little old me. The body of the food chain on that day. Nothing at all could be more humbling. As we fought over a sandwich thrown out, circled with winged, gnawing gnats, I tried to bare my teeth. I tried to stop this wildebeest. We fought, and I put up a brave front with all that I had, there in the back alleyway of an abandoned business. A hair business. A bar. Something like that. I didn't even care about the sandwich. It would certainly make me sick. I just wanted to have control. To be a winner. I did not win. But (!) I did not back down. I stood my ground. I put on a brave face.

Remember that day. Remember that face. It will be needed today. Yes, yes that is the face. Put it on. Keep it there.

The dog won the fight. But I won a small victory, persistence. And in noticing, or out of boredom with me, the sud filled dog left behind remnants, the crusts. The worst bits, arguably. I returned home as quickly as I had left, and it timed out well enough with school that no questions were asked. I ate anything I could find in the fridge, and I had never, nor doubtedly will ever have been more grateful to eat than in that moment. On the floor. Awaiting my next beating. That gratitude did not slip me, no hand nor belt. For this was one of those nights in which Dad did not come back. He stayed out all night. And I went into the night to try and see the stars. Hitting my head upon my hand. I wanted to desperately to see stars, any.

And as I did so, I nearly suffered a stroking heat. This is why you don't skip meals. This here. This is why you must always go to daytime prison - to school. To eat.

I passed out. In the middle of the night. In the silent winds. And it was odd, for there I found something. I found true silence.

It was quiet for a long time. And further still. A true blackout. Bliss. As I left my body, I could feel my soul exit me. It appeared as such. For I towered high above the ground, and then it began, the music. The hum. Only in hearing the beating sounds of wings that guided like fans, did I come to. A dream. Some feverish dream. I hoped it would never end. That I would stay there. That I would never return to the ground. For I envisioned flight. Soaring high, high above it all in the darkness of night, I was light. I was bright. And there were so many stars. Quite possibly. As I took notice, Shadows covered me. They threatened to consume. To take over me. So tempting they were. But I had no desire to be anyone but me. *Are you sure? It would be so much easier. Give in. Give over.* No. I was quite sure. I just wanted to be me. *But you desire for more. You want so desperately to feel less pain. There is so much potential. Come on Little Bird, be all you can. Let us take over.* No. I was most defiant. A day of much voice and opinion. First upon the war with a wildebeest. And now with some food, some home, wings flying out, I was in control. Total control.

No.

I was cool for a time. I was happy. Air-bound and free.

I awoke mid-morning, but nowhere near where I had stepped foot outside. No, no. I was at the exact mid-point between Comfort and "home". The fanning wings were nothing more than the wave of a gas attendee. He was waving at me. Waving me off. Waving me away? Circling around me, were star in a blazing sun. Which makes no sense before moon break. I had passed out at the closest business in town to my home. And this person was a stranger. Strangers can be more dangerous than the people you know. You know those actions. Of a stranger, the possibilities are too endless. So I've been told. So I can feel deep in my bones. No one can be trusted, least of all a stranger.

I do not know if that is true based on the one I do know. But I do not want to test it. If it can be, I do not want to know it.

The stranger gave me water from their store.

I was scared to drink it. As they made a dash into their ice bin, I ran home. I ran to the bus. Even though... it was now a Saturday. I did not care. I ran. I ran with all of my might. The wind pushing and propelling me forward all of the way. I sailed into home and there was hell to pay. Hell to pay in repentance.

I had barely made it and on the other side of that door, where scraps lay upon the floor. Scraps from my selfishness, my vanity. My hunger. I met them posthaste. The floor and I became one on that day, as a fate as bad as death was lain into me. Welt after welt.

And thankfully, I had not taken from the wildebeest. Outward scars can be attended to. But inside, a fast worse than death. Whatever that animal could have shared with me would have been a curse. An end. I would certainly have been sick for six days. Violently so. The kind that makes you wish for death. Lets you dip your toes into its pool. But does not let you go. Pushed unto the floor, I remembered how much quicker this kind is. This outward pain.

I thought I saw my candle fade.

I did. I wished it would blow out. I breathed out deeply to try and help it to extinguish as he whelped into me. Again. And again.

But it did not.

I prevailed. *You stubborn bastard. See, if you had just let me take over. This would not be.*

No. That, like the crusts, is an otherness I desire not. Whatever that voice is. It must be squelched. It is not for me. Be gone.

And like that, it did. It stopped. And so did Dad. He left, and I had a full Saturday to recover on the floor nearest my bed. Close to my pen. Close to all scraps. Thankful I was most of all that my scrappy self had another chance, had not taken the bate. Had not taken those scraps. And upon that floor I dug out each letter in the shag carpet to spell out: NEVER AGAIN. One letter at a time, atop the next. N. I added an O.

No.

It is etched into my brain. That shag carpet.

RUN. Keep running. Remember that. Do not let it happen again. That was my mantra with each breathy step.

All things are possible. Except, to do option A or B ever again.

Never again.

NO.

So I run. I run into the only option left: C. The sole and true option: I must make it to the bus

NO matter what. I must.

I must. I must. RUN. RUN. And—

I am in luck. I make it.

It is the biggest victory imaginable. I love a small victory. I take them in stride. They bring about pride from within, from around.

I arrive. I enter. And there is no attention to greet. No one cares. Furthermore, there is no air circulating. There is no movement within of any kind. Silence. Vacuumed. Sealed off. *Sit. You ran, now sit. Blend in. Get by.* And before I can fully give way to the beast of this rusty, once yellow'd thing, the wheels begin churning. The contraption is scurrying. The door closes upon the Shadow of my steps. And we are finally tethered. Goodbye you beast. I have won. If not won, I am in nonetheless.

I cannot help but to smile. As I look up, they have seen. It is noticed. The Driver. And just down the row, directly within eye line, the sole kid that gets on earlier than me is here. Hungry. The Bully.

I sit far away from each. Hoping to avoid any more confrontation. But always prepared for it to be. And I clutch my stomach in preemptive defense.

I am in luck that the seat aligns with the split of windows. For I do not want to face the reflection of a wispy, dirty, 12 year old: me. That aging, pitiful thing. That balding, ugly Little featherless Birdie. For I am aging. And I am ugly.

No matter. I see it not. And reserve my mind to take notice of other sensory's. Difficult when so little air moves about.

What a blessing, I count. To be greeted with the split of these windows. I cannot see anything at all. No eyes. No judgement. No noise. Blend in. It is peace. To the touch, the metal is nearly cooling. I begin to press my head to it. I press firmly. No, I am being pressed firmly. Just as I had begun to relax, I feel my head pushed whole heartedly into it. The Bully. Of course. Right on cue.

Seeking power from within, I am but without, for I am powerless in this moment. But it will be over before I know it. I have survived much worse. And I wonder how bad this Bully's little home is. How bad it must be. I pity you. This is all you have to look forward to. What a thing that is.

Yes, I am an easy target... for now.

But as my head begins to slam with the bumps of the road, I wish for more cereal now. I wish for the smell. I remind myself of the whizzing sounds my ears did meet before the blackout this morning. I disappear into each and every sensory. And—

Then, with a lurch, the bus stops. We are too early for the next stop (?).

As I try to focus on those other senses, I hear movement. I hear steps. And I prepare. I hear yelling. But it is not directed to me. The Driver has the Bully now. Much scurrying. Much noise. The metal is cooling down. It envelops me. The old flaking leather holds its fingers out to intertwine with my own. I am rich with excitement. I am happy.

I don't think I'm going to be touched again. Not on this bus ride. Perhaps I am safe. Perhaps I need not worry again about the bus ride, nor the Bully in this space. Perhaps, just maybe, this has grown to be a safe space. A transitional one at best, but a joyful thing that is... perhaps. And I remind myself to once again sit where I can see my own reflection next time... just in case.

If I looked in my reflection right now, I would notice the corners of the lips coming up to greet the hook of my nose. I would note that I look most happy.

Inside of the prison-school it is a whirlwind of bad and good. As I pass the Eyes, I remember to stay silent. *Little Bird, be a mouse. Docile. Quiet.*

I make it through the day with little disturbances. It always comes.

I do not like gym. That is my least favorite. I don't like dressing and undressing in front of other Bully-like-children. Whomever thought up this game is a villain of the worst kind. At a time when confidence is lowest, from 11, and even worse at 12. Having to undress. To showcase our bodies in the selected houses of what "our bodies" represent. I do not belong in this room. If I could be a snail, I would retreat into my shell. I would not be ripped from it and thrust into a shell that I do not fit.

I don't want to reveal my body.

I don't want to be seen. The welts and the bruises I do not mind so much. But I don't want to reveal my scabs. I made them. Those are for me.

And beyond all, I don't want to reveal the other parts of my body. That which is least of me. I don't want to be compared. To be noticed. I don't want to be seen at all.

Little Bird wishes so badly to fly away during this part, this shock factor. To escape. And my other senses do not help in this time. They cannot. I am stuck here. Locked in each locker.

Pinned down. Unable to get away. *Stay here, and suffer.* That is my fate. My otherness.

I don't have cool clothes to dress into. I don't have a confident armor to barricade myself with. Nothing about this lack of aloofness is impressive. Nothing about this should be on display.

If I forget to bring the clothes, I don't get away with it. I simply have to wear what I was wearing. And will be cold, damp, mildewed, all day.

I don't have any means of an escape. There is no excuse to not dress down in this time. To be on display.

So I have to do it.

So I do it.

I go along with this. This torture. I do it every single day. And it never gets old, in the way that I can get used to it.

So I get through it.

So I do it.

And because of this, I will add a new scab tonight. Something for me, out of this incessant showtime.

As I pull the pants below my underwear, I take notice of each ridge I've made. These Rocky Mountains. These ridges, these valleys, these places of just me. Just mine. I will add one more ridge to your row on high. I will bring about another newness. Another design. Something all mine. A control factor. We all need the control we lack.

I ignore the words sputtered at me, they are too unmanageable to re-utter. But you know them if you think long enough. If you think hard enough. In truth, they will come too easily for you to strain in through upon them. Beautiful ridges are my focus. I take my time upon each. Each with a name. Grecian gods. Fallen heroes. Stars bright. A place I can stand upon and see. See through the fog. See through the sweat and deceit of this day. Escape from these words so simply uttered. Muttered with such frivolity. Words so simple, and yet so hurtful.

As I move past the ridges, I lose the sight of stars. The hope. It's gone from me now. And I am left with the surrounding words, many, and plentiful.

I try to hone in on the senses around me, to escape through them, for I am in much need of a distraction, but they are all a betraying lot. Aloft, they all run fast away from me. Leaving me alone.

I am alone.

This sight of a locker room, which is as dizzying as it is hazing. The smells of putrid acid. Bodies secretions. You know what middle years smell like. Once you've lived it, you can't escape the memory of it. With my sensory, I am overloaded. The senses run back to me in an application times 10. Times 20. Then by one hundred. Senses that take your nose and folds it around your ears, wraps it around your dangling throat. Senses that blind the eyes and bring

about tears. All orifices you must remember you cannot plug. A reeling feeling within the body, as it lurches trying to stand up. And with such sensory overwhelming, can only come the deprivation, as the fingers grow out and become numb. My body is icy, yet hot. Sticky and sweaty.

It is done. But it leaves a mark. A mark I cannot control. A mark I did not design. A mark I did not create, nor ask for.

I'm returning my other ugly clothes to one of the lockers without a lock. Much could happen to them while I am gone. Much has. Much probably will. But it doesn't matter. Nothing is worse than the moments extended before this. I've been objectified. Ridiculed. And that is loud, for it resounds even heavier than the war within my head.

I don't fit in.

I don't belong here.

Back to class. Get good marks.

It's expected.

You've already lost.

RUN.

Don't let them see you sweat.

Little Bird. Flightless.

I do like Literature. Anything to write. Unlike History, where they re-write and re-write. How can anyone deal with such blatant non-facts? What is the truth? Is the point to confuse us all, endless? To keep us guessing (?) must be the fervent blow. To keep us uneducated, confused, stupid. Surely we are all dumb if not numb.

Math... isn't something I comprehend.

But English, you blessed feast. My Teacher is a woman that I most like. I am thankful for her. She doesn't seem to take to me. But it doesn't matter. I am happy with a one way street. I am used to this.

I wasn't expecting to be taken to her. By her. Smitten. Not romantically. She is an old woman whom pays me no mind. And that is sometimes better than anything else could be.

To be unnoticed, Little Bird loves. Flourishes there.

I am doing well in the mystery of unseen. There I can pay attention. There I can remain apt, and keen. I can learn in that space. I might even could thrive. I am learning. I am home here. And I am in love with it. Ever so.

Perhaps, I feel safe. In those Shadows.

I wish to be a trinket. Something upon a mantle. I have wild desires that she would one day discover me and take me home for keeps. "Here, you little trinket. Perch upon this nest I've built thee." Thee, such olden speak. Like Robin Hood, as I imagine Teacher Maiden Marion doth regale. Perched high upon her mantle, and stuffed fat with her polished brandy and flavored breads. These are the thoughts I think as she swoops in and strikes her literate punctures, on state sanctioned stories.

I don't care where the stories come from, I'll take any escape I can get. Try though they might to sanitize this place, there is always much to subjugate. There is context of the author, and context from those reading the source. There are moments of my interpretation, much that exists between lines, in the crevices. Like me. There they are, with much left unsaid, witnessed. I catch each falling peep. Stories of Fairy Tales, folklores, and "Square heroes". Stories of heroism, and chivalry, and macho-macho notions.

And when it comes time to report, I remain hidden. I remain quiet. A lot of what I write I do not turn in. Most I do not. I am scared to turn in my thoughts. Scared to be apprehended, or furthermore to be noticed. What if Maid Marion here likes the way that I think? So much pressure to continue. To be perfect, is something I cannot even begin to think with a blink. With a wince. With any fiber of self. And worse, perhaps, what if she disagrees with what I think? Finds me out (?). Then I shall truly be sunk. My perch will remain barren. I'll never be to the mantle. I'll never be hers.

I cannot show her my truth. I have been in trouble for less than this. My honesty is not what is desired from me. Never has been. *Remain quiet. Remain hidden.*

My truth, a troublesome thing. To be honest on these assignments, what I say is often deemed unpleasant. Frightening. It could be perceived as a threat. For my otherness, my ideas, my very essence is to question exactly what it is to be a citizen.

I do not have the aptitude, or stupidity, whichever way you see it, to placate these people. To blend in. I do not know how to do it. I'm not sure I've even tried. It's not in my genetics. It's not something I can handle, divvy out, it will not help me to survive. They would smell that lie a mile away. Smell it louder than my fears. So, I must remain silent. I must remain in the cracks. Doing just enough to get by. For without fail, I would get it wrong. I would get it all wrong, if I tried.

Tried to blend in. Tried to succeed. Tried to be anything other than a trinket. Tried to be anything other than wallpaper.

I don't need to be the best. Competitions at this age are ridiculous. What is there to prove? A peak? I much prefer other ridges. I much prefer the valleys.

I write for my self. We all love a selfish act. And it is the act of writing that brings me joy. So, that is why I do it. Late at night. On my own. On the upswing, if at the end of the year I have to repeat this grade, I will be ok with that. Because I will get to see her again. I will get to hear her daily. I will get another chance to be taken home. To be a certified trinket.

Though she doesn't really like me. She's at least never hit me.

Though she doesn't take to noticing me, I feel seen here. I feel safe. She reads so well. The story from Davy, to other crocks of shit. I could listen to her read all day.

I enjoy—

The ring of the bell gongs and lifts. I'm off.

Couldn't it last just a few more moments, before I have to go? Back to the monotony of home. The anxiety sets in as I approach the bus. But I repeat as much as I can of what was read in class by her.

I repeat it, like a loop. Getting every word right. Memorizing it. Turning it over and over for a meaning, a hidden message. I become so entranced in my own thoughts, I cannot hear anything else. I listen to no one. Not the Bully. Not the other Bully-children around me. I can only imagine how bad that they have it at home.

As I await in line for the bus, drafting a referendum on heroism and what it means, I am struck by something. A hand. A tall, peering hand swoops from out back and strikes my head. I flinch. Everyone takes notice. Without turning around, I try not to be tense. Try to remain calm. I try to appear at ease. Maybe this will prevent me from being hit further. Not that it is of any use. I was found out. They all know who I am: weak. I am already seen. But I am stubborn. I must continue my attempt, though I know I cannot act. I must put about a brave face despite all of that. And it only further seals in how I am truly feeling, which is displayed readily all over my body. This decay. I strain to show comfort. I gag to remain easy going. I choke to breathe. And always I maintain my look directly to the ground. To remain in my thoughts. To hypothesize. To focus on Literature. The participles of speech. *What are you waiting for? Strike me, if you are to strike. It is taking too long for a true hit.* My brain and eyes meet in a space of curiosity and I can no longer remain rigid. My eyes grow from the ground, rooting a tall, desecrated tree, up to meet the eyes of whom I thought would strike me. Looking up, perched on its highest branch are a pair of eyes. They have taken notice. I am being watched, specifically. Observed by one. I never like that. To be watched so fervently. Much prefer to remain unseen, hidden. It radiates an emotion. Am I being pitied?

The Driver is observing, steadily. Perhaps it last months, perhaps a few seconds. Perhaps had I not been so stubborn I would notice I may not have been struck at all. Perhaps I would look on to note that I was being pat on the head. A form of encouragement. For what? Why? *WHY?*

Why would you do that?

The intensity of my stare back matches every bit of this day. Every horrific moment I endured. No longer wishing to do merely an enduring. They turn, and before their back meets my sight,

out falls a word I don't think I've ever heard in regards to me. Not in my whole entire life, "sorry."

It was so quiet, I don't think I heard correctly. *Sorry* (?).

To whom was that directed? I lean in to catch it before it topples to the ground completely, shattering all around. Grasping, hoping it will be collectible for my own treasured account. I don't think I heard it at all. I mustn't have.

Sorry. I'm fighting this with every step of my walk. *Sorry*. And as I pass the door frame, I run past their gaze, past the lips from which alleged wording falls, I run fast to a seat. I run and I plop before noticing that this is the wrong one. The wrong seat. The Bully's seat.

Fool. You idiot. Get up. Move. But I am frozen in time. Frozen as fast as forgotten words falling with, "Sorry." It has caught up with me now. It took it long enough, ricocheting endlessly upon the ground before meeting my ears perfectly, imminent. It rings so loudly, "SORRY." I cannot avoid it anymore. I search for the eyes of the Driver, they are not upon me. They are nowhere to be found. Forgotten, I sit, ejected. In a seat I should not be in.

This is their seat. I do not belong anywhere near it. Sacred. Unworthy. But I do not get up. *Why*? I do not get up in time before they arrive. And I don't know if I'm being rebellious? Am I shocked, unable to move out of fear? I do not know if this was of malicious intent on my part. Or consciousness of any kind? I can only reflect back and wonder what bravery, what stupidity, brought me here (?). And it is awful, but I crave to be further seen. Another apology. Another sorry. I grow cocky with it all now. For when I am approached, I decide not to sit on the blunt end of this sword I have yielded. This sword I have chosen.

They say my name twice, and up I look—

And I am not to be tested. I am further not struck. Like sorry, the attempt falls to the wayside. It falls upon the floor, shattering, splintering without fracturing my skin's surface. And my name is not said a third time. I remain here. In a place I do not belong, I stay.

Rebel. A little victory. There will be repercussions for this. But it does not matter, for this is a huge win. A victory on this cursed day. Not even cursed—decent. Enjoyable.

Sorry.

The bus takes off.

I sit by myself. But I do not feel so alone after all. I have won!

I have power within me.

I am a tall tree, nested, with roots below firmly planted. Little Bird has power. Little Bird is strong.

Not sorry. Not so sorry at all.

I slept on the ride, without knowing I had fallen asleep. And I am awakened by a hand greeting me.

Not an angry hand. That same hand as before. That hand which rigidly, intensely made me question with such anxieties. It is not a hand of callous intent, though there are callouses upon it in full. It is a hand most misunderstood. Most private. A hand filled with hope, prosperity, and good.

This hand I am not met with differs from many of the hands I've met before, for I have known all kinds of hands like heat. This is unlike all I've seen, for it is nice, it is pure. This hand offers no ill affection. Nor malice. This is a hand of outreach. This is a hand of civility. This is a hand of justice. And all things that are good.

I am met with a cautious touch. Gingerly and it is saying one persistent thing.

As I look up to the Driver, they tell me: get up. It is time to wake up, indeed. I wonder how long I've slept for. How long did they allow me to sleep. No one else is on the bus. It's just us two.

Which is odd, for normally the Bully is left behind, always watching.

I have a compulsory instinct to run. I look up and want to run, but stop short of this. I must say something. I must acknowledge, with gratitude.

"Thank you." I attempt to mutter, mouthing, graciously.

Then, as instinct allows, determines, I run. I run out of my shoes. I run as fast as I can. I run off into the distance leaving a trail of dust behind. I run so fast and with such frenzy, I don't know if I'm running away from or towards an alternative situation. It is in this indecision that I trip.

Buckling out of my shoes, I fall. I topple. I roll over. I flip. I am so embarrassed. *You are not a runner. You know better than this.*

And as I sit on the ground, unable to shake it off, something swirls within me. Perhaps it is from the rest that my emotions are prepared to stir, for I want desperately to cry. I open my mouth to let the first wailing sob be emitted, and all that lifts from Little Bird's beak is but a HONK.

HONK. From... me? From—

HONK. I turn and see the Driver waving. That gingerly hand. That kindest of hands. They leave the dusty door open so that I can see this as they begin to move on. The hand waves and waves, not closing the door as it begins to roll. Out pours another kind gesture, the kindest gesture I did ever hear, "Tomorrow I will pick you up right here."

I am stunned. Unmoved. Before I can comprehend what is happening, before I can wave, or move my lips to flap, the bus rolls away. The door shuts. And I am left to pick up the peices. The words, so many words. I recite them each back. And they flood my ears at once. "Sorry" "Tomorrow I will pick you up." "Right here." With an x on the ground, I mark the spot. And I turn to take stock of where I am. I am much closer to my house. I can see it. If I could throw stones, it would hit the trailer. It could, if I threw in that way. "Home" is right there. RIGHT THERE!

An outpour of excitement fills my belly. I turn and I turn and I turn around. I turn around, and though I know I am not going to be seen, I wave. I wave and I wave. With all of my might I wave until my arm threatens to dislocate from its socket. With all of the joy I have to give, I have had a victory on this day. I have made a friend. Dare I say?

I won! I've won!!

I feel glorious. I wave and I wave and I wave until the bus is but a memory. Until the memory is just dust. And the dust is settling.

Have I made a friend? Or am I getting carried away? As I sit with questions that are piling up high, I wonder... I wonder about a lot of things. Perhaps I shall make no new scabs. No new ridges. No new valleys to peak. Perhaps I have done enough on this day. This is enough. I take in a deep breath, and roll through the fog to face whatever comes next. I can brave it. With this confidence I turn to face the house, and I see the door hinged open. Father awaits inside. Yes, I think I've had enough self made scabs. Enough for one day. No— enough for always. It is time to grow up. Twelve is here. Buckle up 1-10. Remember 11, you are older. Time for new habits. You've made good. You've made growth. You've even made a friend. *Little Bird, it's time to live now. It's time to remember your potential. You've made promises.*

I walk and it is like a showdown. A face-off. Me and this "house". But the "house" isn't really just a house now is it? This is a battle ground. Here, I will face-off: me and my fate. Pre-destined or chosen, there are promises. Potentials. Ends. I will blow the candle out my dear, and make that wish come true.

Dad will be Dead by the end of this. Sooner or later.

Dead before 12 stops its chime.

Dead, with a wish to blow on. I like the sound of that.

And I take my steps to the "house". I begin the count.

1.

2—

The difficulty about a thing is a matter of how. When it's so necessary, so cared for, how, how, *HOW*. DAY ONE—

How to execute the execution? *How* to get away with it? To pull it off, more so than to be devoid of "guilt." How it should be done requires much deliberation. Much precision. I must be meticulous. I will be ruthless. I will do this.

I sit with my self-made attorneys within, those that I keep on call, and test all markers that rise to the bench. We go back and forth to find the perfect alibi, the perfect execution, the perfect how. And the how is most stumbling.

In a case of murder there is always the who: who did this. There is a bit of where. Why: a motive. But it truly a matter of one hinging moment, for without this, there'd be no murder, nor case at all. Everything falls to the wayside without it. *How*. Everything was obvious as I stand before the glassed bench, wiping away debris to discover exhibit A: the blurry weapon. I must lean in and see.

It was found. I do believe I've cracked it. But is it enough? Is it too simple? I must be prepared for deviations. I must be prepared for variations. And I must practice.

The simple answer of how wasn't simply found. It was overwhelming. Insurmountable.

Daunting and for this a panic ensued, a week on end. As I've aged, vocabulary has elevated the precision of generalized anxiety, to a clarifying and first proper panic attack. The panic was not helpful. It brought no clarity. So, I did what I had previously sworn I would not again. Not ever more. I retreated back into my shell, peaking at the mountains and valleys. I demanded a release. Leading me to do the thing I didn't want to do anymore. That I don't want to do. I clawed one more time upon the frame of myself. Just... One more. One more time for good measure. I relapsed. And I formed another scab.

It was defiant. It was saddening. But it was for a moment, though fleeting, freeing. The panic that had lead me through the night was changed this morning. Without breakfast, late as can be, I avoided him. Successfully, something that had I not been consumed by panic, I would have celebrated. No arguments. A total avoidance: victory.

Instead I was focused on running. Running in my splotted soaked pants as the blood freshly gushed. Soft drips piping down my leg, for with each firm step into the ground, I pushed out a rushing gush of more. A splatter. Without caring if anyone would notice. Eventually, it would congeal. So late I was I liked the warmth running, collecting. A distraction from the fears: *I'll never make it to the bus in time. Foolish foolish me.*

Should've cut deeper.

Should've cut twice.

Should've cut more.

Again. Again.

Maybe I'll turn back and forget all of this. *Just go back.* Yes, maybe I'll go back.

I ran so hard and without thought that I nearly ran into the open door of the bus.

"I was beginning to think you'd gone to the old pick up spot." My friend—I am growing more comfortable to surmise that precisely is what they are— said with what can only be assumed was a grin. Had I looked up I would've received it. Would've taken this in. I would have halted and welcomed it for the needing distraction that it was. Had I but lifted my eyes up and out of the swirling panic in the pool of bloodied pocket I was under, I would have found a moment of calm in this stormy windless whirlwind.

"Well, good morning to you too."

You remembered, was the thought I thought so loudly that I do think they escaped a Little Bird's beak. Marching in place to insert feet too large for the shoes I am so prone to run out of. Punching my feet deeper into the tongue of them, hoping they would stay on today. *Stay on. Stay balanced. Do not run off of me.* Little betrayers at the best of times. This was not the best of.

Anxiety. And a feeling lurched within me like a wave toward rollicking shores. Something was lingering. It dawned on me that I was still being watched. I don't like being watched, not in that way. I felt hunted.

I pushed the ever cutting anxiety down lower than the new thigh's cut. looked up toward the mirror from my knee jerk reaction, expecting to see the gaze of a predator, but finding only that of a friend. A concerned friend. A watching friend. I put my head upon the window. And I rested in the solace embrace of this. To feel safe in a silent eye. To feel safe with a friend. What a gift.

THUMP. My head hit the window abrasively. And I jolted ready to take on whomever pushed me into it. But there was no hand that did this.

