The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine

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The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine

Byron Cross

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The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine

By

Byron W. Cross

THESIS

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Department of Creative Writing

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"so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens."

-W. C. Williams

The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine was born in a debris field of violence, of conflict. I write mostly from an autobiographical place and a debris field is the perfect way to describe the careful stitching together of my experiences, taking a memory and extracting the emotional boom it left behind. I take the piece and spin it in zero gravity, carefully examining it. For this reason, writing an Ars Poetica without “I” would be an impossibility for me. So, after scoffing at the notion of third person objectivity, I proudly and without apology impose “I” into this body of text, this Ars Poetica describing the context in which The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine incubated and grew.
Writing fiction, for me, is the art and science of transmitting a human experience by means of symbolic code, functioning through metaphor, of recreating an experience within another human’s consciousness. It is an energy transfer. I strive to spark within the receiver’s mind, the same level of emotional energy the experience gave me to evoke the right frequency.

The first person voice of Johnny Leadfeather speaking throughout The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine seeks kindred spirits. Johnny does not want to be emotionally invisible – he seeks a higher state of energy, of conscious and connectivity. He wants to know the experiences of others – even the dogs that run through his beloved El Paso, Sunset Heights haven – and to share his experiences with others, even the old dog living across the street. The language, the code, the metaphors exchanged between himself and his daughter, girlfriend, crazy animal liberator Remy, Mida the baker/ aquaponic art maker, the shop keeper America Tirado – all these exchanges create, when different forms and ideas of speaking come in contact, mutations and novel forms. The following conversation between Johnny Leadfeather and America Tirado shows how the language they employ builds on itself to open up new meanings:

“…America’s shelves contain amazing paraphernalia. Pipes and hookahs, vinyl records of early Johnny Cash, Aretha Franklin, Eddy Valence and The Ramones. Candy bars. Ramen Noodles. Books titles such as On the Road and Naked Lunch and Carry Me Like Water. A coolerator filled with soda and TV dinners.

You appear to be a fan of Americana, I say, pointing at the objects, carefully placed with calculated randomness within this room’s space.

I collect things, she says.

It’s a fine collection a memorabilia you’ve amassed.
It helps me remember where I’ve been.

You’re much too young to utter such talk!

Maybe, but time is a relative thing.

The ambiance you’ve evoked takes me back to a time when an American, not America, but an American could craft something and offer it to the community. A unique something because it came from an individual’s hands, breathed in the air of a particular neighborhood with all its idiosyncrasies. Terroir. The taste of the soil in which the sassafras in a root beer comes.

I admire your passion. And I know you pretty well. What are you driving at?

Might you consider selling hand crafted American soda, if the opportunity were to arise?

That sounds exciting! I would certainly take a keen interest.

That, Mrs. Tirado, makes me most happy to hear. The opportunity has arisen and stands before you.

I know you’re the neighborhood tambourine man when it comes to booze and hooch, but I didn’t know you were the Pied Piper of soda pop.

I’m not. Can’t even play the Kazoo. Though I did once sleep in the Das Hotel Stadt Hameln.

Did you enjoy the jail party?

Got too drunk to remember.

When people communicate and share experience and language, it is mutually liberating. When reading the Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine, I say to you, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (Ellison, ??)
I exercise a high level of disclosure. I must offer myself up to the reader, open all the closets and bedrooms, open the pantry doors, even though it might reveal a forgotten apple core, a cockroach standing victoriously atop a black seed, happily munching away at memories I’d rather forget. Open up the bathroom, it’s all right, I’ve learned to deal with it, don’t be afraid of my father. It’s true, he looks menacing holding the belt, but take a walk with me and soon I’ll find a knife. Turn around. Look into my bedroom: I’m grabbing breasts – she rides, moans and calls for more – harder – don’t stop. I’m very insecure when standing nude in front of a beautiful woman. Stop looking and judging me. Wait, don’t go. It’s all right. I’ll stand naked. Fill out this scorecard. Take it. Look. Through the kitchen window- yes, the one with the long crack running crooked, that’s my daughter throwing snowballs at me under blizzard skies.

I offer up the truth for your consumption: I’m a coward. The truly crazy-brave write straight autobiography. They tell the truth? The truth presented and explained in facts and figures, dates and achievements, curriculum vitae. I’m too frightened to ever reveal so much of my life. I might get audited and the incoherency of it all would disinterest you. It would be fractured. Maybe you would think it all a fiction anyway. I prefer to tell lies. It’s a more honest technique. Keeps us both straight. I strive to be as honest as the magician who promises to trick you with sleight of hand and legerdemain. I still want you to look and I’ll still offer myself, but only in pieces. The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine is me in a million pieces, scattered and strewn about a battlefield, me as a pixelated cult of personalities. The evocation of fictional landscape is an act of exorcism on the progenitor’s behalf. I want you to look inside me. I’m desperate to exile the demons, send them beyond the wires emplaced carefully so as to cut you with razor wire if you come too close. Is my work informed by paranoia? Surely it is.
I’m a confessional writer wanting you to understand me, and not the idea of me. I say me because my work is me. Mapping my footsteps will not lead you to an understanding of my work. The map is not the territory. I submit that meaning does not reside in structure or ideas, rather in things. Following this dictum, I wrote The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine in splashes of imagery, from stitched together memories of the jump towers at Fort Benning, triple canopy jungles in Panama steaming in the morning sun, a violent marriage, women I’ve loved passionately and without reservations, living out of a Geo Metro (at least I got great gas mileage) and, for many years, the feel of an M-16 in my hands. I illustrate my point in the following passage from my novel:

“Now we’re moving again. This time, at a slow jog. Ahead, the trail lets out into a field. The tunnel widens as I’m almost sprinting and lets out into a field of flowers. In the prime of spring the colors splash beautifully, like a Kindergarten class gone crazy with acrylic paints while the teacher stepped out to piss. Mad colors- and then I hear the pop of smoke grenades and see beautiful red smokey mist fill the area of contact. They smell like Turmeric and a slight hint of Cardamom, powdered up and inhaled through a rolled up dollar bill like a berserker mad blow fish at her last rave.”

These paragraphs use imagery to convey the emotional truth – the experience as I felt it – of moving under direct fire across an objective, towards a force in opposition of one’s will.

The imagery of flowers and the smell of smoke grenades is true to life, but the associations they trigger in Johnny Leadfeather’s mind reveal much about where he lives. I mean in the temporal sense. He does not stay attached to the moment in time in which he finds himself.
On the one hand, this functions as a survival mechanism – enabling Johnny to escape the prison of a miserable moment – and on the other hand, Johnny is simply possessed of a stellar imagination; both traits common to myself as I served the US Army. Carefully crafted imagery is the key to revealing deep psychological undercurrents.

While a semi-autographical author, as I’ve already confessed, I refuse to completely reveal myself: Johnny Leadfeather, the speaker of The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine, is a collage of my consciousness, memories and experiences – and memories and experiences are not the same. Memories twist about and change. Experiences haunt you like demons. They never change willingly. Like the memory of my first trigger squeeze while moving under direct fire:

“I turn in, moving around Andesino and free fall to mother Earth, the weight of my ruck slamming my body into the soft fertile soil, which you don’t think of as soil when digging a hole to sleep in, but as I roll to the right and readjust while my finger rotates the selector switch from safe to three round burst, I notice crushed blue, red and orange flowers beneath my body armor. And I think, as my breath escapes my lungs and only after my lungs are empty, still and quiet do I squeeze the trigger, not anticipating that beautiful metal click and the supersonic booming hellions that follow, as I hang in that eternal moment of weightlessness, unstuck and out of time, free for a moment – I think that I am laying in soil. Not dirt. Soil. That which gives food that nourishes the body.

Click. Bapbapbap. Three rounds travel down range.”

As the novel continues to reveal the sequence of events surrounding a firefight, the reader realizes that Johnny was firing blanks and not live bullets, despite the fact that he mentioned
three rounds traveling down range. Again, I say that the emotional truth far outweighs any obligation to be factual. It felt like live rounds the first time I fired in a realistic training exercise, and that’s how Johnny speaks about the experience as well.

I followed the aesthetic of bright imagery interlocking within a stream of conscious type flow to form a coherent novel. I launched fragment after fragment of imagery into a debris field of many emotions. In this manner, The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine began. I allowed my mind to wonder and play, build onto the imagery, until it became necessary to choose an end point, which, for the novel and myself, was the final image of Senay drawing pictures on the sand by the sea.

I opine that the best novelists are also good poets. In writing The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine, it was essential to learn when to linger in a moment and when to move the novel along towards some type of landing. For me, the term ending does not apply to my work. I could go on for a much longer time, weaving together imagery, playing with language, revealing different aspects of myself, and sometimes revealing nothing of myself – many characteristics of Johnny Leadfeather may represent what I’d like to be, but am not, or things I admire or abhor in people I’ve known. For me, a novel is a field of infinite play and exploration – a monster wearing big baggy clothes with many pockets – so much to explore. Must all the fun come to an end? I suppose so. The novel must come down and land, must crash to the ground in a controlled manner so as to leave the author intact. I feel that it is the novelist within my poet counterpart that takes the control of stick and rudder, brings the novel down along a steady arc, to a landing. Not too fast, not too slow, least we stall and crash hard.
No artifact of art is born in a literary vacuum. The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine reflects my love for authors representing several literary traditions. Not only authors of literature, but also musicians and film makers. Musicality is an integral part of certain texts. For instance, Martin Luther King’s most famous speech employed musicality as part of the technique making the text work and as part of the text’s strategy in reaching a target audience. Dr. King said:

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.”

I love revisiting these passages. I’ve even pulled down my Navajo drum while chanting it. These stanzas or paragraphs read more like verses to a song, which makes perfect sense. Dr. King
composed the speech in such a manner, given the importance of music in the transmission of slave culture from generation to generation, right down to the audience to whom he addressed this seventeen minute speech in the year 1963.

Musicality comes through in The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine most prominently when Johnny sees rushing an objective as a rhythmic orchestration of bodies and supersonic metal jackets. Rifles fire with rhythm, talk to one another, synchronize. It’s not a cacophony of sound, rather a symphony of supersonic booms. I think the following passage illustrate these thoughts well:

“The rifle and machine gunfire ahead sound a bit distant. Whole companies engaging in close combat sound like far away ocean surf, at a distance. The first time you hear it, you don’t realize that such a soothing and hypnotic sound can shift from a melodic incantation to acid metal played out by meth fiend Goth dudes, break into the mechanical sounds of tracers spinning out of barrels at supersonic speeds. Little hellions bent on breaking open skulls and spinning through gray matter.

I hear machine guns and rifles talking.

Machine gun and rifle talking shop about death and the shredding of flesh and snapping of bone. They converse with rhythm but the tone is all business. They do this for a living. It’s not really personal or anything.

BapBapBap BapBapBap Bap Bap. An M-4 Carbine searching carefully. It targets and takes aim at a specific silhouette, a specific entity.

BapBapBapBapBap BapBapBapBapBapBapBapBap. Faster clipped M-249 trying to make the guy with the M-4 Carbine miss. The 249 is meant to keep enemy heads down for a few
seconds at a time so we can bound forward. We measure the distance in feet and seconds, but due to the random chance element, it’s probably more a craft of statistics and probability.

It’s a game of rates-of-fire. You want to fire more bullets at the guys on the other side of tree or field than they can fire at you because this increases the chances of your ass not getting shot till you get close enough to cap the other dumb bastard. When the rates of fire change, now that’s a time to pay attention because it signifies a shift in probability either in favor of your ass or not.”

At one point in the novel, for a moment, everything breaks down to nothing except rhythm and sound:

“Click. Bapbapbap. Three rounds travel down range. Course, they’re not full metal jackets. But they’re not blanks either. They’re Simunitions. A metal primer jacket with a wicked ass pointed plastic tip. It might be some kind of high-speed food coloring, but make no mistake – it leaves a painful welt and hurts like a tiny devil throwing a tiny red-hot poker into your balls…or other private part.

Andesino, with a machine gun, and Hompotocheck, with rifle, feed off each other and I join in the symphonic bee-bop.

BapBapBapBapBapBapBapBap Bap Bap Bap BapBapBapBapBap Bap BapBap Bap
BapBapBapBapBapBapBap Bap BapBap Bap Bap Bap BapBapBap Bap Bap
BapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBap Bap Bap Bap BapBapBap Bap
BapBapBapBapBapBapBapBap BapBap Bap BapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBap Bap
My rifle pulled snug into my shoulder and my nose against charging handle, I let go my breath, that familiar metallic click sends love down range, when my left peripheral vision catches sight of a paw. Something that’s made me smile since I can remember.”

I particularly like this passage because it illustrates several ubiquitous elements of The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine; musicality being a core component of human experience, the overriding theme of hunger and how to nourish body-mind-spirit and, of course, the ever present theme of dog and pulse of emotion.

The Beat Poets employed musicality as an integral part of their literary tradition. In particular, musicality is an essential component of the works of Jack Kerouac. I have read most everything written by Kerouac, thanks to my fiancé, but I prefer to cite his work Tristessa, with respect to The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine, as I see many parallels between the two texts, musically and otherwise. The following passage from Tristessa illustrates how musicality functions both stylistically and thematically in Kerouac’s work:

“At the end of the San Juan Letran is that last series of bars that end in a ruined mist, fields of broken adobe, no bums hidden, all wood Gorky, Dank, with sewers and puddles, ditches in the street five feet deep with water in the bottom – powdery tenements against the light of the nearby city – I watch the final sad bar-doors, where flashes of women golden shining laces behinds I can see and feel like flying in yet like a bird in flight twist on. Kids are in the doorway in goof suits, the band is wailing chachacha inside, everybody’s knee is knocking to bend as they pap and wail with the mad music, the whole club is rocking, down, an American Negro walking with me would have said ‘These cats are stoning themselves on some real hip kicks, they are
goofing all the time, they wail, they spend all the time knocking and knocking for that bread, for that girl, they’re up against that doorways, man, wailing all – you know? They don’t know when to stop.” (Kerouac, 43-44)

Within this passage, we see Kerouac connecting with music, rhythm, natural language, something I opine happens throughout The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine, reflecting my own obsession with capturing real language and the sounds of Sunset Heights.

Another commonality between Tristessa and The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine is the fact that both novels were written under duress, or at least incubated under such conditions. I offer the following passage from Kerouac’s work to illustrate:

“… Everybody curious to see the two ragged girls and the raggedy man, stumbling like a slow team in the dawn – The sun comes up orange over piles of red brick and plaster dust somewhere, it’s the wee North America of my Indian Dreams but now I’m too gone to realize anything or understand, all I wanna do is sleep, next to Tristessa – She in her skimpy pink dress, her little breastless body, her thin shanks, her beautiful thighs, but I’m willing to just sleep but I’d like to hold her and stop shivering under some vast dark brown Mexican Blanket with Cruz too, on the other side to Chaperone, I just wanna stop this insane wandering in the streets – …”

Allen Ginsberg described Tristessa as a narrative meditation, despite the extreme conditions of poverty, addiction and violence surrounding the works voices. In reading the Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine, I believe a similar phenomenon occurs – voices surrounded by conflict and violence, but Leadfeather moving through the chaos in a meditative type state:
living room battlefield, her flank attacks and my bounding back to break contact through the front door. Escape and inject myself down asphalt arteries to a truck stop where I could shed tears and not lose masculine credibility.

At midnight she begins to circle the living floor. Says random things to herself. Then turns to say, hijo de puta. Por tu culpa.

I’ve no idea what she references. I don’t ask anymore.

I tell her that I don’t want to talk because I’m reading for a test in the morning. But that I love her and we can talk tomorrow.

She slaps the book out of my hands.

I get up to leave.

She grabs her snatch and screams at me, no lo queires?

Adrenalin glands emit a distinct, musty odor when activated under extreme emotional duress, whether real or imagined.

Combat stress takes its toll on the sex drive. Carpet-bombs the libido.

Senay, my infant daughter rests in her left arm.

La voy a dejar caer! Y voy a decir a la policia que es tu culpa!

The bombshell cracked. I pull hard on gravity to keep the pieces spinning. Let them spin. Not fly apart. Cause I might fall forever and never awake. Sometimes, the only thing left is to let them spin. Forever.

I make my way to the door. Undo the deadbolt before she makes her way across the carpet fibers pushing against her weight. Against her soles. She, I’m certain, being schizophrenic
and paranoid. Her mind a carnival of personality. Haunted house of mirrors I’m forever trying to break. Break those ties.

No puedes jugar en la tierra, screams Magdalena to baby Miriam, immaculately fucked from the moment of birth. Te vas a enfermar! She walks away to tell Juanchin how many belly dancing shadows she sees lurking around the back yard while he trims the mango tree – Magdalena, he says from deep within with a chuckle – no hay nadie.

My torso half squeezed out the doorway leading to the street that passes Madeleine Park, she grabs my arm and screams, auxilio! Auxilio! Auxilio!

She falls back, her buttock landing on the floor.

Standing in the doorway I weigh the possible outcomes to this fucked up situation. And walk down the sidewalk to escape.

The gears in reverse, I’m unable to spin the tires because she follows me outside, reaches into the car and clutches my shirt in a tight gasp. So I pull out my phone with right hand. 911, shoots across my screen.

Llameste la policia de nuevo!

No debes dejar a Senay sola. Van a venir la policia.

Porque, she screams. Pain vibrating across vocal chords in horror of my betrayal.

She sprints back into the house and I pull out of the driveway, slam the clutch into drive and start to roll. Then break, realizing this may never end. I pull back into the driveway, dismount and sit my ass down to wait.

The police come quick. Bright red and blue strobes blazing as they pull in front of the house.

Good evening! Was it you who called, sir?
Yeap.

Where is your wife?

Inside?

Are there any weapons in the house?

Kitchen knives.

Firearms? A pistol? Rifle?

One slingshot. But I’ve never killed a bird with it. Not even as a child.

Has she been drinking?

No.

Have you?

Two beers.

Let me see your face.

Tristessa was a major influence early in my writing. I suggest that it comes through in this thesis, stylistically and thematically.

***

A few good metaphors guide my writing, providing a theoretical scaffolding upon which to craft language and image. I opine that a deep understanding of underlying principles and
psychology is more important than adherence to specific technique. In this sense, I am inspired by Taoism and early training in Chinese internal style martial arts. One learns forms in order to capture deep underlying principles of movement – the objective is to internalize the movements so as to let go of form. I strongly posit that the same phenomenon occurs in the craft of writing fiction and poetry.

Gravity

I write straight through a work, with frequent stops to revisit a passage. Often, in doing so, I trip over a word or image that wants to travel a bit further, so that revisited section will expand, often breaking away from the storyline. This allows a novel the potential to move on indefinitely. I’m fine with this. A good work does not end. It should contain the possibility of infinite expansion. Therefore, rather than ending, I see a novel landing like a Boeing 747 (CAUTION: wake turbulence). Every landing is a soft version of a crash landing. If you walk away in one piece, you possess deft piloting skills. A novel must end because the author’s intent is for it to eventually be read. Being corporal beings, we humans have a finite amount of time to read a novel. So a novel must end, but it should do so reluctance. Its landing should be met with melancholy, like a warrior approaching a battle field with solemnity and great respect, as if attending a funeral.

The Swamp
The triggers that inspire a writer to evoke that first sentence on blank paper or digital field are limitless. They come, I believe, from the subconscious mind. Personality and experience are not seamless. They are splintered. These splinters make up a mosaic of experience: a subconscious swamp. A writer draws from these misty images to strike across digital field the first signs of life, the first sentence, whether it be one word, a number, or a fifty-four word sentence with no punctuation, an open interpretation of meaning for the reader.

Whatever sparks the passionate quest to continue smthing language, the author continues by way of a continuous dialogue between the text and the subconscious. Words on paper take on a life of their own, the movement of dark little critters slithering around the swamp waters. I read through passages of a work in progress, seeing portals opening up, Johnny standing in the back yard with a cold brew, I snatch him up, send him strolling down the alleyway. Sometime, I re-link with the narrative flow. In other words, it continues seamlessly. Other times it creates a break. Even when it does, somehow the pieces still fit together. This I believe is the emergent property of the writer’s subconscious interacting with the emergent complexity of words on paper coalescing into sentence (or not), paragraph (often not) and narrative flow. With the creation of every word the author revisits the swamp to see what everyone says about those written words and this gestalt creates the next word, the speed and direction of narrative flow.

The Machine
Resolution is a metric at the employ of a camera. It doesn’t exist in the narrative that is the human experience or in the collective experience from which individual conscious arises. Principles should guide a work; not techniques, which traps the writer, killing spontaneity. Principles allow for the endless rearranging of the carefully placed elements of a text. Any sequence will be organic so long as the writer clings to strong principles, which function as lens and frame for the emergent narrative.

The voice of a novel allows for evolutionary expansion, growth, all necessary for the creation of fictional landscape that brings and keeps a reader in the vivid dream, to convince the reader that he can time travel across space and consciousness. I say that the entrance to the vivid dream, the rabbit hole opening under foot, allows the reader to escape his or her self-imposed imprisonment, past the inertia of one’s own consciousness, travel outside one’s self for a moment in time, temporarily enter the experience of our fellow brothers and sisters. Voice in The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine constitutes the landscape – it is the principle element keeping the reader in the vivid dream.
The Big Green

Mama-mind-Fuck

Machine

A Novel

by Byron Cross
A million thanks to
my fiancé Mandy Baquera,
my daughter Haley Cross, and
a big Mastiff named Luna.
I was a conduit, a way
to capture our stories.

Thanks to my advisor:
Benjamin Alire Saenz.

Thanks to my mentors:
Daniel Chacon
Lex williford
Johnny Payne
Jeff Sirkin
Rosa Alcala
Robert Wren
Brenda Riesch

Thanks to the construction workers
who blasted into a desert mountain,
giving birth to the streets and alleyways of
Sunset Heights.

Thanks to Shifu Bill Painter;
who gave me the tools
that enabled me to survive
addiction, warfare and close-quarters emotional assault.
If any one thing defines me,
it is the Internal Arts as taught to me by Dr. Painter.

Thanks to gray skies
and rain drops coming down
stealthy-like, pouncing out a
Bogota, Colombia sky.
“Pleased to meet you/ Hope you guessed my name, oh yeah/ But what’s confusing you/ Is just the nature of my game/ Just as every cop is a criminal/ And all the sinners saints” – The Rolling Stones

“I'm fixing a hole where the rain gets in/and stops my mind from wandering/ where it will go/ I'm filling the cracks that ran through the door/ and kept my mind from wandering/ where it will go.” – The Beatles

The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine

I

The angry old man who lives across the road, fuck him. Fuck him and the old dog that lives with him. He’s always yelling at his dog. This makes the dog angry. That’s why the dog always barks at me when I walk by. The dog just wants to be left alone. Maybe the dog wants to walk down the road, past all those fences and gates. Fuck them too. All those fences and gates.

This old man’s house is made of bricks, sits in an old neighborhood where money used to live. All the houses on this street once had money, but the money left. Big windows surround his house, wooden frames all dry-rotting, paint peeling, wind whirling through the thick branches of the tall tree in the front yard, a crow circling above, rain clouds drifting by, the split-second
precise mechanical scream of a sport bike on a distant interstate, and I’m standing on the 
sidewalk across the street from my house.

The front door opens. Out steps the old man. I move behind a tree rising through the 
sidewalk, look both ways down the street – no people, no cars, just a black ribbon of asphalt 
splicing the neighborhood and a light drizzle making the street glisten.

The old man starts yelling at the dog. Keep away from the satellite feed – you mess with 
that cable again – you won’t eat for a week, he screams through vocal chords singed by 
mentholated cigarettes; his voice stalling in a pit of tar, cracking in a bubble of filter sap. Then 
the old man grabs an empty bottle of whiskey – grabs it off this little wooden table that looks like 
it once sat in a trench on the German front line, holding up a radio that somebody used to call 
higher and give body counts to. The dog reacts, jumps off the porch. The old man pulls back his 
arm, it snaps like a catapult. The bottle falls an inch left of the dog’s head. Damn it, Lucas, yells 
the old fuck.

The dog runs for a window alongside of the house – a window touching the Earth – a 
window into the basement. A bottle hits the brick above Lucas as he slips into the dark window 
and vanishes. The old man is looking for a third bottle. I’m looking for a rock. The old man finds 
his bottle before I find my rock. He launches a bottle that looks like Mezcal; it hits the dirt, 
bounces, and rolls into the basement.

Hey old man, I yell out, why don’t you pick on something not so helpless. You’re going 
to ride the train to Ptolomea someday!

I don’t think the old man understands me. He looks over at the tree, and me standing 
beside the tree, turns red, and yells at me, mind your business boy, I’ll treat my dog how the hell 
I please.
The wind picks up a bit and the light drizzle turns into a steady pitter-patter. My beanie is getting damp. I pull it off and see beads of water clinging to the black fibers. That’s the soul of this old man, an interwoven mass of black fibers, interconnected, inseparable, and unapproachable now, because he’s most likely been held up in that house for the past ten years and never comes out. I brush the water off my beanie and put it back on my head. Emotional content, it’s the reason why bee charmers turn angry swarms passive – animals react to emotion. This old fuck doesn’t register any emotion.