No one around me was watching. Glad it was not witnessed. I was slipping back into the territory of being unnoticeable. And paranoid. A juxtaposition perfect for my riddled anxiety. I had time to think before arrival. Several minutes before prison-school grounds. Make a plan. Steps. Actionable ones you can consistently take.

From what I had surmised, an element of surprise would be needed. It cannot be expected.

But make no mistake, it will be pre-meditated, precise. It will be calculative and exact.

Thoroughly practiced. This must go down without error. Without the possibility of lightning re-striking, igniting a once lifeless wick a Nu.

Best to be done late at night. Post-drinking. Stupor. Yes, it must be done late at night. Just before the moon and the sun switch shifts. Just before, in the embers of mirth and darkness.

Quietly, it will be done. Most unexpected. Good, that is a start.

The timing will be obvious as I keep a watchful eye upon the horizon, an eye-line seen easily from my bedroom window. For at the perfect timing, the tree's shadow ceases to hover upon the "house".

In the backyard, there lives a tree. An old, rotting tree that has long since been dead, but remains unmovable and stoic with its presence. It must be heavily rooted, for in all of its years of decay, it still stands three fold over the "house". The perfect metaphor for a family in ownership to it. That which exists upon land with equal roots and ground amuck with rot.

Rotten to the core. A tree archaic and nightmare inducing. That which reflects the horrors of the unimaginable. That tree with tangled webs of limbs most divine, that claw and tear whenever light strikes upon them. This which claws down, pining to grow further, so that it may scrape at the ground. To dig its way up, and walk free from this place, to any family that is not so rotten. To grow again. To thrive. That tree which, at all times, gives shadow direction in this star-less sky. Despite the fog, despite the haze, a shadow barren and bleak cascades from trunk to each nail biting tip. That is until the switch. If you focus your eyes at the right time, that shadow sinks just back beyond the horizon, and ceases to exist. It disappears. Gone. That is the time of my deliverance.

No matter the choice of *how*, no matter the weapon, it must be done in secret. And I must physically prepare for all variables in tow.

I must become fit, is it "as a whistle" (?), they say. I must become strong. Rooted heavily like that tree. No matter how I am struck, down into the night, threatened for death, I must continue on. And finish it. It could be as inconsequential as a pillow. A smothering. I could smother out his life: Dead.

"Did that hurt?" A voice is speaking... to me? "You know when you... pow! Hit your head?"

The voice moves closer. It is an intimate voice. A voice that doesn't match the body it is confined too. Are we similar? I'm scared to look further, to engage and discover that our similarities stop there. To see that I am alone in my weirdness. To see that I am truly alone at this age. My body isn't home to me yet. I feel foreign, from rise of shell. That very shell of me will be shed one day and I shall rejoice in it. For I do not fit into even the imagining of its hollow growth. A most unwelcoming carriage I carry.

"Looks like it would've hurt..." This stranger was concerned for me. Curious. Bossy. I had an impulse to laugh. Not an impulse, I was laughing. They laughed back.

I had an impulse to hold their hand. But always kept my hands to myself. I wish I had held their hand. It would be nice to know what that feels like. To hold a hand and not from a strike. We could've formed a deeper bond. Perhaps. Could come to this spot each morning and share our emotional journeys with one another. Oh how it must be to find an accomplice. An alliance, built. To laugh together. To cry when needed. But I didn't say anything further. I did the opposite of impulse. I replied on autopilot, in the way I'm accustomed: I turned back to the window and stared into the reflection, past myself. I am but a shell.

I think they took notice of the blots upon my leg. I must steer clear of this all seeing individual. They are much too perceptive. Best to keep it at what could've been. And I could certainly have had more on this day.

Again, I failed.

I am alone.

With this I made eye contact with myself in the mirror. *Get it together. This time in your life is fleeting. The task it hand is forever. Do it swiftly. Focus. Do your steps.*

But all my brain could circle around to, was how they'd looked at me. With such kind eyes. With such friendliness. I could see this in the reflection of how they were now sitting. Beside me but detached. Equally uncomfortable in their own clothes. Reaching out to me was a big gesture. Even if I wasn't so disliked socially. It was a big gesture for them to do this monumental task of asking such a seemingly simple question. It was packed with much more than all of that.

We are uncomfortable. Much in common, I bet we have. Only they were better at hiding the difference. Better guarded. More equipped for the life here in the Square. More adaptable. Smarter. Cleverer. They were an actor, for they were better at playing this two-system act. But I could tell. I saw them. I felt their discomfort. My senses were on high alert of all of this. If only I were braver.

I should hold their hand.

If only I were more like them.

The bus stopped. They walked away. We never spoke again.

One day. Maybe I'll be brave enough and reach out to them again. Perhaps.

A pillow will do. It doesn't much matter much the source. Yes, a pillow is fine. *Use that. No need to think further. Go in, and begin to play the system to your advantage. This whole time, the tools were surrounding you, while you avoided them. Learn from the places you least expect to. The places you have long since hated, utilize. Get strong. Do your part. Seek it out.* Dead. It is a countdown to the dreaded gym.

When I entered the gym, I got through the clothes portion as fast as I possibly could. And made my way to the teacher with haste.

I want to be strong. I need to kill my roommate. Is that what I should say? *Say something.*

Instead, I didn't speak. I stood silently, awkwardly for a duration of time any person with an ounce of perception would've snapped their fingers in front of my face to check for coherence, a breath, something, and then swiftly checked for a pulse. But standing silently, obligatory, was so common of me that nothing was seen of this. Typical Little Bird behavior.

I wasn't even noticed. That's how small I was to all. I wasn't paid attention to for this is not a space I'm intended to exist in. I excused myself to the bathroom and suppressed the desire to cry a little by digging into my newest scab. There, dull the pain inside with this exterior. Much better. *Dig deeper.*

How am I going to get strong? What a foolish expectation. I am very, very weak. That is when I heard the rustling. A noise that was most muted, no one else would've noticed. But I have the heightened senses. I focus on the sounds. A threat imminent?

In the stall next to me I can feel, then I can see that someone is changing. Secretly. Privately. I'm not amongst a threat, but a genius. A peer. I have discovered a secret. I do not have possession of many of these. What a treasure. How had I never discovered this before? I usually notice the quiet, the benign (?), what a secret to behold.

Glimmers of clothes litter the floor, and are picked up quickly. The hand grabbing them, the extending collector belongs to a hand I know. A hand I took notice of just this very morning. Should I outreach my hand now? How I wish to theirs. Should I yet? Maybe they need their hand held. I desperately need mine held as well...

I do nothing. Typical Little Bird. Before long, the bell rings and I move on to the next station. To the next class. And then the next. A monotony of days. The humdrum. The very definition of

defeat. I'm moving along with the convoy, en route, until defeat becomes victory. Literature course!

My favorite, saves me. It is library day. In the room filled with a scarcity of books, on peeling wooden shelves, I can get lost in here. Lost down a divergence of two paths: that which exists, and that which lies between. Each of the remaining books, as the shelves constantly dwindle upon newer discoveries, more are fizzled and literally burnt out. Book burnings are a regular occurrence in the Square. They wish desperately for us to read less and less. That which remains here exists often with many redactions upon its pages. Clever beasts, these steps of black ink. I hope that I will find answers somewhere. In here, lies an answer. You just have to be willing to read between. I need an answer. For I've myself a monumental question! How to get fit? Where will I find help with this? Where will the answer lie? Not lie—be?

How will I execute this? And a competing question lingers, cushioned by doubt. How will I execute him? Without being found out. Is the pillow enough? Is this an effective tool? How to not seem so obvious? To read horror, to read murder mystery's perhaps. But the horrors of reality give way to more terror and more preparations upon life's unpredictable variables than these straight and narrowly journeyed books, on or off their own redactions.

Just do the pillow. Just commit. Lie down with the idea. Focus on getting fit.

I nod to the more pressing, and needling question: how will I get strong. This persists and prevails in finality. Louder than a library wall should allow a thought to ring.

I am lead to the fitness section, which exists as large as the "religion" section and much larger than the "history". Here! I've found it. My "god"! My shining light: Guns of Steele.

Tucked into my hands I know success will bring me home. Not "home", but homely. That of a home with its sweet, sweet end. This book shall lead to peace. Perhaps not the world over but for the world of me. Thank you Guns of Steele, in 60 days (or less). A surprising use of words in this censored world. For anything of violence is not permitted. Not in TV. They have a tougher time controlling radio. But definitely not upon a book. Not in the printed word. It's frowned upon to be discussed outside of a boxing ring. There it is permitted for the rich to place their meager bets and let the people's frustrations leave.

To be here with a brain, you must be in constant denial of "new found facts". A hypocrite to the "truth". For everyone is the opposite of their expression. Everyone is violent here. Violent, whilst it is illegal. Violence is unspoken. It "doesn't exist". Hypocrisy. All are rule breakers. And so this book also is.

Holding the book gives such comfort like I've never yet felt. I am feeling filled with hope, as I wait in line to check out.

Moving through these hollowed walls, in this library most redacted I have to think. My mind wonders to what all this building has seen. This, one of the oldest buildings in the town. One much in need of repair. No one will throw money at the educational system. This is the last upon the Square's list to fix. Better to put money into fear mongering, into "safety": imprisonment. School-prison stays open as the beginning function of this system. To indoctrinate. Therefore it has been allowed to continue. To get all of us citizens on the same page. But looking around, what does the page say? Do we redact the same words, at the same pace? For if you read even Tom Sawyer this week versus a year ago, you'd find a different set of ink upon each blotted page. Cemented by the rebellion, which paved it this way. The Square won't let us think for ourselves. They wish us to not read.

I clutch tighter still to my Guns of Steels, as I pass the map of the Square, plastered tightly to the wall, I look out to its perfection, a beautiful map with rigid borders, all painted over blank voids of mishaps (presumably where phallic, toxically masculine and hairless body parts once lived, drawn out by someone wishing to have their hand removed). I take note of the allowed graffitied "traitor" upon territory just beyond the Square's borders.

I clutch so tightly to Guns of Steels that I risk popping, or to herniate a disk. I feel sickened by two things. The hypocrisy. And of the Bully coming towards me.

"What's that you've got in your hands?"

I want no trouble. I just want to get my book, before it is redacted. I want this book to be mine. I am so close. So few steps left to take until I have safely exited this pathetic excuse of a library, and closer to home, to study.

I want to go. To exodus my body. To retract from this shell. Just let me get this and go. Beat me, thrash me, gnarl me, hash me once I've already checked out. Just wait.

We both know that is not what will transpire. And as you can read between the lines, you of power and wit, of knowledge and accessibility to truths, access to true facts, I'll let this breathe for a minute. I'll focus on my breath and suggest that you do the same. For how boring is it to read of another beating? I want to write of less. You know where this is going, saw it a mile away. No need to spell it out. *Redacted*. Yes, I will bypass the details of my bully's tongue and fists. As I fall to the ground, I stare past the graffiti upon the map, I imagine myself jilting through, past all graffiti, redactions, and banal lies. I fill myself, pouring into those spaces under those lifeless words and far from the clutches of this pathetic Bully who preys on easy target, digging their knees into my shoulders. Keeping me pinned and immobile.

It does not matter. I am amongst the stars. I am in a deep ocean. No. I am in a great dessert land! It awaits me with turquoise palaces and glittering gold that hangs like wind chimes, most extravagant. It chimes of money. Of excess. It rings beautifully, but alarms with the quake that villainy is afoot. It chimes. Chimes. Chimes.

Strong people like Ox fight to tear down the border walls that surround the palace, stretching further than the mirage gives way. They clammer to let the people go. To free the enslaved.

Heroism of "biblical" proportions. So much so that I am initially in doubt of it. Yet I relish in the delicious thought of such heroism. *More of this is needed*. I find myself thinking, chest concave, myself plummeted, unable to move time over again and again. There is no use. The feet are clasped under my back, the knees locking down my arms as my face is hit with no end in sight. I am locked in this exchange.

Locked, but escaped. I'm not in my body. I am on the dessert front. Far, far away. Before the splitting of the earth. When it was still one large mass of things. Upon the back of this, I ride high on a chariot. I am not being tortured at all. I am leading the fleet to freedom. I am all. I am a dynasty.

I ride high and fast, chasing the border as it is ripped down! The wall falls like ill stacked dominoes around me. And as it does, the very fabric of the earth falls along with it, coming undone at its seams. A splitting of the atom. A Nu earth awaits.

My hair is luscious and cascades with rippling shadows that make out like snakes to vines upon ridges high and valley's peaks. They ride, hiss, and taunt. They welcome, and dip into the shadows of this new forming ripping.

Out from the belly of this, an Ocean of birds emit. Fantastical. Rich birds. Once hidden, outward, now gleam. They bite upon the shadows, the crevices of threat. A Nu order is afoot. A Nu pecking order given.

The horizon is coming and the shadows will cease soon. All will stop at the end of this long awaited quake. Like my "house" tree, soon these shadows will not be in view, and take to the shifting sands. The shadows will remain only as ripples upon dusty shores: a memory. Then they will go to wherever shadows go to. Swept away. To no longer exist (?), or to another home.

As promised. As hoped for, then, it comes: the sun. The son and daughter, in one, has risen. A dynasty. I stand tall upon a fallen kingdom. With the last chime of the last fallen golden participle. I stand upon a new land, with a growing Ocean between us. The free rule their side. I am chosen to rule mine. This is a strong pose upon me. It is effective. I bask in it. It is a warm feeling. A warm *vision*. It chokes me up.

I am choking.

The view spirals out of mind and I am back, barren to a concrete floor. Bloodied and choking upon it. Fret not, hope is not lost. I still have hope. I am almost grateful. For now I've an idea!

As bright as the sun. I could use this pose mid-night to strangle? To suffocate. With that pillow. He will die in his sleep. So the coroner will think.

I'm not much for strength. I'm often overlooked. I'll be overlooked. An advantage. His alcoholic tendencies will prove enough evidence. Toxicology reports. All those empty bottles, exhibit A. Exhibit B. Exhibit CDEF. Exhibit—

This has to be iron tight.

Can I move? No. This grip is excellent.

Try again. Can I move? No. *Perfection.*

I am hit for moving around too much. Rather than take it, I do not slink away. I become present. Fully realized. A strength lives within. I look up with the strength of the sun, with all the strength of a dynasty to back it. I look on, through swollen eyes, filled with hope, from all the sons and daughters of a Nu horizon and stare directly into the Bully's face. There is a power in this gaze. My eyes tell all. See all. Through time and space. Suffocate within my *vision*. Many planets have birthed and died in a gaze ablaze such as this. Stare directly into the sun, but be warned. With each blink I destroy, then create. Destroy, create. That is the power of these eyes. Many Nu, reincarnate.

I cannot move. And I don't need to. It is better this way. The Bully is not much more in stature, size, nor weight than me. *This pose could work.* This pose will work: *definitely.*

I don't need to win this little battle. *Pathetic Bully.* Who cares to win, anyhow (?). That was always my feeling, my intent. But today, I have found the strength of histrionics. I have had a *vision*. I don't need to win. I probably won't win most battles. But I do not have to escape. I do not have to win. But if I want to, if there's a chance of this, in my current stature, my current lack of physical strength—it does not lie in the swing of my weapon, it does not come off the strike of whom has the mightiest of blows. No. To win a battle you don't have to strike at all. Even if it feels the only option. To win, to truly win, you must not be defeated. I just have to see and be seen for what I am. Inner strength. Core strength. That is unshakeable. My truth shall win.

I am not scared of you, you Pathetic Bully. You pathetic lot. I pity you. I see your pain. And I am sorry for that. But I do not take it on. I stand still. I hold my ground. I remain at my core. And all the while I lock eyes with the Bully. I stay here. More than hope, I know this will bring an end to this beating. I will it to be so.

Look at me. Yes. YES. *Stay there. Stay in this reflection. Stay here: in my eyes.* At first they are angry. Then mystified. Lastly, tortured, to the point of disconnect. They witness horrors in this gaze. I hold on. They have seen truths not even I could. They are subject and witness to a glimpse of their own Dynastic *visions*. Of Shadows fallen. Of Shadows surrounding. They fall off of me.

It worked. Until I'm very strong, these eyes will have to fight my battles.

This bully stands, but punches one last time as if to retain the dignity lost here in this match. Punching into an eye that gave them the fright they have. And my strength still remains, even with the lift of this half-committed fist.

They get up. I am breathing shallow breaths, for that shoulder grip suppressed my ability to take in life, to take in air. *Excellent.*

And above all, I still have my book. A win! It's the small victories that keep the clock pressing forward, that keeps the cogs from being stuck. This is beyond a small feat. A true and ecstatic win. As I approach further towards the bench of the librarian's desk, I feel pressure, heat. I feel the looks and abject stares of a person. Perhaps of many people. I am being noticed. Watched. The eyes belong to—

Before I can locate the eyes of whomever is pressing upon me so profoundly, the Teacher is upon me. Standing over me. Pick me for your mantle. My saving grace. My favorite. *Snap out of it.* Oh no, she's taken notice of me. *Correct.* This can't be good. Look away! Take notice another day. I do not want to be known for this. Not for being beaten up. Please, do not draw attention to me. To this.

There will be no repercussions for this, so why draw attention (?). The Square has a propensity for violence. Expects, encourages it. To be seen in this way, marks you as a clear loser. The weaker. A weak link. It is nothing more than an embarrassment for the links surrounding to take

note and mark such a territory. "Such a pity," I can feel the Teacher say. Then, outwardly it pours, "Who did this to your eye?"

I stare. With all of the power that I have, through an ever closing eye. *Do not betray. Stay open. Stay quiet.*

The Bully identifies himself. Proudly so. I stare on. I will not be moved. I will not be spoken to. Not if I'm not here. I am invisible. I am already beginning to fade away.

The Bully laments how they are in the right. For I am a phony. A fake. The R-AGE stirs. I quiet mine. They would be wise to quiet their own. But it is too late. They are of action, always. And thinking they can stomp me further into the ground, to prove me weaker, still, they make a regret. They take my library book—the library's book— and begin to rip out page after page. They rip until there are no pages left upon its spine and drop it. As it collides with the concrete, they have sealed their fate.

Violence upon a peer is a thing so little, so common it is almost non-existence. They should have kept it there. But this sort of violence is seen as such: an attack. An attack upon the Square. An overt, punishable attack. There is nothing worse than the destruction of public property. Public, meaning in ownership to the Square. There is no worse offense. People lose ligaments for this. Their lives. Their legacy. People are ostracized out of fear for being associated with it. People can lose their heritage. Stripped of titles. Surviving children change names to avoid this. Most of the jailed people exist upon a lesser offense, to what Mother called the enslavement. That is what the place is. "Modern" slavery.

They should not have done that. *I pity you. You without limits. You without a filter. Whatever was going on, has matched up to you now. The cycle of abuse, now catches its brake. The wheel ends.* Destroying this book, this property of the school-prison owned by the state, owned by the Square is a fate well sealed.

The Bully looks up, from the hands that shred, realizing that they have largely over stepped. But it is too late. My eye will heal, this book will have to be reprinted. There is no chance at a re-print. This is the last of its kind. The book dies here.

There is a ringing of the buzzer. The Bully is collected. Not daring to lock eyes with me. They search for help, knowing that they will not find it. Kicking and screaming, the Eyes take them off. The Guards, three fold, knock, twirl and remove them. Last of the senses is the sounds. The terrors of such I can feel etch into my bones. Etch like a record carved, to be replayed at any point in my life. The last sounds I ever hear from the Bully.

I feel bad for them. Not even almost bad (?). I feel truly bad for them. I do.

As I pick up the pages of this innocent laden book, I collect the lacerations and am thankful that the pages are still mostly legible. I make immediate peace with the normalcy of what transpired. That it is over. That I am not viewed too heftily as the loser. That my moment ends, and that we all move on.

Peace with the removal of a classmate. One I will likely never see again. I wipe them from my memory, almost. And though I find no comfort in how our meetings have come to an end, I embrace that I have an ending. A resolution. And that I remained true to myself, cool, calm, but enR-AGED nonetheless. I will not let the screams bother me further. I must focus on me and I must continue with this day.

I am next in line. The eyes that pierced me so, the source of all heat, is found: the Librarian. Librarian's are known to take notes, but what does this looking say? The Librarian is a post, year over, that exchanges hands, for it has a high turnover rate with each new encroaching and restrictive order from the Square. A guardian of the books, the overseer of such a task, must be most precious. Most trusted. I do not envy its position. But this particular Librarian has taken a keen interest in the activities of anyone except for me. That is, until this day. This person that I have seen several times over the course of the last few months now is aware, is watching. With a stare I cannot place. A studying. I do not enjoy it. *Look away.* An intense and inquisitive stare, so much so that even through closing eye, I quiver.

They are studying me. Me? But I am not a book. And I am not open. I do not wish to be read. This is lackluster, not a show and tell. I cannot be easily read. I hope not. But I feel exposed. I feel without my shell. Naked, and all together too noticed. I don't like that.

The Librarian clocks into expository fashion. Noticing that I am noticing this... notice. "Play coy," I can hear their own thoughts seem to say. And why is that? What is their intent upon me, suddenly?

This is a threat of the vilest kind. For it is not obvious. It has no outward motive. It cannot be tracked. Worst of all is an attack I cannot prepare for. This look enshrined.

As they reach for the scrappy, loose leaf book, as it remains, I do not want to give it up. I do not trust them with these remnants. That is not my book, but it certainly belongs no more in the hands of you. You cannot appreciate such a book as this. With its corners missing. With holes upon certain portions of illustration. Ripped, tattered, removed. This rubbish. I do not like the power that they possess over my rights to this book. I do not trust them with it. I do not see it boding well for me. And all remaining hope flies off from me, immediately.

To my surprise, the Librarian showcases continued excitement, with jowl, hound-like teeth protruding as they ignore the book and continue to perceive me. The illusion they have created. Whatever that is, is far more exciting than I currently am. *I do not like this.* They are beaming holding this—this mere wreckage. And they aren't reading it. Not taking stock in it at all. It as if this is any object. Any normal, complete object. And nothing before has transpired. I wonder if they watched the Bully be dragged off, or know that the bully tattered this at all (?). Did they stare at me this entire time? They must have. *They have.*

Smiling at this extension of me, this "freedom" of choice, my book choosing. With a piercing grip of the reflection upon such foul, predatory, jowl-like teeth, they smile upon and through me. It is piercing. I am threatened.

We do not know each other to have such an interaction. To have any interaction, in truth. And we have not yet spoken, truly no interaction beyond passing by as two ships would. There is no need for any response elicited from such a wolf. A wolf like none I have yet met before. A crocodile.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

Why now? Why this smile?

RUN. I am in danger. *This does not sit right.* If I had a photographic memory, I could take the book back. Could copy and paste it into the scanners of my mind. Blink. Repeat. Blink. And throw it away. Give it up to be shredded, burned, whatever they wish for. But it is too late. It is in the hands of a decider. This crocodile. A fate, I worry will result in my demise. The rejection of what I need: I need this book. I am desperate for this book. *That is not a position you want to find yourself in.* I cannot bring myself to look upon this individual. I don't want to stare into the eyes of a crocodile. Just eat me whole. *Do it, and do it now.*

Had I looked, maybe it would've changed the next moments altogether. For they make a decision without consorting with the powers of the institution. A massive overstep for a Librarian. An over-reach. Risky. Life-threatening. For me (?). Why? There's something to this. There's a reason. Something is off. I cannot be in gratitude of this moment, for it is ping'd with something else. Something sappy. I will be tarred for this. For less you would. Am I being tested? I do not know if I can even accept the book, should I be given it now. *No, no burn the book. Take it. I don't need it.*

Rather than putting the book aside, or even attempting to glue it back together, they offer it up to me. As is. "You can keep it. It will be our little secret."

I don't like the implications of this. Secrets kept are often secrets held against. I do not desire two secrets in one day. The cubicle undressing was more than enough. How I wish that hand would come over and tell me what to do now. Hold my hand, swat the book away. Something. Take the lead. I am just a nuisance. I am just in the way. I do not deserve this book. It should be burned.

"Take it."

I am being tested. But I cannot defy, as a child, a person of higher societal rank. I cave to this crocodile. I cave to the overseer. I grab the book. But am stopped.

"One second."

They grab the lattice work, a glue like structure with brush to dip, used in order to expunge — to redact— any word deemed off limits. And there was a definite word in question upon this: Guns. They had made a flaw in not doing this earlier than today. They should not have let this slip. I now have a secret too... I have the upper hand. I made it known with my newly powerful stare. We lock eyes. *I wonder how many other guns there are in this library.*

One less now.

With *** of Steele in 60 days (or less), in my firm grasp, I leave. Making sure to not let any pages slip out. No shrapnel. No evidence. Just a book and me. As I do, I remove myself of this odd exchange. Out of sight. Out of the heat.

But I have a piercing feeling that the Librarian does not so quickly move aside. Perhaps they are still studying a textless thing: me. Perhaps they watch as I walk out. And continue to watch. Perhaps they are watching me right now, from some hidden block behind any wall. Behind a map, an outlet, a floorboard. Perhaps they have me on camera, and watch me at all times. Perhaps they are my stalker. Or perhaps I have over thought it all.

I sit, calmly alongside my peers, waiting for the final bell. We are not lectured about what has transpired in the Library. We already understand.

We continue with the lesson. We are excused by the bell.

Calm, cool is the collective. A hive mind. Blending in. No more distractions. And for a time, there will be no more outward R-AGE. But never forget, it always exists. Especially at this age. Albeit now more quietly, the R-AGE inside boils like hell. It churns. It mulls over. It is waiting to slip up. To be expressed.

R-AGE, you will have your day. A field day. Just wait a little while longer. Prepare. Do your steps. Above all, *wait*. You will have your hour. Wait for the last strike of 12.

Just a little longer.

I intend to read the entire bus ride "home". To commit. I am going to dive right in. I love having a task. I love even more to have a routine. This comforts me. And there is additional anxiety on this day. I need a distraction from wondering where the Bully went. I cannot help but wonder. I must be human, for curiosity stirs within me.

Everyone around me discusses it. Away from school-prison, that which is missing can be discussed openly. Not completely open, but enough that it is heard. The whispers. The many, many whispers.

I focus on the written word. I try to... anyway. I feel the absence of eyes upon me. My morning friend does not sit beside of me. Best to not associate. To seem too familiar. I doubt they will sit next to me again. If they do, it won't be for weeks. By which time, I hopefully will not even be upon the bus. That person which I so desire to hold the hand of. For what reason? What is my intent behind this desire? Lust? Familiarity?

I focus on the written word again. I wonder now if they even were the one changing in the bathroom stall next. Did they notice me, too? Is this why we are so separate? Do they know of our similarities? They seem much more intelligent than I am. To be sure they noticed. *They've noticed.*

Focus. I read and begin to map out a plan to build up endurance, tolerance, and a built frame. This will require time. Patience. And persistence. Things I have. Things I will acquire. I have a foundation for this, an aptitude. In my stubbornness comes a persistence.

I will keep an active account of my workouts through scrapped paper. A collection of smaller tidbits. Stick with the plan. Come rain or come shine. Come injury. Come all. "I do." I commit. I read until I have practiced the plan, established enough memorization that I can continue on, should the book suddenly disappear, through a grasp of Dead or from the handless winds. I don't want to become obsessive over a thing. I recite it back. I move on. I look up, for the first time and take stock. There are but five people left on this bus. As I am near the very end of the

route, I am compelled to be compulsory, to act up a bit. Confidence fills my chest, and the desire with my head matches it. I want to move to the front of the bus. And so I do. I have never sat here before. The seat is cooler than where I was. Not by much, but enough for the senses to shift. Sounds hit differently. They echo, yet disappear more quickly. Thoughts, however, are stuck in front. Louder they are. And below, a vibration. The wheels of the bus, I feel as they go round and round, or however the childish tune went. It is stirring. All of my senses enjoy this change.

I take note of the cushion. The wear of the leather. The atmospheric pressure. I feel the height of the chair. And note the view as one, then two walk in front of me.

Not having another seat in front of me is peculiar. Jarring, even. I've never been a front row kind of person. Too exposed. But here, we all face the same direction. Even despite the mirrors. These eyes. These blessed, beautiful eyes, unwavering. This I enjoy. The brushing of other's as they exit, without the need to speak to one another. To watch their descent, there is a power dynamic involved. I love to people watch. I am an observer. I am glad I have tried this. It is just the distraction I have been looking for. I make note to do this again. Maybe not tomorrow, but again.

I look out the window, to the door to see how it bounces as we move along potholes and other persistent concrete breaks. It is rickety. Rugged. A bit alarming. The door threatens to open in completion, nearly taking out a mailbox. I am surprised that I am not bothered. There is a surprise or two left in me still. I like it here.

Perhaps it is because I am nearing an end.

Perhaps I have proven bravery today.

Perhaps I am malleable.

Perhaps I am comfortable given the dynamic, and power change.

Perhaps I feel intelligent.

Perhaps I feel accomplished for having sought answers and having found them.

Perhaps I am comforted to have a friend nearby.

Or perhaps it is all of these factors that I am liking it here. No matter the case, I am on a journey to joy. A JOYrney. A phrase I shan't use again. But joy, I ride upon, with the vibration of the wheels, and the squeezing tension of a door knocking about, threatening to open.

My friend. I dare not look at them while they drive. Nor speak. What would I say if I did? A child to an adult (?). What conversation could there be? Nothing of interest, surely. Would we gossip? How do you do small talk? Quietness. Nothingness.

I wait to arrive at my "home" and to discover if my book will survive my entrance. As anxious as I am in this silence, for anxiety never truly leaves the Square, contained in its rigid lines at all times, never needing an un-boxing, I continue on my path of joy. And I am hoping they do not say a thing to me either. They oblige. My friend does not look onto me, though I know they have noticed.

I am hopeful this ride never ends, as another exits the bus. I am hopeful it is the longest ride of my life.

And it is. For that is just how far away I live. *Good*. Sometimes it pays to be a loner.

The last leaves. But I stay in this moment. Un-rehearsed, un-prompted, we never make eye contact. Never exchange a word. We just ride. I am upright, at attention. But comfortable. I journey with joy.

Then we arrive. The door handle is held. The opening is lingered upon. I panic that I had not rehearsed what I would say as I exit. For one could foolishly lose their footing and mutter off family recipes, spit secrets now obtained. One could accidentally literally trip up or reveal too much emotion. What if I tell them I love them, in a friendly gesture of niceties? That I am up for adoption. What will I say? What will I say??

The hand teeters on whether it shall open the door, as it clutches onto the handle. I move slowly. I have risen. I stand and look towards the stairs decline. And know that the day will descend from here. A metaphor, unkind. I remain in this moment, with my back to the Driver. And they move not.

YOU ARE VERY KIND. I rather yell at them as I peel out of the door, not waiting for the handle to open from clutch.

"Must've been a good book!" The spit out as with the outside word I splat. *Had your nose in it the whole ride.*

YES. I say with a nod of my head that should replace the roll of all six tires.

As I begin to take the next step, the longest step I feel I shall ever take—as I begin to count my steps, hoping that no one will threaten what I have today accomplished, I hear more, "Cherish a good book." They speak to me as if I am easy to converse with. I stop nodding and let my eyes agree, out of fear that all of loose marbles trapped in my head will fall loose, slip up the bus and cause a wreck of my new friend.

It is OK to have a friend. You are on a path of Nu, of joy. I gather strength, I collect myself and stare directly into their eyes for the first time. Gathering my power. Reclaiming my space.

THANK YOU.

They smile at me. There are no crocodile teeth. It is a smile most friendly. A fellow Little Bird, perhaps.

"I'll see you right here tomorrow."

And they are on their way. I'll never get tired of hearing those words. I wish desperately to hear them again. Someone that holds up promises. Someone to pick me up whether I am down, or doing well.

I run into the "house" not because I'm excited to enter, not because it is a home at all, but because I have a reason to run. Not from, not towards. I have a reason to be. And that is wonderful.

Overall, I have had a good day. One of my better days. A blessing, and a curse of sorts.

Everything changes with Dead.

Bad to worse. Well, good to bad.

As this was a good day, it is of fate that it will not go on and remain this way. A good day, a bad night. A bad morning, a worse day. That is just how the cookie crumbles, whatever a cookie may be.

He has had the drink. Dipped into its well, but is not drunk enough to be incoherent. Not far enough along for the clicks to be clicking. The synapses fire out in fire shots. Flares. Warnings. Trappings. You must delicately dance around and through each statement. They are tests, trappings. It begins with talk of my incapacibilities. My stupidity. My foolishness. My otherness. It begins this way the moment I enter.

I must not make it obvious that I am protective over my bag. Shall not indicate that there is a book. I must remain neutral. Respond as I always do, as if nothing needs protecting. For the book is much more precious than I am.

He is grilling me. I am roasting upon this flame. And my eye betrays me. I cannot hold it open as I do on a normal day. He seems to finally take note of it: the bulging, injured eye. And for a moment I think he's going to have a parental instinct. But instead he says something that makes my stomach twist and knot in a way I had not anticipated. I am filled with acid, immediate. Nothing could prepare me for "I wasn't even hitting you hard. You really are weak." "Pathetic." He thinks I am. He doesn't even care if he didn't give me this marking. He doesn't care. He assumes. Why should it be possible that anyone else would see me long enough to hit me? Let alone care enough about my existence to be affected by it? To hit me... I am not even worth this interaction, this exchange. I am worthless.

I get up to leave the table, to wash up and away this eye before it is betrayed by the wet, the tears. And another hurling comes forward. There is always another attack. They pile on with each step in this "house". I can barely carry my own weight. Sure, hurl on another log. Another fuel for my R-AGE embers. I can carry. Path to joy. *Go on Little Bird, keep carrying.*

With a noise of contempt, of disgust, bellowing from his atomic belly as he pours another drink, "The only worse view is the back of your head." And he laughs.

Having never taken me to have help with my hair, to get it cut, combed, or evaluated—having never taught me how to take care of this which I've inherited, he hurls insult upon insult. And I find this to be a particularly low blow. Not only am I child, I am my own parent. I am instructor, and I get it all wrong, time and time again. I am protector, defending my unfortunate victim. I am now dresser, and barber, and weight lifter. I am to do all with such to carry. With such ugliness. With ridges of many. Even in moments of fleeting confidence, they cannot be grasped, for I must focus on the weight of the R-AGE, to carry it and not let it out of my grasp. With only two hands, I cannot juggle so many talents, nor hold so many hats. My hair used to be beautiful. So much so that it was my identity. And now, I know, it is gone from me.

Embrace it. Embrace change. Or be defeated.

I leave as he drinks. Steadily, step by step I repel towards the bathroom. Towards its door. To move its hinge. I open it. I am unnoticed. I am but a ghost here. I close it behind me. The air is a false sense of welcome. Stifling. Trapping. A coffin. But at least I am in. I am alone. With all of my hats. I am alone. I can put down all the thoughts. I can face myself.

I take my powerful eyes and stare through the one remaining open to peer upon just as I am. The bravest thing I do on this day. I look at myself. I take it all in. Every ridge. Every thin line. Every hair. Every loss. Every squint. Every imperfection.

I stare into this that remains from battle after battle. Little Bird with puffed, tuft and patchy remaining few feathers. Feathers that fall. Balding hair. Shedding, thinning. So ugly.

That is what I am. It is true. But there is potential.

I can make a move. I am not a tree. I will move on from this. I will be. Who is the Nu me? *Study. What do you want? What do you want to become? Set your own destiny. Is this the best you can do?* No. **LOUDER. I SAID IS THIS THE BEST YOU CAN DO?** No. *Good.*

This will not be my identity anymore.

NO MORE will I be this.

I cut.

No more will I be ugly.

I cut.

No more will I be taken advantage of.

I cut.

No more. Cut. No more. Cut. NO MORE.

I remove every last hair. Until I cannot cut any lower. Upon a few swipes I swipe at the scalp on accident.

No more. I can do no more. I want to be unrecognizable. I want to be anyone else. Different. Around the room I find one of the few remaining momentums from Mother: her old razor. My ridges friend. I remember the first time I found it. Joyful. Escapism at its purest. And with each use I am thrilled to find that it is still not as dull as I imagined it would be. Tucked within the back of the toilet. Like me: unnoticed. Unused for as long as I can allow. I rinse, and with a pleasant surprise that never gets old, I put it to use. Not to make ridges. But to make definitions. A healthier choice.

I remove the stubbled rest. And it proves difficult not to disturb the head. That most delicate skin. It is much easier to slice on purpose.

Not my intent. Never again. I won't slip up. I am a Nu person. Potential, you are arriving. Next stop: final passage. Me.

The front door opens. The clicking begins. He has arrived at the point in the night that is good for me. Dead drunk. Blackout. No more will I be at risk to BLACKOUT from his swings. He cannot make contact easily at this point. Not at this rate. He is outside fumbling with the debris. Then throwing rocks. Perhaps he will go for a drive around this aimless baron wild. Always with a drink. Oh to observe him. So predictable. To live so simply.

He is arrived at drunk and I have arrived at the point of decision. I can do no more. I must take myself in like a drink, fully. I must consume. I must taste the reflection. I must lap up in its pool and discover who I am. Who is this Nu? Is it enough?

It takes more strength to look at myself.

Do it. Look at yourself. RIP IT OFF LIKE A BAND-AID.

I do it. I look and recognize no part of myself. I have to touch my skin. And end up touching the reflection with apprehension, for fear of falling in. To a trap. To an Alice, or whatever. I've nicked myself in a place or two. I can see the trickling blood but no source for the spot. I leave it. Let it decide how it clots.

These eyes I possess, pierce through even me. And are more effective now. Now that there are less distractions. I look hardcore. Bold. Dare I say it, this smooth head works for me. I could get used to this.

I am getting used to this. I like it. I like the way I look. I stand differently. I am stronger, already. Not so different. But altogether changed. A metamorphosis. I am strong. I not only feel the potential, I see it. I see a killer. Little Bird that will fly. I see an achiever. I see it through strong eyes. Eyes that give way to stars, and one in particular, the bright star, at center. My eyes, even through bulging fraction, are imminent. They are dangerous. They are not to be fucked with.

Do not fuck with me. I could not see it before. Only felt its burden. Only told it to be quieted. But now I can see it, the source, the bright star. I can see it: the R-AGE. It is all around me. I am its source. I am its host. I stare, and the mirror bends, threatening to crack. Upon the edges it fractures. And I continue to stare.

A whole Nu me.

This is not just Nu. This is the true, real, raw me. Unedited. I have grown. I have much to do. Surprise bitch. Here I am. Take me as I am. Or melt. Fold. Crumble.

I take my bald head and pace from my bed to the door. From the door down the short hall way. Past the bathroom we share. Into the entrance of the main. To the side of his bed. I count each pace, each step. I codify the shortest distance for each. I assemble the quietest floorboards and factor them into my steps. By the end I have my answer. I double check it.

9 steps from the right of the bed to the door. For the left sides leave creaks too much.

9 smaller paces down the hall. Switching sides just before the bathroom door. Then back again to his place. The entrance does not squeak. I test it and test it. Noticing the best way to grip the handle. Something I am not accustomed to, for my door does not have this. No handle on my door. Removed before Mother left. My door might as well be open when it is closed.

Leaving the entrance and stepping through, I practice holding my breath. It must be steady the whole time. Even. Quieter than silence. Unnoticeable.

11 steps to the bed side, with the pillow carried from my bed. Start over go back and do that again.

9-9-11. And the tricky part begins. Crawling into the bed, on top of, without being noticed.

Little Bird must move swiftly. Must not stir. Must not awaken. For even if I am fit, I would not win that fight. I must aid in the drunkenness. I must add fuel to that little fire. I must help the clicks remain, by keeping the whistle wet. I will spike the drinks. I will make him click faster, and harder than he is prepared to be.

9 steps.

9 more.

11 steps.

Death within reach.

Calm, steady, with pillow in tow. Walk wide.

Switch sides, switch sides.

Turn the knob, holding breath.

Launched upon.

Practiced crouching tiger discovered from Bully.

And smother. Kill. Never give up. Dead. Good riddance. Dead. Ding dong. Dead.

I will go on to practice this every single day at least once when he is not here inside of the "house". But I will play it in my head on repeat to remember every board that squeaks.

Musically so. A dance.

I will breathe deeply and practice keeping the breath steady. I must. I will watch more steadily his consumption of alcohol. And find a way to spike it up further. When he's not looking, yes, I

will add to his flask. Ever so slightly, nail polish remover. With steady breath, constant sight peripheral. Never letting R-AGE known.

I will focus and not let sensory's be overloaded. I will remain calm. Focusing only on one: smell. The smell tells all, at all times. There you can find atmosphere, pressure, and weight. Hearing is too heightened. Taste is betraying. And touch makes for a focus of victim, fear, and overall is less empowering. Smell alongside. Breathe in, and lift. Smother. Smother him. Smell of death... I cannot wait.

This will go down perfectly.

Practice. Practice again. Think about it. *Dance. Dance Little Bird!*

Take a soapless bath. Be cognizant of your own smells.

9, 9, 11. Done for. Dead. Good. Here it comes. Goodbye. Good riddance. Success. No more prison. No more victim. Only solid, free, pure potential. Only me. Alone. Freedom, at last.

That is the track. That is what comes next. And as I count my steps, I must focus first on the now. And the next steps. Of tomorrow. Of showcasing my new visual. My outward appearance. To see how I am approached. This shift.

I go to bed alone with my own visuals of self. Tomorrow there will be other factors. Other opinions. They never mattered before. But this is a paradigm shift. I must focus on the breath, and not give the outward thoughts too much life.

I go to be alone, just me and my bald head. It feels good to the touch. The bleeding has stopped. And it affects my other senses. The smell of pure skin. The coolness. Even hearing changes slightly. If possible, I can hear things more clearly now. The wind hits my ears at different angles now. The touch upon my lumpy pillow is much more good. Perhaps that is called confidence. A deck of less crowded thoughts (?). Whatever it is, I could get used to it.

I will sleep steadily with this plan inside of my head. And this Nu, dare I say it, confidence. Yes, I shall be bold as to say it.

Little Bird, here I am. Nu and improved. Watch me. Wait and see. Breathe in, and I am out with the night.

I sleep good.

Morning arrives and I am enveloped by it. Anxious to be seen. Anxious to have judgement placed upon me.

It is an ill fitting pursuit. For Dead is not present in the morning to see me. The truck is gone. Good. But also not. The first opinion I will receive is one I care for much more deeply. What if I am not recognized? What if it is off putting or too intense? I am nervous to show the only friend that I have.

Focus. Take actions. Enough of these emotions.

It is day one of my pursuit. I shall take steps to become more fit. More agile. More readily adapted, so that I may be effective in my pursuit to this end.

As the first ray of sun peeks through the mist, a rarity in these parts, I begin to push and pull at the ground. It is difficult. And though I am wobbling upon it, I have more strength than I presumed I'd have. As I began to sink into the last of my push ups, I am greeted with a touch of it: the sub beam. It stretches, more likely it creeps it's tepid way through my dirty window, into the still of my stale room, onto the glistening sweat of me. It did not stop to pat, it struck at me. Like lightning. I am doused as a rod of it. I double down on my pursuit. And threaten to overdo it. The beam is out as quickly as its given in. And I decide that is my cue to stop as well. There are days such as this, beautiful day to some. But I couldn't help but to notice what the light brought. Shadows appeared around every object. Dancing wildly. These pitted, dark shadows of formation gray. They stand, were they always here? Definition-less, perhaps. But here they stand at attention, watching, knowing and then... grow. They scare me. Something is not right. This will not be a beautiful day.

This is a premonition for what lies ahead. And I hope that I am wrong. *Focus.*

This will be an ominous day of decay and ruin, won't it?

Even as the sun dismisses itself quickly, the shadows remain. And so do my wicked thoughts.
An imprint as I eat. As I count my steps.

Out to the bus. Out to the first impression. From a friend. What if this ends the friendship?

What if this is the ominous notion I am to attend?

What if they don't like it (?). Step 3.

What if this changes how they feel about me (?). Step 7.

What if this just further cements my otherness (?), my strange (?) ways. Step. Step. Step.

"Bald headed weirdo." "Freak." "Circus clown." "Little Bird lost all their feathers!" I can hear them flooding toward me, unending. Then—

The doors fling open—

"Oh. You look different." Is all a friend said. Which could mean a million things. 999,000 of them being bad.

I linger at the front seat. *What did you mean (?), are we still friends (?)...*

I HAD TO MAKE A CHANGE, I run to my usual seat. I ignore the reflection. I hope my eye shall close around me as its injury desires to have of me. What a relief it would be to see less. Out of spite. Out of pity. Or even rejection. I wish above all to return to sleep. To escape.

"Different is not a bad thing." I perk up, hoping to tether to the words pushed towards me. To grab them, to take hold of these straps and to strap them upon me before they dare release. "I think I like it. Yeah, this suits you."

The power those words had. I sit in them. I revel in them. It is a buffet of strapping words. I belt onto each, lassoing without release.

A smile begins as I am buckled, reveling in these kind, refreshing words. It does not fade.

The door shuts. This will be a good day. Perhaps that ominous notion was wrong.

If I looked up, I would see that the Driver smiles back. A proud smile. But I don't even have to look. I can feel it. I feel it deeply, profoundly.

I look good.

I am happy.

We smile together in silence. It is perfect.

The students, subjects of my age always make it a difference. Any otherness is to be pointed out. And if I am the subject of my peers, it goes unnoticed. For I know an escape. My senses can be focused on. But today there was no need for escape, for I was not noticed.

No change is seen. No one notices. I blend in. I could be a wall, an artifact, any thing.

Instead, it is of the sky. Thankful, I become for that distraction. For that shining beam. Some had seen it too. Others did not. And there holds the subject by my peers on this day. Who was chosen to see it. Who had chosen to make up stories, much fancies. What had they seen at all when the sun beam touched down on these humble parts (?). No one thought discussed what I had saw. No one discussed that which the light brings: the shadows.

The sun holds much power and attention, even when not being witnessed. So rarely does it make an appearance that when it is witnessed, even for the split few seconds it touched down on today, it is an event. It is as big as what Mother referred to as "an eclipse." Some sort of changing view of that which orbits us. Of the sun. And I have more desire to witness that than this.

The conversations are so benign, in their simple little thoughts. As if one person, one neighbor is more chosen to see the light than the next. It isn't even luck. It is idiocy. For so many here do not pay attention. So beat into the ground are we all, that we don't even think to be alert. To stand at attention. To be prepared for this massive, bright difference. How quickly we can be conditioned this way. And how sad that is.

I decided to stop listening altogether, for it always takes a turn about here. In avoidance of that oppression by the Square, and by allowing ourselves to be at this comfortable position, the conversation becomes of other discussions. Power grabs. Legacy. Entitlement. Further ways to divide ourselves. A false sense of pride upon this land and each familial roots unto them. This land so cursed. So rotten. Yet, they fight steadily for it. Tied down to the notion that they are

better than the next. That they were destined to “see.” These without *visions*. These simpletons. Such idiocy.

I kept my ears off, and my sight down. But make no mistake, even as I appear shut off, more than my peers, my senses are always at attention.

I stayed on edge throughout much of class. Pretty much the whole day. No one was asking the right questions. Why is it so rare that we see the sun? Is it due to pollution? Or from the Square’s never ending wars across its “rigid borders”. This indoctrinated “land of peace”. Lies. Fallacy.

We were not blessed to see the sun. The sun had come out, yes. But the sun did not like what it had seen. And that is why it retreated, almost immediately. We are not lucky. Something is coming. Something bad. The shadows warned us. For that is what is left behind. That is all: a warning.

Something is coming.

I steady my eyes down and away from my peers, until safely seated back upon the bus and out the window I could escape. Could fly. Could release the senses. Could be in my body.

Escaping my not-so-bad reflection. Near a friend. Rows removed, but in the same space, breathing the same tainted oxygen.

And as I stare, it comes. Is it the warning? Is it the sight I am destined to meet on this day of fates? There, shadows exist. There they live and stay. These swirling figures, high above. On judgement.

I am greeted with company. A grouping of such.

But they only appeared shadowed. They are lively, thrill seeking in abundance. Strong. These are no shadows. These are the watchers. The pervaders. These are the mighty.

As the bus moves on, they right along side of us. And no one cares to notice. But I do. I lock eyes with the mighty tower above. I build my stack of cards. And I desire to be up there with them, to speak.

The wheels on the bus go round and round. And Little Bird steadily watches, the rolling, beautiful birds above. Always in awe. Always observing. To all of the commotion, for which there is much above head. This beautiful, terrifying prey.

I, like the sun, emit through the fog. The warring clouds. The pollution. All of this. I am out there with them.

Out with the buzzards.

I am coming.

Something is indeed coming, is it me? Is this my potential?

They are gone. And I have not even the shadows left to reflect upon what this was meaning.

But they remain imprinted on my brain. So many beautiful thoughts. Even more questions. But a pure, unwavering feeling: something is coming. And I will pay attention, alert for its arrival. Whatever it is, I will be ready.

Escapism has very few traffic lanes. You’ve the radio. And the state sanctioned programming. Often I don’t feel the need to escape, but within the first day of the steps—I find myself here. Exposed by the sun, richly. Shimmering, I dance too closely to being seen.

Tuesday is the night of the Square’s most watched competition show. Everyone watches this. It’s almost a mandate.

I do not care for competition. I much less care to be in observation of it. I find this to be a programming of multi-tiers. Conditional. A desire to keep us controlled, as programs to the system. But if you intend to blend in, this is your best chance of reaching that pinnacle—that lackluster. Pretend you enjoy it. Pretend this is your traffic-ing lane of escape. Ride along and enjoy the ride. Pretend you do. Watch the programming. But never forget who you are in the process. You are not the program. This is not an escape. Remember that as you watch.

Dead loves this show. Perhaps that comes as a surprise. But it makes sense. A human so devoid of their own emotions needs escape. Dead is exactly programmed for a program such as this. He eats it up. It is his favorite. Making it all the less something that I could avoid.

In watching the glimmer that forms within his otherwise lifeless pupils, it is evidence that the programming does its job, and that it has found audience within him. This abusive, callous man. If it has this affect on him, I can only imagine what other parents, and furthermore, the impressionable childless youth see within its meticulous frame. How it gives everyday civilians hope at more. Hope for a world that is civil. Pride to live in a society from 6-8. The aspiration for more. To keep working, knowing that there could more out there. The hope to be famous. To breakthrough the mist of such a foggy society. To part through, like the sun on this particular Tuesday. Never mind this show's cheap imitations at acts of variety. Year over, it is the same. Magic, singing, "talent". Followed further by edited down vaudeville shows. That which airs late at night. Old shows. From a time they desire to hold on to. In black and white. Some are colorized. I am tempted to say I love them. Even with their redactions. I wish I could see them in their original condition. But a world without censorship is nonexistent. Combed through and edited shows from before the fall. How desperate they are in the attempts. These westerns without guns. No violence. No hysteria. Only "joy", and "hope". Propaganda of the highest descent.

Tonight is to be the epic conclusion for the talent show. One winner will be crowned. I am curious which type of act will get the merit.

Though we do not discuss who we think it will be, I have a feeling Dead likes the magic. It gives him hope for more. In the eyes, it gives way to these desires. Perhaps he wanted to be a magician. There is so magic all around us. I can feel it richly in the wind. I can see the dark side of it in the shadows. And in night, it is clearer than day with the *visions*. But with a man of such simplicities... this is as magical as life can be. This f-less life: lie, for that is what this truly is. I do not care for lies. I do not enjoy watching this.

I do not wish to speak with him, nor to connect. But at least for the two hours of this broadcast, we can sit in silence. There is no threat upon my nature, if I do what I do best—remain like decor, silent, opaque. If I sit and do nothing, I am safe. I oblige, humbly. I watch on. And keep his keen, glistening eyes in view. Wishing, partially, that this simplicity would simply stay that way. If we did speak, what would we discuss? Do other families discuss? Do they place bets? Do they speak of their dreams, their talents that could hypothetically lead them onto the program? Take them to the far corners of the Square, to perform in that Holy-Woodless space. That land of magic, and TV sets (?). Do they act it out upon commercial breaks? That could be fun.

I can see him brimming with excitement of his own potential. During the hours that stretch, he is not rebuked by the potential. They are not squashed. They are still within reach, or just beyond reach. I can see him reaching out to them. Believing they are possible, still. The eyes do the heavy work. They pour out, fingerless, grasping. Such desire lives there. When the program is on, Dead appears more as a simple Dad, more alive. More keen.

And as soon as it ends, I know the inverse is coming. A switch breaks off. And makes me doubt everything I see. I focus on the now and to see that twinkle, through the corners of my eyes, that I am not wrong—though in mere minutes, he will make me second guess.

I know, as it is en route, that he will make me feel continued otherness. That this is a manipulated tactic. Perhaps, because he doesn't have anyone that he could discuss what is seen here with anyone. Not today, not tomorrow. And how lonely that must be. Of course, he feels no choice but to counteract, to demolish me. Take it on on someone, that's the familial route. Dead returning.

He will make me think he enjoys knowing I'm controlled. That I dis-enjoy watching this. All too aware that where this broadcast makes others feel hopeful, this makes me feel less than. I think he is tune with that. And desires to make me feel unworthy. Depressed, should he use such words, at the programmed pawns whom have given in. Who think they play the game, by being played.

Maybe, as I watch his giddy glimmer, he is equally assessing mine. That glit of diminished terror, of inverse. More likely, he is not in observation of me at all. And that is what I must focus upon as I watch. For a finale! Tonight, he seems particularly invested. Enthralled. And... there it

is, I've spotted it: on edge. I can't get a read on him. I am riddled with doubts. Something is off. Something has been about this whole day. Why not be exposed to it all of the way until the last of the sun we cannot see, rings out?

He is on edge and not just the edge of his seat. Beads of sweat drip from his forehead. Something isn't clicking. It must be the drink. Oh no. The drink is not taking him away. It is not guiding him towards the click, click, clicks. I need the bottle to do so. To walk him away. I force myself not to look upon him. To sink further into the background. To blend further in with the arm rest, with the floorboards. To exist to exit. I must escape. I focus to the corners of my eyes, and as the commercial breaks, there is a hovering drove of darkness. Anticipation. It is like the shadows, more long they grow than ever before. Perhaps I am just in my head. But these corners of the screen grow hands that draw into the center of a blinking, pulsing wait. A commercial that may never come. He does not move. Does not move more steadily towards the click. I feel the challenge brewing. Sink into the space. Watching with baited breath, I have my eyes upon the reflection of the darkened, shadowed screen. I can focus directly upon him. I see that not only is he sweating... he is plotting.