You’re an asshole. Someday, you’ll get what comes to people like you, I say in a steady kind of way, keeping eye contact – I look as deep into that mass of black thread as an eye can see. I shiver, not from the cold breeze, but from the absence of light or anything. That’s why the dog tweaks around the old man. The dog knows how to act towards hate and anger, love and affection, but black holes give him nothing to work with. He doesn’t know how to react. And neither do I.

Fuck you old man, I say, you’re an asshole. And I walk back across the street towards my front door. I promise myself, never get pissed off when the old dog in the old man’s yard barks at me. We’re kindred spirits now. I understand him.

You better be walking away, yells the old man. I’ll call the police.

The police, if called, I realize, would offer no help to me. Even if sympathetic, they would not issue so much as a citation. Probably arrest me for some unpaid traffic ticket haunting a PD database, a ghost in the circuitry, turn me in for extradition to southern Georgia. Fuck the old man. I just keep walking and don’t look back or anything.

II
Black converse on feet, I’m determined to grow bigger balls tonight. Balls of iron that will clank together like a couple of cannon balls hanging by ropes off the monkey bars at a playground. Remy will slap me on the back tonight and call me a brother in arms.

Baggy black jeans, a black sweater, black beanie, black shoe polish on my face smeared in a traditional Apache pattern I saw in a book once – my ancestors would be proud – this is how I dress for my midnight extraction mission, my foray into what Remy calls purification and sanctification.

Dark bedroom lit by a full moon beaming through a big window and Esperanza sleeping under the glow of heavenly bodies, this image I burn into my mind, file it away as a snapshot, not streaming video, but a snapshot, and I know this moment will never be lost. I do this from time to time. When I really want to remember something, I burn it into my memory cells, scar it into the gray matter, and make a snapshot. I’m thinking now about this married lady I dated – but never fucked – and parking in front of the Mustang statues in Dallas and sitting beside her, kissing her, feeling her legs, crawling between them, letting the seat back, my knees were on the floorboard, looking up from between her legs, angelic face and long blond hair, and taking my snapshot. I’ve never forgotten one locket of hair. And so I look at Esperanza tonight, thinking things might get rough tonight, hell, I might not make it back, because this is the real deal, I’m going into the shit, the suck zone. I blow a silent kiss to Esperanza and whisper goodbye.

The stairs creak severely, they are wooden, no carpet and in need of re-staining. I know the stairs intimately, exactly and precisely where to place my foot, at what angle to roll my weight onto my foot so as to minimize creakage, which steps to skip entirely, the ratio of weight to place on the rail so as to lighten my weight on the wood, I know my stairwell.
Daidiee, I hear in a harsh whisper. What you doing? Why you wear those clothes?

Senay stands at the top of the stairwell, calling me back, apparently awaken by bad dream. Angry alligators. Bad dragons that slipped past the good blue ones.

I return to tuck her into bed.

Listen, I say. I’m all dressed up to go and track down some bad monsters run amok in the alleyways behind the house. But I want this to be a secret between us. OK? No telling Esperanza.

Ok daidiee.

I’m at the base of the stairwell without making a sound. My ancestors would be proud. The Apache were great warriors. I read this in a book at the university library.

The door lies directly in front of me. I remember, a ski mask, I need a ski mask in case the old fuck wakes up and spots me and the mission goes bad. I creep through the living room, the breakfast nook, through the kitchen, into the washroom at the back of the house, reach into a cabinet, extract my ski mask. Now, fully prepared, I make my way back to the front door, choosing an alternate route, going through the dining room and straight back to the front door. Taking one long, last look into the living room I open the door, step into the moist night air.

The rain no longer falls. This is good. Or maybe bad. The rain would provide cover, concealment. Oh well, I must proceed forward. I can feel my balls shrinking with every second of hesitation and I like my balls too much to let this happen. I step off the porch, my weight sinking into the thick, lush green of the lawn, a streetlamp from the interstate beams in the distance. I can see it through the passageway between my house and the next. On the horizon, a streetlamp one hundred feet tall, lights the interstate, my neighborhood, and the Mexican neighborhood on the other side of the river by the interstate.
A gust of wind brushes my face, rustles my hair, whispers into my ears, delivers the scent of vines growing up tree trunks, honey suckles sending pollen into the sky, chlorinated water in the Jacuzzi on the porch, I always add too much, shit from a stray dog, who just now crosses the street and looks back at me furtively. The sound of a train travels through the air, magic trains carrying refugees to Naboombu, I imagine, and stop in the middle of the lawn to listen to the train’s whistle hit perfect harmony with an engine break on a tractor-semi, struggling to slow the beast down as it rounds the interstate.

Johnnie, says a voice from the sky say. I instinctively dive into the grass, roll onto my back, because the voice comes from the sky, breaks my communion with train and semi, and almost makes me piss my pants.

Johnnie, the voice says, what the fuck are you doing dressed like a burglar. At midnight. On the front lawn!

Esperanza’s face is hanging out our bedroom window on the second floor. Bright LED lantern projecting halo around her face. Angelic, but annoyed. She looks very much annoyed, and soon to be pissed enough to launch heavy objects out the window, unless I quickly explain myself. And don’t roll your eyes or glance in an upward direction to the right before responding, I say in my head. She knows this is an indication of the formation of a lie. So I lock eyes with her and don’t look away. I say, hey sweetie, couldn’t sleep, we’re out of smokes, I’m just going to the K for a minute.

If wings were to appear on Esperanza’s spine and wrap around her waist and a wingtip stroke her cheek. Wouldn’t surprise me. Her voice rolls. Through the night air. A quite pyroclastic flow, coming down a mountain. Pyretic. The drum roll of African Bambada. A perfect beat. Guitar riff of Carlos Santana in perfect harmony trumpet; the trumpet of Gabriel
announcing the second coming, and Esperanza is my salvation. Goddamn, I think. I hope she
buys it.

Her nose twitches, a sure sign of trouble. Could it be you’re up to something stupid, she
says, because you being out here at midnight, dressed like mission impossible, is, by definition,
stupid, and I have my doubts that you’re looking like that just to buy cigarettes at the K. Could it
be that some childish, ignorant plan, that’s going to get you in trouble, has popped into that head
of yours? Could this be possible?

Well, I say, you know me well, but I must say that I’m an innocent man. I pause, sing a
line of a Billy Joel’s song in which he sings, “I am an innocent man”, with a long accent and
extended note over the “am”, and raise my arms in a dramatic demonstration of supplication.
Angel, I say, I will hug your legs and worship at your feet as a goddess deserves. Course I’m not
up to anything. Anymore. And I’ll be back in ten.

I’ll be timing you, Jonnie Leadfeather, she says, you got fifteen minutes. Tops.

I am strolling down Portobello road towards the K. I am walking in the shadow of the
mountain. I am strutting in the streetlamp light of the shadow of doubt. The houses of this
neighborhood consist mostly of brick construction – so, to me, it gives off a gothic vibe. If New
Orleans evokes images of vampires, then my neighborhood evokes images of werewolves. In
particular, this certain tax foreclosure property. The thing should be demolished, it’s an absolute
menace to the barrio and I’m certain it harbors a den of werewolves. And I hate werewolves. A
vampire can be reasoned with, but never a werewolf. So I’m walking quickly and as quietly as
possible in front of this abandoned, two-story hulk of brick and crumbling adobe. I’m praying to
my ancestors, using all my ancestral Apache skulking skills, wishing I owned a Katana made of
silver.
With a bit of luck, I reach the K – never actually seeing a werewolf, but I’m convinced one was watching me – and return to my front lawn. Looking across my street I observe the old fuck’s yard, no sign of the canine I intended to liberate tonight.

III

My house doesn’t look much different from the old fuck’s house. It’s two stories Of red brick in the desert. Old, big, in need of paint around the trim and windowpanes.

It passes through my head, this thought, that I could pay a visit to the old man’s house tonight – nothing violent mind you, just a simple snatch and run operation. Some friends might help. Like Remy. He’s crazy, but reliable and always enthusiastic.

Remy. The fuck is Remy when you need him. If he were around he would have walked into that yard, snatched up the dog, and walked away without a second thought. I’m not that brave. Remy acts like he’s outside of everything, he acts on things, nothing acts on him. I’m always in the center, at the fulcrum point of the spinning abyss, waiting for the moment, I’m a militant Taoist mercenary at the employ of the nameless, he always says.

The sun creeps through the avian filled cracks of the gray sky; those damn clouds seem to be oppressing me, so it’s nice to see the sun. The weather is unpredictable in the desert when the seasons change. I always get the feeling that the clouds follow me this time of year. Maybe it’s just paranoia. Not that I’m crazy or anything.

If craziness were a part of me, I’d be acting more like Remy. I know crazy, I took abnormal psychology. Remy is borderline schizophrenic. I think. He doesn’t hear voices or anything, but he always thinks the establishment is trying to act against him. Course, the
establishment is everything that disagrees with him. That pretty much covers most government agencies.

III

Looking at the old man’s house, the door is shut tight, the blinds closed, light doesn’t escape or enter. I don’t even think that the sunlight peeping through the clouds wants to place a finger on that place. It’s goddamn oppressive. The dog is nowhere in sight. Probably still hiding in the basement. Dreaming a long swim down curb lined asphalt rivers, all the way past the Plaza Motel, downtown. Maybe like Huckleberry Finn, down the Mississippi. Except he’d be rafting and rifting down the Rio Grande. Big River where little big dreams die. Pack Navajo prayer beads if you sojourn through this landscape. Cross with caution. Like the light trying to pass the window blinds.

Instead of opening my front door, I walk a block down the road, passing houses with nice porches and balconies – maybe they need some work – but at least they don’t look like cookie-cutter tract housing in some suburban hell. Repetition is hell, I think. Dante said that, which makes suburbia a living hell on Earth. John Cougar Mellencamp wrote a song about all those goddamn little pink houses. How there’s one for you and me, for every little boy and girl, so longs you can make the monthly blood sacrifice to the loan service corporation.

At the end of the block, I cross the street, walk a half block up, turn into the alleyway, and keep walking till I come up behind the old fuck’s house. I’m cautious, creeping, scouting, conducting a reconnoiter, you know, being stealthy. I’m in Ninja mode. I’m like Odysseus creeping through the cave of the Cyclops, ready to take out the old man’s one big empty eye. I
only perceive this eye because of the positive space around it – the trees, the street, the sky, even the bricks in the wall of his house – give off more of an emotional signature than that one big empty in the middle of his forehead. Maybe, I am a bit paranoid now. I’m just imagining him coming out the back door, affixing me with that one big eye, drawing me in, sucking in everything, like the vacuum outside a cracked space capsule, sucking out all the life – not because it hates you or loves you, wants to slap you or wants to kiss you, but simply because that’s what it is and it has no self-awareness. It is an it. An undifferentiated mass of apathetic strands of psyche, a big empty, an alkaline salt flat by a desert beach.

The backyard is empty. The dog, nowhere to be seen. The house, still locked up like an asylum, brandishing bars over every window.

I squat down next to a tree in the alley and whistle. Here boy, or girl, I say. Nothing. No friendly canine smile to greet me and say hello. Nothing to reassure me, that this dog, this neighbor friend of mine, is alive. Maybe the old man went into the basement and took a baseball bat to my friend’s head. Maybe. Or maybe not. I might be acting paranoid. Then I see a black snout poke out the basement window, tentatively, testing the air, searching for traces of Cyclops or of whatever else dogmares consist. The dog comes creeping out, stealthy, like me, cautious, obviously in reconnoiter mode.

The wind picks up a bit more fiercely. I’m feeding off it, maybe. Fuck this, I say. I pull off my black beanie and wring it out – wring it tight and watch a small train of raindrops hit the alleyway asphalt, like desert boxcars derailing. They splatter with the sound of artillery. Boom. Boom. I’m getting fired up. Ready to save my friend.

The dog’s head is out the window – I see his brown eyes looking about – taking in the smells of rain in the desert. That scent of moist, fertile sand dunes. I’m not sure a sand dune can
be fertile, but they smell like life when the rain falls. I imagine, the dog smelling the oil puddles underneath this old fuck’s 74’ Chevy Nova parked out in the alleyway. It must drive him fucking insane. Imagine, smelling oil every day when your olfactory senses rage a thousand times stronger than human. I watch that black snout.

I raise my voice a bit higher – still whispering – I say, hey boy, over here! The dog’s ears perk, he looks my way. I say, hey boy, come over here! The dog’s eyes lock with mine, I know he sees me; I make the universal here-boy-smacking-noise with my lips, trying to call my friend over to the fence line, to cross over the wire and brick and concrete. He walks towards me, a bit wary, but he’s definitely coming my way.

The dog is by the fence line now. I reach over the fence, offer my hand. Hey friend, let’s get you out of here, I say. I’ve been known to calm the angriest of dogs, I’m a dog charmer, and so I extend both my arms over the fence and beckon my friend to come. The old dog growls. I pull back my hand. Calm down, I say, I’m here to take you away from the Cyclops.

I start to climb over the fence, but my friend gets agitated – he cuts loose this ear rending howl. Starts barking. Easy, I say. The dog keeps barking, snarling, telling me to go. I back off the fence.

Then this loud boom and a shattering of glass splits the air, the back door opens and slams into the wall of the house. The old man comes out. Looking mountain man with a bottle of moonshine in right hand and snakeskin boots and a black hat with a crow feather pointing at the sky. He sees the dog by the fence line, sees me standing by the tree, comes down the stairwell, grabs a big rock off the ground, and throws it at the dog.

Goddamn you, Lucas, you fucking traitor, he screams! The rock launched by the old fuck nails the dog right on the crown of his head.
I scream this kind of guttural sounding noise – as best I can describe it – and then I say, you old Fuck, you’re a demon and I’m the trumpet of Gabriel come soon to harvest your black empty eye from its socket!

The streets rush by, the rain pelts my face, I’m running, down the alleyway, under those alleyway Palo Verdes sucking sunlight from the gray sky. I’m crossing the street and a car almost hits me, it honks. Fuck you, I say, and keep running till I’m behind my house, in the alley, opening the gate, walking through my back yard, under the big Mesquite tree where I like to smoke out and drink Coronas, opening the backdoor, walking into my humble adobe abode. It’s not really adobe. I just like the way those two words sound together. Adobe. Abode. Adobe abode. Sweet rocking lullaby adobe abode drop me gentle from the tree tops. I love to play with words, and so I do, walking under the shade of thin green Mesquite leaves and a bed of pinecones crunching under my feet. This is when I see the great beastie four-legged one.

Hello, my Luna, my Moon-dogge, my Lunar-beast, an ode to you, oh great Mastiff of the Lunar Darkside, greetings oh Six-Nippled One, I say, and grab a big handful of brindle Mastiff ear. She shakes the stub that used to be her tail. I’ve had quite the adventure, I say. She responds, an ocular blues player bellowing out code from behind soulful brown eyes. She understands me better than could any human intellect.

The backdoor opens. From within home, my rugrat emerges. Explorer of living room sand dunes, kitchen jungles, dining room swamps filled with murky water. Step your foot in, you never know if you keep sinking or maybe hit something solid. Or maybe touch something that bites. Sometimes, it might slither away in fear. Eyes. Always eyes glowing green within Weeping Willow branches.
Senay Keyuri’s eyes are hazel. Speckled with green and brown constellations. She comes across the lawn now with her backpack bouncing on her back. Splashes through a puddle on the cement patio before foot sinks into luscious greenness. The rain falls ever so lightly upon her golden locks.

I’m not the type parent to come running with umbrella to save my child from some imagined monster cold or flu. Senay, I always say to her, you come from a long line of body guards who lived near Emei Mountain, who hired sword out to royalty needing protection when traveling to visit other royalty down bandit ridden trails. No, I’m not Chinese, I tell her, neither is my Shifu, but he did receive the heritage direct from an old man fleeing China because he pissed off someone in the communist government. These thoughts fill my head as I see the sky billowing around Keyuri, the sky time lapses quick above her locks as she approaches, the ocean beneath her feet, smile radiant across her face, a portal opening up undiscovered borders and cutting into new frontiers, undiscovered channels.

Senay K, you look to have good news to share, I say. How went school?

Teacher say me I go see movie tomorrow.

And what movie will they show on movie night, I inquire.

Ahhhhhhhh, they say horsie movie about horsie.

Right then, I say. An equestrian flick. Any zombie mares or werhorsies?

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. Crazy Daddy, she says.

Luna stands ever observant. Ever present defender of Keyuri. Ten years ago from today I brought her home. She came from a small ranch, at least a dozen Mastiffs housed in a corral with
doghouses, located an hour from Seattle, in the shadow of Mt. Rainier, where I worked for
Mama-mind-fuck’s strategic interests in other folk’s take on wealth distribution and this whole
issue of whether you can actually “own” a piece of a planet, a notion some of my ancestor’s
thought an absolutely silly notion. I lived in Fort Lewis, a black box of The Big Green Machine,
a few miles from baby Luna’s crib.

Luna squats down beside me. Senay scratches a floppy lobe.

The grey sky breaks a bit. Let’s in a circle of blue. The back doors of the fence rattle
gently as the damp desert wind moans in protest of all this moisture invading her space. Not the
doors exactly; really, it’s the chain securing the large wooden doors shut. A chain I installed on
day one, being very much aware of the werewolf epidemic in the neighborhood. In the last light
of sunset, I see the breeze ripple across the tall growing weeds on the neglected side of the house,
the yard, bipolar as I.

Dadiee, says Senay, I wanna watch movie. You wanna watch movie?

Sure, I say, first we need to check our tanks.

She frowns.

And, I say, you can pick some flowers from the growbed.

She smiles.

We walk past tall weeds on the one side of the yard, approach the glow of lights within
the glass walls of a small greenhouse sitting at very back of yard. Damn weeds. I toss Turf
Builder and weed killer. The grass never grows much and the weeds proliferate, like a field of
missile silos, spores ready to launch anytime Senay or I gain close proximity.

Hey guys! A weed screams in my head. It sits among fellow weed stalks bracing against
the breeze. Check out the little humanbabything, he says. It’s, like, walking human plant food.
The tiny little weed head sprouts a weed mouth with baby Boa type fangs. Lunchtime, proclaims the weedpersonthing!

Another weed emerges from the now multi ranked rows of belligerent weeds. She sounds like an old maid from a Southern Plantation, thick accent and limited vocabulary, yet capable of reformulating simple words into spontaneous novel structures that hit your brain with the accuracy of a guided missile, a Tomahawk or Sidewinder.

Leave the man alone, she says. He going to bring back beer from within that green lighted thing over yonder!

Another weed steps up, alongside Auntie Weedie Antebellum, says, Hey! She got a point!

Now he turns his attention to me. You, he says! Yeah you. Half breed Indian boy. What.?? I need to send up a smoke signal so’s you comprende? We let you walk, you come back out that weirde shop you got and toss a cold one over our way? Comprende Kimosabe?

I blink. Phase back into now time. Senay stares at me, inquizetively.

What you think in your head, Dadiee?


Senay shakes her head, says, Crazy Dadiee. She stretches up to reach the doorknob of the rear entrance greenhouse door. Its small, sure, but I’ve a 500 gallon tank of brewha within and another 500 gallon tank filled with Tilapia, four growbeds, strawberry towers in PCV pipe, and
them strawberry fields do go on forever, past Wal Mart and its evil Comptrolls – nothing more
dangerous than empowered accountants.

You got to get bigger, I say to Senay.

She looks up my way. She says: Bigger? Get? Get bigger?

Yes, I say; the doorknob turns as my arm twists in synch with the rotating knob. My
weight sinks slightly and rises, as I push the door with open palm. Slight rotation of the waist
channels energy from my legs into the receiving palm.

Opening doorways should be a meditative experience, I say to Senay. A practice of
precise delivery of energy.

She no longer listens. Instead, looks about wide eyed with wonder lust at the flow of
water through transparent PCV pipes snaking around this inner sanctum, the place where
Esperanza and I grow vegetables and fruits, saving much money that we subsequently reallocate
to our Scotch and Whiskey budget. Damned Scotts. Nobody can duplicate their processes.
Maybe because they’re not processes in the linear sense. Maybe, those oak barrels undergo
quantum transmigrations of some novel quarks and that’s what makes my neurons ping out novel
codes like a rabid crazy repeater tower, on the brink of oblivioncreation. I digress.

V

The door, before being partially closed, booms open, collides against the wall. Luna
enters. Looking dourly at me for having left her outside. She’s a bit oversensitive. Trots up next
to Senay looking into one of many small aquariums housing her pet fish. Luna licks her ear
evoking a giggle that echoes through the humidified air space inside.
I walk up to a wooden desk, painted purple and blue, adorned with fish and dolphins and sharks and hump back whales traversing oceans, alongside container ships burning dino bones all the way to Shanghai, where they will, no doubt, load conex after conex of things perfectly nonessential and nonedifying to the human spirit, or whatever you might want to nomenclature that pulse within that drives one to get off ass and splatter paint on canvas, sing form into air, craft digit into linebreak or anime, sew a sweater, whittle a stick into a stick woman, chainsaw a log into totem or a block of ice into an angel like my Esperanza who peeks into the room, not unawares, since we’ve discussed the issue, of the angry mobster weedyhumanthings most likely flanking her as I speak.

Johnny, speaks Esperanza, I’m wondering, about the possibility of you diving in that tank for some big fish to grill under a bed of mesquite chips tonight.

Dadiee cook fishiee, queries Senay?

Yes, if you ask him real nice, he just might cook us some fish and serve it up over linguini smothered in white wine Porcini duxelles. Hmmm?

Guini? And fishiee? I like guini and fishie. You like guini and fishiee?

Hells yeah! Most certainly, without doubt, unequivocally, yes.

Well now, I say, I’ve been handed a mission. Who am I to deny such lovely pixies such as these two?

I bow dramatically, then make my way quickly over to kiss my love and bear hug Senay, who laughs hysterically as I swing her through the air like a pendulum. Though she sways in the air, she remains deeply rooted in the now moment in which all children dwell until puberty teaches them other things, pulling them away from the now and into time measured like a sine wave and until they understand strategic planning, training schedules, key leader meetings, dine
in etiquette, rosters, flight manifests, end items, subcomponents, Surveillance Approach clearances, small unit tactics, long treks through woods under heavy gravity triggered by a 50+ pound ruck: packed with ammo, food, pictures, Camel cigarettes sealed in crush proof H2O proofed plastic containers where normally sits biochem detection paper. But: Haley, who has not yet slipped into that wormhole, swings and giggles in my arms as I gently place her back on Earth, to scurry a return to her favorite aquarium where swims Eugene, the pregnant Seahorse. Apparently he got knocked up by a horny female.

So, I say, fish? Tonight everyone wants fish. Then fish it shall be and fish shall be dinner and dinner shall be fish.

Yeah, says Senay! I like fishiee. You like fishiee Dadiee? I like fishiee.

VI

I’m walking over to my tank when my phone rings like a cathedral bell over a silent desert. Pulling it out my pocket, I see a message from Lieutenant Colonel Sordo, the Batallion Commander for whom I work one weekend most every month.

OhFuck: muster formation at 2200 hours. full battle rattle. pack your bags for the night. Hydrate, as the opord given from col dick requires a 12-klik movement to contact.

I realize immediately that my night is fucked. Any hope remaining of rescuing the dog from the old fuck across the road must happen expeditiously. Putting the phone back in my pocket, I walk quickly over to the Tilapia tank.

Baby, I say, LT COL Sordo wants to play in the desert tonight. I’ll be back tomorrow night. Fucking A though, I’ve got to be at the unit by ten. Get my company ready to roll.
Esperanza looks annoyed. I’ll just try to think of the extra money that I’d rather they keep so I can keep you, she says. You should resign soon and grow long hair.

Then, I say, whose gonna listen to the black spot on my soul?

Maybe we could fuck till it shuts up?

I do love the way you think.

On side the fish tank, sits a button labeled “net hoist”, a button that completes a circuit, releasing a spark of electricity that turns gears that pull a net, now at bottom of tank, up to the top. As it rises, Haley claps and laughs at fish falling and flailing about the floor. She scurries over and runs circles around a panicked fish, feigning entrapping the creature, but having too much fun to follow through. After all, the enjoyment comes from playing the game; the endstate simply signals the end of all the fun.

With a net, I quickly scoop up three fish.

We’ve still time for dinner, says Esperanza. I’m going to the store for two bottles: one of Merlot and one of Sotol. You’re having some fun with us before you go. And fuck the Colonel and his machine. I’m not taking no nos. Besides, you can run, swim, drive and write while seriously buzzed; almost as well as me.

Well now, I say, who am I to argue with a poet goddess like you. Let me prepare some filets.

And so I saunter over to a table with a center drain designed to catch fish blood. Chop up fish and watch the blood flow and when the drain backs up a bit, I watch it swirl in a pool around stainless steel. I contemplate bloodstains over cracked cement and mortar at Khobar Towers near Dhahran.
A desert surrounds me, in swaths of sand color and blue sky and Spartan buildings devoid of any human element originating from an emotive pulse. Not even wind chimes or something carved into the brick to signify something of the creator’s identity. They arise out the desert floor in gray anonymity. These structures are the creation of a logic machine, a difference engine.

I’m sitting in a guard mound. A box on legs, a look out post suspended about fifteen feet in the air. The lights of Khobar Towers shine on the horizon. A car bomb disintegrated the face of the structure about five feet deep and shifted six plus floors of concrete and metal off its foundation. It now sits crooked in the desert, a broken finger pointing up at an empty sky. A box of MREs on a trap door dead center of the guard mound. I place it there to warn me in case of an unwanted superior officer audit at the moment before sun slips back up into the sky, turning black desert into twilight. Five-fifty cord strung all over the structure, attaches the mound to a rock and the rock to a big blue Porta-potty, in turn tied down to a stake dug deep into the desert floor. All this courtesy of a Private angry at too many tiedowns: ammo pouches tied down to belt on Load Bearing Vest, Night Vision Goggle case tied down to LBV, Night Vision Goggles tied down to NVG case which in turn ties into the tied down LBV, ammo and grenade cases tied down to LBV, ammo magazines within ammo cases tied down to ammo cases of Pacman game in the rec room kept me entertained for hours before radio crackle calls in the night from the perimeter.

My body may be tied to the box on which my fifth-point-of contact sits, but my mind flows out and up into the desert sky as it darkens to night. Looking through my NVG looking glass, I watch for falling stars. In the hazy green war-light of night vision, a falling star leaves a
long, long tracer behind it as it is simmers down the horizon. I think of a lonely lost city girl, about seven or eight, with a crayon, drawing lines on baking hot concrete sidewalk. The girl’s hand moves in a haze of heat fever. Her mind deep in sleep fatigue because she lost her way back home. The red Crayola marker bubbles as a line of color moves across the sidewalk and all the way into my sky.

I’m sitting in my tower, a fat caterpillar smoking a pipe, as the body armor melts away and I compose a song for my little girl Deborah.

VIII


Johnny?

Images of Esperanza and Senay come into focus in the reflective surface of the stainless steel sink. I turn to realize they’d both walked up behind me. And me unawares. Sometimes I lose it like this.

I’m ok, I say. Just building a list of things to name and pack for the field. That’s all. Let me finish the fish.

You already did, says Esperanza pointing at three filets in my right fist.

I shake my head, slowly at first and gain speed, allowing my imagined jowls to flap about in homage to the Great Drooly Bombster Pup, the Moondoggie. As I intended, Senay laughs.

Esperanza’s giggle gets tainted by a shadow swimming somewhere behind those gold specks suspended in the sky around her iris. The pools populated by Piranha and shark, not some
bullshit Japanese novelty fish in somebody’s “meditation” garden in the backyard of a suburban entropic hell. I know she wonders sometimes what landmines I trip over, what the landscape in my brain holds, the shape of life and death in my swamp.

Whoaaaaa, I say. Fuck a duck. That feels much better.

And a wink at Senay sends her into a fit of laughter.

Dadieeee crazy, she says.

In a good way or a bad way, I ask. Do I over deconstruct?

This canon-like boom and a blood-rending howl fragment our discourse like a Bouncing Betty shredding calf muscle. I look out the bright light window of the greenhouse, from inside looking out. Of a sudden the light tunnels around me and everything else fades to black.

IX

A trail opens in fried crispy sunlight, narrow and tunnel like, snake like, running around trees and through thick brush, Brer rabbit paradise, beckons entrance into the back forty of Fort Campbell, a base sprawled out over two states, her skies filled with attack helicopters and big windy Chinooks flying sorties over Amish farmers traversing back roads in black carriages pulled by blind folded horses. The trail cuts through thick bush country, vegetation that makes you crawl and climb, fight to break through.

We started this trek at dusk and dawn crept up then faded into midday when I see the dog. He, or she, moves alongside the ranger file, we hundred plus marauders and the captain up front, camo clad minister of death.
We started this trek in a latrine, compacts in-hand, we spread black, green and loam war paint over cheek and nose bone, over ridge above the eye. The dog, young and skinny with rib bones showing, paralleled our trajectory for approximately twenty-one hours and forty-two minutes.

I’ve kept time.

Noise and light and even smell-discipline protect us, give anonymity from the Grim Reaper and his scythe; word is he turned it in for an AK 47. I suppose he prefers the stopping power of a heavier round. Personally, I prefer the 5.56 round. Send it into a forehead and let it rattle around a while. The ricochet effect off bone and through tissue and organ is a motherfucker.

I’ve not smoked a Camel since this trek began, in the latrine of my barracks, at about three in the afternoon, after a ceremony in which the fucknut in front of me, while holding a rifle with bayonet affixed, began to teeter-totter under the weight of a burning Kentucky sun. He slowly, and amazingly gracefully, fell back, freefalling in gravity for a split second, stiff as a board, into my arms, his bayonet almost nicking my cheek.

It paid off as he gave me a beer before we left for this field problem – correction, field exercise – since some dishonest prick at The Pentagon decided to change the language in hopes it’d change reality. I suppose it all depends on your exact grid coordinates on our beloved Gaia. Maybe if they’d change the syntax things might change. Or maybe let go the syntax and allow for a little bit of change. Let things grow organically like the Tao Te Ching talks about. Maybe.

The dog, walking next to the point man up front, is a certainty, an entity of pure emotive pulse, never a pretense or ambiguity.

My platoon currently walks point of spear with three platoons in tow.
Leadfeather. The voice of SGT Scott, a big black dude, breaks me revere. Looking around, I realize my mind went on walkabout while my body was patrolling in a ranger file.

Leadfeather, he says in a harsh whisper. Take a fucking knee!

I stop, step a few feet off trail, into lush green vegetation. Not so lush when you’re up in it. Its full of goddamn stickers, dry leaves – sometimes nicking an exposed part of hand where black glove and camo sleeve break for a second – dust, spider webs sometimes with the proprietor on property, mosquitoes, gnats, wait-a-minute vines, and in deep, deep wooded areas far from urban sprawl, the pungent smell of the fecal matter of innumerable species, overwhelms the olfactory pathways, makes the head swim with life and decay and the pheromone essence of all these organisms clinging to existence, even if only a second in a second of frying pan time.

The dog seems now to approach the file. I watch intently. He seems to be moving towards me. I extend my left hand and gesture the dog to approach me. To come and commune with a fellow warrior. I’ve lickeys and chewies to share, a pouch with Green Apple Jolly Ranchers, Beef Jerkey, Sunflower Seeds and a half eaten MRE. I think the M&Ms, peanut butter and some vegetable crackers are still left. The dog nears, then passes me to stop just left of my platoon’s point man.

A sharp pain to me head and accompanying scattering boom of a rifle butt against Kevlar helmet break my ritual.

Leadfeather, says Staff Sergeant Scott. Pay fucking attention to woodline! Where about a click away from the objective and you’re trying to pet a fucking dog!

Sorry, I say. Won’t happen again Sergeant.

It better not!
Up the trail comes the rear platoon to take point and the point man of the rear platoon passes the point man of my platoon. The dog does not stay in place. He keeps step with the point man of the platoon now assuming lead. I lose sight of the malnourished Rottweiler as the new point man fades on down the trail.

As the last man of the new point platoon passes my point platoon’s point man, we stand up and begin moving again.

This is tedious. We move under heavy gravity for three days to enjoy a firefight that lasts maybe an hour, maybe ten minutes. And I signed up to be an Army Ranger waiting for a shot at Special Forces. The recruiting video I’d seen showed a ranger running across a log suspended over a dry gulch with Bonnie Tyler singing about how she’d hold out for a hero till the end of the night. Fuck her. I’ve no longer any desire to be any girl’s hero. Except in bed.

Sunlight filters through the canopy above, scrolling strange patterns across the forest floor. We continue moving under the midafternoon gravity. The trees pass by, one after the other. This is not a scenic walk. No snow covered mountain, no gypsum sand dunes, no salt flats, no jungle cliffs, not a goddamn chance the trail will funnel us all onto a South Pacific beach where native girls in bikinis will greet us as jolly green heroes walking across the land and feed us funnel cake.

Gunfire erupts ahead.

I drop to the ground and crawl about five feet away from the trail. My comrades on my left and right move in synchronized movement with me, muscle memory. We seek cover and concealment and spread out. Andesino covers my right and Lebeau covers my left. I’m intimate with their movements while reacting to direct fire. Andesino tends to move a bit too far ahead and funnels into towards me. Lebeau tends to lag behind me, but stays perfectly in his lane. So I
see myself as the linkage, the thread by which we move in tandem. Course, I worry about shooting Andesino or getting shot by Lebeau. If Lebeau nails me in the ass bone, I’ll expect payment in cases of Tequila. Fuck the beer. And not some Cabo Wabo bullshit made by Sammy Hagar. I’m gonna be expecting some Espolon or Sotol. Juice from desert clouds. It’s amazing the images that flash through your mind when under extreme stress.

The rifle and machine gunfire ahead sound a bit distant. Whole companies engaging in close combat sound like far away ocean surf, at a distance. The first time you hear it, you don’t realize that such a soothing and hypnotic sound can shift from a melodic incantation to acid metal played out by meth fiend Goth dudes, break into the mechanical sounds of tracers spinning out of barrels at supersonic speeds. Little hellions bent on breaking open skulls and spinning through gray matter.

I hear machine guns and rifles talking.

Machine gun and rifle talking shop about death and the shredding of flesh and snapping of bone. They converse with rhythm but the tone is all business. They do this for a living. It’s not really personal or anything.

BapBapBap BapBapBap Bap Bap. An M-4 Carbine searching carefully. It targets and takes aim at a specific silhouette, a specific entity.

BapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBapBap. Faster clipped M-249 trying to make the guy with the M-4 Carbine miss. The 249 is meant to keep enemy heads down for a few seconds at a time so we can bound forward. We measure the distance in feet and seconds, but due to the random chance element, it’s probably more a craft of statistics and probability.

It’s a game of rates-of-fire. You want to fire more bullets at the guys on the other side of tree or field than they can fire at you because this increases the chances of your ass not getting
shot till you get close enough to cap the other dumb bastard. When the rates of fire change, now that’s a time to pay attention because it signifies a shift in probability either in favor of your ass or not.

Rates of change turn straight lines into circles. This makes the planets spin. So rates, I think, are very important, especially in combat. Because the objective is to gain a superior rate of fire so you can get close enough to the guy trying desperately to stay behind a tree, or wall in urban terrain, to cap his ass – even if you have to double tap a wounded but not quite dead troop when you cross the objective when you see your first round didn’t quite do the job. Geneva Convention be damned.

My platoon leader, a twenty-three year old Second Lieutenant fresh out of college, talks on the radio. Probably, I think, receiving orders from the Company Commander. I can hear him. Just barely. It seems the radio battery died and the Radio Operator, something equivalent to a medieval sword boy who unleashes the dogs (now we unleash air strikes or offshore missiles) when the knight gets knocked off his horse, forgot to bring a backup. The LT starts cursing fairly well for a college geek who majored in Creative Writing, probably dreaming of writing about the kind of misery attainable only through experience, wanderings with Bible and gun in hand. After a minute of this, he whips out his cell phone. Probably texting the commander. Then he puts away his phone and dons his plastic face shield.

I see everyone donning plastic face shields and follow suit.
Now we’re moving again. This time at a slow jog. Ahead, the trail lets out into a field. The tunnel widens as I’m almost sprinting and lets out into a field of flowers. In the prime of spring the colors splash beautifully, like a Kindergarten class gone crazy with acrylic paints while the teacher stepped out to piss. Mad colors and then I hear the pop of smoke grenades and see beautiful red smokey mist fill this area of contact. The smell like Turmeric and a slight hit of Cardamom, powdered up and inhaled through a rolled up dollar bill like a berserker mad blow fish at her last rave.

I’m following behind Andesino and Lebeau follows me. We’re Alpha Team of First Squad, Second Platoon, B Company of the Second Battalion of the First Brigade of the One Hundred and Second Infantry Regiment, Airborne. Except we’re not really Airborne anymore. Vietnam fucked that all up. Now we drop in from helicopter gunships. Dangling from ropes, rappelling into combat under heavy gravity. So now we’re Air Assault. Course, I earned both badges since I didn’t want to be a “dirty nasty stinking leg” (the nomenclature for all sentient beings that have not yet jumped out a perfectly good aircraft) all my life.

We are running about fifty meters behind, I think, the soldiers of Alpha Company, who lay in the prone popping rounds down range under a hazy Kentucky whiskey sky, sprawled out amid beds of blooming flowers, toy soldiers or maybe green apple jolly ranchers carefully laid out by playful and imaginative toddlers who calculated perfect fields of interlocking fire.

I’m at a dead run and seriously trying to keep up with Andesino. Lebeau falls further and further back.

Glancing back I see him trip and hear a painful scream. He disappears into the smoke. Torn tendon or some such bullshit, I think. This brings Everman up directly behind me. Come puffing through crimson smoke.
Hompotocheck, my Laotian team leader, turns right, into the flowers. The line of contact between Alpha Company and the assholes on the other side of heaven ends here.

The enemy is attempting to flank our Battalion and I’m sprinting behind Andesino who follows Hompotocheck.

As Hompotocheck drops to the ground and returns fire, Andesino goes around Hompotocheck and drops to the ground about seven meters from Hompotocheck’s left flank. The prescribed distance in an uncomfortable and monument-to-political-failure moment such as this is exactly ten meters, depending somewhat on MISSION-ENEMY-TERRAIN-TIME (METT). So SGT HP gives SPC Andesino a look like Napalm over babies and nursing mothers in some Vietnamese village.

I turn in, moving around Andesino and free fall to mother Earth, the weight of my ruck slamming my body into the soft fertile soil, which you don’t think of as soil when digging a hole to sleep in, but as I roll to the right and readjust while my finger rotates the selector switch from safe to three round burst, I notice crushed blue, red and orange flowers beneath my body armor.

And I think, as my breath escapes my lungs and only after my lungs are empty still and quite do I squeeze the trigger, not anticipating that beautiful metal click and the supersonic booming hellions that follows, as I hang in that eternal moment of weightlessness, unstuck and out of time, free for a moment – I think that I am laying in soil. Not dirt. Soil. That which gives food, that nourishes the body.

Click. Bapbapbap. Three rounds travel down range. Course, they’re not full metal jackets. But they’re not blanks either. They’re Simunitions. A metal primer jacket with a wicked ass pointed plastic tip. It might be some kind of high-speed food coloring, but make no mistake – it
leaves a painful welt and hurts like a tiny devil throwing a tiny red-hot poker into your balls. Or other private part.

Andesino, with a machine gun, and Hompotocheck, with rifle, feed off each other and I join in the symphonic bee-bop.

BapBapBapBapBapBap Bap Bap Bap BapBapBapBapBap Bap BapBap Bap
BapBapBapBapBapBap Bap BapBap Bap Bap Bap Bap
BapBapBapBapBapBapBapBap BapBap Bap BapBapBap Bap Bap Bap Bap
BapBapBapBapBapBap BapBap Bap BapBapBap BapBapBapBapBapBapBap Bap

My rifle pulled snug into my shoulder and my nose against charging handle, I let go my breath and that familiar metallic click sends love down range, when my left peripheral vision catches sight of a paw. Something that’s made me smile since I can remember.

I look to my left and see the dog. The skinny ribby Rottweiler standing amid gunfire and popping smoke grenades. Though easily distracted, I’m focused in the moment of contact. So I ignore the dog as a massive cloud of red smoke blows our way. The dog assumes the prone position, lying between me and Everman at about five meters away. The dog lies down, as would any well-trained Infantryman.

I watch in amazement as the smoke billows over the dog, who must belong to some crazy brave Green Beret.

Hompotocheck does a combat roll right and springs to his feet, sprints about ten meters forward and drops to the ground. Immediately picks back up a rhythm with his rifle. Integrating back into the riff of rifle and machine gun blues.

Andesino rolls and comes up on his feet as soon as Hompotochek starts putting covering fire down range again.
Off to my left, Everman takes a turn, rolling, jumping up and sprinting ten meters to fall left of Andesino, leaving a space between to fill.

I roll left and sprint forward, falling into place like pinball finding it’s slot, returning fire at a steady like pace: Bap BapBap BapBapBap Bap Bap

And the thunder chorus rolls on. Like surf slamming up against cliff wall. Wearing down its defenses – water possesses the patience of millennia – it ultimately asserts its will over everything – the ultimate will to power.

And we Rakkasans who once fell like falling umbrellas over Okinawa act like a slow motion tidal wave. Ten meters. Next rush maybe five meters because that little voice in my head says “drop now”. Maybe fifteen if I’m particularly suicidal and not giving a fuck.

I push maybe twelve meters when I see the dog slip a meter in front of me.

I drop, partially fall because I almost trip over my own boots out of sheer amazement at sight of my noble canine comrade. So I land with a thud, looking, I think to myself, like a Cheetah been shot by some asshole Safari hunting attorney with a small dick.

As I fall I see the dog squatting back down to Earth, assuming the prone alongside me.

M-4 Carbine coming up quickly to return fire, I steal another glance at my faithful sister in arms who lies beside me on this field of flowers.

Her fur glistens in the darkening sky, rain clouds coming in low, and where her pelt meets the soil, a line of contrast between bright red flowers and brindle fur draws in my vision.

After Andesino, I take the initiative, roll and leap to my feet. The dog moves beside me. I make it about sixteen meters. Then another six, hearing that voice in my head.

From far left field green smoke begins to drift my way, the signal to shift fire right.

C Company opens fire on the enemy.
Caught off guard and generally having no cover on the flank, the opening volley from C Company puts down most of the undesired rounds coming across the field. And since I like my balls, this brings a great sense of relief, as it has every firefight over the last two years.

The soldiers of C Company rush across the objective. The enemy on the field, poor bastards, their numbers decimated and lacking a superior rate of fire, quickly get overran.

On the other side of the objective, C Company sends up waves of blue smoke. Signal to cease fire.

Hompotochek moves forward and we follow his lead, across the blue heaven field of flowers till we reach the first enemy corpses.

Being on the primary team ensuring the dead really lie dead among the flower petals, I stop at the first arrangement of three pseudo dead troops. Two keep their eyes closed and act truly dead – even when I accidentally knee one in the balls – I only received a halfhearted “fuck you”. I think he appreciated the sentiment on some level. Like maybe he’d of done the same thing so he bore no genuine animosity.

We move on to the third troop, who rests half on his back and half on one elbow, chin strap unfastened and holding a lighter in one hand.

Hey bro, says the troop. Bro I been out of cigarettes for a fucking week now. Bro – I’ll pay you the ten dollars I got in my wallet – for one fucking cigarette bro. Just one.

No worries bro, I say. I got you covered.

From within my ruck a black plastic container emerges; the side reads: DO NOT STORE AT A TEMPERATURE ABOVE 110 F (43.3 C) TRAINING AID, PERSONAL DECONTAMINATION KIT, M58A1 MFD BY MINE SAFETY APPLIANCE CO., PA., 15208.
You know, I say, they even put the goddamn zip code on these cases. Not the name of a city or anything. Just numbers. At least we can write a letter of complaint if their product turns out defective. Right?

Sure bro. I’d send a letter from a fucking combat zone.

He chuckles and I hand over a smokey dromedary.

PFC Leadfeather, says SSG Scott from directly behind my back. What the fuck. You plan on searching this corpse or you guys gonna exchange phone numbers? Do your job. Stop thinking all the bullshit you talk about. Or you won’t see a weekend till Reagan comes back to office.

Roger that, I say.

I spare this third poor soul the perfunctory knee-to-ball action. I figure, not having a smoke for a week is enough to drive anyone mad. Poor unprepared bastard should of made a trip the Post Exchange and bought three cartons.

The long ranger file begins to reform. We green suited killing machines move zombie like towards the vegetable tunnel on other side of flowery field. The smoke all cleared, I admire the play of sunlight over orange and red and blue petals. Try to make out the patterns on petals, but not daring to stop out of concern for SSG Scot’s rifle butt maybe getting a chip from banging my Kevlar.

The dog appears before me, coming from behind this big boulder in mid field. She glides over grass, shimmering fur in sunlight. She picks up a trot to catch the point man.

XI
The point man enters the tunnel and we’re all sucked in behind him. One by one, bodies vanish into the vegetation. I walk up to this passageway through wilderness, this portal that shifts my mind and consciousness from a short skirt and the wisp of perfume and bouncing black trestles of hair in suspension above a tight ass and a smirk as she accepts my attention while walking into Forever 21 to buy a new pair of jeans and I smile but I don’t say hi because the possibility is enough I know if I were to say hi she’d shift me mind and all into another time stream and we’d move parallel together maybe have a baby after a couple of years I’d love to find the perfect woman but around this place even fried chicken and biscuit eating wilder beast get picky and want six feet of testosterone so I’m just fucked since those back roads of Kentucky maybe look cool in a surreal kind of way with all those military convoys stuck behind an old don’t give a shit Amish farmer with butter churning wife at side but this place is an intelligence wasteland that despises art and color and supports very lax animal cruelty laws while enforcement is non-existent and after a week in the field I miss the weight of rifle in hand throws me off a day or so and perfume hits me like a pyroclastic flow coming down a mountain they were all in love with Diane that was blowing like an avalanche coming down a mountain some will die in hot pursuit in fiery auto crashes some will die in hot pursuit while sifting through my ashes some will fall in love with life and drink it from a fountain that is pouring like an avalanche coming down the mountain and I’m gonna go find her when I get back and adopt this dog… …and my feet move off the trail and I take a knee. Blinking the world back into focus, I peer down the twenty something klicks traversed. Mostly done out of consciousness, out of mind. Time travel is an essential element of any combat soldier. Let the mind go free and wander
around new terrain. Fuck the map. Because the body ain’t going nowhere and at some near point in the future you might find yourself separated from it.

Squinting in the failing sunlight, I look ahead, up the trail, and recognize a tree designated as a rally point in case things go to shit. A big tree that looks like a Banyan tree so I’m singing in my head how *we slept on the banks on the leaves of a banyan tree when the world was young and all of these spirit voices rule the night* and I can hear the water drop falling on the bathroom tiles *hello darkness my old friend*. We get quite intimate down long deep trails.

The weight of my ruck forgotten, my feet move me further down the trail, past the banyan tree Simon singing me down this trail, wide as a sea, somewhere between waking and dreaming and all of these spirit voices singing and voices singing *sing rainwater sea water river water holy water wrap these children in mercy heal them ser’a tudo ou ser’a naoa/ depende, cora,c~ao/ ser’a breve ou ser’a grande/ depende da paix~ao/ ser’a sujo, ser’a sonho it will be dirty, it will be a dream* on down the trail past the banyan tree.

I come out the trail and look behind to see my fellow comrades popping out the vegetative beast. Like a line of dominoes we fall out the trail in a haze of sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion. Canteens empty I move straight for the water buffalo.

The sun fades quickly and I’m finishing my temporary fighting position on the perimeter of our circular encampment. Hompotocheck sits on my right, cooking Ramen noodles on a portable gas burner. Everman still digs.

A sunflower seed swimming in my mouth, I surrender body to the Earth and rest my head on my ruck and sink into my sleeping bag, fabricated by smart lab coat wearing geeks; it provides protection up to sixty degrees below zero.

The night sky opens up above me to reveal bright stars and planets and nebulae. Light
pollution being so absent you can almost see the color and texture of planet and blue nebulae. Or imagine seeing them. Despite exhaustion, it keeps me awake.

I fixate on what I believe to be Jupiter and her moons and contemplate whether there might be dragons swimming about under the frozen surface of Europa. As I’m swimming around the sea, backstroking with a lit Lucky Strike in mouth, I discover a race of blue dragons. Very militant and Spartan but friendly and definite warrior poets of the highest caliber. I come about this dragon sleeping in his temporary fighting position within an ocean canyon. Like me, he is the only warrior awake in camp. So it’s only natural, I figure, that we should strike up a conversation, being fellow warrior poets and all.

Greetings brother, I say.

And likewise to you, responds the dragon.

I’m Johnny Leadfeather. Private First Class, Bravo Company, Second Battalion of the One Hundred and Eighty-seventh Infantry Brigade, Rakkasans, of the Hundred and First Infantry Division, Screaming Eagles. How do you do?

I’m Huey the baby dragon. Well, I’m not a baby anymore. I’m a kid. I’m almost five hundred years old. Look, I can count on my claws.

He holds up both massive paws, him being about twenty feet long, and puts up three claws on one paw and two claws on the other paw.

Three plus two is five, he says proudly. Why do you hide your face behind all that paint?

So the bad guys don’t see me coming?

Oh. And you’re the good guy?

Sometimes. You see, in my profession you don’t have friends. You have allies.

Well, is an ally a friend?
You never really know.

Is that why you hide your face?

Maybe I just wear it so I can’t see inside myself and settle this philosophical conundrum.

What that mean? Conundrum? Like a drum? I like drums! They make me soooo happy.

I’m always hearing ceremonial Native American pre-war raiding drums beat in my head at night when I dream. Course, tonight I just can’t seem to doze off so I’m here talking to a baby blue dragon. This is absurd.

Ohhhh! I like you! Let me lick all that paint off you face so we can be good friends!

Whaooooo. Steady there little fellow.