I pray that I do not become prey tonight. I retain my eyes on him in that darkened space. There is power in your glare. Remember who you are. Remember that power you hold. Do not look away. He who is plotting his next steps. Two can play this game. I remember my own plot. I remember my pace. I begin counting down the days. This will be the last time we watch a show like this together. And that brings me a comfort that perhaps is ill advised. But no matter, I hold onto it. I stay locked, rigidly beside of him, with the burning R-AGE flaming high within the belly of me, a beastly thing. It rises to my throat, and I dare not open my mouth, for the fire that would escape.

I watch on. I count. Day one. Soon to be day two. I count. I forget to wait for his click to come. I don't care if it does tonight. I watch and watch on. The TV rattles under the weight of this unbroken glare. He sweats more steadily, and the shadows dissipate. They appear too... I imagine they linger. I imagine that they too wait. I could learn from their patience. But must, at all times, keep them far away. They are not of R-AGE. They are unnatural, something else. Their own entity. I do not desire them. But will learn of their ways.

BLACK OUT blinks back. The program returns. Dead sits back slightly. I think I have made him nervous. Good. Perhaps. I don't want him too aware of the power growing within. Don't want to give him a chance to undo progress.

As the show progresses, I am aware of him. I am becoming impatient. Brash decisions are what lead to failed attempts. I am trying to be patient and to not give into my thoughts. Which are telling me, tonight. Tonight you can do this. And I struggle to cut the thoughts off at the knees. To push them back. Like slick hair, each thought illuminates, and I wish I could comb them down. Yet those silent, persistent shadows from such a darkened screen move closer to underneath my seat. I feel the shadows swirling around me, tempting me. It is making me nauseous.

Dead just sits, continually. Relaxed. Blithely unaware. Or more sickly, back to an oasis to the mirage of uncomfortable me. I do not sweat. I am not one to perspire. But it warns of an exit in mass quantities. I am not just nauseous, I am stifled. I am overcome with emotion. Stress. And panic. But I remain vigilant. For I have trained myself to suppress. I am talking myself off the cliff of this desire. To run to its edge, high upon the shores of some crest. Some wave. Some place where K is. Whomever K is. That place where the water has not eroded this sinking place. True and original waterways. I am there. I'm running. Paddling (?). Swimming (?). I am not in the body, not in this room, not upon this chair. I am with my desires, wearing them like married dressings, betrothed to each one. I run from these worries, though they cling. They grow, stretching out like shrouds, shrouding me. Dressing me, complete. As I run they grow heavy and heavier, still. Still, I run on. I continue paddling (?), swimming (?).

I reach out for K. I hope they are here. I hope to be heard, or seen. Inevitably, it is I that must disrobe. It is I responsible for the un-burdening. No one is coming. K is either alive and well, or lost and without. So, it is up to me. Upon the cliff, the dressings, the worries, the stress begins

to cascade over the cliff. To sink down. Threatening to carry me with it. Into a split. A trifling, dark and howling rift. A place where shadows sink. Where shadows are trapped and do the trappings. A place where fear exists. Perhaps, where fear is born.

I will not be torn down into the rift. As they weigh my body down, I claw and I slither with all of my might. I shed this like skin. I disrobe each fabric, piece by piece. I release my worry. I gift it to the shadows. *Take this, not me.*

I watch on as the last piece tries to cling to me and kick it away. I watch as the rolling shadows take and take, gnawing and gnashing in horrific sounds. *Consume them. Leave me.*

But the gnashing horrors. These sounds tremendous reveal a name. They are calling out. They are in pursuit of K. They are calling out a name. Kenny? Kendra. "Kendra!"

Kendra beware. Be safe! Down the rift a pulsing light exists. Much unlike the sun. A light of false source. The constructed idea of one. A mirage! But altogether too real. There, at the far end of the rift, at the beginning of the split is a shell. A winding collection. It looks like a maze, and it rumbles in sounds melodic. But strange. Unlike the music of the wind. Unlike that of the birds above. This is the shadow of a song. Haunting. It cries out one sound, "Kendra.

Kendraaaaaaaaaaaaaa."

BEWARE KENDRA—

I snap back into today. Into my chair. I am jolted back. With the jolt of a bolt, with all the forces of the wind. Before I can hope to remain composed, I take acknowledgement of my surroundings. I ground myself into the chair, into the touch of the worn fabrics, reminding of the thumb holder-tear. I am here. I am back in my body. I note the water's rush within my ears. I feel it leave, and remain only a guess. I am on land, so dry. I am in the rot. I am back to here. I am fully present. And as I am, I note that action in pursuit is better than an action chased. Do not be hasty. I have the power to end him. I believe that I have the strength. But I must not rush it, lest I be bogged down into my own existential rift.

I have sweat a bead or two, and it is noticed. Without speaking, a smirk illuminates upon his villainous face. Expressing my own name. That name I so hate.

The shadows watch onward from the floor, feeding at these fears. I have nothing to dis-robe, to throw at them. They sit, and wait. Patient beasts. Watching. Nodding. Smirking.

My thoughts cloak me. I wrap myself in them, as I press deeper upon the thumb's holding.

Thoughts that say: remember your place. They say loudly **NOT TONIGHT.**

I watch the show. I remain uncomfortable. But I find absolution in the persistence of a simple sight. A simple action. I need not pay attention to my other senses. Just watch. There is a comfort growing. A confidence. And with it, a smile spreads across my face. But it is not because I am enjoying what I see. It is because I am enjoying the show I will create.

We are together in this room. But we are very far away. We are at opposition with one another. And who doesn't love to see a fight? The underdog? A Little Bird catching the worm? I smile at this.

I wonder if Dead has ever been brought to a cliff? Ever envisioned a metaphor, or literal place such as this? What would they do? Unprompted. What would their impulse have them to do? Do they jump. Are they pushed off of it? And by whom? What voices speak in and around them? What hands point them into a direction? What hands push them? Surely it is the shadows. The shadows of regrets? Of haunt? Of discontent.

Or are they too simple for this hypothetical? Do I give them too much credit? Surely they watch this sport of slow roasted kill. This killing of the brain cells. Killing of identity. Killing of separation. This kill, kill, kill— BAM. That is when it happens.

My ears ring.

A gun has been fired. On national television. Unedited. Violence. Panic. Unwavering.

It is the first time I have ever heard this noise in my life. Though the Eyes of the Square carry weapons, I have never seen a gun used. Perhaps the guns they use are of higher tech (?). Perhaps their weapons are more muffled (?). Either way, I have oft imagined what a gun would be like. What a gun would feel like. The weight of it. For to possess is a weight, indefinite. What

would it smell like. The taste of that power. And the aftermath of pulling its weight. What would that be like? Would I enjoy it? Eliciting.

When such a thing is redacted so steadily as “gun” upon such a violent place, you can only imagine. And the imagination sends one into the throes of ridiculousness. Of places that can’t even be true. Places you can only crave to know through imagination. It is the rebellion of curiosity. Oh how it sneaks up. Gun. How would that make me feel, to hold. I imagined, time and time again throughout the years, but I never imagined correctly. In watching, all of the words I had previously used to describe it do not come close. Nowhere near. For watching the Host on this live television program take out a gun, and shoot the First Judge—was not like anything I had imagined. The sound. The smell. I am there in the room. We all are, watching. But I am there. I cannot look away. The act is not of power. It is of weakness. Chaos. No one is stopping this. No one is looking away. This false power. It is a cheat and unnatural. It is evil.

You cheater. You pathetic morsel.

Yet, I cannot look away. I am in the room. The blood is splattered upon me, on the stage. I lift from my seat and walk around. I circle as the crowds run away. As the Camera Operators hide. I walk on. And wipe my eyes from the splattering, these guts, fragments of a human that now paint my face. Blood congeals upon my skin, marking me. I am metal. But without shield. I am vulnerable. I remove a chunk of some previous brain from my eye. I peel back my shock and remain in the room. I will not look away, as the sound echoes through the padded room. That sound which stays, stains, and desecrates. Dumbfounded, I do not run. I watch on, immobile, wondering if that is all. If the Host has had their peace. Even they seem to question.

Looking to the fallen First Judge, bloodied, immediately dead from this head-shot, it is as if I too am shot. I look into the camera and can feel the collective mothers and children watching this across the Square. All eyes that are witnessing this. Seeing this finale. This favorite show. What a blow.

All of us collectively seeing, witnessing and feeling this death and bleeding out. We are dying here. Hope ends for so many. The programming crashes. All is unhinged. The false sense of comfort, gone. Immediately. Panic. All are panicking. Yet the program remains on air. Why isn’t it ending?

Who is the source? Someone is allowing this. No, someone is prompting this.

Then it comes again. BAM.

BAM.

BAM, again.

Down the line, one by one, each of the Judges are shot. Every Judge. As the gun turns to its next victim, I search. Somewhere, in this room exists someone pulling the strings. This is being allowed. It feels forced. The hand pulling the trigger is rigged by many more. This Host is but a puppet. I do not yet know if a bigger plan is looming at large.

Then, as I feel I have found a culprit, in the control room, someone hovering over the panels, maintaining a steady watch—I hear the final blow, upon the final target: the Host.

I look away. I cannot hear this blow. Perhaps I stand to near. Or am in shock. Perhaps the reverb of all previous shots makes it oblivious. But, I think the truth is that the shadow hovering has been silenced. That the shadow of this day is squashed, finally. That this bullet is absorbed into that void, that pit, that puppetry.

I sink to my knees, off of the chair. As I collide with the floor, I pace my breath. I try to focus but cannot catch. *Get it together. You were not shot. You merely witnessed. You have experienced worse.*

BAM. The sound will not leave me, as the world rings about my ears. The hard flooring creaking beneath me. With each movement, another jarring sensation. Another BAM.

I cannot get it together. I watched death. I witnessed death. I cannot stomach it. I do not know if I can handle the sight of it. The feeling. The smell. I do not know. Can I truly kill? Yes.

As much as it was disturbing, I find a source as to why: these people did not feel deserving.

And the tool, not needed. All of that felt wrong.

I am not feeling averse to death. I am feeling boundaries. Right and wrong.

Quickly I find my strength, yes I can. For my death march is rightful. For I would never execute in this way. Outright and in front of others. Birth and death should be private. Exclusive. With hand picked witnesses, if any. More than likely, none. That is the ultimate justice. Just an end. Just a beginning. The cycle of repetition between them. Birth, death. Birth, death. Privately, on end.

It is of intent. Mine is outright. I know where I stand. I intend to rise, as I look on to the screen, which now switches to the next program. A re-run of vaudeville. A series of acts. As if nothing transpired. There will be ripples from this. I do not know what they will be, but they are felt. This was purposeful. Execution, with an exactness. This was intentional. I have to focus on my own. But notating the difference is important. *How did they even find a gun?* They were outlawed.

Bought back. *A gun?* I must have said this, for as I did, it was felt.

Before I could rise, I was brought about by a clicking. One that cannot come from a drink. A tiny, insignificant metal sound. One that I had just heard repeatedly. It was pressed into my skull, cool to the touch. Uninviting, but enticing. He stood and held it steadily. That cold metal. "Bam." He said and walked away. Was it loaded? A threat? Had he seen my eyes in that shadowed marsh of screen? Was he proposing his own warning?

The door slammed, and so did the safety of my plan. This event did not bother him. Not at all. Our right and wrong have a barometer most different. He is evil. He is more malicious than even this act on screen. He wasn't bothered at all. This will have no affect upon him. That lone man.

And in my witnessing, he found an opportunity. The perfect moment to showcase his cards. Something I never knew, in all of the 12 years living together, a life so routine. A life with no places of hiding. He displayed a card, and with it I became the joker, my own stacked tower tumbling. *He has a gun?*

There is a gun in this "house". How long has that been here? This changes much. This changes everything.

At night, I do not sleep. I work out. I begin to double up, not caring if it pushes me past a point of exhaustion. Running through the plan, the steps I have to take, is the only safety net. I must ensure that this will work. This will have to work. He has spelled it out clearly: it is either kill or be killed.

Push up 10, 12, 15, I reflect. I envision. I prepare for that fate: to win. Late at night, when he is properly drunk, the eclipse of his son's birth. That blessed 13 eve, I will put an end. I will stifle out his last breath. Respectfully, in the privacy of his own room. I shall make his slumber, the last he lives.

That will be the day I see the sun clearly. I shall see it through the mist, no matter how thick. I will not be distracted by the shadows. I will put an end to him. Dead.

That will be a bright day.

I pray to the wind, to the earth, to whatever will listen: please, keep the shadows at bay. Earch, hold onto them. Wind, blow the others away. So that the shadows remain where they are. Do not interfere. Do not become a distraction. Do not tether to him, and provide him shade, nor strength.

I've had enough with the shadows in this day for a lifetime. No more shadows. No more.

He is walking around, into the night with a gun. I can hear him. It is as if everything before lived is unraveled. I have a true target on my back. It is no longer a game. Nor a desire. It is not a wish. And I will move about, steadily in this way. Towards the countdown. Working out morning, and night — those bookends. Practicing the steps. Prepared. Most practiced.

When I awake it will be but 10 days left on this plan. 10 days left to countdown. Then off, like the shot gun. No turning back.

Much anticipation builds.

I have begun to sweat. It does not threaten to take over me, to pass me out. I work up to a sweat. I work towards it quickly. 11 days before it is time, I overdo it.

He does not come back inside. Sleep is all I've left to find.

When will the barrel next appear? Will I awake to it upon my brain, my body, my ear? Will I hear the sound if the trigger is pulled? I keep my senses alert at all times, thinking I have trained them, even in sleep. But in truth... I never sleep well when I do not know where he is. Which is unfortunate because tomorrow.... I will have needed it. Tomorrow, much will change.

The shot heard round the Square had an impact. Much changed. But if you watched on, you'd think it never happened. No news is reported of the event, it was attemptively washed away. To be expunged. Obsolete. But it was too late. With the firing of the gun, and the onslaught that ensued with each BANG. BANG. BANG. The fabric was sewn.

This morning, like many before it, I did my routine. Nearly by rote. I have to focus. To remind myself the purpose. Not just go through with the motions, I must be of intent. And it went fine. It was truly all right. In the way that makes the dawn of all wrong all the more evident. Working out in the darkness of my room felt of this.

Cereal, without him here. In the nights I am uncomfortable to know not his exact whereabouts. But in the morning, I care not. I used to not. Now there is no difference. I do not like him in or outside of the "house". There is a quiet, steady uneasiness that has settled and lodged itself within the base of my stomach. For not knowing where he is includes not knowing where that gun of his is. Not here? Perhaps he is in town buying bullets (?).

He could have killed me at any time previous. Not even through strength, for which he had previously had the upper hand with. As his strength fades away with each clicking of that glass, now he needs not be strong at all. He can end me at any time with one push of the button. Just simply by pressing a trigger. BOOM. Undone. Extinguished.

To think it all happens with the push of a button. The choice to watch the events that had transpired on that fated competition show. Equally, my own. "Pick your final words. Your final meal. Have a final selection." A final, unfulfilling and pointless feast, fodder for the killing. "Oh, I know what I want to watch. A climax." BOOM. Done. Finished. Fate (?).

With this, I raise the last bite of stringy corn mess to my lips, still parted, mere feet from where I had witnessed death, and nearly succumb to my simultaneously. *Take it easy. Don't choke.*

Easy steps. Workout. Cereal, bus. Sit. That's my morning routine.

The bus arrives on time, all the same.

But the Driver shoots me a look, and I thought for a second that they were going to... hug me. I should have hugged them. I wish I had latched onto this outreach, this opportunity. Only one of us need be brave to hug. Alone, on a bus. Instead I sit.

On the front row, I perch. My sometimes comfort. They do not look at me again. We sit in total silence. Whereas I normally would relish in this, I find the discomfort, I feel the anguish. It is the longest ride I have taken. Intrusive with loud, unsaid thoughts. Altogether too silent.

As the other passengers attend their own seats, they do so with a shuffle. The only sounds are of the feet rustling. Something had died that night of the hosts shot in succession. Something changed within the collective.

We all sit in silence. Quite a feat for 11-14 year olds, whom are not known for being particularly quiet.

The bus parks. The doors open one final time and we all walk in a nearly perfect single file line. We take our time, steadily towards the opening metal doors. Up the few stairs and into the school. But what greets us is not the same.

There are usually Eyes here, but today there are a multitude of the uniformed here. Scanners. There are electronic contraptions I have never seen. And these are the Eyes that only see. A one way mask guards these figures, for they are the faceless, the covered ones. I have only heard of them. This is going to be bad.

The Faceless Eyes do not make obvious to where they look. They do not speak. They are out to prove a point. Intimidation? Power? There is something that they seek, and I smell it as I approach. These are not protectors. These seek only one thing: trouble.

No turning back. The strong armed are here.

Upon sight, we each collectively lurch but continue to approach. There is an impulse from the group to all turn back and to run away. To get back on the bus, and to rewind this day. But we are in line. It is all just the same. We must move forward. Slowly. One at a time. We move forward. We wait.

The scanners upon entrance are amplified. Their sound is magnetic, and you can hear its ring as you approach the top of the stairs. The Faceless Eyes hold hovering disks and wands, but nothing magical. It's all prongs and pings. It's all static electricity. Large dogs bark as they sniff. They scare me. Four legged creatures do not seem anything other than beastly. I do not trust them. Such teeth. And collared. As if that will keep them tame.

With the ringing of a buzzer, the hounds are upon someone. Chaos. I wish to look away. I wish to have this unseen. The laceration of a person. A child, by all age accounting. A first year, that looks less than 11. They are dragged off. To interrogation (?), to be strip searched (?), to a worse fate than this. I didn't know them, and now, I likely never will. We must move forward. Slowly. One at a time, as if nothing has happened. As if we are not scared. And we do. We wait. Who will next be dragged off? Is it the person before me? Beside me? Anyone, you pray, except for yourself. This is of division.

The guns of last night, have brought terror here. The Eyes were told to protect us. But we all knew, quietly, that they were keeping us locked in. Now, they are here to threaten. To further get the civilians in line. To imprint at a young age, not to act up. We will go back and tell our families. We will become quieter. More oppressed. They will ensure that what we saw on TV is a fluke. That no one acts up. To contain whatever R-AGE is inside us. To stop that fire from being let out. Squash us. Squash it like our hopes are. Squash us each, individually.

Collectively. Squashed. We move forward. We continue to wait.

The oxygen is low within this room. The breath is shallow of the collective, and hangs low, just above our feet so that it is not trampled on. But threatening to be tripped over, and squashed if we do not move slowly. The lights persist brighter than on previous days. There are cameras being installed. And our movements are to be tracked.

What a reaction. They are so scared. No child has a weapon here. We are children. Guns supposedly did not exist. Most of us were unaware what a gun looked like, outside of when the Eyes walk through. And even those were a different sort of gun. A tranquilizer. A stunning ray.

But now, we are seeing many guns. The Faceless carry them. They are big. Bulky. Scary.

What a reaction. They may be scared, but they intend to not show it. They intend to intimidate.

They will not be scared, can't be if they are more scary. All a guessing game. Nothing is expressed. And the Faceless Eyes give nothing but more questions. Whatever they are gunning for, they have won over. For it is terrorizing. And immediately I think how brittle such a society must be. How scared they all are. These leaders so desperate for power. The Square must be terrified of another coup attempt. Ramblings have been discussed of these. Generation old tales, never written down but expressed from word of mouth. Terrible stories. How quickly what once was fell. This Merry-Ca? Some place. Until the uprising. The Fall. This former empire place. Where there was voting. Where there was freedom? Choice? Uncensored TV.

Uncensored news...

But that sounds too good to be true. I can't even imagine that all of that exists simultaneously. If it had, it would not have fallen. It would not have led to this. Not that purity. Not all of that truth. That would have squashed this out, quickly. Would not have let this slip through its mitts. For this to persist, there must have been cracks. A crack. There was an issue. And there, a shadow existed. At once, the crack formed a larger and deeper rift. The shadow made its way out and took over whatever that place was. That is why we are in the land of the fallen. As often is with the game of telephone, I wonder what the truth was. Which part was not as it is expressed via word of mouth? Not how it appears to have been long ago by the people of now, but what truly transpired there. Was it as is proclaimed? No. Or was that too propaganda? Highly likely so. What are the embellishments? Did they feel as we do now? Or were they blissfully unaware? Individually. Collectively Moving forward (?), but really just continuing to wait. They, in this cursed, scorched earth place.

This place of wind and terror. The bridles wings of metal. And now metal that shoots. Faceless faces. There will be so much change. I should have heeded the warning when doing my routine. Had I not paid enough attention myself to the signs of where this day would lead? The imminent feeling of the tornadoes that very well may sweep down upon us at any moment. The swirling, threatening air. Perhaps the birds are up to something. Perhaps they puppet the wind, rather than riding upon the backs of it. Perhaps the birds are taking strides, making plans, and making movements as they dance in the sky. I hear the intoxication of their cawing. I desire to be up above with them now. Up to something. Up and away from this. This unnatural buzzing. There is music to the sounds of these scanners, but it is not a pleasant song.

This was the last thought as I stepped through and the buzzer I stepped through went off. Shit. It's me. I'm next. Tackled. Scanned. A shoe presses against my neck. And I await for the dogs to be released, to trap me. To take what they can. For all of my progress to leave. None of my training prepared me for this. The Faceless Eyes have a strength that is inhuman. They and their beasts. I am doomed.

My jacket is ripped off as I am picked up single-handedly by one of the Faceless Eyes, and my back is pressed against the wall by way of my neck. I hit my head hard. And am held steadily here. I do not move. I struggle to stay focused. I must look forward. And think. I must take down each note. Each movement. The cognition of this may save me. Above all, I must remain still. I must not resist. This is the kind of aggression you cannot avoid. You cannot escape it. There is no chance of release from it. You must bend to it. Oblige. Submit. Subservient.

This aggression has no motivation. No drive. Nor intoxication from your pain. This aggression permeates. It is their very nature. Made to be always correct. You are wrong, no matter what happens and they are always right. You are so wrong. Just from your existence. The Faceless Eyes hold me steady, unmoving as I hover, inches from the ground. Are they scanning me? Clothes are ripped from me as another pats me down. Their arms are so long, I could not stretch to touch them. I could not hope to hold myself up. And I fear I will be choked out. There is nothing to grasp onto. Nothing for me to do but to gasp. To wait. To hope that this ends.

Focus. You have potential. Even in this. You have power. Remember yourself.

Eyes, do not betray me now. It is time to bring about your power. I look down. I lock eyes with... a Faceless. There are no eyes. This mask does not allow for *vision*. I cannot see a damn thing through it. I try. I focus. But there is nothing. There is no escape. I am desperate underneath this crushing weight. And I am naked. Their strength alludes me. Yet it persists: I am choking.

I am unable to move. To set myself free. I am not going to get away. All of my life and this is how I will go out. So simply. So unimportantly. By a scanner's mistake.

Everyone can see me here. Exposed. Weak. Maybe I am to be an example. But they do not look. They actively try not to pay attention to my pain. The only way to continue slowly, one at a time is for each to disassociate. Disassociate from the hall, from me. From everything these Faceless Eyes bring.

I am alone. So alone. And I am losing sight of reality. My wick is fizzling out. I am being choked darkly, deeply. Into another realm. Another place. Like waves, they lap at me. These shadows. They call out my name. They call out many names. Throughout time and space? A proclamation? There I am with *visions* I had seen before. With Kendra. I can see so clearly now. So many that I had not yet known. And some I had not even met. I see the person in the booth. I see how they have taken over. I see the ancestors. I see a cursed land. I see the birds that come out of the rift. And I hear all of my *visioned* friends say the collective: ruin. Ruin?.. That cannot be so. I look on to the younger *visionaries*. Those not yet even born. I see the one's trapped in a portal. Another trapped in a clock. One in a snowglobe. And I see one pure, that is rejected. One dismissed but knows it all. They walk up and say, as clear as day: run. Run, they say. They are saying run. Run fast.

The shadows creep alongside me, tempting to help, but it will not help. They desire for me to run away. From the menacing. And each of these interwoven friends help me. They are gnarling at the shadows. They are brushing them away. RUN. Swept away by strikes like a tornado of

wings. striking and clipping, they are brought on to new places. These shadows swirl and leave me. I am swept up alongside the winds. By something guided by or guiding the winds. By birds (?). And then falling.

I fall. I fall hard.

I am back into this realm. I am back in this cowardly body. Cowering, coughing. In a frenzy. My body is desperate for oxygen. And I am thankful that I no longer have to shallowly breathe, for I am at the height of the oxygen's attention on ground level. From there, I am quick to observe. And I make out through the reflection of the buffed tile, a strong and powerful person of bravery and merit. Someone in this physical realm has come to my rescue. Someone lovely and pure. Someone that has helped me before. Someone that I trust and has had my back, even before I was noticing them. Someone I should have hugged. And now they will suffer immeasurably for helping me. The Faceless Eyes shift their attention away from me and begin their lashings.

If only I could see into the Faceless, the one that had tried to blow out my light. That face. There must be one, right (?). What are they? I could not see through the mesh.

Blink back and find them. *Visions*, stare deeply who are these? What are they? Are they human (?), I ask of each. I ask of the universe (?). Help my friend. Help me see.

My stronger senses come forward. And I smell something. Something permanent permeates. A brassy smell. Like nickels. And with a coin flip, this moment could go either way. Release. Or be killed. This quality and smell is unforgettable. It is unforgivable how the Faceless Eyes next behave.

In the time I see my friend striking at the Faceless, I hear it again: run. RUN. The children scatter. They leave. They flee. If only they would have helped. There is strength in numbers, no matter how small the bodies.

Climbing, like ants upon these Faceless, we could have removed their masks and ended them. Showcasing this inhumanity with its body. So that we may see their eyes. Expressions. And to take them down from there. Together, Ants. We should crawl. We should lift. We should be ripping, devouring these that do have a face, yet hide behind as Faceless.

But they all just run, as every instinct and the very *vision* proclaims that I should too do.

COWARDS. Cowards (?), no. They are not this. They are scared. They are but children. They are being purely selfish.

And I too, do nothing. Which feels a great deal like cowardice. But I cannot intervene. For I still cannot fully breathe outside of the nickel. I must rise and move. I must go away. I cannot stand and watch, lest I become another targeting. Standing leads to falling. More aggressive choking. No one is coming to help us. We are done for, it seems. RUN. CRAWL. Little Bird, follow the Ants.

I am alone to watch as the Driver's weapon—a mop, from the bus—I'd seen them use this when the motion sick happens from one of us—is ripped and shattered into splinters. What are these creatures? I watch on as the Driver is being bashed at. Lashed upon by the Faceless Eyes. My throat threatens to cave in and I wish to scream. To howl into the halls so loud and so great that it will blast each of these villains off my friend. To blow them away. To shatter them like they did the mop. But I still cannot breathe. Nothing is coming out.

The Driver. My friend. Whose name I do not even know. Stood up for me. They did not have to do this. As I watch on to their surely broken arm. I hear the crack as next it is their leg.

"Look away!"

But I can't. I cannot grant them this dignity. This must be witnessed. It must be documented. It must be written down that these villains whom run this place will stop at nothing. They will not stop until we are erased.

They will kill children.

They will kill old bus Driver.

They will do this to friends and in front of friends.

They will do this in a crowd, no matter the size.

They will pick us apart one by one until there is nothing but curses left on this scorched earth.

After they appeared finished, and the Driver remained limp, I took note of the casualty I had just witnessed. The blood spilling in rivers towards me on that newly buffed tile. All at the hands of the Faceless Eyes as they tore apart one daring to save me. I wish I knew their name. I will miss that beautiful face.

They take the limp body and drag it not caring what it knocks into. Two take them off. And the trail flails behind.

This, even for the Square, is abnormal. This is a new precedent. Normally in public beatings, they are not so public beyond a taze, a singular hit, or a warning. They do showcase something so brutal, for normally this could lead to an uprising. Usually, they are too outnumbered to make an example like that. But there is something new going on. And it is a threat we must read loud and clear. They are coming. They will continue. They will stop at nothing. We are fucked. We that are left in the fallen will all fall to this.

I go in and out of consciousness, attempting to stay in this realm. The *visions* desire to help me. But in doing so, I will continue to black out. I do not know if our connection can move me. I have to just do this myself. I must move on. And away from this hallway. I am repulsed by the blood trickling towards me, as it dances now between my fingers. Mostly no one is left in the hallway. And I can hear the body being pulled with a clink upon each step, out into the street to be made further example of.

To attack an officer is grounds for punishment. Time served in the prisons here. But with each clink, it is apparent that that weight is truly dead. My friend... they are no longer here. They were murdered. Protecting me.

Insignificant, barely witnessed to anyone. No justice will come from this. So for my life to carry on, I must make something of it. Something in their honor. I have to live two lives now within me. And they are so missed. They, who I do not know the name. They who risked and sacrificed their life for me. I do not know if they saw the potential, or thought it could get to that level. They risked, anyway. I want to say thank you. I want to yell SORRY. Sorry, for getting you into this mess. I don't know what I've done to deserve such fierce protection. To the death. No one deserves that. No one should be up against such odds. Not in a school. Not at our ages, across the age gap.

I know not why the scanned buzzed me so. Seeking to buzz me out. I do not know why I was tackled. And stripped. But I am sorry. I am so sorry. I wish more than anything to hug my friend. I wish I had hugged them. I want to be with them. I should be with them. This is not right.

Where are they? I do not feel them in this hall. They are purely gone.

This has a fault. And partially it is mine, for wherever I roam, trouble hovers near. For I am trouble. I am always troubling. I deserved it, I deserved a punishment. Perhaps not death, but I could take whatever is given unto me. The Driver did not deserve anything of the kind. That I am sure of. This is not right. I'm sorry you were my friend. I am sorry you had to intervene. I LOVE YOU! My one true friend. And with that, the door shuts. It does not swing, it does not pivot, it takes one loud click and is done. We exist in different worlds now. I in this misfortunate living. Alone. Everyone is gone.

All that is left is me, in a stream of my friend's blood. And through the wired pane of the window, through the space of the closed doors facing the street, I can see them being hoisted up. What remains of the body. Flanked for all to see.

ROAR. Little Bird emits with all of the power possible, all of the sound and wind within. The doors begin to shake, but I am too weak to burst through them. No one is there to hear my cries. To hear Little Bird's continual attempts, then squawks with terror and tears. No one hears my cries. I am alone.

Then it begins. Foot steps. Clanking, heavy steps. The steps of a predator. On the prowl. I am alone, with no friend to help. Alone with... whatever this is. This thing. This inhuman creature. This cyborg (?). I sit naked, crying on the blood stained tile as it comes again: the Faceless Eyes. This employed, national terrorist. This beast. This thing. WHAT ARE YOU. I feel them tiptoeing around me. Observing. Cornering me. Where are they? Their shadow proceeds

them as it stretches across the river of my friend's blood. And it gilts and contorts in ways that are manic, unnatural. First it is to my left, then meanders from behind. Now it is to the right. YOU DID THIS. THIS BLOOD IS UPON YOU. As I lift my eyes to greet where last feet attach to that disgusting shadow, I see something. Something unexpected. Somewhere, in the shuffle, their mask had twisted. Revealing a darkness on their all too human neck. A long mark. Branding.

The mask is ripped. And I am thankful, for that mark upon the neck leads upward to a red mark that shined like embers, a fireball. Unlike the sun. This is of something else, most hellacious. They scurry to put on their mask but not quickly enough. For I have my eyes upon them. And the power they pack is in full force. I rise to my knees, then to my feet and with all of the strength I have, all of the strength I will ever have I stare into their eye and I memorize every indentation. Every acne scar. Every scar from whatever Pox they have carried. And I stare deeply, unblinkingly into their eye.

I will remember you. I will find you. I will end you next. Dead and then DING-DONG. Your turn. As they threw my jacket at me, and without a word ordered me to get dressed, out fell a spoon. The Faceless looked upon me with excitement. Something within me, this sick bastard liked. I stared more deeply, unwavering until all of my senses left me. I hovered in this moment. I began to feel my feet rise from the ground, as I did. I hovered up to their height so that we were swollen-eye to branded-reddening-eye. But they were trained well, and moved swift. The Faceless adjusted their mask back into place and walked on. Out into the front of the school.

As my feet touched back to the ground, though now it seems, they may have never left (?) it jingled as it too fell. From the table beside of the scanner, my removed pants revealed a spoon. I had brought a spoon to school. Had I? Why would I do such a thing? All of this over a spoon...

And yet here in the Square, we will come to lose more from much less. At places of education. This is just the beginning. Nationwide I can feel that this is happening. Every school. Every market. Every grocery. The Faceless Eyes are upon us and they intend to showcase that they are indeed always watching.

I wonder how many more friends, and family members are now also being strung up on sidewalks such as my friend is. I refuse to put my clothes back on. I stay stained in my friend's blood as I take steps back to class.

I can imagine all of the road blocks that are being set up for random searches. More random than the searches we are subject to now. More intentional. More harmful. And will go on until every weapon is exposed, every culprit destroyed. Every memory unspoken, painfully engraved.

Hell has released a new normal from its inner circle. And the eyes of the hellish beast, try though they might, cannot be covered. I will see. I will find. I will destroy.

Too much these eyes have seen already on this day. At 12 years of age. Though it is seemingly just beginning. How much more can I take? That is what they want us to ask. To be grateful to die, it is preached. Not seeking its end. Just going along, meek. Be grateful for the next and final resting place. Don't try to be pleased here.

No window to open. Only stifled and recycled air, hovering low to the ground. Don't trip over it. Walk on, steadily. Wait. Wait for freedom. But there is no freedom. No escape.

I want to throw it all into the wind but it would just blow back at me. To chase after my stolen friend. To relieve their corpse from the enemy. To hug them—I should have hugged them. I didn't know that would be my only and final chance to embrace my friend. I will not make that mistake again. I will never make that mistake again.

As I return to class, and sit my barren ass upon the chair I am assigned, I look out. I look as the sirens begin to swirl overhead. As the metal birds chase and threaten. I watch as the Faceless multiply and surely recruit more and more.

Children that tried to escape our school-prison are tackled and taed. Stripped. And beaten. What for? Does it matter? We had our chance to revolt. That has ended. We are stuck. We are

prisoners now. And that is a fate we sealed ourselves in looking so shallowly. For we should have given it everything we've got when we could. At first glance. Before the scanner ever went off. We should have charged. For this is a fight. And at this rate, we will never win.

In battle, whether you stand your ground or flee, running doesn't stop the inevitable. RUN. You cannot outrun it. For inevitably, the runner is always caught. The race always ends. Slowly, steadily, it will be done. As is evidenced, looking upon the front school lawn. They all are caught. And all are beaten.

I remain in each class. Just as if it is any other day. Naked. Bloody. My Teacher's do not put it into question. It is neither for punishment, anymore so than that they would have something to clothe me with. The sirens blare. Streaming's terrorize louder. And all I can do is to look forward and disassociate. We collectively will become good at that. That's how they keep us here.

I am in my body. But I'm absent.

I am here but I hear nothing.

I slowly erase the senses. Hearing. Sight. Taste.

I am forward with breath. But not within my body.

I release. And the most difficult to remove is the smell.

Brass. Coins.

I hear them clinking, in and around my head.

I wonder if this is what Dead feels.

I smell the brass.

Then fire.

I see the sun.

It is not warm, but its fire emboldens with each R-AGE flare.

I see how this ends: ablaze.

All wicks coming together to stomp out the bad, by bonfire. Torching.

We will torch this Faceless to the ground. We must. Or we are doomed.

Amen, I have the impulse to say. As they would love for me to so do.

As the sirens take pause, dwindling, the screams lessen. Or perhaps I am already adjusted (?).

We rise uniform to pledge our allegiance. So broken. So disassociated.

I am left wondering if this Merry... whatever it was, that former place did group speeches such as this? Drove a hive mindset? If so, that might be its first crack. That indoctrination. That cult. To pledge such blind allegiance will only result in a slip up. "We got away with them saying this, collectively, what else can we push them to say? Subtlety. Not so subtle." Pledging eternal devotion regardless of abuse suffered, friends murdered, at all costs, allegiance to this cursed place?

As I stare into the Square flag, I am determined they would never. That that is too preposterous. And continue to wonder where the cracks lay in that former place.

Amen, we all say. I in mouthing, only. And sit to continue our school day as if nothing happened. This is just another day. It may not feel like it, but soon it will be. See how quickly we adapt?

This is good. Routine. Good. They all seem to think. Collectively. "I made it through another day. Aren't I lucky?" But inside, such intolerable R-AGE.

None of this will appear in the paper.

This will be the last you hear of it, for even I don't like to harp on. It is noted. Now onto the next. But the ripples it causes will last for generations, so long as someone remembers. Even if it's forgot. Subtlety it will survive in the wake, the way water always does.

This is my telephone call. It is not a game. Pick up. Tell the next. Stop it from happening again. Little Ants, move forward, before it is too late for y'all.

For the first time, maybe ever, I am more excited to go "home" than to be here. Though I am not sure which is safer, in truth. At least I know the opposition there. Best to know your

enemies. And I know the all too predictable Dead well. The new Driver I immediately resent. And I make sure to detach immediately from them, escaping towards the sky, hoping, searching for birds. For wind. Something to swoop me away, to ground me to the exterior of this bus. Up there. I do a good job of it, for before I know it, I am at my stop. My initial, first stop. Miles from "home". Oh, right. *This is where I am routed to be dropped.*

We do not converse as I exit. This new Driver and I.

Many of the kids I sat beside of will not be back tomorrow. The collective will dwindle. I may be one of them that does not return. Maybe that was the point. Keep us uneducated. Keep us locked down. Un-smart. That is a smart maneuver. To keep us separate. That could work for the Square. We really should have taken the Faceless Eyes out. Stupid Ants.

Along the walk, I see him stirring in the yard. I press on, not caring much if I go unnoticed or not. I am not as I am met with, "I got rid of it." He said with dirt encased nail beds. Noticeably dirty, which says a lot for he is such an unhygienic creature. Those talons that struck with veiled malice over and over upon Little Bird, days on end. It's amazing that they had not caused infection. I must truly avoid the talons today. *Disgusting.*

But I commend his intuitive nature, for Dead answered a question I'd wondered, worried about at school, on the bus ride, and it was answered before I had even thought to ask him of it: will our gun be found? For if the home's are searched, and it is found, we would both be killed.

Good. Answered. I can settle... a little bit (?).

These exchanging of words are the closest thing we had come to a conversation. And though it was unusual, it was important. For to be found with a gun was the second highest stately offense. To take arms against the Square, was second of malice only to an action taken against the un-born. Children in the uterus are cared for more than any living creature.

I would comment on once they arrive how they are on their own, expected adults from the moment they breathe this toxic air, but this is not a sermon. And you already surmised my opinion of this, for I imagine hypocrisy is not your MO either. For you and I both may lack many things, basic comforts, basic needs being met, conversation, the hug of a good friend, but what we do not lack is intelligence.

Good. He buried the gun. I hope he cannot in the future find it. May it stay buried. And after he is truly Dead, perhaps I can locate it. Just in case.

Good. I can continue my plot with my unexpected strength, for I will not be combatted against the immediate of something that requires no strength at all. At least I won't get shot.

I agreed to stay in my lane, and to attend school each day. Perhaps I have a death wish. The Faceless Eyes came and went. But I could see no sign of the one with the red mark, the branded one that had attempted to choke me out. I don't imagine that they returned. It is better to stay in my lane, so as not to raise any flags upon the Dead. In the week before me, I deviated little from the plan, and the Square met me there with more of the same. For the routine was all very par for the course. It didn't matter that the new bus Driver was interchanged, from one to another, the original route remained. Each day: cereal swept up quickly after a workout most swift, a dash three miles out to the bus, staring at my reflection until we arrive at prison, walk through the thresholds hoping the scanner would not provoke an attack. Only to step upon the place where my friend was unlit. Suppressing the trauma, but remembering my intent, as I carry my R-AGE down the halls from class to class until the darkening skies shift. The wheels of the bus go round and round to return to a "house" where rounds of boxing have lived. Into a dwelling for nightly workout. Adding more, and more to the numerics, to the sets of it. Pressing strength forward with both determination and anxiety, I continued. Steadily. Persistent.

The night returns each night, as I sleep in a cold, sweaty mist. Knowing full well I will rise to begin again.

I continue on, steadily. Persistent. *Good.* And before I know it, it is the eve of it. Tomorrow. My birthday. As the clock finishes 12, just before the blessed 13, I will receive the best present I could ever be given: Dead. Finally. Freedom. I breathe in the many practiced steps. Each

9-9-11. And exhale to the opportunity, the potential of what I will have tomorrow. I rest fast and well. Tomorrow! I live to create death. I let my R-AGE begin.

CHIME. CHIME. CHIME. On it goes. I can hear it click. These hands moving onward. But I am greeted with the unexpected, "You're looking..." any number of things that followed would be too much. And the lingering made it all the more anxiety provoking. I hate when he waits at the table for me. Watching on. I much prefer the days he is physically absent. Now I am left with questions, with doubts. The last thing I need on a monumental day such as this.

Am I still ugly? I am getting better now (?). Despite this acne. Despite this furrowed permanent brow. *Has he noticed?* As I grow pale from all of this shrouding, shadows and darkness. I would prefer a scuffle. The abuse of a hand would be less torturous than what he said—for it was nothing. It amounts to nothing. It reduces me to a beneathness. Below the shallow breath, and the low hanging oxygen. A fruitless place, only to be stepped upon. There I exist. It curates doubt. And so many questions.

With that he is gone. Achieved what he set out to do. Constant disruptor. All day I'm left to fester upon this. This open space. This nothingness. The equation of me. Through the bus, up the steps, through the scanned, down each and every hall way, nothing. Nothingness.

In the locker room I remove the clothes without thinking, highly distracted. I simply do the act, a routine change. Getting through the motions of it.

"DAMN!"

"Look who decided to be a man now?"

"Looking fit."

To be gratified by any of these wouldn't be true to self. I don't belong in this room. I don't like being noticed. But I was complimented for in this one moment, this sweet morsel of time, I felt I could blend in. I felt that I nearly could belong here. For one moment, I realized that my work was paying off. I may not be of nothingness. I can pull this off. R-AGE, your potential is not being squashed. It is being met.

Humbling, immediate, in juxtaposition is when I was punched by the new Bully. For in the ashes of one, is always formed another. Villainy always has room to grow and to smother. Sometimes something worse grows from the portals of this. Someone that was eyeing, waiting. Someone that now has the bravery to improve, to be better. In this case, to bully worse.

"Hit me back!" I was punched again. "It's like a fucking brick!" A compliment (?). Then an invitation, "Y'all gotta try this." *Oh no.* RUN. I was hit by two, then three. Hands, multiplying. I took them, without squirming. Without a need for true escapism. It hurt. But I would not ruin myself. I would not encourage any chance at changing the ending of this day. I must remain routine.

"Finally, you're a good match." However, a worthy adversary YOU are not. This is but a poser. A weakening of the line of brute strength. With a louder mouth. To encourage many upon one, such pathetic odds. One-on-one, you would not survive me. And I would end them so easily, if only I wasn't saving my strength for tonight. I would have done so much unto them, I could have, truly. But this R-AGE needs to be directly directed. This R-AGE can only go in one direction. So I engulf it. I absorb each hit, and I enshrine them into the pit of my stomach as it is hit over and over again. More fuel for the R-AGE, to be utilized all for another time and place. Tonight. *Stay focused. Wait it out.*

A circle begins as the bullies in the boys locker room all pander and wait for instruction, around my increased seemingly testosterone filled body, and I know that my strength will be tested. My strength must endure. To be beaten up by a group is an altogether different level of fuckery. Both of unequal ranking and of true coward prowess. Where are the Faceless now? To put them in their place. Nowhere. In the nothingness. To there, I must escape. But I choose not to. I stay here. I stay in my body and continue to absorb. To endure, as I must each and every strike. I must not fight back. I risk to lose all of my strength.

It is inevitable that I will lose anyway, as they square up to attack again and again. Do not prolong this. Get to it. *Get it over with.*

That is when I am “saved”. Out furls the loudest, piercing sound. An alarm. We had not heard of this previous. This is a first. But installed on that first day of the Faceless, I am sure. Installed alongside of the cameras, for the Faceless were always watching now. And they had seen this. Though they were not in attendance collectively anymore, they had an overseer, whom watched over every room. At a control panel, somewhere in this prison. We were their personal TV show. And I feel bad for them for this, for TV is boring at the best of times. 11-14 is not the best of TV. This is a channel usually boring. Usually childish. Someone had to watch all of this, this nothingness. It is uncomfortable to be watched in this way. But now, I guess I am thankful (?), for it saved at least some of my strength. Saved by my adversary. What a concept. Those that create violence, yet watch for excessive violence. To break it up. Note that they do not break it up before it begins. Only once it is stirred just enough so that an example can be made. They still allowed the fight. They allowed several hits. Several people to strike at once. Not much of a hero.

I think we are being tested. What are our limits? What is the collective? How will we behave? The sound rings on loudly, deafening. It is everywhere and pulsates. The shrill sound reverberates and strikes through the core of each of us, sending shock waves through the lockers that threaten to open, or to bend under its shrill weight.

This test. Perhaps child prisons are just the first step. Perhaps this noise will begin all over, everywhere. Beginning with afflictions, but then further as a warning. A threat. A reminder. Randomly displaying that the Square is always watching. Watching every shopping center. Watching every yard of every home. That the Square is every where. At all times. I wonder where this stops.

As I lie on the floor with my hands behind my back, we are each searched by the hands of the gym Teacher. The Faceless are not here, which is good. We have no weapons, the gym Teacher announces. Yes, I’ve no spoon anymore. No one had the opportunity to plant something upon me. But that is not enough. We must move to satisfy those that watch.

I am patted down third in a line of succession as the noises continue, maddeningly, threatening to drive us all into a deep, fearful bend of psychosis. I can make out through the mouthing of inaudible words, “whoa! Somebody’s been working out.” Even the gym Teacher has taken notice. Shit. This isn’t good. It’s evident that I’ve been working out. It is obvious. *You idiot. You fool.* “You’re looking...” Fit. I am looking fit. That’s what Dead had meant. Shit. Shit. Fuck. He took notice. He is on to me. And surely now he is planning. Preparing. Perhaps digging up the gun. Tonight is in total jeopardy now. I am in jeopardy.

As I move back to the ground, I can feel the weight of this thrown wrench in my plans, hit me. I scream with the last rolls of the siren. No one can hear. We are all left. And the sounds continue to effect our hearing for many minutes. At first it is difficult to tell if the sirens are still ongoing, or if it is just in reverb. But we continue with class all of the same. And as they brush past my senses return to me. The new self-appointed Bully says, “I will get you later.” Clear as day.

WHY WAIT. I launch into them. I hit the shit out of their evil little ass until they are on the ground. And then, once they collide with the floor, I really light into them. *IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED. IS THIS IT!!!* Kicking and stomping upon them, the others start to move to help. I tear one off and the others stand back. I begin kicking and flailing at the new Bully, with all of the air around me. Such movement. Little Bird could take flight if the room were not so stifled. If the senses were not so recently overwhelmed with such piercing sounds. I stay planted on the ground, heavy. And I use that weight to kick with all of the strength that I have. With such force from my legs, I feel the reciprocal pain they must be under. I like it. Suffer. As I continue to kick and kick and— the gym Teacher holds me back. “Whoa whoa whoa. Alright boys that’s enough.” The mislabeler doesn’t want to hear the sirens again. I am sure the consequences of two sirens upon a watch would have steady repercussions for any Teacher. But the Faceless never came. They appear to have little interest in such squabbles. Though we are surely being watched. I wonder what stopped the Faceless from making the deafening noise return. Did they enjoy this show? Were they placing bets? I have a feeling I am being watched by the marked one, the branded in red. My adversary was watching to see what I would do, in control

of the panel. Perhaps they were hoping I would levitate again, if I had so indeed ever done. I could feel them, my marked Faceless, with their hand lingering over the button, watching on. Watching only me. Focused upon. *Oh how I despise thee. You wretched, low life fool.* And with this, my R-AGE launches again. Hurling at the nearest culprit, this Bully 2.0.

“Hey! No! That’s enough. You (Bully) over there. And you (me), go sit in the library today until you cool off.”

As if the library was a punishment. *Good.* “I don’t know what’s gotten into you. Go to the library.” And I swear as I leave, I can hear under the gym Teacher’s breath, “God you’re strong.” Or maybe I imagined it. Either way, it is the truth.

With just a taste of R-AGE upon my breath, I desire to release. I want so badly to wet my appetite. To be. *That was just a smidge. Imagine what you could do.* Tonight, I cannot wait. *Bring the gun, you fool. It won’t do you any good. I am strong now. I will end you.*

On my way to the Library, I saw out of the corner of my eye, the new Bully trying not to cry. Cause and effect of a mis-labeled pathetic. Any other day, they could receive my sympathy, perhaps. But they are not worthy of it. That is what you get for being self appointed. You thought you could rise to the occasion and all that you have done is proven to everyone how weak you are. To be beat by me, the easiest of targets, now you are not the Bully... you are the Bullseye.

CHIME. CHIME. CHIME.

Today is filled with R-AGE. What else do you desire to watch, you Faceless beast? I can feel them watching as I shift from one screen to the next, filling the angles of each camera. Are they anxious? Beaming? And this pathetic little Bullseye better not try me again. No one had. I went into this day with the intention to kill. And if Bullseye doesn’t watch out it will be them.

This R-AGE has to be directed. For when released, whomever is nearest, will feel the bunt of it. I fear I will not be able to focus it, for the beast is so wild, so thrashing upon the cages of my ribs, it is its own thing. It is inside but separate of me. When unleashed, I do not know what will happen.

The Librarian looks at me from across the desk as I enter. And continues to watch on as I sit. I am being stalked. *Great. Everyone is watching me. All of these Eyes.* And it makes sense, for a prison must be full of watchers, mustn’t it?

Rejecting this set of eyes, I move to the other side of the row of chairs, knowing full well that there is a camera in here somewhere. I am between the pairing of Faceless and the all too expressive. They watch on, like hawks to Little Bird. Am I enjoyable, or their prey?

Even as I shift to the division of a bookcase, I can still feel the Librarian’s laser eyes drilling through the case and into my neck. So much so that I worry a marking, perhaps in red, will be enshrined upon my own neck. I rub it off. I have no desire to be branded, to be scorched like that Faceless. I swat away at this. *BE GONE. STOP.*

They are upon me, within arms reach. I look to find the Librarian peering at me steadily through the nearly empty book shelf. *WHAT. What do you want with me?*

At first they are “placing books back”, those that have made it through another series of reactive checks, but that is just an act. And they notice I am aware of it. Boldly, they give unto the answer for which I seek: intent.

“Aren’t you Amathus’ son?”

That was a name I had not heard in a long time. How did they know it? It has been so long, I almost didn’t recognize it. That name of which I am born. *Mother... I miss you.* It all comes flooding back. Emotions. *No. Not on this day. Squash it. Redact, do not reflect.* Not on being left. Not I, this nothingness. *Find your strength and resist. Do not react.* But it is all over my face. This Librarian, whomever they are is no friend. They know more than they appear to know. Why do they know this of me? *WHO ARE YOU. WHAT IS YOUR INTENT. Run. RUN Little Bird. Run away.*

I hadn't heard that name in so long it could've struck me dead. I, immobile, sit watching at the jaws of a lion's den. *This is a beast. I am in the presence of their layer. Threatened. RUN. RUN.* Then out, it stretches. Held within their claws, the Librarian pushes over a white tipped thing. I am doomed. I will be ended.

They dare not touch me. But push further this... this thing. I am curious what it is but have no desire to touch. *This cursed, surely poisoned item.* So innocent it looks, *this cursed item.*

"Can you give your Grandfather this?"

They say, as I stare back. Stare, in warning, to not come any closer. Stare with all of the power of the suppressed R-AGE, the beaming glare of the sun. And they heed my warning. For it is powerful, entrancing. They do not move further with their jilted desire and poisonous gift. *They are scared of me. This is no lion. What kind of layer is this? To think I was trapped. Pathetic.*

They are pathetic. Useless. And needing something from me. Without going any further advancements, without any warning, the afraid little mouse of a Librarian drops their item. It is but a scrap of paper, a note. And it remains upon the ground, beckoning to be picked up. With all the intensity of my eyes, for it lingers. Curiosity will lend me to temptation here. Spiraling, it wanders. Such a simple thing. But so intrusive, this scrap of seemingly simple paper. The curiosity of question, of identity rings as loud as the sirens did. Flooding me with ideas ranging from horrific to truly stupid.

They were scared to touch me. *Good (?)*. They could barely handle looking me in the eye.

Curious, for they had been so hoping to reach that desire from me... hadn't they, as they watched on (?), ebbing closer and closer to me, here within the confines of their layer. They who see themselves as a lion, but play to no more than a mouse.

Grandfather? I've never met him. I don't even know who he is. Where he lives. There in that rejected, avoided part of Comfort. I know no more than the words of Dead and the silence of Amathus, Mother. I am useless for this—

I give in and reach for the note. As I lift my head, they are gone. It is as if they were never here. Nowhere. Back to their nothingness. Their mouse hole. Or perhaps out of the building altogether. I wonder something wildly that I must express, though I know the irrationality of it. What if they got this job just to give me this note? To such an insignificant being? Why? Is this why they and the Faceless watch me so? I have lifted the note, and can feel the Faceless watching my next moves. No sirens went off. I would have been in trouble already had they taken notice. Surely they had.

Confidence strikes. *Perhaps this is a trap.* But whatever it is, I am already on its path. I am traveling the journey, whether intended, unlucky or fate. With note in hand, I walk out of the library and feel a tinge of eyes lingering upon me from somewhere. The mouse holding. I snap back one final glare but they are nowhere. I may be going crazy. *Good.* Walking down the hall, I hear the CHIME. CHIME. CHIME. The Ants will soon fill these hallways, but I will no longer crawl around with them. I have R-AGE to attend.

With note in hand, mindful that I am being watched, I decide to give the Faceless what they want. I walk towards Math, then past. I walk down the corridor, shadowed, refracted. I walk past the largest of the prison rooms, the one where Ants come to feed. I walk through the scanners, and I exit out of the front doors.

I am outside. I will never walk through those doors again.

Faceless, did you like what you see?

Fuck prison. Fuck the patriarchy. Fuck the Faceless.

I am not a pawn in your game. I am not the collective. I am my own person.

And as I hold the note in my hand, I wonder... am I? Or have I fallen directly into their trap, and am precisely all of that? What if I am just a pawn to some grand plan?

CHIME. It is too late to guess. With another CHIME, I am on my way. CHIME.