The baby blue dragon’s tongue stretches two feet long and ends in a wicked fork. Before I can react he darts down and takes off half my camo in one fell swoop. Then he comes in for another lick so my hands are up in an attempt to keep his tongue off my face. Then I’m knocked on my back and wrestling with this tongue when I hear Hompotochek’s voice and wonder how he made it to Europa.

Leadfeather, I hear him say. Why don’t you and the dog get a room?

I blink and stare up into the snout of the dog. She’s licking my face, trying to wake me up. And I’m now awake.

We’re rolling out in about an hour, says Hompotochek.

Groovy, I say. Sergeant HP. What about the dog? Can we arrange transportation of some variety? I mean, she’s already half-starved and if we leave her she won’t survive.

I don’t know. I’ll ask around.

Thanks Sergeant HP.

Go get in chow line.
We are no longer tactical, but the first sergeant demands we keep our Kevlars on. Idiot.

Three tables sit below a large tree and a KP detail serves food, hands covered with plastic gloves, plastic aprons covering Battle Dress Uniform and helmets swapped out for paper caps looking like something tossed in a Happy Meal. A product some marketeer might target towards an elementary school.

A line of soldiers pass by the tables, grabbing paper plates and Styrofoam cups, they’re served a simulacrum of spare ribs served out of a shiny metal container that we ironically call sea rations. Or sea rats.

Dougan, I say to the troop about to serve me chow. Might you hook me up with a second plate for the dog?

Wait for seconds. Then give your food to the dog, he says, nodding and smiling in satisfaction at coming to resolution of a paradigm shifting problem, coming up with a wise compromise that might make King Solomon green with envy.

No problem.

I look for a nice piece of dirt to call my breakfast table. Fortune smiles and I find a tree log.

I examine my food, unsure of what it consists. After, prodding and poking it with my plastic fork, I determine it was vacuumed off a slaughterhouse floor, mixed up with a long list of preservatives, injected into some large machine, which subsequently compressed the mass into a solid structure. Then the machine spat it all back out and it went whirring down an assembly line where a mechanical arm cut it into the thing that now squirms on my plate.

The dog watches me. Sprawled out on my sleeping bag. I imagine an army of ticks and fleas now inhabit my earthen bed. She seems to be staring at my plate, which I’ve no intention of
eating, so I walk up to her with it.

   Take nourishment, I say.

   She comes to the plate, removes the artificial rib thing with her teeth and drops it on the ground. Sniffs it. Paws it. But apparently has no intention of eating it.

   Hompotochek laughs over his canteen cup brimming with Ramen noodles, an open can of spicy sardines on his lap.

   Dog won’t even eat that crap, he gasps through a fit of laughter. The dog starving and he still not eat that thing!

   Hompotochek laughs even louder.

   It must be the sauce, I say.

   Dog never gonna eat that thing, he says. But don’t worry. Captain say he take dog back. Feed her in the barracks.

   Let me try one more thing.

   Whatever. You waste time.

   Under a flow of water beneath the water buffalo, I cleanse the meat and return to my comrade. Offer up the meat again. This time I offer it in my hand. The weight of the non-meat resting light on my palm.

   She sniffs it. But doesn’t take a bite and the laughter or SGT Hompotochek rolls through the woods.

   XII

   I’ve internalized a simulacrum of rib. I’m looking into Senay’s hazel eyes. Everything
fades around that color. Driftwood, floating hazel skies over devil blue seas.

The weight of fish returns to hand.

A blood-rending howl fragments my contemplation like a Bouncing Betty shredding calf muscle.

What the fuck, says Esperanza?

Senay looks inquisitively around. What that, she says?

I’m going to take a look-see, I say. Sounded like gunfire. A shotgun blast. Double barrel.

Walking around the side of the house, I go through gate, standing on the sidewalk a second later. Across the road, stands the old fuck beside his brick castle, waving a, I suspect, discharged double barrel stage couch shotgun in the air. Remington, I think. The bastard Cyclops shows good taste in firearms.

Shithead dog, he screams! You got lucky this time, but next time – I’ll nail your ass, skin your mangy hide and pin it to my wall. Stay out of the trashcan!

Hey you old fuck, I yell without much premeditated thought or anything behind my words. Ever thought about feeding your dog, you abusive old fuck!

Mind your business, or I’ll save a couple shells for your hide as well!

He storms away into that black hole of emotion as I yell, some day you gonna face a day of atonement!

He flicks me the universally recognized finger. I consider the truly international status of that sign. Western culture, as my Humanities professor said, truly is a global phenomenon. Beijing, Kabul, Constantinople, Warsaw, Cape Town, Mauritius – it must be recognized everywhere now. Odd the things that unite a world. And with these thoughts running amok in my
head I disregard the urge to call 911, given that cops don’t take much interest in animal rights, and make my way back to my fish.

The sun is setting over Mount Cristo Rey, some atmospheric phenomena and effects I’ve always meant to study, yet still haven’t, brush red and blue and purple shades of colors in acrylics all across the sky. Beautiful the sunsets in the desert. Then again, aren’t they beautiful everywhere. The hardness or lightness of sky from continent to continent and sometimes from city to city, a distance often longer than distances traversed by airliners at thirty thousand feet, give or take a foot.

Ahead, Esperanza and Senay wait now in front of the green house.

What the hell was that, says Esperanza.

Yeah, what that Dadiee.

The old fuck across the road heroically fired two rounds of buckshot at my dog friend. The one that never stops barking every time I walk by.

I thought you hated that dog.

I thought I hated that dog, till I saw the old fuck in action today.

Why not call the police?

Like they’ll do anything.

I wink and say, I’ll take care of this issue.

She shakes her head and says, don’t get yourself in trouble. You’ve already got three warrants out for traffic violations.

My love, I say, it’s just that meter maids don’t appreciate my proactive driving techniques.
You are recklessly careful and oh so smooth behind the wheel. Oh how it turns me on. I do so love you Johnny L.

Overwhelmed by the light shimmering along down her black trestles of feminine form, the play of light along the contours of her face so carefully painted in cruelty free mineral products, the black lines like an Egyptian goddess around her eyes – I swear the echo of opening inner sanctums in long sealed Pharaoh tombs echo in those eyes; I know she, for the first time, opened up herself to me in many ways she’d never trusted anyone before – and her Gothic kind of Dia de Los Muertos style jewelry and long flowing gypsy skirts only amplify the frequency – and so I reach out and embrace my love, my Gitano baby, and our kiss sends waves ripping through my being. I’m a surfer dude and she is the riptide wave keeping me cocooned inside her watery tunnel cosmos.

Dadiee, I hungry.

Ah ha, I say. Time to paint up a culinary marvel for our Senay.

Get busy, says Esperanza.

XIII

El Autor de este evento es muy supersticioso.

XIV

I turn fresh fish into carefully sized filets, a total of eight in case anyone wants seconds and two more in case a passing sojourner comes in need of sustenance. Of course, I’d offer
poetry and music and wine as well. Equally important to nurture the soul spirit thing of our sisters and brothers.

And back inside the house I place pre-soaked Black Eyed Peas into a blender along with choice spices and an onion and a dash of Quinoa to add protein, these I make into bean fritters, rolling them into little balls and into the deep fryer they go. The fish I blacken Cajun style. In the stockpot, I’ve lentils simmering in a soup, fennel and coriander and cumin and salt and lemons and crushed red pepper exhaling from within the pot.

What can I say? I’m a bit of a Culinolgist. It’s a wonderful blend of science and art. People, I think to myself, should spend more time and effort on food and less resources on SUVs. This I think while looking for a choice beverage in the refrigerator.

Esperanza, my love, I say. We’re out of fruit and I’m feeling the need for pomegranate juice.

From the living room she appears and perches herself up on a kitchen counter. Well, she says, since they’re out of season, what might you suggest?

A trip to old Mida Nuba, I say. A conference with a fellow Aquaponicist.

You sure that’s wise? You’ve a play date with your Mama. And it’s not good to make Mother angry, she says with a squint of her eyes and an ominous gleam in iris.

I wipe the edges of her mouth with a napkin. Sorry, I say. Just wiping away all that gooey sarcasm.

I’ll be quicker than scalded ape through woodline, I say.

Just remember to avoid any political banter and you might be back in an hour.

Advice I shall take straight to the bottom of my black heart where lies a hole, like the hole at the bottom of the sea.
Through the house and out the door I go with a case of Mida’s favorite Lunar Dog brew lovingly in my embrace. Into the now darkened streets and alleyways. Mostly alleyways. You see more sometimes in alleyways. Through nighttime windows you can often make out the things people hang on their wall, articles of delicate clothing laid out to dry, staccato signals beaming in from satellites. The things people place in their backyards: open satellite feeds, unscrambled, unencrypted.

I’m making my way through the alleyway behind my house, passing quickly this certain abandoned looking house in which, I suspect, a lair of werewolves sleep. Down the road I go, making my way to the BioDyn building sitting on the I-10 access road, facing Ciudad Juarez, J-Town.

XV

After passing a lively and vocal pair of German Shepherds, I arrive at the BioDyn gate and fire out a quick text to Mida, alerting him to my awaiting presence. He appears promptly, the Persian Aquaponicist of Sunset Heights. Of course, you’d not know of his humble shop unless extended a personal invitation, and given his pride in being a recluse, this is a difficult assignment.

Hiya Johnny, says the dark skinned Persian with a glowing smile best explained by his rotund, well-feed belly.

Greetings Mida, I say. Many apologies for disturbing you. My pomegranate stocks are flat out empty and I come seeking assistance, knowing that that’s your favorite fruit and I seem to remember some trees you planted in your growbeds. And I come bearing gifts.
Mida grabs the beer with no hesitation. Come in, says Mida, come in Johnny. It’s never a bother to see ya. Come right in. And thanks for the cerveza. You’re a hell of a brewmaster.


Mida slaps me affectionately on the back and says, you underestimate yourself young Johnny.

I step within the walls of BioDyn, saying a prayer for the lights of J-Town before they disappear from sight, and walk across the asphalted surface, maybe a parking lot, and up to a corrugated steel door designed to admit semi tractor-trailers coming in tired from starlit cross country journeys, tired and ready to discharge cargo.

Mida pushes a button and up rolls the door, rusty gears clanking and clattering into the air already filled with the hum of I-10, with the pulse of electronic fuel injected America, a place in which whole sub cultures proliferate in digitized fields of grain: amber, green, blue with Mohawks… Light spills out from the door as it rolls up. A sea of growbed light washes over Mida and I. The light emitted from this structure radiates some type of celestial divinity. It’s some perfect ratio of short, medium, long light waves. A symphonic harmony of electron clouds.

Within, the building opens up to a large warehouse, walls terraced with tanks and growbeds and a tangle of clear PCV pipes to put mine to shame. Sometimes he runs food dye through the pipes for aesthetic quality. He likes to play with lighting and color. Mida measured the space within his building down to the micrometer. He calculated exactly how many tanks and the volumes of fish and water they contain. He calculated the space and water and vegetative potential of each growbed. Between columns of tanks rise ladders almost to the roof. And growbeds arise on mighty steel scaffolds across the floor, ladders giving access to these as well. Mida makes sunlight. Grow lights hover like tiny clusters of stars above each bed, smiling down
sweet long beams of friendly radiation. Mida knows the exact frequency to sing to each type plant he fosters. He is a master of light wavelengths. Clear PCV pipes move water around the entire system. Constantly circulating water from the tanks to the growbeds and back.

Grain towers rise up on one side of the building. They stretch to the roof in ovular shapes. These towers don’t circulate water, rather they contain misters inside which occasionally hit grain roots with a nutrient laden shot. He currently seems to favor wheat and Quinoa, though it be classified a pseudo cereal. Great amino chains in that plant.

And on through a big metal door across the room, sits Mida’s bakery, one of his chief means of cash flow production. He feeds the neighborhood hot crunchy bread at regular intervals.

All these things I see from the front portal of Mida’s Neon Oozlefinch.

Mida the Persian holds the title of Master Aquaponicist in the border sun city. None of his competitors come close to the scale of his operation or the knowledge required building and maintaining it. Of course, aquaponicist culture is one of cooperation and nurture. We stand together and profit together, else the evil bastard comptrolling wizards of Wal Mart might put out a contract on all our heads. Door greeters trained to attack and snip vital organs. I consider myself to be in a certain type of quasi-spiritual warfare for the self-defining soul of America. But the zombie ranks are dense, well-funded and well trained.

Educated?

Suppose it depends on how you define the word. Complex question that one.

A huge blue neon sign hangs dead center from the ceiling: The Neon Oozlefinch.

I never asked, I say, what pray tell, good friend Mida, is an Oozlefinch?
It’s a Finch that flies backwards, he says. I thought it an appropriate name for my establishment. I consider our movement one of low-teching decentralization. I plan to add on solar panels and start producing biomass fuel. How foolish and undemocratic to have one large entity producing everyone’s electricity and fuel, most undemocratic and dangerous because it centralizes power and the flow of cash. The same goes for farming and distribution. Economy of scales is a phenomenon manipulated by CEOs and high level managers, designed to keep them in annual bonuses.

Remy sees things the same. Says we must decentralize food and energy production for reasons of security and biodiversity.

Yes yes. I know Remy. A dear customer that one. He was most impressed when I showed him the atmospheric water generator I’m about to install on the roof.

Amazing, I say. You’ll be off the grid, off the map, out in uncharted frontier land. You start cooking biomass and you could go gypsy. Make everything portable. Me and Esperanza would join you. She loves to travel. We’ll make a long ass convoy and follow the buffalo like my people used to do.

People?

Yeap. Nez Perce. We used to live on the Northwest coast. But my people were gypsy-like. They’d hunt buffalo in Montana alongside Apache and other followers of the sacred beast.

Johnny, I mean no offense, but you don’t look very Native American.

Just like I don’t look very “Chicano”? You know I speak Spanish and crunch down jalapenos better than most Mexicans around here. But if I write a novel, it’s not considered “Chicano” because I’m white? So because I’m white I’m denied my heritage? Maybe I should go
do plastic surgery and have more pigmentation injected into my skin. You gonna deny my Wyakin cause I’m white? No vision quest for Johnny?

    Ok ok, calm down Johnny. Fine. You’re as Indian as I am Persian.

    What lies in heart and mind, dear Mida, makes you Chicano or Native American. Besides, my grandmother was registered with the Nez Perce. I just came out looking more like my bastard of a father.

    Do you still speak?

    No. I spent too much time driving around Dallas looking for a job to stay in contact. And I was seventeen at the time. Seventeen. And never did he put me on his insurance policy or even cosign a car. So I received a ticket and trip to jail on an annual basis till I joined the green machine. You see, my brother, I think everything went downhill when Grandma left the tribe. If she would of stayed, I’d be hunting buffalo right now.

    I think it more likely you’d be watching Gilligan’s Island on a black and white analog TV in a trailer park. But it’s a very nice idea you keep. So keep it. It’s very nice. Very nice indeed.

    Thank you Mida.

    We make our way up a metal circular stairwell and into Mida’s office. His office sports huge bay windows overlooking lush plants growing in tanks, the sound of water running, the smell of life unaccompanied by the pungency of decaying matter. The low-key hum of super quite pumps moving water against gravity.

    Mida goes to his computer control panel.

    Want to see my show, asks Mida?

    I’m not sure how to answer that one.

    Observe through the portals.
I’m looking.

The overhead lights suddenly dim dramatically and the pipes light up, embedded and threaded fiber optic type cables lighting the pipes. Then the pipes slowly shift between alternating colors, Mida injecting hue and light frequency into the arteries. The warehouse comes aglow in growlights and softly glowing tubes, shimmering flow of water within. Something sounding like a composition by Johann Christian Bach plays out speakers embedded cleverly out of sight.

We repose, listening to music under the soft dim lights of Mida’s office, overlooking a performance art done in plant and plastic and the flow of water and color, the conductor being digits programmed in microchips, Mida the creator. This warehouse functions like a womb, a cocoon, a chrysalis. It gives birth. Nurtures and sustains life and mind and spirit.

Mida pops open a beer, chugs a mouthful, his cheeks bulging out like a puffer fish, swallows, and releases a long sigh of satisfaction.

And we sit in silent contemplation till the symphony begins to repeat itself.

How is your lovely wife, asks Mida? She came more often before for bread.

Ah, yes, bread, well she’s recently gone a low carb diet. Wants to shed about ten, maybe fifteen pounds. So as crunchy good as the French loafs may be, we’ve been resisting the urge to come and purchase. How goes business? I’m sure just a couple customers not buying bread don’t hurt the bottom line much.

No no no, it doesn’t affect anything financially. I just miss all the interesting conversations with Esperanza. Such a smart one she is. You’re a lucky man.
I am indeed. Never imagined wanting someone to stay at home and take care of me and my children. Always imagined a career-oriented person. Ironically, she never imagined being where she is either. It just fell together that way.

I thought she was going to the university.

Soon she shall journey through the halls of academia. She plans to do this in New Mexico State University. Be an Aggie. She was unhappy with The University of Texas at El Paso. Says its ran like a business and feels like a shopping mall. Plus those bastards at Sodexho piss her off as much they do me. Fuck those bastards.

What will she study?

Film. She wants to do a documentary on bats in the Southwest. The manner in which they navigate fascinates her.

Mida’s eyes light up. He leans intently forward in his chair.

Amazing, he says. I keep bats. They fascinate me as well. One of my growbeds is dedicated to food for my bats. You must come see and then she must return to visit! Ahhh! I am so happy to know one of my favorite customers is an enthusiast as well. Come with me now and I will show you.

We travel back down the stairwell, onto the main floor and travel to a circular plastic growbed, in the middle of which sits a pomegranate tree, roots vanishing into peay gravel and, at the moment, submersed in water. Ripe luscious fruit adorns the branches. I try not to appear overexcited.

Help yourself my friend, he says.

And he hands me a long pole device with a mechanical hand on the other end. I accept and pluck a dozen juicy pomegranates.
Thanks so very much, I say. It’s amazing what you do.

No no no. No need for thanks. You would do the same for me. We struggle to build a common community, you and I. And even our crazy friend Remy. Only in a more direct way in his case.

We travel back to the stairwell and ascend the steps, this time passing Mida’s office and traveling up, passing the roof opening and stepping out into a thermodynamically perfect spring night, the air like gentle breath of a beautiful woman passing over the spine, or like fresh puppy breath on your cheek. We look out over the lights of J-Town. I say, again, a prayer for that troubled city.

On four legs on top of this roof sits what looks like an oversized doghouse. Its painted dark green and riddled with ornate carvings of bats, etched everywhere into the wooden walls.

You have a flying dog, I ask? Or a paranoid maid who feels safer suspended over your rooftop? Pet vampires?

Mida’s belly jiggles as he laughs, shakes his head and rolls eyes in amusement of my quip.

Johnny, my friend, he says. You were actually closer when you said vampires. It’s a bat house, my friend, a bat house. But vampire bats don’t live up there. That would be equivalent to building a large mosquito house on your rooftop and inviting a swarm of bloodsuckers to live by your bedroom window. No no. I have Fish-eating bats that I acquired from a fisherman who lived by the sea in Baja California. A very special and magical hacienda he built. I helped him build an aquaponic system. He taught me how to care for bats. He gave me a horse as well. I named her Pabu. Maybe someday you could go visit and say hello for me?

I’m in need of a vacation. Quite desperate need.
We climb up two parallel ladders to peer into the house. Mida shines light within the bat house. I see a strange fellow with fur, about twelve inches tall, hanging from big, oversized looking feet. His face beautifully expressive and a pair of soulful eyes.

Wicked, I say. Your pet bats, they fly on pure frequency amid your clandestine tanks and beds and towers.

It is very cool, he says. Would you not agree?

Beyond a doubt, I say. What do these echolocating minions consume to nourish those huge feet?

You ready for this one? Ahhhh? What type bat would a bioponicist encourage? What would a bat that lives by the sea consume? Why, of course, fish!

That why they got such big feet?

Yes! It is so they can grasp fish! They eat insects as well.

So you allow them to hunt among your tanks?

Yes exactly! And they fly around the neighborhood as well, searching for insects. Helps keep the mosquito population down!

You have taken the game to a new level.

My phone vibrates in my pocket so I say, excuse me one my Mida. I venture to divine Esperanza calls. I’ve stayed too long in this wonderland you’ve created.

OhFuck: CPT Cross. Stand down. I’m here at the range. Unfortunately, the range cadre refuse to allow me to sign for the site. They’re requesting certificates of training for our designated primary and secondary field sanitation teams. Apparently, we have no personnel with the corresponding certificates.

You have to go now, asks Mida.
Nope. It appears my foray into two days of bullshit may be canceled.

Whatever do you mean?

My Battalion Commander called earlier from Albuquerque, requesting I prepare my company for an over-the-fucked-up-weekend field exercise, but since we’ve no qualified shit hole diggers, the event is off the calendar.

This is good?

This rocks harder than Mojo-jojo. Wait one.

Me: Sir, I requested SPC Bevins and SSG Raykar be sent to a one week course in Fort Benning in order to prepare my company. Unfortunately, Major Bleaks did not sign off on my Supply Sergeant’s request for a credit. Subsequently.

I break and send half the message hurling into the troposphere…

…and compose the other half:

Me: Beavins and Raykar were unable to buy tickets for a Boeing 737 willing to fly them into Atlanta. If you might instruct the BN XO to sign off on the credit card, I can avoid this situation next field exercise. Respectfully, Johnny Leadfeather, Commanding, USAR.

A single finger sends the other half of my message out of state.

Alright then, I say. A night at home. No mind-fucking tonight.

Mama who?

Just a name for my pet monster, I say with a wink.

You are a very strange man Mr. Leadfeather, but you make great beer. Speaking of which. I decided to try making a batch of beer the other day! I am hoping you might taste and give me your expert opinion. Although I doubt it meets your standards. And have no doubt that I will continue to be your faithful customer and patron.
Thinking to myself, I wonder if this development might lead to a tightening of cash flow for Lunar Dog Inc. Far as I know, no one else brews and sells direct to the public – and even delivers in Sunset Heights – I was the only game in town.

XVI

I follow Mida back down into the womb, onto the main floor, to a corner were sits a stainless steel tank full of brew. Sitting next to the tank lays an antique cotton candy making device. Of a sudden, carnival images coalesce in my head and some crazy wicked looking clowns walk by me; beware Johnny L, they taunt, something wicked soon this way may come, and one pops open a liter of Coca-Cola, and they all fade from sight.

Mida extends a hand filled with mug of brew.

I take a long chug, allow the liquid to move over every receptor on my tongue and slowly slide over palette and down the back of my throat. I’m hit with sharp tannins and hops up front and splashes of pumpkin and orange peel on the back end. A lingering hint of pear as my body absorbs the liquid bread.

Not bad at all, I say. In fact, quite tasty and well refined. A gift is what you possess. A natural prowess and adeptness for the art.

Ahhhh, bursts out Mida.

The phone vibrates.

DumbsaintMindtrain: Did you get hit by an unfriendly band of braves? Rival tribe maybe? You’ve been gone over an hour! And I know you’re drinking and bullshitting with Mr. Nuba. Come home cause we’re all starving balls off.
My life is complete now, continues Mida as I look up from the phone. You approve of my beer! I waited about two weeks to build courage to ask you to try my creation.

Can’t wait to try the next batch, I say. Give me a moment to answer Esperanza.

No problem! Tell her I say hi.

Me: *Chief Pale Horse come fast back to squaw! Need anything other than the fruit?*

DumbsaintMindtrain: Maybe bring 1liter club soda. If u took ur wallet.

Me: Ooops! Fraid not.

DumbsaintMindtrain Ok. Just come home! The old man across the road was throwing more bottles. I’m really thinking of calling the police.

Me: The fuzz won’t do a goddamn thing. Let me handle it. K? Mida says hi!

DumbsaintMindtrain: K. I’ll buy more bread 2morrow. Tell him.

And thus goes the flow of our collaborative digitizing. Collaborization to the point of losing any sense of personal authorship being a popular idea these days. But when I text Esperanza, it’s my heart strings translated into HTML. It’s the tiger peering from behind tree with bright green eyes, no pretext or subterfuge. EADGBE six strings strumming and it’s all me. No coauthors or business associates usurping or manipulation of text to effect policy.

My apologies, I say. Esperanza says tomorrow she returns to buy more bread and on that note I must excuse myself.

Mida walks me to the door and back across the parking lot. No twinkling stars to wink and flirt above. Heavy clouds have rolled in and moisture fills the air.

You best hurry, says Mida. The weatherman said rain will come to town tonight. A storm front.
I’ll pick up a trot, most rickety tick. Cool runnings to you Mida. Bottle up and save me one of your brews next time.

Through the door I slip and on down the road and up an alleyway.

The clouds follow me, running over my head in time-lapse motion. A light sprinkle starts cleansing the asphalt and I pick up a slow jog. No battle assembly tonight, Esperanza waits at home and the old fuck throwing more glass. Coming up to the street where sits my house, I bypass it, go up one block and turn right onto the alleyway behind the old fuck’s house. Now comes vengeance your way old fuck, I say this in my head, psyching myself out for this raid, this real world mission.