The walk back is long. And I am already hungry. Fuck that prison. But I need its lunch. That is how they keep you. Those desperate enough to stay around just for the meal. That is how they indoctrinate you. Breaking you down slowly, until you are forgetful of the suffering and all that

remains is the gratitude. They feed you just enough to keep you coming back, but not enough to prevent the hunger. There, is the balance. They need their work force fed. Their cattle grazing just enough to hold society up with our feeble legs. So that we may continue to carry the weight of society.

I must eat. As is evidenced today by the sight of all, I am a growing “boy”.

I am going to try tonight. *Try? Succeed.* I must not let the hunger take over. Must not let it speak louder than my R-AGE. Regardless of circumstance, I must I try. *Must succeed.* I have to. It is tonight. *Good.*

Each step beats like a drum. I am sounding the intent for war as I walk. The path back is arduous in this weather. This wind. It threatens to blow me off course, pushing against me as I take strides, losing count. I mustn't wear myself out.

Tonight is the night, is the night —and I've already gone into one fight, reducing my barometer for future engagement. A fight that I won. *Handsomely* so. From a coward encased in Bully peels and posers clothes. So far, this prison-school school year ranked:

Little Bird - 1

Bullies- 34

Not “so far”. That is the final tally. That's it. *Pathetic.* How had I let them win so many times before today? Idiocy. Cowardice. *Never again. No more giving up.*

With this lightning bolt of a thought, I hear the rumbles of hunger settling in and I know that I cannot walk much further. I look to the wind, and am tempted to be taken. I feel I am being led. I can only hope it is toward sustenance. I need to be able to replenish this strength. Lead me to food, please. A safe space. Some place I had not before thought of. Away from the Eyes. For to steal from a restaurant, in the middle of the day is an impossible task. The very thought is laughable. I will just be taken back to the prison, if the finders are lenient. Or in this post-gunshot world, punished. Strung up. Made an example of, as a warning.

I can not bring myself to read the note. I want to be able to digest it. To be rational about the reading. Though I can feel its temptation, the words pecking at me through my panted pocket. It causes more friction with each step than my inseam. *Just wait a little longer.* I cannot read you in this headspace. This lack of clarity. I need to eat and then I will read this stupid note of mysterious nature.

Grandfather (?)... much lingers in the shadows of this interesting exchange. So certain was the Librarian mouse, with such pointed directness, that I have no doubts whom it was directed towards. They meant the words for me. This is indeed my letter.

The winds pick up and without thinking, I give in. I lift to the tips of my feet and allow it to take me. I am grateful to wherever it may lead. Hopeful, it will bring food. My prayer is being answered. *Take me. Take me anywhere.*

I am desperate for food. That is not a good space to be in. Danger lies afoot there. But the wind soothes me in a way I cannot describe. I am subservient to it. Moreover, I am nurtured by it. Two juxtaposed feelings. One really should not exist amongst the other, yet here I am gliding through its wisps and fingers. Carried toward... the gas station (?), which marks the halfway point between two prisons: school and “home.”

The wind has directed, and now it is time to stand up, to stand tall. And to get off of its back. I will enter and steal from this gas station to steal from the Old Man that runs it. I bet he owns it. He is always here. He is so old, and sloth-like, there is no chance of being caught. But I must not appear to be a threat. Nor cockily expect more.

There are many processed foods within, it is paradise. Jam-packed with high sugar contents and enriched with flour and limitless soy. My favorites. I will stack up on carbs. I will get packages of any protein I can find, and sugar for a quick burning fuel, galore. I shall feast. And I do not care to plan for ahead. No snacks beyond this one. One giant, large feast. I can envision eating it all. But I must only take what I can carry.

It is time to enter. The wind nudges me along, threatening to take me elsewhere if I do not march in. *What are you waiting for? Now. Go now!* I do. I start towards, moving steadily focusing on my breath. As I walk in the bell goes off. A deception I did not expect. Shockwaves

ripple through me, for I was hopeful that the Old Man would be in the freezer, the employee bathroom, perhaps washing his truck out front. Something, anything other than for him to be in attendance at the front, behind the register. And for us to take notice of one another immediately as I enter.

Unexpectedly, the Old Man was re-stocking the shelves. He is surprisingly agile and sturdy for his age. Not at all like a stereotypical Old Man. None that I had seen before. I wonder what his regiment is... To be so healthy in this state, this age, this place.

Great, I am going to have my work cut out for me. This may not be easy. For he would see me pocketing everything. He may be able to stop me, with his words if nothing else. I do not want to tussle with this Old Man. He does not deserve these eyes, or worse these hands that have become like weapons.

"Hello. Welcome." He was welcoming me in. If only this sweet little Old Man could remain in that state, blissfully unaware of what I was intending to do, to pillage, to take. If I could keep him there. I immediately felt protective over him. Drawn to keeping him safe in this way, this stranger.

I move along the side of the wall furthest from him. Sneakily. I am sure it added to suspicion. Never removing my focus from seeing what else he can see. Where are his eyes? Are they upon me? Focused on work? Are they darting? Is he an Eye? That would explain a lot. To own an establishment like this would put you in direct alliance with the Square. Why do I not feel a threat from him in that way, then? *Focus. Enough with the getting to know, just grab and go.* Little Bird, the little taker. That is not the legacy I want to live. Not ever. Not even in desperation. As he stood down from the step stool, his towering height seemed to sprawl to greater heights. This made it questionable to form just how long the hands could reach. Perhaps even aisles away. I am immediately out of my comfort zone. I will be found out. The poser that I now am. I should walk out now, before it is too late. From this Eye. This Old Man. This... situation.

I do not. The fire of R-AGE keeps me on my toes. With just the brush of it earlier, I am bold. Too bold. I watch. And I wait. I observe what the Old Man is doing as he moves the little step stool down mere feet away, to stock more. He shuffles and organizes most meticulously. He is precious with the items. Intentional. There is nothing malicious in this man. He is pure. And it takes me aback. Further, I have a feeling that, though he appears to not care what I do, he is watching, keenly. It is as if there are eyes in the back of his head. Eyes that do not require sight. And they are blinking at me.

Here comes the showdown. My old jacket only holds so much, for its ridiculous pockets on the side are quite shallow and worn. Why did I pick today of all days to wear such a mess. So sentimental to be close to Mother's work. On this old jacket, with darned pockets which have since frayed, threatening at any moment to rip. Had it been fate that I would keep her around me on this day? This day, in which someone mentions her father? Mentions her name? Had it been of the Nu and the unusual for me to bring this with me?

This stupid jacket. Why had I indeed picked thee? You safely hold nothing. Something could fall out, could rupture. But I do not care. I merely listen to it, that which is driving me: hunger.

Grab. Go.

I lift the first item, holding my breath, as if the very sound of it will sound alarms. And to have the Eyes upon me. Am I being watched now? I test as I place the first protein bar into my jacket. The Old Man continues about his business, unmoved. No sirens. No movement. Nothing has changed.

That is a dangerous feeling: invincible. I must take again. I do without thinking. I take. And take again. I must stuff. And hold onto the pockets, so that nothing spills out from the bottom, the brim, nor that these frayed pockets of Amathus should rip. If I can make it out of here alive, the battle away from hunger hinders on my ability to eat quickly. I feel preposterous. Starvation, why must you speak so loudly (?). I have a terrible feeling, a lurch in my stomach that is Nu to me. It is not hunger, nor even anxiety. It is a fear. A knowing of what is about to transpire. And despite every fiber of my being now yelling for me to RUN. I avoid. I listen to the winds. Oh,

how they shift. *Take more. You can do it. You've only taken a little bit. You can do more. See what else you can get away with.*

I am stubborn. Selfish. I continue on the path I am on, like a by-passer. The road is so easy. I just have to keep moving along it. *Finish. Do it. Grab, and go.* Just grab and go. So simple. But as I do, it becomes evident that the path is littered with a fog denser than that which barricades us from the sun. *Grab.* I obliged, knowing all too well, this may not go according to plan. Not at all.

I had pocketed everything I could hold. Throwing items down my shirt and into my sleeves. Into my pockets. As if I had never eaten. In truth, I had never been full. And that fear makes one act impulsively. For once he is Dead, what of my next meal? Where will it come from? How will I survive. That survival mode was in full force. And I wondered if it could end. For now, I am stuffed, filled with wrappers, with packages. What a gift.

I viewed the door and the 11 quick, necessary paces needed to go through them. With only the Old Man, on ladder at the other end. I can make it! *Grabbed.* Now go.

10, 9—the countdown begins. I keep my head low, trying to blend in with the dust that is settled below each step. To disappear.

8, 7, 6— I am nearing— “Where you off to?” I—was barricaded by the Old Man at the door. Damn. This Old Man moves fast. “I may be old but I’m not dumb. What have you got in your pockets?” And as it is asked, one of the protein bars falls from my sleeve. From my belly. Perhaps a trail behind has littered the floor with each step. I should tackle him. I can make it through his grasp with at least one, maybe a handful of these items. I will never need to come back here. He will not know me. *This is but an obstacle. A silly one. An easy one. Go.*

But peering into the purity of his eyes, I know that the Old Man is pure. And I cannot do wrong unto someone not deserving of the R-AGE. That would be a sin must unforgiving. I stand await instruction, like the child that I am. “Return them and we will not have a problem. Those too,” he says indicating all of the snacks that have fallen.

“Unless you want to have a problem.” If I want to leave with the products, his products, I would simply have to go through him. That is spelled out, simply. All too easily. I could kick his old little ass down, and remove myself from this establishment. I could be back on the road and to gather my strength. To prepare for the task at hand. *You do not want this R-AGE, Old Man.*

Does he want to be embarrassed? *I am being challenged.* The fighter in me will always step up when a proposition is raised.

I continued to peer up into the tower of this man’s eyes. And I would love to say that I was indeed stopped there, in the pity of an Old Man’s purity. That I knew better. But I was on another journey. A by-passer to what was to come. Consider this, I was not about to be stopped. I will not be stopped. In desperation, I needed to eat. I needed to kill. So, I did something for which I am most ashamed. I attacked. And it was easy. I did so without remorse. I did it swiftly, and moved on, as if he was nothing. A no one. And in some regards, he was. I did not know him. He was just another man in my way. How unfortunate for him. But that has little to do with me. I was challenged. And to that, I raised. I whacked him where all seem to think that manhood lives, and skirted out of the door. It was, indeed, easy.

Running, I took bite of the first bite I had up my sleeve. Tossing the paper to the ground, which goes against my moral compass, I littered. *Freedom. No rules now. I have no rules. I will not be stopped, nor tamed.* Who cares if I had stolen. Who cares if I am a thief. Maybe I am a scoundrel. An abuser of the purest. I have no propriety. I am nothing, and all. Perhaps that is my true potential. Nothing will stop me. Nothing will get in my way. Not nobody, not no how. I do not care about anyone but myself. No one has looked out for me, so I will. If that makes me evil, vile, fine. So be it. I tear into the next protein bar, and the next. I eat the stolen things. As others litter the ground. Yes, I am a tyrant now. My appetite is insatiable, and I intend to feed. I will never go hungry again.

Let it be known, that is who I am. I have arrived. I do not care if you do not like what I see, perhaps this is me. I throw caution into the wind with each rapper. I am a bandit.

With a bit less hunger, I have room for more common sense. It is time to get off of the road. To hide. The shadows upon the path stretch out and I walk towards them. *Yes, come closer.* I oblige, tickled by their taste. So cool, refreshing. I must find shade and continue to eat. I must not be seen by Dead. Not until I intend to be seen. The shadows hop and guide me into cool pools and rivets of hiding.

I must walk the remaining needed path in their lead, as by-passer but mere host to my own journey. Waiting safely for the horizon to settle and then, only then I can go in. *Eat. Collect strength and await.*

All collected, bouncing into one pool of shade against the horizon of this mostly flattened land. The perfect spot. A beautiful spot of rest. I sat and lapped up the cool ridges that took me in. And as they did, doubt began. Eating, the fear of earlier stopped with a massive halt. And I remembered who I was. As I took the bite of a sweetened sugary confection, doubt crept in, and anxiety swiftly behind it. *You silly fool. You loon. You have betrayed yourself. What has come of you?*

They latched onto me, these thoughts, and each pulled upon me in this path of regret to tether me down, to pin me into this desecrated land. They wished to eat at me. To have me. To consume me. I swat at them but could not escape the lies. A particular shadow bounced around and hopped furiously away and around the pool we were both entrenched in. I made focus of it as I reminisced on my recent mistakes. I had attacked an Old Man, I dove upon the jumping shadow. It scurries away to the opposite side of the pool. I did this attack after stealing from his store. *Shameful.* I plunge again unto its next hop. And as I land it sends shivers down upon me. All around me and through me. I grab and cannot lift, nor grasp anything tangible. Only despair and anxiety, perhaps beyond repair are in my clutches. And as I look around the ridge to find the hopping figure in particular, it is apparent that the shadows have waited for such a moment of regret. They stretch like hands upon the bowl of the rim, and cast down upon me as the fog sinks over and in. They spool like jowls and threaten to chomp me to bits. *Forget. Stay here. Live without regret. Remember what you did. You should not be trusted. Stay here and give in. Submit. We can remove all fear, all thought from you. Submit. We will get you to your fullest potential.*

The sole shadow, differed from the rest quivers. I pounce upon it. I grab it by its scrawny little neck.

See. Stay. Feel the power. This is but a morsel of where you can go. The freedom. Let's explore it. Let's go further. Much further. You could be great. Oh so great.

No. I take the neck of the shadow and rip it to pieces. It whimpers and then stops. The darkness lingers all around but the hands do not dare inch closer. I look down and there is blood upon me. It wasn't a shadow at all, but a rat.

I wipe the blood upon the ground and open wrappers. I remove as swiftly as I can. I wish to be rid of this, these feelings. This is debase. None of this is who I am. I was confused. I would never hurt an animal. Never. I thought it was a shadow. I must leave before I lose my mind altogether. Shivering, I will not reside to hide in this cold for hours on end, least of all with these shadows.

I must think practically. *Think.* This is not the way to exist. I will only lose strength out here, alone on this day. This is not the kind of waiting that waits. This is the wait that haunts and preys. This is nothingness. If you abandon yourself, then all intent is squashed. *Do better. Grab and go. Grab and go back to the store. Repent.*

I had no need to think it over, once the thought arrived, I boarded its train. *Go and do not look back.*

I must atone. I must go into this night with purity. The fingers of the shadows whispered at the heels of my feet with each step. But I never looked back at their jowls that had attempted to chomp me upon the bowl of that space. That sink hole, the inevitable opening to hell. *"Do not leave."* They yearned, as I heard them munching upon the tiny bones of the poor field rat. I feel bad for such a fate. But hopefully it was a swift end on an inevitable fate. *"Stay. It is not done."*

We are not through." I run along with the train away further from that place. Making every marking resemblance of where it is upon my brain. So that I may never come back here to this place. *"This is but a beginning. Stay."*

NO YOU STAY. YOU STAY. And it did at least give the illusion that it had listened to me, this darkness, this shadow. For I felt it no more. And I heard it much less.

I go, for I am indeed better than this. I am not my mistakes and I will not be defined by them. I shall defy them. I shall do better, if only the wind does not push me back towards that place. I looked only forward, as I forged ahead in resistance. No matter the shape of the wind, which was mostly in my favor, now that I had made it to the road.

Sprinkled along the way, a sugar trail. Stolen items dotted the way back from the station I walked. A candy lane. So many fallen snacks littered this street. I picked each up. All of this... so much waste. And I continued on, collecting my bread crumbs to face an unexpected destiny. To face potential punishment. To which, I would deserve.

This is me. My truth at its core. As I walk, I walk back into the light within. I walk back to myself. I will atone and repent. I will grow from this. I will not hurt someone that is not deserving of it. Not old, nor young. Not animal, none of this. Never again.

The bell rang and it tolled for my judgement. I enter unto it, whatever it may say. No going back.

Without interacting, I b-lined back to the initial shelf and placed each stolen item back. Some half eaten. That is when I heard it, a rustling, sincere voice, sturdy in its age. The Old Man spoke, "Welcome back." I peered from this unexpected noise to see a gesture alongside it: a hand outstretched. The Old Man indicated from his stool and ice, where he sat, that I was to join him. "Sit." And I did.

"You must have been hungry." I nodded. "How many did you eat?"

THREE, I indicated shamefully with my fingers as I was taught to count, like the child that I am. "I see. Let us keep that between us." Then after some consideration, and a good look up-and-down for I could feel him observing me, he spoke without an ounce of pity, decidedly, "Are you still hungry?"

I looked up to see eyes that bloomed as Mother had indicated flowers do. Something I have only heard of. It was lush and rich. Kind eyes, filled in earnest fields. The grass is green in there. Those deep, rich brown eyes, fertilized and welcoming to teach. I could learn much here. I desire to hug him. I do not know why. He breaks my staring with, "You may have one more." Standing to have my pick of another snack, which I had not earned I could not escape the remembrance of my dear friend, the Driver, whom laid down their life for me. I stop moving, for I remembered my promise. I will never let such an opportunity pass me by again. This Old Man, this flower certainly deserved a hug. I wrapped my arms around the Old Man. His reaction was jilted and stiff at first. Perhaps unsure of whether or not I was attacking him again. But soon I felt a large hand upon my back. It patted me, and if I were just a hair younger, I would have cried. A hair younger than that and I would have been burped. He was strong. These were the hands of hard work. But there was a gentleness to them. I trust him. There is no malice here. This is a good man, something I had yet to meet. I wish to never leave this embrace. One could get used to this, the simplicity of a hug and food. I could get used to this. But it is best not to. Suddenly overcome with emotion, I made it a point to peel off before being found out that my eyes can run their own course, complete with tea ducts. Peeling away before being seen for the child that I am. And he spoke, in all soothing matter of fact that immediately dissipated the tension I had felt within for doing so, "Hell, grab me one too." He said, and I ran to the only aisle I knew, to grab two "snacks" without much consideration. Reading the labels, I noticed that these may not be something he would enjoy. They were all carbs and no purpose. "You may like the snacks better down this aisle." He said with an indication of the middle aisle. Smart, for these snacks prime location. The optimal snacks. There is a strategic nature to this space. He has been intentional, my favorite quality in a person.

I placed the two thoughtless “snacks” back onto their respective spaces and walked as indicated. “Take your time in looking.” He wanted me to familiarize myself with the store. An invitation to his attacker. Odd. But taken. “Can you read?” I nodded. “Look for a low sugar option, please.” I buried myself in reading. Pretending I was not shocked in any way. I put on my best poker face from this “please (?)”. Had I heard this correctly (?). Immobilized, I let my arms continue moving. For I was in shock. Please (?), had stumbled me. Please (?), baffled me. I, a thief, was treated with such courtesy. I whom had attacked him, was asked of politely for further steal from him. As if I am doing him a favor?

In attempting to read, I moved past this, stumbling over nearly indiscernible colorful labels. The backs of complicated labels, all lined with questionable percentages, and gimmicky displays that distracted. “For me! Get whatever you want. I don’t like too much sugar this late in the day.” A point of clarity, or a joke. Small talk? Either way, he was thoughtful. And that is an attribute I really had not noticed in many adults, least of all men. Really, any men before today. I made sure to find the lowest sugar item: 12%. Of what? Of daily intake? Of the bar itself? I did my best, and settled up with that being enough to return to his side, hopeful that I had produced something worthwhile.

I handed it to him and lingered for a while. Then, without being prompted, decided I would not run out. That I would sit and eat with him.

We ate in silence. It was perfect. He finished his first and went back to the cash register. He began tallying, “That’ll be 21.15.”

My mind betrayed me and ran out of the door. To be sure, I left the store again, but by the reflection upon the cash register, I could make out the small bald head of a Little Bird. Perhaps my mind had left, but my body remained completely in the chair, baffled. I stood.

“You can start by sweeping these floors to pay that off.”

I did just that. I swept the floors. I mopped. I re-stocked shelves that hadn’t been touched in years, utilizing that little step stool this near-giant had utilized. I was quite prepared to stay all night. To leave behind Dead. I was reserved to make this my new home. I liked it here. I feel safe around the Old Man. We had hugged. Something I had not done with anyone since my Mother.

Just as I was beginning to leave the thoughts of my intent behind, the purpose of this entire day: Dead to be dead, finally — a ringing.

The store phone began to ring. And clarity sunk back in. It is around the time that a certain bus would make headway from the prison. As he went into a little closet space to speak upon the phone, I could have left. I probably should have left. But I did not want to leave. Perhaps I wanted another hug. Or the opportunity for one. I wanted to see this through. I feel like a child around him. And I want to know what comes next. So, I listened. Pretending to stock shelves that had no need in being restocked, just as he had done when I first entered the store. I am tempted to say, like father, like son. But that is a ridiculous thought. I do not know this man. Before today, he was but a stranger to me.

Eavesdropping is easy. I can utilize my hyper-senses as need be. Unfortunately, the call was a sad one. With a person arguing on the other end. As it progressed, I pieced together that it was the words of a mean and ungrateful child. The Old Man did little more than listen. I get the impression that he does not usually speak a great deal. But upon this call, he said little outside of “hello” and “mmhm” and “well”. There was no time for even this quiet man to get a word in. This mean little child. A role reversal in the family dynamics I am used to. This is something I had not seen before. It was fascinating. And seemingly unjustified. Perhaps there is more to this Old Man than what I know. Perhaps there was not always a flower in bloom there (?).

Perhaps, at one point, he was rougher. And those hands were not so peaceful (?). I cannot imagine it. But I remind myself that he is a stranger. Even if I feel my eyes see all, they may not. I only have the potential to know. I wonder what all there is to know about this Old Man. What could be learned about and from? And how much of it would I wish not to know...

Abruptly, the call ended. And I could hear the Old Man blow his nose. Were there tears? A sigh revealed probably not and he nearly jumped in the air when he saw me. For during their

conversation, I had moved from the step stool unto the chairs where we did eat. *Nosy. Just like a child.*

"You're still here?" I nodded, duh.

He took to the door and removed the help wanted sign from the window. He handed it to me.

"It looked like you needed a little bit of help today. So I am going to extend this to you. Turns out I need help a little help too. You did a pretty good job." The sign, though cracked and peeling, was the most beautiful gift I have ever been given. I know where I will be after tonight. I know how I can make meals and to provide for myself. I am given a chance. The wind blew me here. I do not know if it was fate, but I am thankful. I am so very, very thankful. He cleared his throat, as if to signify more needed to be said, or perhaps to get me out of my own head and these deep thoughts, "I tell you what, you come back here three days a week, and I will let you have three of these snacks each day."

He handed me the sign to keep. To think it over. As if there was anything to think about. I do not know him, but even despite the conversation I had just heard, that private one on his phone, I imagine that I can trust him. No, i know I can. I feel safe here. I like this tall Old Man. I feel very comfortable here. So much so that I allowed something out, publicly, that I had never done before. Something I always suppress: tears. Sweltering, warm tears. And I was not embarrassed by them as I started to cry.

He let me. And it continued for a while. I thought that he would hug me. But that is not really in his nature. And I was OK with that. I had already had one hug for the day. Best not to be spoiled, nor rely on such a thing. He is my new boss after all. But maybe we could grow into a friendship. He sat with me, and allowed me to cry. Another gift. This Old Man. He was not the Driver. No one could be my Driver. And he was not my friend. Not yet. But I can see potential. So much potential. And it gives me hope.

I stood with my wet face, hugging tightly to the sign. And I let it go, placing it upon the counter. I stood for some time, taking in the store. Taking in my purpose. And breathing in restored hope. I am recharged and ready for this night. For tomorrow, I will rise to something great. In scanning the store, I finally peered at the exit. Looking out the front door, I could see the horizon begin to meander as it does before the fog allows the sun to creep down as it sets. If I wanted to make it home in time without suspicion of skipping prison, I needed to hurry. I bowed to the Old Man, and was out with the bell. But, as surprising as ever, the Old Man spoke up as I ran, "Here. You forgot this."

The voice indicated towards something I had almost forgotten about. That note. That... letter? Where had it slipped out? Where had it fallen? Oops. Again, I am thankful for this Old Man. I took from his large, delicate hands, and waved.

The mystery of my Grandfather lingered, answering, beckoning for me to know of it somewhere on the lines of this small scrap of paper. It pulled and sifted through my thoughts with each pace as I ran towards my destiny, my purpose, my hard-work, planning and intent. There was no time for answers. No time to do anything but think of this. I would keep it close to me and reward myself in reading it once I was accomplished. Once I had finished my steps. 9 steps. 9 more. 11. Done. No more. Once I had finished him. Dead. So very dead. Finally, then I could read this. I had much to look forward to. I had answers and security now. It would not be hopeless. I was hopeful.

I ran all of the way home, and it was a breeze. If I had but wings, I could say that I flew. For I was not winded at all. It took nothing from me to race the horizon in this way. No stress. No anxiety. Just the thought of 9, 9, 11 and rewarding.

Filled with joy, giddy as a fool I ran. A true fool, running back to a "home". Foolishly happy that this could be the last time. The last time I could put "home" in quotes, for soon it would be. But I was truly no more than a fool to think in this way. Just a simple fool. A fool to think I would escape this. That this has an end. That this would truly be my last night with him. Fool. Fool. Fool. Like a fool, I ran "home". And like a fool, I let the unhinged door hit me as I made my way in with the setting of the sun. Just in time, on cue—"Hello, son."

You fool. He has been waiting. And so it begins.

I could smell the alcohol upon Dead from the entrance as soon as I jumped through it. It was so strong, in fact, that it knocked at me harder than the door and its singular hinge had as I pulled upon them. *Good.* Off to a strong start. Perhaps it will be good to appear not-confident. No matter how truthfully not-confident I feel, for I am quite unbalanced.

I stepped in, cautiously, to see him sitting. He was waiting at the table with two cups, that for him, functioned like shot glasses. Both were filled.

"Here. You're old enough now to have a drink."

This fool thinks today is my birthday. Can't even get that correct. It's tomorrow! You f— Wait. We don't celebrate birthdays. This is a specific form of fuckery.

Wait. We don't celebrate birthdays. *What are we celebrating...*

In celebration, on the eve of a birth, I'd like it to be of a death. What is his intent? Do we share this interest? Is he to poison me?

"I heard you beat up that little McRoy's kid? Good. Long line of assholes." How did he know about this? "Your gym teacher rang me. I used to... know them before..."

Presumably the one subject he most struggled with, the mouse that got away: Mother: Amathus. He pushed the bottle at me so that it clinked my shot glass and nearly knocked it over. He was drinking straight liquor. There would perhaps be no need to spike his cocktails tonight. He was edging towards having done enough to not be interfered with by me. Almost. Possibly.

"Here. Have at it. I'm going to... what do you care?"

None. He was drunk enough to almost not make it out of the "house". He rammed hard into the wall. Then into the door and it finally, fully fell off its hinge. SPLAT.

"Oops. Since you're such a good, big, strong boy now... fix—this."

Shit. He had noticed. He could see it: that I was changing. Hopefully he is drunk enough to not take more notice unto this. To see it as intentional, but merely "of my age", my development. He was certainly drunk enough to be considered wasted. *Good.* Hopefully he has not noticed more than this. Yet still he was no where near drunk enough for where I would need him to be on this night. I need this man unconscious.

Looking to the hinge as it collapsed off of its remaining screw, I saw a reflection coming from his back pocket. That tried and true: his flask. A true thanksgiving, a feast for an inevitable death. Drink up. Be merry. Dead at last.