The chain link fence around the back of the house constitutes an affront to the historical society. This old fuck’s house, given some attention, could be a castle. Some man or woman’s fortress with faithful dog out front, guarding, basking in sunlight and bathing in moonlight. Then I realize the tool I’ve forgotten.

I slip down the alleyway and return to my backyard. I’m careful to exercise noise discipline when opening the heavy, wooden door permitting passageway to the backyard, quickly sneak up to the tool shack and extract a pair of bolt cutters. I close the door to make way back to the old fuck and see Esperanza and Senay playing in the living room. Tomorrow she must return to her biological mother. One week with me, one week in Zombieland.

I blow a kiss her way, chuckling as she climbs on top an inert and sleeping Luna.

I circumnavigate the old fuck’s house. The weight of bolt cutters feeling like an M-4 Carbine in my left hand. I balance the metal and wood.

The fence line comes into focus. Metal hexes rising from dirt and concrete. I approach and grasp the handles with all ten digits. The metal goes taut, the scissor end of the cutters biting
into the fence, and then comes a familiar snap, which the increasing metronomic rhythm of rain covers. Except to the ears of canine.

The dog emerges in dark shadow from within the basement window, poised defiantly, uncertain of my intentions. His anxiety washes over me.

Easy boy, I whisper.


And with the last snap I give a shove with my foot and all the links come tumbling down. A section of chain link now lies in the mud behind the old fuck’s house. I whistle softly to the dog – come friend, I say, lets away! I’ve got steaks and chicken livers aplenty! Come meet the moon dog.

XVII

The dog remains frozen before the portal. On the brink of the abyss. Then sinks back into black, succumbs to the doorway and melts away, back into the basement.

I rise to my feet, dizzy and feeling a knot in stomach. You offer salvation, she asks for a box of rusty nails.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, I say out loud to the rain cloud gods. That must be what keeps my friend in captivity. It’s not the old fuck. Its PTSD.

And what, I consider, is PTSD. From what corner of the swamp does its scaly head surface? Is it fear? Or well-honed combat instincts. Maybe instincts honed by marital warfare. Perhaps amid fields of 7-11s, to the constant ping of PacMan and Galaga beside the Slurpy
machine, suburban sprawl’s deadlights twinkling down the slope of a hill in Pasadena. Except I remember no hills. Just broad streets and peering into houses where people break bread. I’ve stolen much bread from the mouths of decadents. I was walking through, selling newspapers for the Houston Chronicle. Making my way back to the house in front of the church for which my idiot father worked. Indirectly. Beside the house slept my black lab Scout. The one I grew up with, he as a baby dog and I as toddler. Till I left him with my auntie for the rainy streets of Bogotá, beautiful concrete jungle under a mountain shade, her constant stream of buses, each driver a patron saint to me, prayed to by the constant rattle of coins dropping into metal boxes.

My crazy aunt looks out the trailer window, out at the fresh mowed field. Tractor sits in grass.

Johnny, she says. I don’t know how to tell you this.

Sounds heavy. I’ve been gone two years and this whole time my cousin’s had a secret crush on me?

No, she says, with a roll of eyes. Can’t you ever be serious?

It’s just that the ironies and absurdities of life make it so hard – I mean I wonder how people keep a straight face anymore. Why everyone on Time’s Square don’t stop dead in their tracks, look deeply in to each other’s eyes and start cracking up into mad laughter. Till the whole goddamn planet spins out from under our feet.

Don’t curse.

Sorry.

Scout passed away last week.

And I was going to go see him in a few days.

I’m sorry.
So am I.

She walked out and I mourned two days in that metal box on the field. Drank many a liter of Coke and ate frozen burritos till my arteries hardened a bit. The blood slowed down and I came back to consciousness.

Scout, defender of childhood dreams, my pathfinder down Fort Worth alleyways where we walked our dog-route along which we fed scraps to all our friends.

Chain link awash in mud and rainwater, I walk slowly away, no longer tactical, mission indexed.

Headlights catch me as I cross the street. On the other side, corner of my block, a white Dodge Neon stops in front of me.

Hola, Byron. Como estás, says my ex-wife, Miriam; her voice tinted with a hint of sadness and nostalgia – for the houses we shared from the beaches of Panama to the old rainy growth of Mount Olympia and finally to adobe walls in the desert – for which I always feel a twinge of guilt. Till I remind myself of the living room battlefield, her flank attacks and my bounding back to break contact through the front door. Escape and inject myself down asphalt arteries to a truck stop where I could shed tears and not lose masculine credibility.

At midnight she begins to circle the living floor. Says random things to herself. Then turns to say, hijo de puta. Por tu culpa.

I’ve no idea what she references. I don’t ask anymore.

I tell her that I don’t want to talk because I’m reading for a test in the morning. But that I love her and we can talk tomorrow.

She slaps the book out of my hands.

I get up to leave.
She grabs her snatch and screams at me, no lo queires?

Adrenalin glands emit a distinct, musty odor when activated under extreme emotional
duress, whether real or imagined.

Combat stress takes its toll on the sex drive. Carpet-bombs the libido.

Senay, my infant daughter rests in her left arm.

XVIII

La voy a dejar caer! Y voy a decir a la policia que es tu culpa!

The bombshell cracked. I pull hard on gravity to keep the pieces spinning. Let them spin.
Not fly apart. Cause I might fall forever and never awake. Sometimes, the only thing left is to let
them spin. Forever.

I make my way to the door. Undo the deadbolt before she makes her way across the
carpet fibers pushing against her weight. Against her soles. She, I’m certain, being schizophrenic
and paranoid. Her mind a carnival of personality. Haunted house of mirrors I’m forever trying to
break. Break those ties.

No puedes jugar en la tierra, screams Madgalena to baby Miriam, immaculately fucked
from the moment of birth. Te vas a enfermar! She walks away to tell Juanchin how many belly
dancing shadows she sees lurking around the back yard while he trims the mango tree –
Magdalena, he says from deep within with a chuckle – no hay nadie.

My torso half squeezed out the doorway leading to the street that passes Madeleine Park,
she grabs my arm and screams, auxilio! Auxilio! Auxilio!

She falls back, her buttock landing on the floor.
Standing in the doorway I weigh the possible outcomes to this fucked up situation. And walk down the sidewalk to escape.

The gears in reverse, I’m unable to spin the tires because she follows me outside, reaches into the car and clutches my shirt in a tight gasp. So I pull out my phone with right hand. 911, shoots across my screen.

Llameste la policia de Nuevo!

No debes dejar a Senay sola. Van a venir la policia.

Porque, she screams. Pain vibrating across vocal chords in horror of my betrayal.

She sprints back into the house and I pull out of the driveway, slam the clutch into drive and start to roll. Then break, realizing this may never end. I pull back into the driveway, dismount and sit my ass down to wait.

The police come quick. Bright red and blue strobes blazing as they pull in front of the house.

Good evening! Was it you called, sir?

Yeap.

Where is your wife?

Inside?

Are there any weapons in the house?

Kitchen knives.

Firearms? A pistol? Rifle?

One slingshot. But I’ve never killed a bird with it. Not even as a child.

Has she been drinking?

No.
Have you?

Two beers.

Let me see your face.

I turn a cheek and the other cop shakes his head, then walks back to the car and pulls a huge camera from the patrol car trunk. They take a shot of my nicked right ear. The blood on my face smeared by Miriam as she apologized. Again. Swearing never again.

Alright sir, just wait here.

The two officers knock on the door, which opens and I see them step into the light.

Alone on the sidewalk leading into this art deco house, I admire the luminosity of the moon shining above, half hiding behind the mountain rising directly in front of the house. Sleepy celestial Cheshire cat keeping watch over all the watch towers along the alleyways of this windblown town, the lights of J-Town bright on the horizon.

Always say prayers for J-Town.

A second squad car appears. One officer goes into the house and the other stands close to me.

Are you alright?

Not for a long time now.

Well, I have to tell you that she’ll be arrested. In the event a party is injured, somebody has to go to jail. I need to know if you want to press charges.

I don’t know.

The whole time, no crowds or helicopters swarming above, no neighbors peering furtively through cracked blinds or subtly parted curtains. Just a light breeze and the quit solace of night. And some cops on the beat, doing their jobs.
Two officers emerge from the house, silhouetted by the light within, Miriam handcuffed. She passes in front of me, glowers and says, me lo vas a pagar!

Did she say what I thought she said, I inquire to the officer by my side.

Yes, sir, he says. I believe she did.

Press charges.

Yes sir, he says with a note of satisfaction and restored faith in the brotherhood of testosterone.

It’s usually the male counterpart in such an altercation as this that we end up taking to jail, sir, says the cop.

I bet. I think I need to drive now.

I just need to ask a few questions sir.

Sure.

How did this start?

I don’t know how to answer that one. It’s like when people ask me where I live. I mean, fuck if I know. In my head, under my skin, behind my eyes. It depends on how I feel.

I mean, sir, was there an argument? Did she say something? Did you say something?

What was the trigger?

My grandpa named his horse trigger and he threw me off one time. Probably more my fault than the horse being mean spirited or anything.

Sir, I need you to concentrate.

I can’t.
The officer continues to ask questions until some semblance of a picture of the events of the night at this house coalesce in scribbles on his notebook, to be passed onto the District Attorney, in one form or another.

Sir, do you feel you need medical attention? Do you need to talk with someone?

I need to drive, I say. Then Senay comes flooding into my brain.

From a haze I speak out, where is my daughter? Where is Senay?

She has to stay inside the house with Officer Tomerlin. She’s in good hands sir.

I want my daughter.

Well sir, the problem is that you’ve admitted to the consumption of alcohol. I can smell it on your breath. If either party in a case like this drinks alcohol, we can’t release custody of a minor to that person. So I need to ask you, can you call someone to pick her up?

No. I want my daughter.

Sir, if you don’t know anyone, she’ll be taken into the custody of Child Protective Services.

Protect her from who? Me? The devil?

I’m sorry sir, this must be hard, but my hands are tied.

A small gray Toyota SUV pulls up in front of the house and I recognize the driver; Janet, friend of Miriam, and perpetual drunk whose vocabulary is limited, mostly, to chu cha verga, said with a long rolling rrrrrrrrrr.

Hola, que paso Byron?

You should know.

Y Senay?

Inside the house.
Pues deja que venga conmigo – you te juro – la cuído!

The officer looks at me, asking my intentions nonverbally.

Ok.

And Senay, wrapped in blankets like an infant baby Jesus, fades down the road in the back of a Toyota.

Well sir, I’m going to let you go now.

Thanks but it’s not within your powers, I say and mount the car, slipping quickly down the interstate, awaking to a hotel room in Truth or Consequences. Not really remembering the drive.

XVIV

I’m staring at my feet. My black Doc Martin’s purchased from the Armed Forces Post Exchange in Panama before the year before the US gave back the canal. Soaked with rain and a splattered in mud from the old fuck’s back yard.

My cell phone vibrates.

Pardon, I say. Standby one.

Bueno.

My phone ruggedized and water proofed, casts the glow of beautifully interlocking cell tower communication in soft shades of LED across my face. I love the wavelength of LED light.

DumbsaintMindtrain: Hey Chief Pale Horse. Where r u?

Me: Coming soon. Left my notebook at Mida’s. Enroute. ETA 10m.

Sorry. So what’s up?
Nada. Te vi cruzando la calle y te quise saludar. Que haces parandando las calles a esta hora?

Visitando Mida Nuba. Y tu?

Regresando del Albertson’s. Yo pense que Mida vivia en el edificio del BioDyn. Que haces caminando del direccion contrario?

Ok. Fine. Trying to rescue the dog across the road from this abusive old fuck!

Que le hace.

Bottles, brick, bullets, any projectile capable of damage.

Pues porque no llamas a la policia?

No van a hacer nada.

Cuidado que te llevan preso por robar el perro.

Sí, yo se.

Y donde esta mi hija? Donde esta me chuky?

Adentro.

Sola?

No. La deje con la Luna para cuidarla y unu hoy de caldo herbiendo en la cocina sobre la estufa que esta a todo madre fuego.

Johnny! Ella no puede estar sola!

No soy idiota. Esta con Esperenza. Ya iba regresar. Fui primero a conseguir unas frutas en la casa de Mida.

Bueno pues. Manana me la vas a traer.

Claro. Manana te veo.

Bueno. Hasta manana.
I wave goodbye and walk straight up to the front door, fumble for a key and realize it got left inside. So I knock. And am wondering why I feel an M-4 Carbine resting in a well-balanced position on my left palm. I look at the bolt cutter.

Fuck me, I say.

And before the shadow in the glass that must be Esperanza approaches closer, I spin and sprint for the shadow of a next-door tree, jumping over a white wrought-iron gate, circumnavigating around my house. The voice of Esperanza echoing a hello as I beat my retreat. I wonder if the wrought iron gate dreams at night of being a white picket fence.

I come back to the home fires via the back yard, entering the house from the rear, through a door close to the kitchen.

Esperanza sits on the couch in the living room, reading a picture storybook to Senay.

Boo!

Hi Dadiee!

Esperanza jumps. Startled.

You asshole! You know how much I hate you sneaking up on me! Cabron!

Dear, I say. I didn’t exactly skulk through the house. I exercised no noise discipline at all.

Fine. What took you so long? And why is a bolt cutter in your left hand.

Fuck.

Why such determination to get arrested? I don’t want my boyfriend in jail.

I just thought I might cut that lock on the back gate since we lost the key.

She, I realize, is not buying my story, but chooses not to press the issue and ruin a beautiful night.
That, I suppose, is a good idea. Somebody had to cut that lock. Right?

Right as rain! Just being a responsible, tool savvy, man of the house, I say.

She leaps off the couch, throws her arms around me, plants a kiss on my lips, which I imagine growing into long merlot vines pregnant with grapes that curl around my body as her embrace comes to a climax.

Thank god you’re such a savvy tool man, she says.

Sarcasm noted. I need a smoke. A ride on the dromedary over gypsy dunes. And you’re my Gypsy.

Grabbing a beer from the fridge and an electric guitar from the dining room, I step out back and take a drag off a slowing burning coffin nail, ember glowing brightly, sending smoke signals up: godisnowherebutwherethefuckarewealone: spiraling into the barometrically dense night. I look, at the houses in my neighborhood, the rain wet clouds above, lit by ambient starlight and a moon hiding somewhere on the horizon. Think how interlocking complex systems in a closed system maintain energy from the zombie land outside sameness. Its evolution at work. I’m stroking my Gibson Voodoo, but when the power chords vibrate, we make Hoodoo. Make hearts of moutaindwelling black Dutch hillbillies break into blue grass moans like at a revival camp on a lost highway near a crossroad. Vampires in New Orleans maybe listening, but this isn’t a street for vampires. Here live werewolves in historic 1910-something houses built on lots blasted out the side of a mountain.

A trunk lid, scraped from a 1970 Firebird, sits propped on the porch. Cigarette packs, opened up to reveal all sides, adorn its metal surface, glued in columns: Camels, Marlboros, Lucky Strikes, Pall Malls and Camel “art packs” adorned with clever imagery drawn up by some artist with too few scruples. Death art sponsored by Mr. Reynolds.
The cigarette packs, belonged to my x-roommate Jaime, then to Esperanza, now I’m gluing these stupid packs onto vintage metal, because nobody else took the time to finish this artistic endeavor. Here I am, gluing a massive collection of cigarette packs onto a trunk lid that is the sole surviving article of my stolen Firebird equipped with a 455 motor and HydroMatic 350 transmission. Americana Beastie took me down the I-5 corridor the day General Bin Ladin, brilliant fucker, set the free world ablaze, later found stripped at a swap meet.

Ashes, I think. J. R. Reynolds’ remnants of tobacco leaf and tarred filters made of many a chemical, including Ammonia, which is the same shit I piss; my inevitable destiny.

Flicking the cigarette onto the street, I take in the moist desert air, displacing the balance of the universe. I breath, inhale, exhale, deep Taoist breaths, release, homeostatic Nirvana pumping CO2 in a spiral to the heavens, slipping past that thin blue line, out to space, catching up with a wandering Gemini satellite, lost somewhere in deep space. How deep the black swamp of consciousness, awash in lightning bug glow. My breath, burrows into the galactic center, warms the left check of Yahweh, that fucking bastard.

XX

A pitter patter of feet strike the stairwell inside the house; Senay, the Bugster, my green footed Converse toddler, comes from above, from the second floor: tu thump, sound her feet, tu (and a pause) thump, tu (and a pause) thump, tu (and a pause) thump, go her feet; Dante did not appreciate children, because repetitious footsteps pounded down by a dreadlocked and pony-tailed chipmunk, cheeks puffing out as she sips on choca-mook, is Heaven. Of this I am certain.

Dadiee, she says, poking head out door, dadieee, I want movie.
You got, I say, a date with Esperanza, my baby boo. You and her are going monster hunting. Remember?

She squints her eyes, pensive, says, OK dadieee. Her voice belting out the o, sinking on the k, staying steady on the da and rising with the dieee. She disappears into the house.

Yahweh is a baby-killing rapist, I think. When the Israelites were sent out to commit war crimes, they asked: Can we keep the women?

**NO! ALL SHALL YOU SLAUGHTER! YES, I SAY, ALL THE BITCHES MUST DIE!**

Can we keep the rugrats? Oh grand Pubha of Nada, we beseech thee! They might prove useful.

**NAY! THEIR TOO CUTE AND OFTEN HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR, WHICH AS YA’LL KNOW, IS SOMETHING I’M NOT EQUIPED WITH! SO KILL ALL THOSE LITTLE HELLION BASTARDS AS WELL! BUT NO RAPING BECAUSE I’M A REAL FUCKING PRUDE WHEN IT COMES TO SEX AND STEM CELL RESEARCH.**

What an asshole.

Esperanza comes out with Senay, both draped in rain gear. She takes her by the hand, leads her down the road. I lose sight of Esperanza, sashaying with Senay down the road to go monster-hunting before bedtime. I blow a kiss she’ll never know.

They’ll be slipping through alleyways and stalking across the park, slingshooting bad monsters. Not to be confused with good monsters. We’re careful to instruct Senay never to exercise the use of force indiscriminately or without proper etiquette. We teach her the art of precise delivery of energy. Under any gravitational spin.
And to conserve her own energy. There are no mad leaps or kicks in Tao Chi Chuan. Feet always stay on the Earth’s surface, from which energy radiates. It’s a matter of spin, I tell her. The planet spins up under your heel. Gives you cosmic strength when you strike with Hsing-I spear.

Senay is heir to a bodyguard tradition. So she must learn that her role is to protect the weak when she someday steps onto those Pre-K playgrounds.

The dog across the road still sleeps in captivity. I dream freedom for him and all those processing plant destined souls.

I go to the kitchen, the place where I nourish my body-mind-soul connection. From amid intricate ice crystals within the deep freezer, I pull out a moose steak, part of me and Remy’s summer Alaskan kill. A moose who died quickly at the booming end of a sniper rifle, never suffering, lived free the days he wandered Gaia’s belly – no guilt running cross my cerebral spheres. Hell, you might find Buddha meditating by a tree somewhere in my – no not mine because I’m jaded – I retract the thought. But amid Senay’s maze of synaptic gaps and canyons and poetic farmlands sleeps Buddha and Jesus and even Yahweh because the prick is an innate color of the human landscape. The scream of Freud’s Id, throwing a temper tantrum, screaming on and on with a loud, singular and eternal cry of I. He knows nothing more.

XXI

Dead moose meat in my hand, I step out back to fire up the grill. Natural charcoal, looking like fossilized and severed black tree limbs, this is the good stuff. It burns fast and sends up sparks into the darkening sky.
I mutter an obscenity, having forgotten to thaw my frozen kill and walk back into the kitchen to nuke my steak a good ten minutes till its tender enough to throw on the grill.

I write a poem as the moose steaks simmers. Look out at the sea foam green1981 Honda Prelude sprawled out, wheel-less, propped up on four tires, the engine compartment open, the motor hanging from a cherry puller, parts spread out on a wooden work bench. A dead head bumper sticker, a line of dancing bears in psychedelic colors singing about a touch of gray, plastered dead center on the windshield in front of the rear view mirror, which is cracked.

I write a poem for my Gypsy spark plug, Esperanza, my lover and teacher of all things Kerouac, Bukowski, Ginsberg and Cassidy. Go to sleep baby Senay, she says every night, say hello to Cowboy Neal taking a fast freight to Never-Never-Land and on to Naboomboo on the Union Pacific.

Esperanza and Senay appear through a light curtain of rain like shape shifting apparitions accompanying a young girl returning from vision quest. The sway of Esperanza’s hips moving in synch to the fall of rain, a soulful rhythm feed by Mississippi River delta blues, New Orleans jazz horns.

This she is to me, sliding through a haze of rain lit by streetlamps.

Hi baby, she says. Standing under the porch with me.

Hi Dadieee! You cook food? I like food. You like food?

Yeap, I say. Especially blackened fish and a moose rib on the side.

You didn’t mention ribs. Going all out are we?

Yeap.

I like Riiib! Dadiee, Dadiee, I like riiib!

I shall arrange the dining table, proclaim I.
Luna creeps closer to the grill as I fill three plates full of food. Her eyes gleam in the
glow of porch light. The six nippled one is clever. She remains in the prone, but as time to pull
the meat grows shorter, in regular intervals she magically seems to be crouched in a closer
position. As if moving under direct fire.

Senay, I call.

A plate with a filet of fish, two ribs and asparagus falls into her waiting arms. She toddles
away to sit in her red chair, huge smile of satisfaction lighting her eyes, flushing her cheeks. Her
wolf cub teeth tear across rib like a reciprocating saw, a cartoon character munching to the sound
of an old type writer, till “ding”! – she hits the end of two ribs and looks at me.

You want another one, I ask?

Senay shakes head in confirmation.

Esperanza emerges from the house, lit candle in hand, gives light and soul to the many

candles hanging from the porch roof in tastefully chosen glass and metal vessels.

We eat on the porch, soaking up candlelight and wine like a trio of Palo Verde trees
basking in the desert moonlight, lunar-photosynthetic skins opening up chemical pathways.

Creating energy.

I imagine how we must look to a random homeless vagabond, a fellow sojourner on the
move. This island of candlelight and shelter from the rain, grill pouring out mesquite smoke and
the smell of an honorable kill.

That’s number five, says Esperanza a moment later. She’s like a ravenous chipmunk.

Senay smiles and shakes her head.

An old man in a backpack shuffles alongside the fence, traversing kliks through a dense
atmosphere.
Hey, says Esperanza!

The old man stops and looks our way.

Hey, you want something to eat, she asks?

The old man shakes his head in confirmation but doesn’t speak. Esperanza stacks five ribs on her plate, goes into the house and returns, plate covered in tinfoil, makes her way to the gate, hands over the plate, the old man smiles and nods his head, walks away.

Esperanza, I say. Gypsy saint of those too restless and thirsty to stay in one place. Or too lost and injured to find a way home.

I’m just a girl. Who knows what it’s like to sleep in an alley.

I wanna watch movie, says Senay.

I’ll take her, says Esperanza. You finish your food.

All right.

I hear the pitter patter of rain and the soles of Senay echoing off wood in the living room, making her way from movie shelf to the DVD player and a return to her blankets and pillows stacked on the floor and off and out, into the vivid dreamscape seaborne or airborne on saddled back of...

Esperanza returns with a bottle of Sotol and two shot glasses.

Now for desert, she says. Baby, I’ve been thinking about saving up for a summer vacation in Guangzhou. How about we save some cash.

I agree, I say. It should be an awesome trip.

We’ve learned about a thousand Mandarin characters, the vowels, the consonants. We are prepared for this new experience. And Baby Senay, the puke face, my angel – I shall unleash my
demon spawn upon the unsuspecting sleepy dragon, the birthplace of Bruce Lee and Matrix style Kung Fu fighters wired up in Hong Kong studios.

    Baby, I say. Like Johnny Cash we’ll go, in search of experience, minus the Bible and a gun.

    She smiles and the light in the room intensifies and softens and I know how deeply love can run, like an aquifer penetrating soil and creating an underground stream feeding a massive tree root system.

    XXII

    We finish the moose steak and fish and ribs and asparagus spiced up with a Porcini Mushroom Duxelles.

    One more shot, she asks.

    Line them up and I’ll blow them all down. But allow me to feed the Lunar beast.

    Eight ribs, remnant moose steak fat and two fish plop into Luna’s plate, next to her one hundred gallon watering trough. Her eyes follow the trajectory of each falling rib, eyes moving but head still and inert. Mastiffs follow movement in this strange manner. Or at least this one does.

    I feint moving away from her bowl. She moves and stops with my movements. We are synchronized, this moon dog and I, like a fire team. She doesn’t anticipate. She is with me in the moment and moves like shadow. Like Tao.

    Down goes the shot.

    Custody, she says. When will you file for it?
Hearts and minds campaign, I say. Win the natives over. Much safer than risking a confrontation on enemy ground, such as a hostile anti-father courthouse. Which pretty much defines any courtroom in the state of Texas.

But you can win. Any judge would be stupid not to see what you offer Senay.

Ohhhh. You mean that reasonable family oriented judge who goes to a local Baptist church every Sunday? You want me to trust him? Better yet, it might be a Sunday going her. Sorry, but to me, the odds don’t sound too good.

Not all judges think like that.

Some do. I don’t know yet. I’m still assessing probabilities.

Esperanza sighs. Whatever. Want to help me put Senay to bed, she asks.

We make way to the living room and I wrap Senay in my arms, pull her gently up, out of the dense gravity enveloping this old leather couch of mine. We make way up stairwell when I miscalculate my path and a wooden board protests with a loud squeak.

Senay’s eyes open wide.

Dadiee, she says. I wanna finish movie!

The movie ended, finished, kaput, I say. How about we read some stories till you catch the dog train to Neverland?

Ok. Storiee? We read storiee?

Yes. We’ll read stories all night if that be your wish.

Ok.

I carry Senay to bed, my girlfriend in a flowing gypsy skirt beside me, up the stairwell to Senay’s room, the galaxy in plastic glow-in-the-dark stars and planets swirling above her bed.
We read books as Senay drifts into a sea of slumber on an ocean bed of seaweed next to coral and clown fish. Her faithful inflated seahorse keeping watch beside the bed, her window peering at the lights of J-Town.

I say a prayer.

Senay asks about monsters. I say, werewolves howling in our alley baby, they’re out there every night, but don’t worry. They’re afraid of Ninja killers like you. They’re just pups compared to you so sleep tight.

I hum Oh When The Saints Go Marching Home, splicing in a facsimile of a sliding trombone. Esperanza and I play Etta James, softly, on an IPod. Esperanza coos about Neal at the wheel, I pull out my laptop, type gently on my Mac, give order and birth, emotion born in a streaming flow of digits, scaffolds born in the echo of a well. Wonder why Microsoft won’t let me save my story as an object, not a file. I write a poem about going out with a Bible and a gun, like Jesus, forty days and forty nights, me and Senay and Esperanza, lost Gemini satellites drifting into deep space slumber.

The buzz of vibrating cellular device derails my locomotive ripple of poetic revelry. I open up the repeater tower digital feed, the pipeline, and stroke Esperanza’s scalp, admiring the complexion of her brown skin as her head rests next to Senay on a satin pillow.

Remy: Paintball tomorrow. Maybe bring the young Padawa. She should start now. Soon comes a day of reckoning. What say?

Me: Fuck paintball. There’s this old fuck across the road who keeps abusing this yappy little dog. Throws bottles and any available projectile. Very inventive bastard with respect to conjuring projectiles. Wanna help get k9?
Remy: May have to make you wait a day or so. Going in train to Baja tomorrow night after paintball. Some “magical” place Mida talks about. Taking the Fat Indian too. Wanna come?

Me: Muy dificil lo que pides.


Me: You never seen me shoot a rifle. Pistol: questionable. M-4 Carbine: sniper from the depths of Ranger Hell.

Remy: LOL you infantry work in guard shacks and dig holes. Why didn’t you unleash the little black spot screaming in your soul. Shoulda went seal team.

Me: I’m allergic to squid.

Remy: So what’s up with tomorrow?

Me: I can workout on the bars. Nothin else cuz I’m workin on university stuff. Got lots to write and read. Esperanza’s nanita’s b-day is tomorrow night. No escaping that one.

Remy: Got to respect the elder shaman.

Me: THE DOG. When?

Remy: Upon my return. Rest easy, little brother. See you at the bars.

Me: Adios. Over.

Remy: Out here.

Esperanza, I say while putting the sacred Mac onto the carpet.

She lifts her head from Senay’s pillow in a start. What, she says?

Love, I say. You want to go to sleep.

No, no I’m not ready yet. Let’s go downstairs.
She shakes off the ZZZ-Monster and we wander downstairs.

XXIII

The rain still falls outside. We are within the rainy season so the clouds will keep stalking me. There is no escape for me without a fast car, maybe three hundred plus Nez Perce painted ponies under the hood and wide-open interstates free of gridlock. I’d be a fast Indian.

Esperanza comes out, vintage black shawl covering her shoulders.

I’m cold, she says.

I wrap my arms around her shoulders. I love you, I say.

And I love you. How much do you love me?

More than all the buggers in all the elephant noses of all the elephants in all of Africa and Asia Minor.

What about Asia Major?

Not a major elephant center. I’ve been there. Ate breakfast at an Ihop and never saw no elephants.

I see. Never knew you’d traveled so extensively.

From Bangkok to Paris to Boise. Antarctica to Santa’s workshop. He even let me use his table saw.

You’re such a moron.

Fortunately, lots of tards like me are living kick-ass lives.

Especially in DC.

I’m reporting to this new Reserve unit tomorrow.
Excited?

How bad can it be compared to active duty? It’s only a weekend a month.

So you can spend more time with Senay and I.

Unless I get deployed.

That won’t happen.

How you know?

I’ll cast a spell.

*Got a black magic womaaaan!* But not all the witchywoman spells in the world can deter Mama-mind-fuck. Looords yes. She shouuu luvz her chillin. Makin um work long days humpin der hous through da woods.

You’re a freed man now, Mr. Leadfeather. Look: we finished half the bottle.

But what if I got deployed for six months?

I’d be waiting.

What about a year?

That’d be rough, but I’d be waiting.

A year and a half?

I don’t know, she says as her eyes shift down and back up in contemplation.

Two years must be out of the question then.

Honestly, I don’t know. I’m a very passionate person. And what about Senay? Miriam would deny me visitation, which would break my heart, so I think I’d just hop the next boxcar out.

Would you come back?

I don’t know.
I’d wait for you.

You don’t know what waiting would be like. To be the one on a shelf.

I know all about waiting. I’m a soldier. Kind of. Well, according to the Army, I’m a civilian most of the month, unless someone gets really pissed at me, in which case they push higher to cut orders, bring me back on active duty long enough to execute some punishment served without due process, then take me off orders immediately thereafter at the behest of some Army comptroller wanting to save dollars. And subsequently invest them in porta-potties or something like that.

Nevertheless. In all that frustration, the one thing you never had to do is be the one waiting for a lover’s return. So how do you know what you would or wouldn’t do?

Shrugging my shoulders, I focus on the rain. Still falling.

If this keeps up, says Esperanza. Flash floods might wash away the city tomorrow. Then you won’t make that meeting at the reserve center. Then they can’t take you away anywhere anymore ever.

I smile. Maybe.

I kiss her lips. Want to go to bed?

I’m not sleepy yet.

Who’s talking about sleep?

Ohhhhhhh. I see. I want to finish off the bottle.

Let’s take it upstairs.

XXIV
Out the window we go, stepping over a sleepy Luna laid out in the foyer, to make out on top the porch roof, under hidden stars and drops of rain, back in, I’m inside and feel myself explode and she might be asleep now, after the climax, the wind blows below the open window pane.

A wind blows across a field, over a grass-covered hill that broke the level plain like a green Popsicle dripping dark green blades of weepy grass. A gray sky hugs and wraps around the hill, four boulders sit atop it, trying to hide among juicy blades, ripe and pregnant.

A mist drifts across the landscape, rising up to crash against low flying clouds. This curtain of thin streaks of rain and glass comes drifting in from some-place where those who live in no-place sigh and with each sigh the clouds spin across the horizon in dark gray solemnity and a the curtain spreads wider and wider – coming from some epicenter, some episode played out at midnight on a dark interstate that ran somewhere between a state of emergency and a state of emergence – running along lines galloping with groaning semi-engines and screaming engine breaks breaking the momentum of wheels spinning down hills.

The surf below the hill screams at the sky and crashes into the sand lit by sunset rays. Breakers crash, carrying tigers paddling through streaks of red and black waves. Fatigued tigers bleeding sky and glass beads of moisture around black noses. Crosses line the beach – each one burning brighter in the light – of a dying sun and a darkening sea and a deadening sky.

A man stands on the beach screaming, *Oh, great ocean. Oh, great sea. Run to the ocean, run to the sea.* Run down the interstate, run past the Circle-Ks and 7-11s, run through your IPODS and into MySpace – we’re all inside!

The man slaps hundred dollar bills onto the beach, keeps slapping them down, chanting, how much you son of a bitch?! One hundred, two hundred, three hundred for a red, red sky!
Tigers spin through the misty air, hurled through the yellow-snow cone-sky from the crests of dying breakers breaking apart against a million grains of tiny sand. They spin through the air, spraying water-drops from wet pelts – each hair standing on end - they crash and shatter against the sand and the only trace left is the smell of fresh, wet fur mixing in with salty ocean spray.

A dog and a man stand on the hill, on the peek of this dark green Popsicle that never melts in the salt air. A brindle dog and a man in a dark blue turtleneck sweater. A girl stands beside them. The ocean rests in one eye and the desert in the other eye – dark chocolate eyes. The wind moves around her and beside her.

“There are tiger in the ocean. Not tiger-sharks, but tigers,” says the blue turtle.

“You brought the tigers with you, but they’re breaking,” says the girl.

“Never seen tigers in the ocean.”

“Mira! Ese tigre esta quebrando!”

“Mira ese otro. Es muy baboso.”

“Pobres tigres.”

“Why are you so sad?”

“I think I should shed a tear for every tiger that breaks against the sand.”

“Seria un mar de lagrimas que soltaras.”

“Un mar para cada vida, cada piel negra y cada piel roja.”

“Who’s the crazy guy screaming for a red, red sky?”

“He’s a tiger acting like a man.”

“And I’m a man acting like a tiger?”

“I’m confused and lost, but I think you live in Tiger-land.”
The dog’s name is Luna and she bolted from the sky in a blur of gray and black brindle, ran careening down the slope of the hill. The equation of the slope – never known to Luna – didn’t keep her from connecting every point on the line to every pint of her blood. Every pint pumping a mass of 185lb of canine that spins in the air as she makes her way down.

The blue turtle follows her down. Going down like a bead of sugary water dripping down the side of a green popsicle melting in salt-water air and an opaque sun.

“He’s a prophet,” says the turtle.

“He’s a crazy-man,” says the girl.

“Same thing.”

A flash of blue streams down the hill, pursuing the dog.

“Hey,” says the girl.

“That’s for horses!”

The gray sky turns violet and pink and that color that’s the thin blue line between all the cellular membranes on Earth and the oblivion of space.

“Hey! There’s that kid throwing ceramic tigers against the beach,” screams the girl.

“Luna’s running straight for her!”

“Catch Luna! Catch that moon-dog!”

A girl with mocha skin stands on the beach, throwing small ceramic tigers into the surf, throwing them at the sand and the rocks on the beach. They drown in surf and break against rock and sand – break into a million billion chemical-nebulae fragments – each one reflecting the colors of the sky. Violet, blue, pink, turquoise – even the desert splits open and pours into sky into each broken fragment. And in the distance the sound of wind over desert dunes blows out from the eyes of the girl. A desert so deep, so dry, that it sucks in the ocean.
A girl voice screams. I awake in my bed to the soothing fingers of Esperanza. Her tiger stuffed animal winks at me from a shelf on the dresser.

Fuck you stuffed tiger, I say.

What, says Esperanza from twilight slumber?

I said fuck Tiger Woods, I say. You know how I hate celebrities escaping justice.

Esperanza looks up with sleepy deep eyes and says, nunca te importas – since when did you start even paying attention.

She rolls back over, into slumberland.

XXV

I contemplate blizzard snows sweeping across the corpses of thirty Coca-Cola polar bears: inert, dead, reeking, eyes all glazed over. The ice shelf melted and they swam too far. Me standing on this tundra plateau, sketching this Empire of broken bones and split flesh into my notebook of walkabouts.

I’d like to buy the world a coke and teach it to sing in perfect harmony? Not this Indian. Not till they ditch the HFCS and replant the sugar canes fields and harvest them with robotic devices, not robotize people. Maybe Coca-Cola injected some serum into their drink; the genesis of Zombieland.

The world needs to sing a kinder lullaby, the babies are bleeding in the tomato gardens, ring around the roses, ashes and ashes, and we’re all falling down. Of these things I dream, Trent Reznor lullabying me into the Pearly Gates to say hello to Saint Jude weeping. Very emotional that fellow, I think, over my morning brew of Lunar Dog B-17 Bomber. My homebrewed
Amber, made in the basement. Wonderful the medicine, I, Johnny Leadfeather, cook up in the basement. I’m generous, come over and try a pint on me.

A brew, a glass of skim milk, boiled eggs (yolks donated to Luna), eggs Sunny-side up, fresh strawberries, black berries and a slice of rye. A most excellent breakfast loaded on a tray. I’m on the way back up the stairwell bringing this feast on a silver tray to Esperanza on a bright Saturday morning.

A breeze comes in from the open foyer window by the bedroom door ajar.

I first approach the doorway of Senay, from within I hear the babble of babes at play and gently I rap upon the chamber door.

Dadiee, Spera, she shouts?

I crack the doorway and peer inside. Senay, having loaded a movie single-handedly, sits on her bed watching Army of Darkness, laughing at automated skeletons poking at Nash who lays in the prone on a graveyard floor, having forgotten the magic words of the Wisemen.

Nice choice, I say.

Whaaaat?

I like the movie you picked. Look, I come bearing eggs a la Sunniest-side up, strawberries, blackberries and a tall glass of skim. Look good?

Yes.

I lay out her food on a table next to her toddler chair.

Enjoy, I say. And Esperanza will come soon. To take you to play submarine and seahorse and such in the bathtub land. Listen. I’m going to go run with Uncle Remy. I’ll be back soon.

Want the door open?

Yeap.
Back in the foyer, Luna looks on with serious interest as I walk by. I pause, dramatically displaying a boiled egg in my hand. Three great drool bombs hit the floor, splash, splash, splash. I toss egg one and she snaps it up in midair. Then I toss three more. Snap, snap, snap, never does she miss a beat.

Baking bread and honey suckle scent floods the Heights from Mida’s bakery and my front yard, sweeps the neighborhood, spills into Mexico, out to J-Town.

I say a prayer.

Sourdough bread and baked yams nestle in my oven, awaiting dinner. Along with Palak Paneer and elk steaks stored in the fridge. At the ready. We are the Roman Empire. God bless America. From sea to sea, shining and aglow in nuclear fallout, North Atlantic to the Pacific washing up on the shores of Beijing, just nobody’s informed the Chinese government yet. They should be notified that the water on their beaches is U.S. property. I, as an officer appointed by Congress and the President, shall compose a memorandum for record and shove it off in a beer bottle, to be rafted across the Pacific on the nose of a dolphin:

For: Prime Minister Mao (you never really died)

From: JOHNNY LEADFEATHER, CPT, USAR, Commanding

Reply: Yahweh (you guys should throw down a beer all juntos and shit)

We already have your best Kung Fu. We’re going for your hottest babes via Internet. Accept unconditional terms of surrender lest we employ our ultimate weapons: Wal Mart, Pop-Up marketing, call centers and Tyson’s chicken. We’re not afraid to turn the tables. Next time you call for customer assistance, the asshole on the other end might be a
redneck sitting in a trailer park in La Mesa, TX.

Haaahaaahaaahaaahaaaaahahahahahahahahahahahaha!

POC for the above: J Leadfeather, CPT 502-568-9750 jleadfeather@us.army.mil

The Roman Empire from the Canadian Pine forests to Mangrove trees off the coast of Panama. Green tree boas in my dreams, hugging me, squeezing lovingly. From New Orleans’s trombones and sliding trumpets wailing about the Saints come marching home, to electric ouds wailing on the streets of Tehran. It’s all ours. Airborne! All the way! Rakkasan!

XXVI

I’m home in the Heights, carved out the side of a mountain in 1880. Pancho Villa banked here with Brown and Root.

Now I’m here, Johnny Leadfeather, at the ready.

I’m awake in the wake. Of last night’s dreamtime; walkabout through the brick domestic caves. Past the doorway of Senay Keyuri, who I hear from within talking to some random blue dragon about the bad monsters holding out in a fortress by the sea horse.

Love, I say. Come forth from your dreams.

Johnnie, says Esperanza. I don’t want to go away from my dreams at this moment. Why the fuck are you awake so fucking early? Let me sleep!
Dangling a fresh berry in front of her nose, I watch her nostrils twitch and she peels one eye open to take a peek. Then rolls up and rubs her eyes and yawns.

What time is it, she asks.

Eight hundred hours.

What gets you up so early on a Saturday?

Going to work the bars with Remy.

He’ll infect you with his psychosis.

Esperanza looks down, then back up with dead eyes and a slack jaw and begins to speak in a deep raspy voice.

Hey little brother, we gots to purify the planet, come hang with Remy a while, she says.

That’s pretty good, I say. Except you need to bring your lip up a bit when speaking. A hint of Billy Idol.

I’d rather have a fix of Billy Holiday, she says, rolling over to turn on the IPod player currently piped into a speaker system. The entire house is wired. We’ve great connectivity.

The sun beams in gentle slant-light, the big orange blob we infantry call BOB, radiates, spills, from the horizon onto my window and into the room. Looking through the bedroom window, I spin out soft-focused vision with my Tai Chi Eyeballs, taking in the alleyway, Matchbox car and house alleyway. I sigh and love my now: the tops of trees bending below in a desert breeze, the line of houses, not a one alike, winding up the alleyway.

Esperanza is smiling at me, looking curious.

This place escapes, gives me refuge from all the tracts of cookie-cut Zombie sameness contaminating this city, I say.

What you gonna do today, she says.
Her brown skin buried beneath folds of white sheets like an wood carving in a snowstorm, one cinnamon knee peeping out from the edge of a Persian patterned blue comforter, she looks angelic and I see cathedral doorways opening up to the bang of bell towers over sleepy little towns whose denizens love Playboy but outlawed Altazor. She is my doorway past those little towns, a tramp steamer taking me to open markets submerged and drowning in aromatic spices, fresh cut vegetables and fresh kill hanging on hooks.

I’m taking the dog to the groomer, she continues. Are you still brewing a new batch of brew today?

Yeap, I say. We’re about out of B-17 Flying Fortress Amber and the B-25 Liberator Lager is completely tapped, out of gas, dead lined. I must brew.

You go Mr. Brew Master!

Ahhh! Brew Prentice.

Such humility.

Well… you know…

She slips the covers, walks naked, dark as mocha, disappearing through the doorway, in route to the bathroom, where she will spend an hour in a claw foot tub.

I, now alone, contemplate what trouble I might find this day. Then like a bolt of lightning ripping across the Serengeti, Remy comes to mind.

Esperanza, I say in my Sergeant Leadfeather voice!

No me hablas con ese tono de voz!

Fuck, I say, approaching the bathroom doorway. My sincerest apologies. I’m supposed to meet Remy.

You told me that minutes ago.
Feels like days ago, I say. See what an extraordinary loves does to an ordinary schmuck like me? I go all Shakespeare and, of a sudden, hours slip through minutes. Baby, its cosmic!

She peeks out the door with her lips pursed and when I try and kiss her she gives me a raspberry. Boom shuts the door! Laughter from behind the now closed door.

Don’t make me bust out Bryan Adam lyrics, I say from the outside. I’ve been singing them since I was twelve – it don’t bother me none.

Even Luna, looking up from the hardwood surface of the foyer, appears concerned, her jowls dropping a bit more and a big drool bomb on the verge of splatter, resisting the pull of gravity.

The door cracks open and Esperanza reoffers a kiss, which I accept, enjoying the plumpness of her lips and the tidal ocean ripples across the membrane surface and my receptors alit and the accuracy and passion and rhythm and the musical blues notes. Angelic trumpets and devil trombones.

Stay away from the old man and the dog, she says. You’re right, that house is the black hole of emotion. Notice how you never hear music?

Careful I shall be.

No! Careful is not the right word. I said stay away.

Right then. I’ll begin the brewvolution and then set out for the bars. And no worries. Senay eats as we speak. And watches Army of Darkness.

And down the stairwell I go, to the laughter of Senay broadcasting from beyond her doorway. The steps creaking because Luna follows with massive paws laying down heavy gravity, close on my heels. We spiral down past ground level and into the subterranean. Into the basement. We enter the foundation.
Copper tanks line one side of the space and oak barrels line the other. The smell of liquid bread lays heavy in the undersurface air. Luna taps my right hand. I scratch an ear. Raise an arm covered in drool and wipe it on my jeans.

That something so cute can produce something so slimy and sticky is one of the great mysteries, I say aloud.

I pull bins of hops and yeast and proprietary ingredients close to the oaken barrels and begin to ladle in substances that will combine in alchemic magic symphony to produce the best brew in the Heights. Pulling the bins in different combinations to the other side, I load up tall copper tanks, moving like a Warlock building potions on the fly on a battlefield, enemy werewolves ten meters away in woodline. Building up powerful magic that alters consciousness, at least enough to muffle those demons that begin screaming every night when the sun spins down under the horizon. A self-medicating magician am I.

Time to resurface so I make way up the stairwell, hound at side, and emerge into the backyard light. The alarm clock rang about six this morning. I’m not sure the date. The sun, I divine with ancestral skill, at its current position indicates the time at about nine, give or take, given the slant of light across my small backyard piece of Earth.

With certainty, I know this to be a Saturday. And every day of Saturn, Remy and I hit the bars.

Opting to check the fish tanks later, I reenter the house, making my way across the living room when Esperanza comes light footed down the stairwell, catching my hand upon door knob.
Aye yaia, she says. Vas a correr y jugar con Remy? Sabes, that guys a taco short a combo plate. Vas a meterte en problemas. Like, getting arrested kind of trouble.

Easy now, I say. A bit of a radical he may be, but crazy he is not. Maybe a bit paranoid. Most likely not medical in origin. Baby, he’s just a vet with a mild case of PTSD. Perfectly harmless.

When someone speaks in prophetic overtures, the full combo plate isn’t on the menu.

How about you think of him as a really weird buffet line. You travel down the line, try to figure out what’s what and then go home and laugh about it.

I don’t want to think of Remy as a buffet. Ehhhw.

Point taken.

Get your hand off the goddamn doorknob and kiss me.

I kiss her goodbye and prepare to leave when comes the sound of heavy paw falling. Up the stairwell, hitting the creakiest steps comes the lunar beast. Looking upset at my lack of etiquette. Forgetting to offer a goodbye and all.

XXVIII

This house is old. And it speaks of all the subtle geographic and gravitational shifts its experienced over the century. Every teardrop shed in joy sorrow or rage. Always the spirits here seem to bear good will. But they listen and they speak through every brick, board and nail.

Listen carefully. It breathes and stretches – all the way from cement basement at the core of the structure, up to wooden rafters supporting a massive roof keeping the rain out.
It loves the wind – that’s when it speaks the most – sings when the desert winds really howl – together, house wind and spirits create a symphonic howl that is beautiful and structured in all its chaos.

Luna steps close to me and brushes an ear against my palm, slides fur right over the meridian from which chi expands, brindle color brushing energy portal, gateway back to when I lived like a child, in continuous moments of abandonment and wanderlust in the shadow of skyscrapers overlooking alleyways full of barking tenants. My dog trails. My companions who never failed to emit nothing but pure emotional content. Never a deception or tactical ploy. Luna steps close and moves away as I scratch an ear.

Be back soon, I say to her.

And with a kiss and a hug I’m off down cracked sections of cemented sidewalk. Towards the bars to meet with my good friend Remy. Passing under a tree I see Cloey’s declaration of eternal love for Javier. And someone posted Jennifer’s phone number in advertisement of free blowjobs. I walk on.

A young boy a block up the road slips time and saunters forward now a few feet away, greets me with an hola and takes a sip of Coca-Cola from a tall glass bottle. Looks as if it might be Polar Bear juice brewed up in old Mexico. Politely, I return the salutation, recognizing him, a denizen of a large brood of natives packed together in a big old house overlooking the interstate, the mighty Rio river and Anapra on the river’s far bank.

Greetings little brother, I say. Taking interest in the bottle, knowing that the local market of the circular K don’t sell this product.

No soy tu hermano, he says.
Nonsense. We’re all brothers. The air I exhale is what you breath in, what gives you life. Then you give back to me. It’s all a big circle in which we live.

Whatever.

Say, from where was your beverage purchased?

The Sunset Heights Grocer. Down the road that way.

You bought it from Harriet?

Who?

Nevermind.

Whatever.

He walks on down the road. Phases out and back in, a hundred meters away. Sucking down that carbonated sugary liquid.

A thought occurs to me, of a sudden an electrical storm front moving across my synaptic gaps, gale force winds.

XXVIV

Before me stands the three story structure known commercially as the Sunset Heights Grocer and within I see Mrs. America Tirado seated at a table enjoying her breakfast composed of a bagel and a hot cup of chocolate. She sits beneath a high ceiling still covered with original molding from the building’s heyday, now a faraway memory. Her dress, solid gray, tight fitting and revealing a very well maintained forty-something body. I bat away the image of America’s skirt hiked up, her naked ass sweaty against the wooden table and me grinding into her, hands all
up and down her thighs, moan after moan erupting from her vocal chords every time I push all
the way towards the back of her experienced snatch, amazingly still tight.

Greetings Mrs. Tirado I say, approaching her table, most likely looking a bit guilty.

Hello. How are you Johnny?

Fine. Enjoying the beautiful combination of light waves filling the morning sky. And
yourself?

Business is slow, but I’m hanging on.