What he did not know is that this very little bottle in his back pocket had additives. Just in case. Nail polish remover was siphoned into it by me yesterday. For extra poisoning. Stronger alcohol. Just enough in the bottle. Not enough to change the taste, nor smell. Just enough for this man to be driven incoherent. Unconscious. His porridge, not too much at all. Yes, it would be just right.

With him out of here, I would have time to work out and to practice. The final rehearsal. One final preparation before the showdown.

I dumped my disgusting shot down the sink. And as I watched the sink guzzle it down, I realized something I didn't anticipate: I wanted to taste it. I was tempted for its taste and by my curiosity for... more.

This scared me. It would not be the last time I have this thought. Before even a first sip, I could see how this could be a habit. I am familial to this. I am DNA to it. And it concerns me that I could be bonded to them for this. That we would share this pattern. This need for clicks.

In pouring it out, I must have reacted. For the shot slides from the counter, and threatens to destroy the balance of this moment. But I catch it just in time. *Good reflexes.*

I catch the shot upside down and a few stark drops drip upon my hand as it is caught.

Yet, *pay closer attention. Be steady. Stay prepared. Now, practice.*

As I walk to my bedroom, the pungent smell cannot be removed from my hand. It sits there, tempting me. I desire to plug my nose up for it hath disintegrated all of the remaining hairs from my nose. But they are both toxic and intoxicating as I breathe them in.

My tongue is wet. And my appetite grows, for this night arouses me. Stirring within me with much... excitement.

29 steps. Just 29. That is all it takes. And then it all goes away. Then, a clean slate. Me. Just me. Just me. Home.

It is invigorating. I feel drunk, though I did not drink as I lap up this potential.

29 steps. I know the boards to skip. I skip them steadily down the hallway. Too giddily. This is not a game.

I sober up and start back at 1. As I practice, I do so efficiently. As I have done a thousand times now. I am prepared. I am more than prepared. There is no need to practice again. I remain in my room and I workout.

All there is now is to wait. And then it shall be done.

To wait, is such a simple statement. For in truth, waiting is the hardest part. You can never prepare to wait. Waiting, that trepidatious, bitter, agonizing beast.

I, on the top layer, perched before this fairy tale slaying. It is soon upon us. My unfairly hell'd life. It all ends, and starts again. Tonight. Cinderella had a ball, and so shall I. Little Bird shall dance upon the grave of the slain beast.

Atop my bedding, I escape in thinking of such a ball. Of such a Prince. Of such a place.

Palaces cannot be real, can they? What does one do with all of that space? Would not a glass slipper hurt? I'd like to try one on and see. I focus on the details. Every planned decoration, every detail of the party. Someone was intentional with all of this, I'd like to recognize their work.

Anywhere to go away from this place. To focus upon a simple story. A simple setting and not to call upon the *visions*. Just simplicity. I am in a ballroom, in a palace. Looking for a Prince. It is a lavish, beautiful party. I've stopped worrying about anything, for I have arrived. And as I look unto the Prince, I take comfort in knowing that they have in turn waited for me. I've slipped into the night as smooth as glass upon feet. And I dance with the Prince in them, in this moment. It as if we are dancing on air. Perhaps when air moves in this way it is fate.

I am with sleep. I am calm. Before the storm, I sleep. I recalibrate.

It is like a flash, but hours later that I hear the bottle picked up. He's inside the home. I didn't hear him come in. Without the hinged door... I didn't hear him.

How long has he been here? What have I missed? I try to talk myself off of the cliff. To hold myself back from jumping off and diving deep.

I had not meant to sleep. Not yet. A wave of panic sets in. Was an opportunity missed? How late it is? I look out the window and note that the shadows are out, wildly. I am good in time. I only pray he drinks enough. Moves enough. Sleep shard enough. So many factors that I have little control over.

The only factor I can control is my doing. My 9, 9, and 11 steps, totaling 29. I know what I control: it will be tonight.

He lingers before my door, it is as if he knows that fear has returned to my brow. He can smell it upon me. There he stands, basking in my cold, sweating chills with the villainous whisper of "you will always be just a Little Bird." A threat. A promise. Or a throw away statement. He knows that I hear him, even if I pretend to sleep. I want to jump off of the cliff for which I am standing, I wish to stand up and to strangle him right here, right now more than ever. But I talk myself off of that cliff. I hold onto my R-AGE. I remember my purpose. I remember my practice. For any deviation, and I might not win. Any alternative, and I might not live.

I do, like a good Little Bird, as I've been instructed. As planned. I do as I intended and merely wait.

This time, I will remain atop my bedding layer. But I will not sleep. Not until it is done with. Until the moon is just about to give way to its fall. Just as it kisses the last branch on the old hollow tree and there is no more shadow here.

He's entered the bedroom main. After the bed stops creaking, I hear the snores begin.

Too quickly. Altogether too quickly. They cannot be trusted.

I am tempted to go about this now. But I must wait. Wait for the shadows to end. Then, begin.
9-9-11.

I am ready.

When it is done, I will not report this death. If approached, he left the way he came, without a word to me. The town drunk. Unreliable. He is probably just dead in some alleyway. Or perhaps he ran away. I do not care to know where he went. He is gone. As Mother left, so will he have. Sure, maybe the problem is me.

At 13, emancipation is no longer needed. Formalities such as this rarely are. Though they are easily done. It will take a little time. The hardest part is getting a credit card, which is how everything is paid for. Cash no longer exists. And in the meantime, I can use the one he has, though I've no idea how much remains upon it. No idea of his pin number. Which brings risk to anyone thinking I've stolen it. And we cannot have that.

On poor land such as this, no one will care about me. No one need care for me, they never have before this. I got here, now it's up to me to continue on, or to die. Either way, so long as I am not a burden, they do not care. And I will not be a burden, for I am close enough to work that I can walk. In truth, it's only a mile or two further than the bus stop was.

I will not be a burden, according to the state. I will simply work. And live simply.

I will grow up. This is the first time I've ever allowed myself to think past an expiration date. For after tomorrow, I begin. This will be my best birthday. My first enjoyable one. Lucky 13.

Solved. No issues. I think back upon my steps as I wait, watching the shadows slowly fold back and retreat from the window. Those claws lingering in frame.

12 times I think upon my steps that count to 29. Carefully, I articulate. And one more time, for good measure, for now I am 13.

Happy birthday.

The shadows are gone. The claws of the tree branch have receded back into their roots, back into the trunk. And the horizon is even. It is time for my deliverance. I stand tall and rooted, like that rotting tree out back. Rotting, perhaps, but still here. And I begin the 29 steps.

He is not snoring, for he is between the places of this. At any moment it will pick up again. I take note as I grab my pillow for smothering. It is quiet. I pay close attention to all senses as I make my way along towards my destination. I have thought this through so many times it is easy to handle. I do not have the jitters. I am calm. I am cool. Determined, I will end this. This is my mantra. I play it on repeat as orchestrations sweep between my ears, filling me with the mood to do what I have set out to. Musical. Quietly, I move along with it.

My hands are not shaking. I am calm. I am cool. And I do not smell of anything. The bird bath I took as he left the "house" helped to ready me for this. I will not notify his senses. So that I may, to him, always remain as one thing: just a Little Bird.

It is a natural thing to wish always to have practiced more, for there are so many variables to manage. You cannot plan for all possibilities. You cannot think of all that there could be. But to overly practice only creates auto pilot, where one is not within the body for arising new factors. You must think on your toes. You must exist in the moment. And I am focused. I do not have the issue of auto-anything tonight. I am listening. I am attentive and I am counting my steps, each, in a row.

I am paying attention to each senses. I move with the timing I planned for. This dance. It will go perfectly. It has to. 9 steps off beginning from the right side of my bed. Into the hallway for the smaller 9 steps, I switch just before the bathroom door and—I can feel the pressure drop.

There is a change in his room. I pay close attention to my nose. To the smells. Deep within my sinuses I can feel an atmospheric change.

Before I can switch sides again in this small hallway, I must await. For eons, I do.

Just before the door of main, I listen. There between the rolling breath of no more than two, the snoring begins. I allow it to roll on before becoming un-paused. Deeply it rolls. A true and natural snore. I switch back to the chosen side and am nearing the door. Managing my breath is the one thing I find that proves difficult. I am calm. I am cool. It will be ending soon.

I place my hand around the doorknob. Something I have practiced many times. It is time to move in. 18 steps down. 11 to finish this.

It is foul in here. He wreaks of piss. He in the mirth. This total darkness.

20 steps down. They were executed to perfection. 9 left to execute him.

21 steps down. I have my pillow in hand, and I am moving towards, ready to smother him.

Ready to end.

Little Bird must move swiftly. Must not stir. Must not awaken. I am at the bed side and am ready to jump upon. A voice rises. It is not my own. "Wondered when you would make your way in." The voice is not coming from the bed. It is from behind, from beside, from somewhere else. The noises of this night cannot be trusted. They betray me as they slide into my ears with hissing rolls.

RUN. Run away. Run with every ounce of strength that you've got inside Little Bird. But my legs betray me. I cannot move fast enough. I hesitate for too long. I am coming undone. *No, no no no. This cannot be.*

"Uh, uh uh. Don't walk away." His voice slithers around corners of the room in a most unnatural way. It is inhuman, existing on an altogether other plane. It comes from near and yet, at once far away. The room has expanded and grown, as only shadows can allow, like a mirage. Like a nothingness that permeates into everywhere. I cannot find where he is. Not in this now clearly stuffed bed. I do not see him against any wall. Where has he been this whole time? The room is dark and betraying. The window is covered. How had I not noticed this? Had it been like this before? Shadows pull around the room, with their swirling talons. He is of the darkness. He is but a shadow now. And it threatens to take over this moment, this shadowing. I can feel him on the prowl. I am being hunted. The tables have flipped, and he is toying with me now. This is but a game to him. One, perhaps, he has always waited to play. A true and "equal" threat: me, fighting back. "This is what you came to do, isn't it?" The sound is to my right, but bounces to the left, "Come in here to smother me, haven't you? Thought I didn't notice you all of these weeks. Getting stronger." He is in front of me. I reach out. But he is not there. "Good."

NOT GOOD. RUN.

"What do you say, ready to test that strength!"

The voice is directly behind me, and as I locate him, he is upon me. Before I can swing at him, before I can move anywhere around, I lose the pillow and am thrown down. He is upon me, my arms are pinned behind my back. The pillow I held launches into the dresser where Mother was burned all of those years ago. As I collide with the floor, so does the pillow unto a jar, the alcohol. I focus on that collision more than my own. To stay positive. Focused. My nose remains heightened, and I am hyper sensitive to what is transpiring from such a centripetal force. The bottle is open and begins leaking from its lips, making a river of two as it splits and twists upon the floor. One lane of nail polish remover and the other of whatever substance he drinks upon.

As I am burrowed into the ground, with the menacing cackle of the shadowed Dead, happy to see I would fight back if I could, laughing deeply from the chest that I do not have the chance, that river pulls towards me, meandering to my expression filled face. Fear floats here, down this river, as it makes its way past the bed, to where he has successfully pinned me down. And the smell of it wafting towards me is perhaps the only thing keeping me from passing out. For he presses upon my neck with all of his weight.

As stars flat in and around my head, I can see them landing, as a strip upon that river, flowing. There, the river stops. Like a barrier between this moment, awaiting in anticipation. Filled with stars along its way. It is beautiful. Entrancing. I focus upon it and kick with all of my might.

Kicking, I feel the flask upon his back, pinging and tinging like chimes upon the clock, stroking 13 times to the anniversary of this new day. If I can dislodge it, I can throw it in his face.

It is a long shot. But it is too dark in the room to see much else. My eyes, even if I could turn around, would not be visible. The fear would have no chance of piercing through the shadow barrier that surrounds him now.

"You tried to trick me! You thought you could make a fool out of me!"

I have nothing to attack with other than to kick and to hopefully dislodge the flask. Ting! I've hit upon a funny bone behind him and he winces just enough to set my hand free. I begin swatting, clawing towards the river. A river I do not reach for the weight of him is enough to hold me in this place. There is no need to hold my hands down as he is pressed into my back. I am going nowhere.

He seeks an opportunity here, to prove a point. He has the upper hand and proves so in dipping my left hand into a center of wax. I know immediate his intent. Similar to the candle Amathus was pushed into, that lavender sweetness which haunts me so, is to where I am dipped. I wonder if this is the same candle, so many years after: 9. That which burned deeply into her and into the imprint of my mind. My first memory. I wonder if this here shall also be my last. Bookending a life I've barely lived. Existed to exit, more or less.

Then, a smell. Not of cursed lavender, but something altogether worse. Light has been ignited. I smell the ignition, the source. A match is struck and time ticks down. I must give it my all. I must fight for my life, before my wick is blown out.

I continue to kick and to swat as best I can. The flask remains tightly wound into his pants. I need another option. What can I do? I cannot crawl away. I kick and squirm, threatening to lose all of my remaining strength and to be totally tired out, despite the adrenaline coarsing through my veins. For this is not even of R-AGE, this is pure fear. This is desperation. I am losing this battle. I need help. A light, a way.

And so the light provides from that villainous match. The good thing about an alcoholic is that there is always a secret or two in stow. Pressed against the floor, I have a good visual of more, of secrets. Through the light, I can see that the river points due north, towards the bed. And my eyes dart wildly to see what is indicated. I must crawl with everything I've got. Just out of reach I see a new weapon. A new hope. It is barely visible, but thanks to that tiny ball of fire, I can see a glint. A bottle darkening, shining. Beckoning for me. That blessed alcohol bottle, and it is open. It is awaiting me. I must reach that alcohol bottle and pour it upon his face. How? I do not know, but I must try. I must do so swiftly before it is too late. I have no desire to be marked. I must do this before he has a chance to do what he intends. For he intends to burn this moment into me. Like Mother, now me. His legacy of markings. I will not allow it. This stops now. This stops today. *Fight, Little Bird. Fight like hell. See an opportunity. There is always one. Be in-tune. Be aware. Or beware an end.*

"I'm onto you! I see you for what you are. You think you're so clever. You think you're better than me." Through the ever growing river, I could see that the fire made headway to the candle's wick. "But you are no better than me. You are just like me. A fighter. You've got a lot of learning to do. How to fight. I will train you just as my Father did. But first, let's see if you're worthy of being taught—"

The fire touched the wick, and as it did the river's stream had reached its destination, it crawled around me and under his knee, down to his foot. As he angled himself to light this candle, he slipped. Just for a split-second. *An opportunity. There is always one.* This weight shift gave me enough wiggle room to move. And move like hell I did. I grabbed that thankfully open bottle. I closed my eyes and threw it backwards with all I had, praying it would stick the landing. He tried to put his hands upon me but I was too committed to be stopped. Wildly, I shook and was shaking, splashing it directly into his eyes and his face. Lashing him, blinding him. And I did. He screamed, like I have never heard a scream before. For this must have stung. And I crawled out completely free from him with one last throw of the bottle. It crashed upon something that did not sound like flesh.

"Coward move!"

I dashed away to wherever I could and from atop of the bed, I could see what was needed. With the river circling around the shadowed Dead, it was made so clear, as he swatted into the darkness, hoping to find me, again. That river with stars abundant, glimmering with ideas, with potential, with hope. This shadowy soaked man of piss, alcohol, and dirt. I had to take his intent and match it. I had to let the fire within me, that beautiful R-AGE become external. I must

set this room on fire and him along with it. He who is soaked by alcohol, in a puddle of similar stuff. To die from his own curse.

I swooped down to grab the lit candle and threw it upon him. But did not dare look. He grunted. But no more than this. I had prepared for screams. For heat. Nothing came. The fire did not inflame. Did not engulf him. The river stayed where it was. And the wax barely dripped. Rather, the wick quickly went out. I do not know if the movement through space did this, or touching upon his shadows snuffed it. But either way, this had not worked.

Searching, swatting for me, still for the time being blindly so, he began beating upon his chest. As I backed towards the door, slowly, remembering to avoid noises, or be found out, I held my breath. Not keeping it steady. Not daring to be anything other than silent. He was horrific to watch. Purely animal. This was no human at all. Whatever shadow surrounded him had consumed him now, entering his nose and every orifice. He was enshrined in a darkened gloom, and it was determined. Any shape of a Father that remained in this tortured flesh was now gone with the beating of that chest. At each pulse, another shadow took onto him. And another. With each, the beating of a drum signaled: kill or be killed. Then he stopped. He listened.

That is when I touched upon the doorknob. And he launched. Much was knocked over as I made it into the hall, no longer caring of which boards rattled nor creaked. Past the bathroom, I removed my shirt and threw it into my room, hoping it would mislead. Take the bait. Go into my room, I hoped, as he dashed wildly from the main room to catch me, on all fours. Though the effects of what I had thrown remained and stung wildly, it seemed to encourage his adrenaline more. His senses heightened, like mine. He sniffed at my bedroom, with enough hesitation that I could grab and throw things. Anything within reach. The glasses. Any bottles. The first hit him upon his back, then the second upon his face.

I am not a great thrower. And with little options left for anything that could do damage, practically, I instinctively went for the blades of any knife I could grab. That is when it hit me. One of the bottles I had thrown. Thankfully, it did so indirectly, for ricocheted off of the back door and bounced onto my leg. I did not make time to look down upon it and to see whether I was cut or would merely have a welt. But I stood tall with that dull bladed knife I had so often with white knuckle held under the table. *Never bring a knife to a gun show.* And I knew this blade would do little to help.

Wet and dripping of wax, his shadow self stood from all fours and was upright. He locked eyes with me, though I knew even now he still could not see past a blur. He stood tall, regardless. And I held my own. One of us was right to stand in such a winning position. Only one of us. I swat at him. And hit him twice. Unbothered, he continued to taunt me. This was the highlight of his day. And the disastrous fall of mine. He enjoyed this and felt no pain. For the human inside was long gone.

I plunged it deep into him, with all that I had, hoping to cast this demon out with that dull spike. But his hands caught my movement and revealed that I had stabbed at nothing. The game was over for him. And he was ready to take things to the next level. Enough, is what he had. Grabbing me by my neck, he lifted me into the air. He flung open the back door with his free hand and my body toppled over the chair closest. I grabbed at it, dragging it along with me into the night. In turn, he ripped something from the wall and whipped at me with it. Some type of chord. The lamp, of which I am sure. Whipping me and my legs. Whipping at my desperate thoughts, choking into the cold air as we were brought out into that horizon-less middle time. For it was neither morning, nor truly night.

He threw me yards and before I could land he was whipping at me further. As I landed, he demanded, simply, "Walk." The voice was rustic, different. Coming from a multitude of places, but retaining one voice. He was host to something that was most perverse, and terrifying. I coughed out whirring lights, into the rotten ground. But I was aware. I was conscious. And for that, I must remain. I guess for that I am to be grateful. Then the chord struck upon me, again and again with severe, lashing whips.

"I said walk." To where? I walked out and away. I looked towards that old, rotting tree and up towards a grouping of birds that draped upon it, birds most fitting for such an occasion: buzzards. That which comes for death. I looked over at this rotting land, and stepped towards a tree that bore no fruit, from a familial legacy that did the same. And as I made peace with the failures I had made on this day, I took in a smile for being so close. For at least being brave. I stepped towards the birds, out in the air, a simple few steps, counting along the way... 1, 2... 3. That is when I heard it... the clicking of a barrel.

I fell to the ground with the boisterous BANG. But there was nothing fired. Just another trick up his sleeve. Or down his pocked, should I say. What I had kicked in his back pocket was no flask at all. Perhaps that was his gun. Yes, earlier this night, he had gone outside to retrieve it from wherever it was hidden. Some place. He was planning as much as I was.

BANG. He said again, pulling at the trigger with a husky, boisterous laugh that rolled around and into my head.

"I'm going to give you one chance. If you find a bullet before this revolver does, in the ground, I'm going to let you use it. But if you don't..."

I looked upon him, squaring off from a considerable distance. And yet he hovered, indecipherable between that host of a body, my former Dead and just before the brim of my nose, all at once. As I stood, he began to whip the lamp chord from where he stood, or seemed to and it struck upon me.

"Dig." He said. And before I could get to the ground, he was upon me, whipping. I dug in the spot I was upon, and it was no good. BANG.

Another false bullet. I moved to a spot by the root of the tree, peering up at the buzzards as I moved. There was no indication, no help from anyone on that windless night, and I moved to the ground, again, hoping that this is where a bullet took root. Hoping, praying to not be mere prey upon this night. I dug and dug—BANG.

I cannot imagine there will be many more false bullets. I am getting lucky, at best. I became disgruntled. I wanted to roar. To fight fairly. Nothing about this was right. If only he could look into my eyes and be struck down. If only my potential would meet me, somewhere out in this barren field. And as I stood, I became uncompromised. Immovable. *If you want to shoot me, then do it. I will not reduce myself to these games. This searching for a needle in a haystack, blindly. I will not play.*

This refusal, my rebuttal disgusted him. He did not like my silence, which was always. He hated my quietness. "You give up so easily?" He mocked at me. And I held my grand, defiantly in that winning stance. I stared and I waited. *You do it then. You end it.*

He whipped and thrashed at me from everywhere, all at once. In every direction. Upon my legs at first, and making their way unto the back of my head. But I remained unmoved, past wincing. I stood tall like the tree behind me, deeply rooted. I stood under the umbrella of the buzzards, awaiting death, and perhaps my prayers were answered here. For I did not move. I will not be moved.

This challenge sickened him. And he took the chord unto me, wrapping it tightly around my neck. I held on for life, to breathe. He could sense the unfairness of this situation. There wasn't any fun in this for him. But the shadows continued, wanting at all costs to win. I would easily choke out. I could hear the thoughts of this. "Tap out?" He asked but I made no indication. "Tap out!" He said in a sound most worrying, for he had lost total control over himself. Having never truly murdered, I imagine this would not be the way that he wanted it done. But those shadows cast much misinformation upon his desires and wants. If only he could have a drink. Perhaps then it would click in.

Above, a buzzard cawed. Perhaps I imagined it, or was passing out. For when I came to I was on the ground.

"See." I did not. Something had stirred him. He was shaking. Grabbing the gun again, he moved on, "You're just a Little Bird. You're not a man yet." I never was. I never will be. And that

is good. For your kind are one in the same. You are the worst of the species: villainy. In or out of shadows, that is what he is and always was: a villain.

And if he is the villain, we are in desperate need of a hero. I look to where the stars should be, on a horizon most spent. I look to the buzzards and I pray not to be prey once more. I pray for their help, once again. I will be the hero, if I can. If I be the her, the hero is ready now.

Before another order could roll out in this never ending game, his all too audible, "Dig. And if you do not find, what you dig will be your grave."

No. I do not like those odds. I do not like that deal. I do not subscribe to what you are saying, you villain, you beast. That is not how this will go down. I will not play unfeathered games with puffed up peasants anymore. I will no longer listen. No more playing at obliging, and idly going by.

So, the day did not go according to plan, oh well. Now it is time for Nu rules, and Nu plans. It is time to throw caution to the wind. And so I did what every instinct had been telling me for some time. I RAN. And as I ran, to nowhere in particular, I could feel the source, I could feel the belly of that beast. That Dragon. My R-AGE.

As I run, I let it out. I let it take me, become me. RUN, the voices say from inside. RUN with all of your might. And as I do, to anywhere, any place but here, I can feel from my arms grow a sprout, a twig of one, then of many. Wings. I am powerful. I, Little Bird, can do any and all things. I maybe can even... fly.

The wind picks up. And it is on my side. I am not alone in this run, for he is running, too. *Good, if you want to play, you will have to catch your prey. The prey is not coming to you.*

I run into the night, and I do not stop running. Running is the easiest thing I could do. It is as easy as breathing. Each step lighter than the last. I do not need to see the gains I have made in distance from him as he shoots towards me, missing me. I swerve and dodge with ease, with the next BANG, which when extended is a real and true bullet. Had I stayed that would certainly have sunk into me. I keep running.

The awkwardness I had once felt diminishes, for I was wrong in thinking that I was not a runner. I am running. Moreover, I am hovering. Lifting inches off of the ground upon each prance.

Steadily, spacing out wider and further from one another. I am gliding. The air has taken kindly unto me. I am unbothered. Un-tired. I am running not only on, but with the air. The inches grow to feet and I become distanced more and more from that rotting land. This is the easiest and most natural movement I have ever had. I am a runner. There is nothing awkward about me. I am proud. I am steady. And I am graceful. Look at me soar. I am beautiful.

My arms grow and extend further as they cascade into wings, and I am soaring. Forward my head tilts, to aerodynamically cut through the air.

As I do this, I take note that the fog is settling, for the shift of moon to light has taken its last bit of seconds. The moon, returns to its pond, and I am bathing upon the final dips before light emits. As I run on, I can feel the sun grow behind me, there wherein, I hear the dimming of footsteps.

Those shadows cannot keep up with the likes of me. I am faster than even the shadows. That which had began in chasing me. At times, I could feel his hands nipping at my back. Clawing at me. But the more my wings grew, the further the distance between that reach. Soon, he was several paces back, hovering in his own way, there for a time. And thudding deeply with the ground. Whatever this potential is, I did not inherit from him. He is a different kind of beast. A pretender. Perhaps that is why the darkness, those shadows took unto him. For he is only a pretender. No potential but to be taken over. Truly weak.

He collides with the ground, fully. With a rich thud. And there are no more footsteps. I keep running. I keep flying.

I do not like not knowing where he is. I cannot hear him moving. I can not truly see him, for the sun is taking its sweet time rising here. Not that it provides much light source through the maze of dust lingering, anyway. But in this moment it is truly dark. There are only shadows. I run on. I attempt to move far and further away.

I swoop into the air and watch on, through hopeful guiding glimmer of sun beams that should trickle in from the space of fog I exist in now. But that sun does not come. I see many things from here. But I am unsure of truths as I look on. For all things are possible. The land plays at its own tricks without a light source to tend to them, to keep watch. This is a dangerous time. Things are moving and switching place.

I make out that insignificant little "home", and rusting truck out front. I see the large, and beautiful tree. And upon the branches, several, I see the buzzards focusing on one particular, small and insignificant seeming figure: Dead. As I do, I cannot pinpoint where I am, and cannot help but feel that I am falling.

The shadows cover me. Cover this place. My wings fade. And as I lose the confidence of hovering, I threaten to collide with the ground. I run, and hope that I can continue to hover, to glide for a bit. As I touch down with the ground, I begin to trip. The awkwardness returns to me. Those moments of confidence, of beauty and grace, they are gone. The run becomes one of panic, then onward to desperation, again. As I run, the tree comes back time and time again in and out of my circling vision. I am any place and no place all at once. Worried that Dead will be there when I stop. BANG. I can hear it. I do not know if anything is shot, as I trip upon this un-leveled land. Filled with decayed roots, which stretch out like the hands of earth's corpse. Those wishing to drag me down and to bury me along with them. To make me their puppet. Or to collect me as another hand in their bunch. These shadows. They run freely now. It is their time. And it is terrifying.

The tree arrives again, and again. But I keep running. I keep tripping. I am tired. But with every fall, I get up. I run further still. And continue running. I will not stop. I will not give up. I run and I run until I can simply run no more. Until I cannot see. Until I cannot move. I am frozen. I stop and observe that for the first time, I do not know where I am or of what. Everything exists in multiple planes of existence. It is as if time has taken its very nature into question, and is changing all before it. Everything is picked up, picked apart, scattered and broken down to an atomically level. Then it begin re-setting. Not all at once, heaps at a time. It is jarring, and I am confused at what I am seeing in its wake. It must be hours, even minutes is longer than the exchanging from sun to moon should take. It is most unnatural, and the earth rolls beneath my feet, tossing me down back into those rich, darkening fields where shadows live. Threatening to usurp me. A Shadowing belch grabs at me. It is most threatening.