I look about the store, shelves filled with old fifties classic cars carved from wood and
mounted on little rubber tires. A model of an old gas station. An antique stroller adorned with
black leather cushions, placed next to a crib encompassed by hard wood bars and rails. Oak, I
believe. Some early turn of century films on DVDs. I almost gasp, realizing a counter contains
copies of rare Harry Houdini silent movies. America’s shelves contain amazing paraphernalia.
Pipes and hookahs. Vinyl records of early Johnny Cash, Aretha Franklin, Eddy Valence and The
Ramones. Candy bars. Ramen Noodles. Books titles such as On the Road and Naked Lunch and
Carry Me Like Water. A coolerator filled with soda and TV dinners.

You appear to be a fan of Americana, I say, pointing at the objects, carefully placed with
calculated randomness within this room’s space.

I collect things, she says.

It’s a fine collection a memorabilia you’ve amassed.

It helps me remember where I’ve been.

You’re much too young to utter such talk!

Maybe, but time is a relative thing.
The ambiance you’ve evoked takes me back to a time when an American, not America, but an American could craft something and offer it to the community. A unique something because it came from an individual’s hands, breathed in the air of a particular neighborhood with all its idiosyncrasies. Terroir. The taste of the soil in which the sassafras in a root beer comes.

I admire your passion. And I know you pretty well. What are you driving at?

Might you consider selling hand crafted American soda, if the opportunity were to arise?

That sounds exciting! I would certainly take a keen interest.

That, Mrs. Tirado, makes me most happy to hear. The opportunity has arisen and stands before you.

I know you’re the neighborhood tambourine man when it comes to booze and hooch, but I didn’t know you were the Pied Piper of soda pop.

I’m not. Can’t even play the Kazoo. Though I did once sleep in the Das Hotel Stadt Hameln.

Did you enjoy the jail party?

Got too drunk to remember.

I love your beer and everyone says you’re the best microbrewer in the city. You and Mr. Nuba. He hosted a beer tasting party last night and introduced his product, which, according to the grapevine, was a smashing hit.

Oh really.

I’m surprised you didn’t attend the event.

As am I.

You weren’t invited, she says? Seeming to perceive great bit of gossip in her grasp.

I’m sure old Mida simply forgot to inform me.
I’m sure.

Certainly. Mida and I sail merchant ships across mutual waters. Must always protect from leviathans in the deep, corporate structures, and the evil comptrolling bastards from the Mart of the Wal. Beyond the Heights there be dragons.

I don’t sell dragons and I’ve no license to sell beer and soda he doesn’t make. Why don’t you go to that dungeon brewery of yours and bring up some samples?

A batch of root beer is all I’ve currently available. And it’s an experimental batch. Not perfected yet or anything.

My interest grows every second. I want the experience of seeing your product development skills.

XXX

America, that’s not it. I must correct you. First, there is no product here, only artifact as art, expression of human emotion and experience. Which is why my root beer gets infused with a rare pungency and a bite at the end, as it warms, screaming all the way down your palette till it punches your belly.

Why Johnny, if I were a younger woman, talk like that would definitely get me alone with you in a dark theatre, she says with a wink.

I wish I’d known you in your wild young days. Imagine the fun we’d of had. I know your spirit and it’s a beautiful thing to see. Let me crawl into the basement and from within I’ll give you a soda fountain.

Deal, says America with the warmest smile I’ve ever seen from this crafty, older business lady.
Oh! I almost forgot. I’ve an appointment with Remy. Might I be permitted to bring the soda in the afternoon?

I’m not going anywhere.

I admire the flat iron shaped form of the Sunset Heights Grocer as I walk away, imagining it part of the old stagecoach route, now separated from its sister buildings by the ever-humming interstate, I-10. Strange how now the information super highway brings back people to its semi-forgotten doorway. America is a great marketeer and fully exploits the Internet.

XXXI

The rising sun to my right, the playground to my front, I see Remy, suspended beneath the monkey bars, hovering above the sand, swinging one arm after the other, moving from one end of the monkey bars, to and fro above the Earth, stopping intermittently to do a pull up, sometimes pulling his chest to the bars, sometimes the inverse, pulling himself up till the back of his neck touches the bar. He remains in perpetual motion, till he spies my approach.

Remy, I say, rendering a greeting as I approach. How long you been up there? How goes the fight?


Pardon, I say.

DumbsaintMindtrain: Miriam arrived to pick up Senay and wants to you if you’d like her to wait so you can tell Senay goodbye.
Me: Its OK. I'll see her next week. Tell Senay how much we'll miss her punk ass. I’m at
the bars with Remy.

DumbsaintMindtrain: Uh-oh spaghettios.

Remy stops completely, he hangs from two bars, looking like a gorilla – this guy’s guns
are formidable – and, without heavy breathing or out-of-breathness, returns my amicable
salutation.

How you been, little brother, he says. I’ve been airborne, free of the Earth for thirty
minutes now, you know, cause’ I always tell you, little brother, this is the only time I feel at
peace, up here, on the bars, with my feet off the Earth. Join me a minute or so. Kick the death-
stench off the soles of them shoes for a minute. Come hang with Remy.

I step beneath the bars. I’m vertically challenged so I hoist myself up to the bars above by
climbing up a pole at the bar’s end. I’m not as strong as Remy, but I clinch fist against gravity
and hang about five or ten minutes, if I take it slow and don’t move around too much.

I’m up on the bars, admiring the park and the sunrise over the desert mountain. The sky
glows a violet, a pink, a blue, the colors spreading across the sky like a child tossing water colors
onto a canvass. They shift hue and texture as the sun moves, smear like a child’s finger running
across canvas, maybe God is a child and this is how he plays. This scenario comforts me much
more than Yahweh barking orders from his sand dune throne in the desert. Fucking bastard that
he is.

You, dragged ass out of bed today, says Remy. It’s a fucking miracle. To be fair, I guess
it’s about a once a month miracle. But fuck it. Good to see you, Johnnie. How you been?
Brewing, writing and reading, I say. And on occasion some other things. I almost learned a bridge on my Takamine, which did finally get a new power jack and some badly needed soldering.

You gonna be a jukebox super hero, says Remy with a smirk?

Chest pulled up against a bar, he looks down at me, face haloed by the rising sun circling above.

Who’s to say I’m not already a super hero, I say?

Your wife?

Very funny. I am Chief Pale Horse. Avenger of my people. Come to take back Puget sound and fill the air with war drums, to summon giant squid from the deep to join our war party, ride great white sharks across salty waves, lay siege to the harbor and demand the key to the city. Last night I tried to rescue the dog across the street from the old fuck who dwells within that black pit.

What exactly went askew?

First iteration the dog panicked, decided to try biting my ass. Second iteration: PTSD

Without consulting a vet, little brother, I’d bet dogs don’t contract PTSD. Even ones been in combat zones.

This dog got it. You can see it spinning round, wrecking mad havoc inside those canine irises.

Tell me the symptoms.

I approached in reconnoiter mode, stealthy like. Cut the fence open with my trusty bolt cutter. You know, my favorites, the blue ones.
Good memories, says Remy with a laugh. We really put those fuckers to good use. On several occasions.

And knowing you, we’ll be employing them again. Like, soon again. Anyways, this section of chain link falls down like the walls of Jericho. The dog standing right there. Then he just backs up. Retrogrades into the abyss. Spooky eh? Like the old fuck black magicked the entire space. Even the air space above. All the way out to some dark-energy star. That’s some mystical bullshit, correct? Therefore, applying Occam’s straight edge, I give you: PTSD.

That’s some convoluted horseshit.

You should have been there.

Then let’s go now. Maybe you could call your psychologist to come along. Or is she a psychiatrist.

All I remember is her legs when she stretched up to pull a notebook off a high shelf. I love short skirts. And long ones. And jeans. Shorts, most definitely.

I get the picture Pale Horse, says Remy.

We drop to the ground. Slip back into gravity and start roadmarching to save the dog. Or at least assess the situation and form a reasonable plan. Write an OpOrder and fill in the details by FragO.

The park is filled with girls and boys digging in the sand, building castles and burying themselves up to the neck. I want to tell them all to work on building bomb shelters, not castles. Time will soon change form and gravity will shift.

The lucky ones find their way back to childhood, recover wanderlust and the ability to evoke magic and imagery. Paint a way back home. Open up a portal and write a way to shore. Strum a guitar till the air bends all the way back to the sand box and the children come running...
back in like escapees from a children’s crusade. Bang on a drum till the walls shake and rattle and fall apart, all around, no more walls.

It’s not just tits, ass and legs, I say. It’s the idea of female, of girl, of woman that I love. Womaness. The Platonic ideal. Always have. Even when I was six years old and didn’t know about birds and bees. I’d watch Captain Kirk on the Starship Enterprise and figured that must be the way to treat a woman, considering how much play El Capitan got. My first girlfriend used to help me push buttons, Starship controls out on the playground. We traveled once upon a time to a star, coordinates RA23h6m45.86 at DO 31’6.86” and ate lunch. Our cafeteria really sucked and RA23 has an awesome little greasy spoon diner with a rocking jukebox.

Entertainmart put out a used copy of the first season. On sale for twenty-one bones. You should buy it. Show Senay. How is she?

Communing with the natives.

We slip time. Arriving quickly and now we stand in alleyway behind the black pit of nada. The gap in the chain link allowing entrance to dirt and sparse patches of grass. Beyond lies the basement portal. Entrance to the devil’s parlor. Probably stacks of new age hits scattered about, etched into vinyl and burned onto CD. What a waste of good vinyl that might otherwise wail blues and jazz and reggae and punk riffs.

The sound of rattling lifters and knocking pistons moves closer, coming our way. At the end of the block a 1966 Buick Wildcat sails the asphalt, gliding smoothly, despite a motor ready to throw a rod through the engine block. This is the coach of the old fuck, his stallion. Rattling around the block it goes.

We should go, I say.
Let’s seek cover and concealment. He points at a tree. And of a sudden Remy is grabbing branches, hoisting himself into the arms of this city tree. I follow suite, watching Remy above me, twisting and contorting his way into the protective vegetative canopy of green. Soon we sit like voyeur peas in a pod, waiting for old man death to dismount the Wildcat. To step on the dirt that is his backyard.

Around the corner of the house comes the old fuck. Arizona jeans and all dressed in alligator skin: boots and hat and duster. He stops, clasps hands together and stretches his body like a lanky old ally cat towards the heavens. I swear, the crack of rib reverberates across Sunset Heights.

That the devil man?
In flesh.

The old fuck looks about, tiger-like, scanning darkly this backyard domain. From the shadow of basement door comes the dog. Emerging from downunder. Snout breaks shadow and wet black nose catches sunlight, an umpire on a field catching sunrays with big leather glove.

I start to open mouth, to warn my friend, when Remy taps my foot and shakes his head, letting me know to stay cool, to control energy.

The old fuck below seems to see the dog. He sits upon the dirt in a half Lotus position. The dog slips the doorway, slips time across the yard to stand in front of the old fuck, who reaches with a gentle hand to scratch the canine’s ears. The dog places two paws on the old fuck’s lap, lays down and rolls over to have belly scratched. I can’t hear the old man, his voice too soft to carry signal across the space between sidewalk tree and his position in the yard.
Demon spells, I whisper. This old fuck is some type of devil or channels some type of wicked charming hoodoo. What the fuck. How might I show the dog that she lives dead center of a spell of enthrallment.

We’ll have to go into the basement.

Through the portal?

That dog ain’t coming out sua sponte. We’ll have to go in. Maybe hit the dog with a tranquilizer dart and carry him out.

You got one?

What do you think?

The old fuck rises and dusts off his ass, pats the dog on the head and walks into the house. The dog returns to the basement, tail disappearing into black pit.

We shimmy down the tree and retrograde down the alleyways, returning to the park and back up on the bars again. I tell Remy about last night. Esperanza catching me with bolt cutters in hand, the sound of trains and diesel engine breaks and rain, even about the den of werewolves in my back alley. True, I’ve never seen a werewolf, but of their existence in my neighborhood I feel quite certain.

The warrior spirit shines inside you little brother, says Remy hanging from his feet, inverted in the gravity well, a blood and bone suspension of traumatic events. All the details you see and speak of, that’s the things keeps a warrior spirit alive.

So Esperanza still calls the shots, says Remy. Your balls haven’t grown much since we met.
Remy holds himself up by one arm, and gesticulates with two fingers how little my balls have grown. It’s an impressive display of power. He seems to defy gravity, not even Kryptonite could make Remy come back to Earth.

On what date do we sally forth into battle, to rescue the dog, I say? We can call it D-Day. Hang with Remy a while, little brother, purify yourself. Then we’ll go forth like holy fucking locust, purifying and sanctifying the planet just a bit more, reduce the net sum of suffering. We’ll be a fucking divine Kamikaze wind sent to scatter holy flame from coast to coast – sea to shining sea. Little brother, just hang with Remy.

XXXIII

The sky above fully phases from dawn twilight to deep blue daylight. A fat blonde boy plays tag with a skinny dark Mexican girl. They run across the green park grass, laughing and giggling, they see me and Remy, we swing, hang above the Earth. We hang in a state of suspension. A compound him and I, an explosive compound primed for liberation. Like Remy always talks about.

Beautiful, says Remy. Aren’t they pure and beautiful? They don’t know where the milk comes from. Take them on a field trip to a dairy farm and they’d never drink milk again.

I’m looking at a little girl who scoops up sand, puts it in a bucket, carries it to her sister. Her bronzed skin contrasts with her white dress. I grip the monkey bar tighter in fear of those huge brown eyes pulling me off the bar, bringing me down to Earth.

I miss my little girl, I say. She’s only been a few hours with her psychotic mother, but if feels like a few months. Time is frying pan. Everything we love a yummy clear olive oil in which
we crisp. Senay with her mother learns to turn off, channel out. Last time she stayed a week with her Mom she came home looking like a zombie, like one of those Sunday morning zombies, incapable of speech. Or humor. My dog’s got a great sense of humor. It’s a sure sign of intelligence. Especially emotional intelligence and if more of that existed in the world we’d be done with fucknut despots, dictators and corporate accountants.

Suffer not the children, says Remy, someday, they’ll sit at the right hand of Jesus, but only after the purification, the bloodletting, the day we make the cities burn and the cornfields crackle in fire. And Senay will be home soon. A week slips by quick.


I’m thinking of the old fuck and my neighbor, the dog. Remy, I say, you’re a crazy son of a bitch. But I must thank you for helping me get my neighbor friend, the dog in need of rescue.

Anytime. This is what us Animal Liberation Front generals do, the orchestration of resources and force in the interest of reducing the net sum of misery on Earth. But you got to be patient Johnnie. I’m driving out to Mexico tonight. Upon my return, we liberate your sentient buddy. Stick with me and I’ll show you a ghost, a spirit moving to and fro upon the beaches, between the skyscrapers and walking on concrete paths in Central Park. The zeitgeist of apathy and gotta get mine.

The sun burns hot, I’m breaking a sweat and my arms feel like lead. I drop back to the Earth. See you at mass, I say.

The little girl with the brown eyes smiles and I smile back, as best I can.

Minds and hearts, says Remy. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.
A battle is best fought cold, I say. I know. The archer, who fires an arrow on the battlefield as if standing in her backyard, reposing after a strenuous workout on tall punching bags, never misses the target. I should chill and avoid warfare since any conflict between Miriam and I ultimately equates to a stressful environment for Senay.

Now you’re thinking with your noggin.

I’d best return to Esperanza. I’ve an appointment with a recruiter.

XXXIV

I walk away from the gorilla on the bar and the angel with the sand bucket, make my way back to my Aztec Goddess and my Lunar Dog.

Hold up, yells Remy. I almost forgot. Follow me to the lair a minute. I’ve something to give you.

Remy drops off down and we make our way to the lair. A few block slip by and we stand before a door in an alleyway, leading into a small room adjoined by kitchenette and bathroom containing a small shower. This room, dug into the mountains gut, is part of the basement of the house above. Stepping inside, the smell of incense overwhels me. A bed with a purple comforter possesses one corner of the space and a metal desk taken from an old naval vessel lurks in the other corner. Flyers hang from the walls, not an inch of concrete left exposed.

You added on many a flyer, I say. Better hope an FBI agent don’t come peeking through your window.
They’re not simply flyers, he says. Not simple paper and ink. They are weaponry. A tool by which we attempt to win over the hearts and minds of America. And when that fails we fall back on bolt cutters and balaclavas. When you gonna join?

Esperanza won’t let me.

Your dick will grow at least an inch if you cut skin and take an oath consummated in blood.

You have some issues. Let me give you my shrink’s phone number. Maybe you can bang her, you being single and all.

I’ve got issues? I’m not the one drinking cow puss, eating the shit scraped off slaughter house floors, wearing a Mary Kay death mask. We’re not the radicals. Mainstream, middle class America has become radical in their obsession with material wealth.

You’ve a point. But I’m not sure about sanctioning the use of force to impose your politics on the population.

Not the population in general, but organizations and individuals practicing torture and violence on our fellow sentient brothers and sisters.

Still, if it’s acceptable to you, then you can’t bitch when someone else does it to you. The structure breaks down.

Look, follow your heart. You want to save your dog friend? Then you help me so I can help you.

Remy walks over to the desk, pulls a knife with a hilt made of obsidian.

Give me your palm, he says.

I offer it and he passes the razor sharp blade over skin. Blood pours out in the passing wake of the metal’s edge. He turns the blade to his own palm and sweep across palm leaves a
trail of red liquid. He clasps my hand in shake and our blood mingles. Crazy Remy and I, comrades in arms and blood brothers dedicated to the rescuing the oppressed. De opresso liber. Special forces are we.

From another drawer, Remy conjures up a wade of white gauze and tape. He wraps my palm in gauze and secures it with tape, repeats the process for himself. Steps back, beaming in admiration of growing ALF by one more member, a new digit on its hand. And – score one for Remy – an agent already trained in the arts of death, destruction and deception. All things that go boom, bam, kaboom. Things that send shrapnel in the air or supersonic lead down range.

Welcome aboard, he says.

I feel as if I’ve just boarded a nuclear sub, I think to myself, imagining penguins scattering into the water as this big ICBM loaded sub cracks the ice and comes surfacing a todo madre. The skipper appears on deck with a pair of binos, shakes his head in dismay and orders the diving bell be rang immediately. Dive! Dive Dive! Under the ice goes the boat. Running in silence through the North Pacific. I’ve gone under the surface. Gotten myself into dragon-inhabited waters.

Remy opens a closet in the back wall of the room. Pulls a shoestring dangling in the dark and a fluorescent light bulb clicks on with a flicker and a hum, sodium light filling the subspace of this room. Within I see uniforms hanging from a long wooden pole. Naval uniforms from Remy’s warfighter days at sea. When he fought for the system.

My phone vibrates against my cock. Pardon, I tell Remy.

_DumbsaintMindtrain:_ How goes the workout?

_Me:_ All done. Arms sore as fuck. I’ll be home in a few.
I meant to give this to you last week, says Remy. When I was a kid, these things really kept imagination on fire. It’s the reason I learned to rebuild a 350 at age of twelve.

XXXV

An official plastic blue Matchbox-car case shimmers before my pupils. He rests it in one palm and opens up the lid to reveal the universe within. To reveal shiny miniature collectible cars. I’m hypnotized, but not so I fail to see three more boxes at rest on the closet floor.

Stop with the drooling, he says. These are for Senay.

Of course. And looks like it falls incumbent upon me to teach her the Tao of matchbox-car play.

I stare into the closet again, wondering what models and colors reside in those beautiful blue cases, when a white collar, dangling from a clothes hanger, captures my gaze. A collar of priesthood. It drips from the cylindrical surface of a green plastic hanger, hovering above Matchbox car-cases, seems to glow in the closets twitchy sodium light.

I point with gauzed hand towards the collar and all it represents. Lock eyes with Remy. He turns to follow my motion, looking vulnerable for the first time, turns back to face me. I nod my head in Colombian fashion at the collar, emitting a non-verbal query.

You were a Chaplain, I say?

Somethings you don’t need to be knowing, little brother.

What? I told you about getting my balls shaved that one time at the Rakkasan barracks where Jimmy Hendrix used to live and now you want to leave your closet skeleton dangling in space, instead of dancing a touch of grey for your comrade in arms? That’s not copasetic.
It was the dog farms made me quite. In Wunhua District. Not the slaughtered ones. The ones being forced to witness, crying and whimpering in fear. They howl together when the wood board comes down. Look at my scrapbook, little brother.

I browse through forty-two pages of pictures, dogs being slaughtered at a market and lines of text, his coping with things seen through a window, trapped in a room, waiting.

Took me seven days to take and photograph. Come take a walk with me, little brother. Come see through my eyes, through the bedroom window above the night market in old town Taipei.

We walk down a street, enveloped in the embrace of night which always makes a downtown district softer around the edges, coats concrete high-rise corners in rubber Crayola, sometimes even gives the city a mystical aura. This place, buildings rising several stories on both sides, plastered signs written in Hokkien, is a mystical place and place of mystics. Herb vendors selling chemicals found nowhere else on Earth, DNA sequences peculiar to the sleepy dragon come awake now. Food stalls lining streets closed off for the opening of night market. Motorcycles and bicycles parked in front of temporary blue tarps set up to cover wares of trade.

Quite what, I say? What did you quite?

You’ll see me soon enough. Be patient.

All these colors and light blind the mind. Come now comrade! Pray tell something not formerly pray told. What did you run from?

The seals and the whole profession of arms. I went pacifist for a time. Vegan and everything. Come take a walk with me amid the market Xi Chang.

On down the street we stroll.
Hungry much, asks Remy? Let me buy you a bowl of mee sua. Maybe we get lucky and find some oysters swimming around with those noodles. Then we can go find me.

We stop at a food stall beneath a tall vertical sing shooting three stories up. Remy speaks in Hokkien so I don’t catch a single word. Then he takes me through the taste sensation of mee sua, nice and steaming hot on the chilly streets.

It’s a bit brisk out, I say.

Typical weather this time of year, he says.

We finish off and make way around the block, moving through a flowing crowd of shoppers and midnight munchers. Coming around the block takes us into daylight across an open field; the city picks up again on the other side.

Remy points to a window in a third floor apartment. And within I see Remy’s face, unshaven and haggard looking, sleep deprived. He looks down at us and points a finger to a pickup on the road next to the empty field. A dog sits in back of the truck, shaking and whimpering, in obvious fear of something. In linked chains on the ground next to the pickup sit five dogs. A blood curdling screaming howl breaks into the air and the dog in the tuck and the five in chains pick up a mournful howl.

In front of the truck a boy of about thirteen drags a dog on a rope to stand before a man in dirty slacks and shirt covered by a leather apron. He swings a large wooden board. The dog falls stunned under the blow. The man yells at the boy whose face turns pale and white at the sound of wood on bone.

The old man is telling him to pass the knife, says Remy.

The boy tosses the knife at the old man and yells back.
The boys says he didn’t want to see this or participate, says Remy. But his father wants him to help out at the family meat market.

That bites, I say.

The old man picks up the knife in a flurry of market dust. Cursing, I imagine, to every god in the Chinese pantheon. Then drops on top of the stunned dog, now laying on his side in a puddle of drool. Drives the blade into the dog’s neck. The dog convulses but summons the last of his life force to rattle his killer just enough to spin and place jaws over wrist. Catches a life vein and blood flies everywhere, both his and that of human.

The old man screams, and from the shadow of a building awning comes running two men. Directly behind them comes bolting a big Saint Bernard, breaks right and heads out for the freedom of field. One of the running men stops running to pick up a head-sized stone. Stone between legs, he stumbles up to where the neck stabbed dog and old man lay in the dirt, the dog’s jaws locked in a death clamp and the old man writhing in pain.

The guy with the stone is telling the old man on the ground to stay still so he can kill the dog, says Remy.

The man lifts the heavy stone above his head to the sky and brings it down like a man bringing iron bar down from a clean and jerk. The stone hits target and the loud crunch of skull and jawbone tsunami across the marketplace. Then a moment of silence before the boy screams, and turns running across the field and away from the marketplace buzz.

That boys gonna need counseling, I say.

Walking across the field comes Remy. The escaped Saint Bernard, rescuer of avalanche victims, walking beside my comrade. The boy walks beside him. They speak together in Hokkien but across the distance the signal travels too feint for human ear.
I thought you were up in that room, I query?

That was yesterday, he says.

Now you’re here?

Not very often anymore.

The Remy on the field approaches the assassins, who start the process of skinning the hide off the dog. The dog in back of truck and those chained together pick up a howl. Remy stands direct in front of the killers’

I’m asking them to stop what they’re doing and never again take an innocent life. I tell them dogs only feel. Imagine the pain they inflict on those sentient beings.

They scowl, brandish knives and yell at Remy. The old man points at his son, telling him something.

The men are threatening to skin me next and the old man is ordering his son to assist him else he may no longer live in the house. Now, I’m telling them to back down and that I will now release the chained dogs.

I see Remy make his way towards the dogs in chains. One of the men leaps in front of him and poke a cheap knife at his chest. A long blade comes out of the small of Remy’s back, his other hand captures wrist connected to hand around the blade leveled at his chest. Blood bursts out of severed vein. Remy twists the man’s wrist and brings him into the center of his arms, then comes under the man's center of gravity. The man comes off the ground and flies several feet as Remy pushes up with his shoulders.