We helped you. Now it is our turn.

The door is open. Walk in. No longer a need to run.

You can be ours, together we can be. So many things.

You have so much potential. We can see it.

We want to help you achieve, we know how you can be it.

We—a family. Join us little sun.

The coldness, like a heat too hot to exist, swept down and rolled over me, threatening to press me flat. I feel my own atoms ripped and separating. The very fabric of me is coming undone. With sweat upon wherever exists now my brow. I am dripping. Soaked. Wet with shadow. Wet with fear.

I pull myself away from this, shapeless as I am. I focus.

What do you want? To be all you can? Give in. Give in. Let us help.

I fight against that. I know I want nothing from them. I want to be nowhere near that place. I walk on until I find him, completely unmoved at the center of the shadows. The darkest of places, as it swirls like the inner circle of hell around him. He has fallen. Whether by trip, push, or some other fate, he sits. And the shadows swirl around him, with hands outstretched upon the young new host, what they hope will be: me.

I focus and see that he is fading. He has totally given up. That the shadows are feeding upon him, what is left of him and his soul. I do not wish to be part of this place. This shadow land. I will never give in to you! Never!

This Shadow continues to keep its sights upon me but moves no closer. It hisses upon each finger outstretched in a most unfriendly, furling fashion. To think it had the audacity to posture

itself as a warm invite. Who could not see right through this? This villainy? This marking most dark? That is a curse. Whatever that beast is. It is most unnatural. Some developed, new-age hell. Whatever has brought this to the surface, wherever it comes from, it need steer clear of me and to go back. You oh cursed thing, you Shadow, I beseech thee. I will not give in. Have at him. He is yours. He chose that path. Not me. Not I.

They surround him. He whimpers, in a murmur of regret. It is the closest thing I will ever get to an apology. To a desire from him to be better. But it is too late for him. They are around him, feeding at where his skin touches the ground. Like leeches, they exist, most excited. Abuzz with white noise. And it feasts, gnarling and gnashing at the darkness of him. For which there is much to eat. He screams in a scream most silent. The kind I know best. And it is deafening. All atoms that had not found their way back to one another, do so now. Settle. And the earth shakes as this comes down. From each item, in every visible place upon this land, whatever shadow that rolls from its re-structuring, makes its way to him now. It adds to the swirl that laps around his body, their favorite host. And it spirals, wildly, threatening to engulf the "house", the tree, and me. I must run away from its growing parameters. Further and further away as it swirls, growing. They cannot get enough of this feast, eating his flesh. I am watching him rot before me.

The night is so cold in this moment, I am truly thankful that the shadows are around, for in their production comes an intense heat. Blanketing us perhaps from sickness. From freezing out in this rotting place. Their acts, eating, decaying of Dead, keep me from feeling a cold. Keeping me numb in its purest form. They, if you give into them, I imagine, are the essence of numbness. For until you are consumed, that is all that you are. A puppet. Numb. Existing to exit.

I am intrigued, called to come closer. A siren of tricks. They wish to transport me.

He was but a test. You would be a true adversary. You could make real change.

I will not be a pawn. I hate games. The shadows stay where they are, and from the tips of their swirling ways, I look and cannot look away.

His physical body is suffering from a heart attack. Or a stroke. He is unable to move and is convulsing. And his metaphysical body is being consumed as he does. Pains. Terrible shrieks are happening to him as the leeches leech. The inaudible begins to escape through sounds most terrorizing. It is the sound of demons, unleashed. Each bite has its own note. It is musical, but for the insane. Each is shrill, defined, deafening. I have to stop it. I have to smother him. I have to end this. For anyone, this nightmare must be ended. It is too much even to witness. Inhumane for even the likes of him, this villain. My suffering source. My pain.

But to stand into that swirling darkness threatens to drag me along with it. Or worse, to be taken over to the numbness, their host. I do nothing but wait and to watch.

If only the sun would come up and I could swat away at what my eyes are seeing, these tricks they've made. If only the sun would hurry and burn these out. Returning the shadows to the basements with which they belong. Not allowing them to exist as the ruler of this world, no matter how much it has rot. This is most unnatural, these flesh eating beasts.

As the sun finally begins, the world shrinks and normalcy to this plane of world is compressed into being the only existence. Things begin to visually make sense again. Like I was part of just a bad dream. And I remove my pants, running with my underwear on, the 11 steps towards him. I must help him pass on, quickly. No more suffering. Just 11 steps, as I would earlier this night, from the hall way, to his bed. A few, 11 steps. The swirling shadows shrink below, returning to wherever they are from as I take each strident step.

Smuggle him. Have mercy. Make this feasting end.

But as I reach him, and the last of the shadows seem to leave, I note that there is no need. He is gone. Dead is dead, finally.

As the last bit of life leaves his eyes, which stay starkly awake in terror, the handful of shadows crawl from the last of his flesh entry points, where they were feasting. They grow together and mark the hand of five, buckling together with the crackling of bones, and dive into the center of his chest like a surgeon would.

They disappear and it is silent. But only for one second. Then a splitting, a terrific rip cracks from the chest most foul. Here, the hand re-emits and begins to grow. Multiplying. With each hand pulling out and up another with a widening, chest splitting crack. Crawling onto another, and forming a new formation. A shadow of his former self. They stand and click into place, to stand tall. Hands that form the shape of him, in exactness. Disturbing, the moving hands trickle and wriggle, like worms in a shadowed human cage. Such darkness. This demon, all in the same. It peers out to the world, and appears to smile.

What is this? I cannot move. Cannot look away.

The shadows come into contact with the elements and exist on their own now. They feel full. Proud of what they have done. Adapted to their embodiment, they feel free. With so much potential. They give an inviting wave. It is not inviting. It is a warning. I dare not come closer. Not to interfere. To these. The voices. The villainy most hellish. A hellhound (?) if ever I saw one. A new kind of demon. Evolution. The shadows are evolving. If this be the first, I worry what else shall come forward in the light.

His face is frozen in terror. His last expression. With a caved out chest, burst wide open.

As the Shadow of him waves, this thing before me, the sun climbs out and breaks truly, for the first time I have ever seen, over the horizon. The fog is beat away, breaking apart by the beaks and sounds of birds. They roll out like one giant tsunami.

Then another. And another. It is a strobe of light pulsating with each rolling set of birds.

For on the spliffs of cloudiness, the dawn breaking rides: millions of birds. They swarm towards us, and circle this hellacious spot. The Shadow is terrified, crawling towards me now. *HELP*. It asks with that hell-fired voice. But the birds do not allow it near me. They circle and encase the Shadow as it lashes upon them. They do not stop. They form a cage of a tornado. The wings and force of which knock me down. There is power and strength in these numbers. And they waste no time.

I settle into the dirt. Little Bird takes strength in the ashes, the ruin and rot of this world. I have survived much. I have out survived this villain. And now it is their turn. The power of which is most glorious. As the wings continue to swirl and wave around the Shadow, which cannot escape, they sting with their beaks, ripping at the Shadow, dismembering it. Each little worm. Each little finger. Each little leech. They rip it apart, with each swirling wave. Then as it is ripped, shredded completely dismembered, each bird strikes to take a bite of the worms as they float in mid-air. They bite and swallow each and every shadow'd bit.

As they do, the birds congregate. They collide and combine as they do. One life form becomes service to another. They exist beautifully. Of one intent, of one mind. These million become thousands, and then down to the hundreds. Combining on and on until but a few, five or six, are left. These are the buzzards.

I am swept up in the moment. And have no need for a full count. For as I see them combining, I realize: it is a dance. And I am invited to join them now. For a dance is best done with multiple participants. It is musical. I can hear it begin. To crescendo as this beautiful day breaks. This day filled with hope. With possibility. In nothing but my underwear, I rejoice. Little Bird dances with the big birds, the buzzards. I circle as they continue to finish their feast, with each lowering dip and rising feast. I am free.

To see me dance, they appear to be happy. For they CA-CAW out in rejoice to the beat of the song I hear internally. They smile. Or I am smiling. The world is aglow.

We have purpose. They are filled with joy as I do this. We dance together, we twirl, narrowing our scope of this moment, our former tornado. It all shrinks and it shrinks until there is no need for it.

As the dance twirls down, to a slow dance, I must come to terms with the fact that I did not get to do the deed myself. And that is my one regret. That he died of, dare I say natural causes (?), extraneous, other causes than I could be responsible for, brings me no joy. I wanted to do it.

And I will grow to feel that I am cheated of this moment.

But for now, I dance. I know that I witnessed the death, for otherwise I would not believe it ever happened. I witnessed and know for sure that he is truly, truly Dead. That will have to be enough. For that is all that I'm left with.

As they look to me, with caution (?), curiosity (?), all knowing. I question upon those that did answer my prayer, that heard me. And I thank them for coming to my rescue. If it was you, oh towering and beautiful beaks of black, that took him out of this "flat-square world". To that I am thankful. To that, I could laugh. I am left to dance. Dancing all around and upon the Dead in this unmarked, unburied and fallen world. I am giddy. Elated to dance with my brethren. My friends (?) and pets (?).

Good riddance you piece of shit. Good riddance parent.

I can feel them watching, as their dance slows down, snowballing into a waiting game. They await, responding to my movements, as if I am in charge. As if what comes next is my call. So little of life has been up to me. Usually, I am the responder. In defense. Awaiting. But now... I have the power. The decision is mine. In my first moment alone, I have to determine what is to be done with the body.

They have the answer. A simple one. A clean one. My approval is not needed, but respectfully they await my call. These devourers of ends. They respond to the dance as if I am a conductor at a symphony. It is a humble moment. I respect them equally as I feel respected. I appreciate this. For now that they have consumed the Shadow, they want to know if I will allow them to eat him once and for all. To finish what was started.

YES. And so it should be. *Make no sign left of him. Take. Fine feathered friends feast!* They have come down hungry. I will not leave them this way. These death seekers. Take all of him. *Good.*

I no longer dance. I sit and watch as they peck at his desecrated remains. Scooping at the ashen soil. Eating his legs, slurping at that opened cavity. Leaping as they peck upon his face. I watch it undisturbed. It is as life should be. This is the most productive thing he perhaps ever did: to become a meal. It is righteous. And glorious.

Were you summoned by me? Is this fate? Have I arrived at my potential? The feeder to the devourers of the dead? Is this what I have brought about? The more I reflect the more I feel that they are. The longer I sit, the more it resonates with me. And after he is devoured, the last leaping leech consumed like soup, they nod their beaks at me, I nod back and they vanish. Alone, I go to the spot where he once died. And see no trace of him. I feel him nowhere. There is no lingering presence. No evidence. As I look, I take in this desert land, and find a gift. The buzzards, my new friends, have left behind in their wake: a finger. One. A momentum. I pick it up and place it in my pocket. That space where my letter was in. I now could read it. For, it is done. But I am not quite ready yet. I don't want to be with my lineage in this moment. No direct family, nor extended. I don't want the influence of a letter from a stranger. I just want to exist in this moment. Fully. For this is the first moment as myself I have. There is a weight within that. And I don't want to escape it. I want to take it in.

I survey the land, and for the first time I breathe in a full breath. No longer am I stepping upon the precipice of what could be the last breath, awaiting a hit. Awaiting to escape. I breathe. I am. I alone.

I am alone.

But whereas this used to haunt me, it empowers me now. I am alone and powerful. I am alone and all things are possible. All that was limited until now.

Now I can be.

Now I can do. Watch, see all that I become. And all that I do.

And I am truly alone on this cursed land. A place I hoped only to escape, to never return to. For as I survey what has just transpired, I recognize it may be best to leave this place behind. I bury the gun in the ground, at the root of the firmest part of the tree. And I wonder if bullets exist anywhere beneath my feet.

I walk into the house, and have no need for quotes. I drag the lamp that whipped me so viciously, and place it upright. I do routine work. I put things back in their place, after rinsing my hands.

I clear the thrown bottles. And I walk into his room to make peace with what has just transpired. Firstly I remove the window's blanket and let the light shine. I open the window and throw the candle out. I use the blanket to wipe up the alcohol, and throw it out of the window too. I should place the finger in the top drawer of that dresser which comes to the midway point of my chest. But I cannot let it go. I want to hold onto it. I want a momentum. I want to remember, if not honor, to have a part of the Dead. I keep it alongside the note in my pocket. And walk over with the matches in my lively hand. I make peace with the room, making it intentional that no shadows live nor are welcomed here and I shut the window.

With the window dressing and pillow in one hand, and the matches in another, I set out to cleanse. The pillow returns to my room. And the blanket goes out back, to be torched. I watch it fade into ash, as he was, with a bowl of cereal. I eat it on the back steps, in that cold, perfect sight. I relish in this glorious moment for its simplicity. As if nothing happened. As if it is just any other moment in time, on any other day. And that this is what life will be. It could be. For now, I relish.

Tucked under my arm I am tickled by something as I eat and discover the remnant of last night: a feather. As I giggle at this discovery, and even as I prepare for the Square's singular condition, the purpose of each of us here, preparing to do that one thing we are intended to do: to work. I see what is to come. For life will not be simple. For, I am no simple person. There is too much potential. So is the legacy of a Little Bird. I place the bowl back in the sink, most routinely. And walk out of the front, hingeless door.

I do not care if I come back. Any place can be home.

So begins a day of firsts. It will be a good one. Of this I am sure.

And so it is for I declare it so.

With my hands outstretched, and a pocketed finger pointing *up*, I know which way I must go. I stretch out my arms, which grow into wings. The first feather trickles out a warning, musical. Within moments, an unfurling. More and more feathers. I am tickled pink by them as I lift into the sky towards the station. With ease, I soar, with my Nu potential, and the wind on my side. Things are looking up. Today will be a good day, I think assuredly, determined, confident as I take flight.

No where but *up* from here, Little Bird. Nowhere but *up*.

With the wind, I am free. I am truly me. And it is limitless. I am springing without issue, for it feels energizing to be inside of this body. I can be anyone. All things are possible. My lungs are limitless. The day is airy and bright. I soar through the fog and high and there above, I find quiet. A place without shadow. I am emerged in cascading light. I dance through this.

Nothing holds me back, not even anxiety. It is as if I am breathing for the very first time. And in some ways, it is. Without all of this decade long stress I have had to endure, living in a "house" that was no home, I finally feel air around me. The kind that does not suffocate. The kind that does not crush. *Stay here*. That limping suffocator with its threats of which breath could be your last. *Stay up*. I am breathing fully, radiating in the sun. *Stay above*.

The wind kisses me sweetly, and I make headway down, back unto the ground. My feet touch at the back of the station, and I walk towards the front for the first day of work.

I have arrived! I am here! The Old Man looks at me, and though it would be argued differently, for he is a most patient man, I do believe a hand was on his hip. *Have I taken too long? Am I... late? Is this job not still available?*

"I had a good feeling about you." I had a good feeling about him too. And a craving for more snacks. Was it too early to ask? "Now come on, let's get to work."

We worked together, and it worked well. Inventory, flow, this even-kilt and balanced ban. His temperament was steady. A good teacher. And learned much, I learned fast. Before midday I took to hammering up loose boards.

“Good.” He was quite encouraging. And I imagine it felt good to have someone else to do the lifting for a change. He was trusting me, for now he began to not quite pay attention. Not always. At times he did not watch. Confidently, I took to doing things un-prompted. And as I did, hammering away, something I had collected fell out. Something that should not have been where it is in the first place. Something I should probably have left behind but was tempted to release: the Dead finger.

I moved like lightning, fast to hide it before the sound of thunder was reached. He, who was just beginning to trust me. He who had a good feeling about me. A reminder of my potential, that I could be someone worthy, someone that one could have good feelings about. But as I looked upon the finger, spinning before me to be grasped, it pointed to the exit. Indicating that it was only a matter of time before I was found out. Found out for who I truly was, that I was not worthy. That I am not to be trusted. And that any good feelings about me would soon dissipate. I looked from the finger, to the exit and between, there he was. There he was... watching. This he had saw. This he had seen. And with that, all doubt rushed back unto me. Flushing upon my face. Flushing my confidence.

Without making a noise, without skipping a beat, he did not acknowledge. He did not say anything. He turned and continued what he was doing. Turned out of shame? Had this changed everything? Would the trust now leave? This, the beginning rift between all too sudden friends?

He “had a good feeling about me.” Why can I not trust even this? If only he had known how ill placed that truth was. Though I had been cheated this death, I was a killer. It is still within me. This R-AGE still lives. It needs a place to be, to exist. Within, it brewed and was intent and determined to continue doing this. To collect more bones. To have more fingers. Those that make-up a collection, like the shadows had built. My own collection of the shadows. Flesh driven.

“Let’s have a snack.” The distraction I needed. I was getting too far ahead of myself with this worry. *Be present.*

With the finger in my pocket, as I picked, something was poking at me. Those of the shadows? *You still want to do it. You still need to. You know you do. You need to. You need this. You need MORE.* I wish to quiet them as I choose some protein, some “snack”. To dismember these shadows, but I can see it is coming from within. It’s my voice. Yes. The Shadows needed to be taken down. And the birds, my friends, demanded to be fed. To feast upon these shadows. As I picked two “snacks” and walked to the seats, I was struck loudly by the thunder within me. A clash thronged by the provoking of this taunting Dead finger. This finger I had collected. Been gifted. This which reminds me, pointing, ready. MORE. Feed. Desecrate. Feed. Shadows ending.

Eating in silence, my thoughts provided much too loud thoughts. Doubts. *WHY did I collect it? I need to get rid of this. This is sick. My little trophy? I need to get rid of it.*

But in the thought of doing so, I already know I cannot bring myself to do it. Fate? Pledge? *MORE. MORE. MORE.*

YES. Yes. Yes.

I am used to moving through the motions, and appearing undisturbed. But the Old Man is different. Showing his age, he stepped in tune with something more than just the en route of motions. He understood emotions. Which, for some reason, are rolling through me now.

“I think that is enough for this day.” And indeed it was. Shaking, I could barely hold the protein steady. Crumbs laid to waste. For I am alone now. I am an orphan.

Where there is freedom, there is a darkness to this. Too much potential. Too much... loneliness. I am truly alone in this world. With no tethers, nor guidance. As I sit beside of a stranger, I cannot feel anything but distance. And needs. I am so needy.

To be orphaned, is normal. One must grow up fast in the Square. Entering the work force by 15 is expected. 13 is not much different. For 12 is not of child. This is a middle ground.

I feel so alone. So vulnerable. Like a child, I wail. Like a child, I have a need to be comforted. No parents. So much loss. So much cheated.

I need to grow up, and quickly. I am desperate. Desperately in need of a parent. With this, the Old Man, lifts me up and holds me like a child. And carries me to his truck. I hope he never puts me down ever again. Without question, the Old Man drives me to his home, with my head on his shoulder. And I oblige, like a child. As my sobs and wails expunge into drying tears, I remain there. And I rest. I rest knowing that I am safe. For the first time in my life, I truly rest. And I do not wake for some time. When I awake, I will be in a new home. And I will not return to the space that was once home. That place that is supposedly mine. Not for a very long time.

I awake and it is afternoon. I do not at first know if it is the same day, or a different one. I rest upon a couch, with my head elevated. And settle into the fact that the day is of little consequence. It does not matter. For I am comfortable and safe. Words I could not have uttered days ago.

I am surrounded by an old and colorful room, filled with art. It is sturdy and homely. It is above all welcoming. Immediately I feel, in the essence of three, these truths: family, safe, and above all, love.

When you envision your parameters of safety, what are they? To thrive. To live truthfully and be encouraged? To be yourself? Or is it more simple than this even? To merely exist without question, fear, the need to escape? Can you blend in for this? Or is it arduous to find such a place?

What do you see when you see a home? What do you feel? Hear? Taste?

Are the two the same that you envision? Is it the same space?

I have all of that now, in one. And I am blessed to have found it.

I have found home. With the Old Man and Alberto. As I wake, music, like a warm bread fills the room. It plays, not through the state sanctioned stations but round and round on some sort of disc. Miss Etta James.

At Last, I am here.

He greets me. My new and favorite dancing partner.

Me, the Old Man, and Alberto. My family.

There is room for me here. It is laid out for me. I could (?) live here for many years. I could (?) be so happy. And I can work all the same. I can build a life. I can live simply, happily. It is so tempting. Alluring.

I sink into the moment and escape through the dance. I feel seen. Together, here, I am safe.

When the dance finishes, and our bellies are full with packaged plates, they go to their bed, and I go to mine. A room just for me. With doors that hinge, without the threat to fall. I press upon a doorknob most shiny. It is bright and without any rust. Golden and beautiful. They leave me to explore.

I am on my own, but feeling anything but alone. I push in and it is like a dream needing no sleep. A dream better than any sleep could bring. For dreams are made of pieces of this and this is that most complete. A *vision*.

The dresser, which rises above that of my chest, to my eye-line, is stacked and mostly filled with clothes. I assume that they are for me to wear. Some of which will not fit. I do not care if it is something I would wear. It is thoughtful. It is a gesture to be, to continue to exist here in this space. I cannot repay enough for this. It is perfect. And the clothes smell heavenly. Cleanliness. I have not smelt something such as this in so long.

I want to disrobe and immediately enter into the first I can rest my hands upon. I scoop them up, like golden trophies, and feel inadequate to touch. For I am dirty. And unworthy of entering such baggy treats.

"The bathroom is across the hall. Good night."

"Sleep tight."

And I hope it continues to be all right.

I run into the pink tiled bathroom and run a bath. Throwing down my clothes, immediate. As the steam rises, I waft and sink.

After, in that foggy room, I step into the Nu me. The homely me. And I feel delicious in the threads of these baggy, frumpy cloths of rich purple, sublime. My favorite color. I shall never wear those old clothes again. I will not go back to that. That is an old me. I bask in my Nu-ness. I will fight against this R-AGE. I do not need MORE. I will try (?) to be happy here. I can learn. I have no need to strike, to R-AGE. This is enough. More than enough.

Those nasty, tattered, old clothes from my old life. From which I already feel such distance. I have the desire to burn them. To strike a match and to be done with them. Later, one day hopefully I will. To purify and purge my old self, completely. R-AGE, settle. Let us keep thee in the metaphor.

For now, I admire the trash bin, and place them there. THUMP. That is when I hear the clinking of it against that bin. It strikes. Always at an unexpected hour. The finger presses on. Deeply, it points. *It is time. Read the note.*

The eyes of this pure, pinkly room stare upon me now, waiting to exhale. As I leave it behind to march into my room. A room I have not earned, but will try (?) to belong to. The gold of the door know stares and assesses me upon entry. Me and the gold. And the finger. With the curiosity of such a note.

The knob is hot to the touch and as I enter I suppress the doubts. They become the new R-AGE: suppressed. Not coming out.

And perhaps they are one in the same. Adapting. Creating Nu, this raw, different form. Perhaps I will grow to like them this way. Perhaps this is growing up.

In purple, I calmly read it. With my no-longer R-AGE, and grown suppressed doubts. My heart pumps that blue liquid, turning bloody veins as intended, red.

Dear O. H.

I believe I have found the fallen sun. In acquiring this position, I have met them and brought about their trust. As is evidenced by this note brought to you.

The prophecy has arrived, finally.

It is time. Please allow me to accompany you and the league to retrieve the ember so that we may bring about the end. Finally.

I pledge my allegiance to you.

Forever in your servitude,

L. B.

The room spins, and as I sit in my Nu-found Comfort I hear the doubts rise without suppression. They are met with the R-AGE I thought to have tossed away, and form a beast that sits at the back of me. I wish not to let them escape, but they are upon me. And sprout a wing each. Here in the darkness of this room, I expand.

I wished to live simply. I wished to be home, and to just exist. But perhaps a bird cannot change their feathers at all.

Fighting the two only proves a threat to the fabric of this home, and to this comfortable room, as I knock into the chest of drawers, toppling through the floor.

"Everything OK?"

YES.

RUN. I will not!

What will you do then? You cannot suppress this? You cannot escape?

So much potential. Perhaps I do have a fate. A fate, spelled out in black and white on a measly scrap of paper.

I will not run from this. *What then?* I will face whatever this. Yes? If they that are coming for me. This league. I will be ready. I will prepare. *Good.*

But it must be in my time, not theirs. I must stay hidden. I must stay where they do not know me. Where I had no previous connection to. I have a bit of growing up to do. That will advise me in this change. To look unexpected, in the unexpected. I think that is good too. For, I must make sure that they do not find me before I intend them. *Remain here.* I will remain humble. Remain at home. This home. Steady. And enjoy what I have, sweetly here. But I will remain at attention. I will always remain on the watch. I will be my own Eyes, and ears, and all of the senses.

Yes. I will be ready. Whomever they are. Wherever they may be. I, will be ready for this LB. That whom has the audacity to tempt me with my own initials. For I am Little Bird. I with my R-AGE in tow. Despite my doubts. With them all, I will be.

I breathe through this, as my wings calm down, and settle. I remain in the moment, in my baggy clothes. My R-AGE is quelled, purring from what it sees, for it will not be squashed, nor replaced. Oh no, it shall have a Nu purpose. And it likes that sound. It likes the growth. The potential. To be (?), and where should I?

An answering rings, most knowing, for it is perhaps my destiny. I feel it deep within. And I have for some time. As I utter, it is known to be true. Whether it is by choice or prophecy, I know where I shall be, when needed. I know where will be when called upon. When the time is night, there I shall be where the fallen go: Out with the buzzards.

For I was once the fallen, and from this, I shall rise. I shall soar. I shall fly. My wings enjoy this sensation and steady, as if by the very nature of their existence. They extend and glide through the windless room, as I breathe out and through them. To new heights, we imagine together. To my Nu purpose, and to put a stop to whatever this is. To stop this league. These villains. I will bring about their end.

Though cheated a death, nu death I will bring. I take in stride this, extending forward the finger I have. I will bring Nu destruction. Upon others, many.

That is my purpose now. And it will take practice. For Little Bird is becoming. Little Bird is to develop. I shall practice, so that I may swoop in upon them and pluck them each one by one. Practice by feeding to my friends, those surveyors of death.

I will steal the villains, and feed the poor. Like Robin Hood, my favorite.

My wings shift back into their hiding place, and the allure of sleep comes upon me, for a sleep that needs no escape. For I can rest. Rest in the quiet, the knowing, my fate.

I will not be cheated death ever again. I will be the pursuant of it.

Rest now Little Bird. You are safe here. I can feel my spirit, my existence tucking myself in, like a child. Ready for a long sleep. What a journey it took to get here. And I have arrived. Thankful, I oblige that which I feel. The words. Prepared for sleep. Prepared for whatever is next. And prepared for the journey that will unfold.

Rest. Work. Live. Be a child when you can. Practice when needed.

You'll have much time to prepare. For here, you are hidden.

But always, remain steadfast and true. In tow with R-AGE, you will be ready. Trust.

You will bring about this end. Or be ended. This it shall be, Little Bird.

Breathe. Like the wind, RUN. Go. You death chaser. You death giver.

It is inevitable.

There is a pining at the door, it is the peppered house Cat. I open but it does not wish to come in. At my door remains the catchings of a dead animal. A mouse.

*NOTE FROM ADAM ***Thus concludes the end of Part One.*

Intermission