The second man comes rushing towards Remy. He sends the knife lancing through the air to land dead center between the man’s eyes. Breaking through skull bone and into spongy gray matter. Electrical connectivity forever severed. Dead satellite.
The man with the slit wrist comes behind Remy, who spins and catches him, grabbing his neck and twisting it snaps with a twist. The man falls limp.

Remy grabs the lock securing the chains around the dogs and cuts the rope of the one tied in back of the truck. In a pack forged in trauma, they make way across the field while Remy turns an eye towards the old man previously skinning the felled dog. He walks up to this old man.

He is telling him to get off the dog, says the Remy standing beside.

What comes next, I ask?

The old man starts yelling at Remy and throws his knife with surprising force for a man his age. The blade sticks into Remy’s right thigh, severing no major artery or other blood vessel. Remy stumbles back and winces in pain. Pulls the metal from flesh and limps his way up to the old man. Produces a zip tie from his pocket, grabs the old mans’ right arm and starts to spins him around. The old man, quicker than imaginable, snaps out with yellow teeth and bites deep into Remy’s hand. Remy reaches out with his free hand and snaps the old man’s head violently backwards. His jaws unhinge and he drops to the ground like a bag of chicken bones.

The boy watches. Seeing his father fall summons tears to his eyes and he begins to shake, emotions gone haywire. He comes screaming and charging at Remy in process of recovering his knife. Remy spins to see the running boy fall into his knife, eyes go wide and then the light fades away. Remy pushes the boy gently off his knife. Falls onto the dead corpse in a long wail of no no no.

You were supposed to go home with the dog, screams Remy.

This really fucked you up, I say. You know it wasn’t your fault.
I should of just walked away, says the Remy beside me. How could the fault not be laid squarely at my feet.

You didn’t even see the boy coming.

I took away the rest of his childhood. His motorcycle or car. First rollercoaster. First kiss from a pretty girl or feel up the skirt in a back seat.

I’m sorry, I say.

Let’s go find me yesterday, says the Remy beside me as we walk away from the other Remy carrying a dead adolescent corpse away.

To where do your carry him, I ask?

I stop half across the field, then find an old blanket on the ground and wrap him up. Carry him back to the apartment.

We enter a three story concrete structure and make way down a narrow and ill-lit corridor. The wooden stairwell is old and all the boards cracked. We make wary steps up the portal, into the room where Remy wrote the scrapbook from hell, which he’d allowed me to read.

Five beds fill the room, five metal lockers, five metal footlockers, five metal chairs, one table and an old analogue television. Four one hundred and seventy five watt bulbs radiate the room. An abundance of light waves. As I look about, candles fill each table. Remy sits on a metal chair by a window, staring out at the field below, scribbling notes into what will become his scrapbook. Intermittently, the room fills with howls of fear and pain from the slaughterhouse market below. Remy stops to listen, then scribbles on.

Can take a look see at what you’re writing, I ask the Remy standing beside me?

Sure, what the hell, you’re already inside my head, he says.
I walk stealthy around to peer on the paper Remy holds. He scribbles quickly, then stops a minute. This seems to be his rhythm.

*Delphi and Kelleher have not returned from The National Taiwan University Hospital. So I don’t have the compound. Dresdner and Lujan never came back from following the Wulai River upstream. Maybe the Atayal turned them in for cash. So I don’t have the root. Remy looks up from his journal.*

*Let’s take a walk down across the mountain trail to the natives. I’ll show you Johnny. Wanna see what five men came to die for?*

*We’re slipping time, moving across a high mountain ridge and the sun’s on the downlow, slipping gracefully beneath the horizon to make room for sister moon.*

*This is Kelleher here beside me, he can’t hear you because he probably died out here going back for the root, the herb. The natives say that a tribe way out in a valley in Xin Jiang region.*

*Rumors say they live in a valley where grows this root, symbiotic with a native tree. They say these people who eat the root live to be a hundred and fifty and can still move like mountain goats.*

*If we can get it, it’s worth big money to a pharmaceutical company, says Remy. Personally, I’d just like to find this valley and live tribal for a while. Have a wife and daughter. Build a house and call it the Ponderosa of love.*

*How are you talking to me?*

*It’s channeling, little brother. Your mind opens up and in I come like a berserker locomotive.*
The dogs keep howling. What the fuck in human nature blinds these people from feeling the pain of my sentient friends dying in the marketplace?

I’ve not slept for three days now. The screams keep me up. So I light candles every night. Lots of candles because this place is not a market – it’s a burial ground. Every night will now be approached as a funeral

This is the last night. All the candles are lit and a dead boy is on my bed. I didn’t want to bloody up anybody else’s bed so I gave him mine. The blood from the knife wound never coagulated so my mattress is soaked. I’m striking out tonight to return the boy to his mother and then I’ll make way across the countryside, back to Shanghai. There I’ll find the first freighter striking out Eastbound across the Pacific. Back to California. Then beer and puntang and English words.

I look up from the pages to see a dark window, candles light filling the room, incense swirling over a bed where lies a dead boy in eternal repose. The screaming of dogs stops at night. I return to page.

One time some fuck cracked a skull at one in the morning and woke me up. After that, no more dreamtime for Remy.

I walk away from Remy by the window, now understanding much more the psychosis of my favorite neighborhood friend. I stand back beside Remy to watch Remy by the window rise from the chair, take the boy gently in his arms and disappear through the open doorway.
Remy, I say. Should we follow?

Yes, little brother, he says. It’s your trip so come look see.

We move behind Remy carrying the boy and snake through narrow night market streets.

I remember seeing this boy around the market place, says Remy beside me. He was always selling bread or something else his mother would give him to hawk on the street. One time I saw him up on a balcony reading a book. So I think I can find the door to that apartment.

We follow Remy into a building and up to the fourth floor. He knocks on the doorway. A woman half the age of the old assassin answers the door. She looks as if she was about to say hello, but stops and peers closer at the face of the boy in Remy’s arms. Then comes the scream and she falls to her knees. Remy moves past her and into the apartment. Lays the boy on a sofa near the window.

Several neighbors pour into the apartment to see why the lady is screaming. Now she turns to Remy and speaks to him.

She asks me what happened to my son, says Remy beside me. I lie and tell her I found him and his father murdered in the market place. Where the dogs die. She asks me why I didn’t call the police and I say I don’t know. Now the lady is calling the police. You see?

Remy by the dead boy steps out into the night, onto the patio overlooking the market. He pulls out a Lucky Strike and it lights up with the flash of a match. He takes a long drag and a cloud of embers swirl around the cigarette. The sound of sirens this way coming roll up from the merchant streets below. He takes a long last pull and beats a quick path to the front door. In all the commotion no one takes note of his leaving.

I think we should let me go, says Remy. You’ve been her long enough. Go home. Back the traumas in your own head.
How about some soup first, I suggest?

Ok, says Remy.

We stop for another bowl of steaming hot mee sua and, fortune smiling, we find oysters swimming around in the soupy broth, frolicking alongside noodles.

When did you stop being a chaplain, I say?

After I realized that no amount of prayer can change human nature.

Neither can a rifle.

True. But at least it can prevent those who refuse to change from harming those who embrace it and choose to care for their sisters and brothers. Regardless of specie.

After we finish our hot soups, Remy’s face takes a somber tone. Got lots of things to do before my trip to Mexico, you better go back to Esperanza now, little brother.

Remy is not a subtle machine. Picking up on the hint, I excuse myself, inject myself like gasoline into fuel injectors, back into the asphalt, returning to the alleyway encircling Remy’s lair, one of many nodules of the freedom network of the A L F. I walk away, heading back to the arms of Esperanza and the laughter of Senay.

XXXVI

Strolling past the Sunset Heights Grocer, I spy Mida Nuba entering the store doors with two six packs. This, I determine, might constitute a hostile act on part of Mida, may be a treaty breaker, declaration of war. He should be carrying product out of the store, not the contrary. I must go inside and assess the situation, up close and personal.

Into the grocer I step.
Greetings Mida, I say, catching him at the counter, awaiting the sex-goddess proprietor.

America emerges from the dark merchant shadowy back area of the store. Possibly a space reserved for storage of end items; a jar of peaches consisting of sugar, guar gum, fumaric acid and peaches. Never assume a jar of peaches contains peaches. Always read the label. America wears a mini skirt today. Black with gray pinstripes and a white tank top.

How do you do today, pipes back Mida.

Soaking up sunshine and hanging off monkey bars.

Ahhh, I see. This morning you do the workout.

What do you have there, I say, pointing at the beverages he carries?

I started brewing soda last month and decided today to offer my soda pop to the lovely Mrs. America, in hopes she would be so willing to offer my product in her store. It will be of mutual benefit to us both, says Mida, smiling and nodding at America.

Funny thing this circumstance. I’m bringing a sample of my soda this evening as well. Also in hopes of getting my artifacts – not products – on the shelf. My bottles contain carefully crafted balances of sassafras, cane sugar from Jamaica, carbonated mineral water and a sprinkle of carrageenan. So tell me America, what would you prefer, a product or an artisan’s artifact made real in bubbly pop?

Mrs. Tirado smiles from behind the counter. Comes sauntering around the register to stand before us with hands on hips, weight shifting to one leg. She scratches a knee and her skirt rides up to reveal a tattoo. An image of Jesus.

We’re all marketeers. Are we not? It may not be a product you offer, Johnny Leadfeather, but you still need to sell it. Otherwise, what’s the point of putting it on my shelf? Furthermore, whether it be a widget or a poem, the public decides what they want to consume. De we agree?
Alright, I say. Your logic is irrefutable. And you’re holding the cards because this is your store.

I’m talking to you as well, she says, looking hard at Mida.

Yes yes yes. I agree to the terms of your contract, he says.

Tomorrow, comes a carnival to town. The boss is an old friend of mine. She agreed to set up in the Heights for one night. A magical night. They’ll make use of the parking lot at the University of Texas at El Paso for the larger rides that won’t fit within the neighborhood. A midway will stretch down the street and into the city park a block away. That’s where the entrance will be. From there, the midway will continue four blocks down to my Grocer and the park across the road. Dakota Bueller never fails to keep a promise and she swore to place a main attraction in front of the Grocer. Said it’d be a positively mystical experience. Boys, this represents a marketing bonanza for you both. Then we allow the public to choose who makes the better… thingy.

And by what metric do we measure success, I ask.

Depends. Wanna go qualitative or quantitative, she queries?

I suggest quantitative, says Mida. In the interest of reducing ambiguity.

Ambiguity is the cornerstone of mystery, I say. Take that away and what’s the point of living? We’d all be like fucking Yahweh, knowing everything – nothing left to learn. Which would reduce us to machinery. Cogs in a biological system. And everything would be the same because everyone would know the same things. No change means energy death. Entropy. The whole race busted in a game of blackjack.

Passionately stated, says America.
Impractical, says Mida. Imagine the time needed to take surveys. People come to a
carnival to be entertained. Not fill out marketing surveys. I suggest we simply set the metric as
number of bottles of soda sold from start to finish time of the carnival.

Boys, says America. I suggest men and women of good faith come to the table and strike
up an accord. Mida brings up a good point. Number of units sold is a rock solid and practical
method. Tried and true and we are talking business here. And Johnny’s argument also holds
water. Or should I say soda pop. If his artifacts are as mystical and fuzzily bubbly mystery
summoning as he claims, then every time a patron pops a top, they might be so inspired they’d
be willing to stop in the middle of a midway and answer a few questions. Therefore, I suggest we
combine the two paradigms. I will accept both cash receipt of a unit sold as well as surveys
signed by willing patrons. Gentlemen, do we agree?

Yeap, I say.

Where do I sign for our agreement, says Mida?

Spit shake, I say?

Amazingly, sexy America spits dead into her palm and offers her hand. Mida looks
confused. I hack a good one into my right palm and a smacking squishy sound booms from our
merging palms.

To keep you happy Mr. Nuba, says America. I’ll draft a letter of agreement for all parties
to sign.

No no no. I trust both you and my good friend Johnny, he says. I do not suppose a written
contract is necessary. I do not, however, want to spit shake either.

Very well then, says America. It’s a bit gross, but an American tradition. I used to do it
with my friends as a little girl.
My phone vibrates. This device, I consider as I pull it out, allows me to exist simultaneously in separate timelines.

_DumbsaintMindtrain: Where are you? You’re taking forever._

_Me: I’ll be home in 5._

_DumbsaintMindtrain: You said that 5 ago._

_Me: Apple ologies. Mida and I are competing to sell soda at the Grocer._

_DumbsaintMindtrain: Sound like trouble at the old Ponderosa._

I look up from my phone to see Mida walking through the front door, out into the street. He waves and I return the gesture. America watches me from behind the register and I’m beginning to get this awkward feeling.

_Apologies to you America, I say. People text non-stop these days. Its neverending. All the code sailing through the atmosphere. Then again, stories are being told, spilt into the sky. A sea of stories. That can’t be an entirely bad thing. Right? I’ve written some of my best lines of poetry in text messages._

_America moves across the floor to a corner where sits a grill, antique refrigerator from the forties, a counter on which to prepare food, heat lamps above a glass enclosed stainless steel unit to keep food warm, shelves full of condiments and a port hole shaped window not original to this structure. The portal draws me in._

_XXXVII_

_Through the windows of the mighty Chinook in which I ride sky, keeping ahead of angry storm fronts, the jungles below roll out beneath the twin blades pushing the craft up against_
gravity. Steam pours up out of the great green ocean below. Comes rising up in clouds of mist under the intense glare of a noonday sun.

Darien Province, an expansive mass of vegetation separating the Colombian and Panamanian borders. For reasons of paranoia, Mama-mind-fuck never built a road connecting the two countries. So this area remains triple-canopy virgin jungle, a green barrier reef wedged tightly between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. A strip of asphalt runs through the tree line, not so far below. We fly nap of the Earth in tactical mode. Banking port to starboard and starboard to port above rivers and mango tree and black palm covered hilltops.

The big windy pushes on through the morning, myself all relaxed and snuggled up against the alloy fuselage membrane, this bird of transport taking me down dark river. This chopper functions like a cell, I think. Keeps the jungle free from all the infections I might inject into its biomass. Western culture and all.

My stomach knots up a bit as the helicopter hits an air pocket and I’m weightless in free fall. Looking out the window, I see monkeys in a tree. Petite Howler monkeys with mouths open, emitting a bellow that belongs to a nine hundred pound gorilla. I can’t hear from my seat in the big windy, but I’ve been close to them in the jungle.

Of a sudden, I’m looking up, not at a cockpit, but two monkeys in a tree. Howler monkeys belting out grizzly punk rebel yells, bellowing sounds reverberating and rattling around tree trunks and white water bends, shaking all three canopies for miles around. It’s a humbling experience. To stand beneath these beasties and acknowledge each other with a warrior’s nod, say cool runnings brethren and move on and out into the great green mass.

And on and out I march. Keeping pace count so as not to lose time in the jungle. Without time, I’m unable to measure distance. So I keep careful accounting of timing. Counting every
beat of my left foot, till the count strikes eight-two. Then I tick off a black bead on a string of five-fifty cord attached to my load-bearing vest. A hundred meters behind and seven more to go till I find the next point somewhere among fruit and nut trees standing over carpet of fecal matter. Fertilizer for ripe jungle dirt.

Ahead on the trail comes walking Tennessee. Looking a bit worse off than me. Uniform ripped in several places and some shallow lacerations decorating his arms and left cheek. Some will become like tattoos, bearing witness of an intimacy with the dirt and soil and green mass. An intimacy that non-infantry POGs (Personnel Other than Grunts) will never feel. Tennessee comes closer still. Smiles, not out of joy or anything, but simply because someone is sharing in his misery.

I imagine us like two mountain men coming across a pass, stopping to say hello. And I think of Zeppelin and white summer black mountain. The spark of calloused fingers strumming chords on a cold morning mountaintop. Sending signals to the heavens, fuck them stars – got more light in a guitar riff – at the tip of my finger. We are here, we exist, and we will live. Fuck off, you big nothing. Put down your chubby little finger for a while. Chill. Even you gonna die. After all, the universe is expanding.

Greetings, I say.

Found all your points, he inquires?

Got three and two to go.

Me to. What point you looking for?

I pull out map and point at a dot. Read the eight-digit grid coordinates.

People been looking for that point today and shooting blanks. Its somewhere really close to the lake.
Close to Kaman and really big fucking snakes.

That’s another way to see it.

That’s what the fuck it is. What you mean by “see it”.

Whatever man. That’s the last point I got to find. Want to go it together?

Fuck it. Let’s go forth to slay this fucknut of a beast.

Whatever man.

And we march away, after I pull my compass up close to my heart and cast an azimuth, beautiful magnetic Gaia sending me sweet geomagnetic pulses, telling which way to walk, which angle to play, and we’re off to slay the wizard. Down a trail we move. Passing this big rock formation to the right.

Kuna grass, he says, pointing ahead at center of trail. That’s a big mass of it. Wanna box around?

I hate boxes, I say. Its only about ten meters of the green stuff. Let’s just go over the top. What you say?

He nods and we start making way over grass so tall and stiff it forms a platform. But you never know how stable it will be under combat booted foot. So we move with caution.

Of a sudden the Earth gives way beneath my feet. I’m in free fall, which means the planet is about to smack my ass for some indiscretion on my part. At least, my ass maintains intermittent contact with the grass as I slide on down this slope of green, hoping to God this hill don’t lead to a cliff. I hit a bump and my Kevlar, hanging on my canteen pouch, rolls one-way and I another as Tennessee above yells out.

Leadfeather, you all right?
I come sliding up to an edge. You know you’re coming to an edge, to an end, when the shadows give total surrender to bright white nothing. My eyes focus and I see I’m sliding towards a cliff. And therefore must commit an act acknowledged as universally unsafe: to reach out and grab a tree or branch without a careful examination so as to determine the existence or nonexistence of black palm thorns. Nasty critters that contain a toxin. They’ve evolved a particular strategy. The thorns are very brittle. You can try and pull the thorns from your flesh, but odds are, it breaks apart under your skin. A surgeon’s knife can’t remove all those tiny particles. They will swim in your blood till you die. The ultimate revenge of the black palm. Vindictive bastard.

Cliff edge coming up in seconds, I reach out my left hand at last second to grasp a branch. With a jolt my body stops, feet dangling out in open space, the jungle surface a couple hundred meters below the cliff edge. I take a breath and laugh hysterically a few seconds.

What the fuck you doing down there, shouts out Tennessee from above somewhere?

I’m picking up my balls. That’s what I’m doing. My feet are hanging off a cliff and the deck must be a couple hundred meters below. Wheeeew!

Hey, all right, wait a minute, he says in a tremulous tenor. Hold on and don’t move. Let’s figure out how to get you up. Staff Sergeant Arzola is gonna kick my ass if you die and shit. Just stay calm! Stay calm!

Yah man, I say. You sound real calm there Tennessee. If you were air traffic control and I a pilot coming in blind through ice and snow, I’d request a new pattern.

All right man, now stop with the geek talk, you’re making me nervous. I’m trying to figure this out!
Goddamn calm the fuck down. I’m just gonna crawl back up. Just stay put and I’ll be right there.

I pull my feet up and away from the edge of that daylight abyss in which somewhere rests my Kevlar. An image of my angry squad leader demanding a signed statement of charges comes quickly to mind. Strange the things come flying into a mind stressed, feet hanging over a cliff, brain moving out to deep space.

Looking up, I find another branch to grasp, examining cautiously for thorns. Gloved right hand clasps onto the branch and I pull myself up the slope of the hill, meter by meter, hand over hand, pushing my legs against tree trunks when possible. I lose track of time and let my mind wander.

Up on a rooftop. The concrete towers of downtown Bogotá on the horizon and a sea of houses, mostly three stories or so in all directions. My back against unpainted cinder blocks forming some type of greenhouse structure in which grow tomatoes and onions and cilantro and Belki the dog calls it home when the family kicks her out of the living room for stealing scraps off abandoned dining room table plates.

Tu vas a estar bien. Tu vida esta llena con gente que te quieren, que te protegen. Y cuantas mujeres no van a querer estar cerca a ti?

But all I want is you.

Que?

Que te voy a estranar. Muchisimo.

Aquí voy a estar!

No. “Aquí” no vas a estar. Tu vives en tu cabeza y los catedrales de tu mente estan viajando un camino donde yo no puedo andar. Esa tierra no es para mis pies.
She hugs me close and my eyes shut tight to feel nothing but a perfect radiant sun warming my face, making glow the artificial night behind my eyelids. Then I feel a kiss across my eyelid. Warm lingering lips in eternal contact with my skin. The moisture of her lips, perfection. I’m still lost in that moment. I never left and will live there forever, in that moment of sunlight… …Panama skies tickle my nose, the sun having slightly shifted in the sky, peeking around a different frond.

My eyes open to take in the jungle beneath my feet. The cliff and abyss lost from sight below. Still waiting and hungry for fresh meat. I close my eyes again, feeling a bit of vertigo. Jumping out of airplanes and helicopters doesn’t bother me, but cliffs and precipices make me nervous.

Leadfeather, yells out Tennessee! I can see you now! Whooooa shit! You was all quiet and I thought maybe you fell through the Kuna grass!

I open peepers to look into bright blue Tennessee eyes. Angelic now in the blue backdrop of Panama sky. A surreal combination. Somehow, Tennessee seems more a part of this place than the all the Kaman and Python Bushmasters.

Give a brother a hand, I say, crawling up the last few meters and stretching up a hand.

Tennessee is substantially larger than I. He pulls me off the slope and back on my feet standing on the trail again. I dust myself off and pull out a canteen. Take a long swig of the warm water. I assess the situation, realizing we walk along a ridgeline and are therefore not where we thought, since the map shows no cliff the dimensions of what I almost fell into. No abyss on the map less than a klik or more away.

Look here, I say, pulling out map. That hole that almost ate my ass, there is nothing like that nearby. But there is two kliks over. So I think we’re actually in a total different grid square.
How the fuck man? No way!

Look for yourself. I’m sitting down to eat some chow after that harrowing near death experience.

It was just a little fall down some Kuna grass.

Really? Next time you take point.

Tennessee studies the map. Paces about. Stares intently at major terrain features nearby. Finally, turns to look me grimly in the eyes and shakes his head wisely.

You’re right, he says. We’re at least two kliks away from where we thought we were. How the fuck? I found four points so how could I be so lost? I was dead on track. Even backtracked at one point to find my smokes left by a tree. I found them. So how the fuck can I be so lost?

He sits down and pulls out an MRE. Opens it up. Pulls out the Mexican galletas and eats them in two bites. Then he goes for the cheese and jalapenos, spreading the cheese on thick between two big crackers. Making a kind of processed cheese sandwich. I’m imagining how many grams of fat and cholesterol must be loaded into the few bites already consumed by this Jolly Green Giant. Who, coincidentally, really is from Tennessee. He speaks with a pleasant deep-south accent.

An infantryman is never lost, I say. Merely, disoriented. I’ve no fucking clue. But we’ll find a way out of this big green trap.

Right we will, he says. The whole land navigation site isn’t more than a few kliks.

True, but… I hate to be the voice of pessimism, but, unfortunately, the navigation course is adjacent to the beginning of the rest of the Darien province, which is nothing but jungle all the
way to Bogotá, Colombia. Get it? Potentially, a person could get lost out here for months. Years if you’re a complete idiot or not possessed of survival skills or training. Get it?

All right, he says. Then let’s get oriented. Let’s find some high ground and see if we can terrain orient back to familiar territory.

That’s the first intelligent thing come out of your mouth since we crossed trails today. I say we turn right up the side of this ridge and try and find a hilltop. And by the way, if tree climbing becomes a necessity, I’m not gonna be the climber. I never even climbed trees as a kid and I hate heights.

So what’s up with all the badges?

To jump out of planes and helicopters you just make it to the doorway and throw yourself into the gentle breezes of fate. Whatever happens will happen. Tao and all. One spider bite while climbing tree, you lose grip and splat. Your kids are collecting a check for half a million wondering why dad was such a moron, climbing up trees and all.

We eat in silence. A bright colored snake comes slithering from the woodline. We politely stand up and move to the other side. Watch the snake move on down the trail. We resume scooping tuna and noodles and chicken cavatelli out our prospective vacuum sealed plastic containers. The sun sits dead noon in the sky. Tennessee and I sit back to back against a noble old tree. Seeking solace in the shadow of tree. Tall and narrow trunk. I’m finished and wiping my mouth with a moist towolette provided in a little package inside my MRE.

Ready to roll, I ask, since he finished before I did and now wipes down his M-16?

Sure thing. Up the hill we go. This is gonna suck.

Yeap. We’re totally in the suck.
We turn off the trail and move directly into woodline. I lose my pace-count within fifty-seven meters of crawling under and over tree branches and shrubs and thick vines. We walk, crawl and climb for at least an hour.

As we move up, a breeze comes in stronger with every meter we move against gravity. The air seems to lighten up, the humidity decrease. A hilltop in the jungle feels like an air-conditioned pavilion in which one may repose and enjoy a smoke or piss. Eat a MRE. Maybe even mix up the strawberry shake, if you’re lucky enough to get one.

We break into a clearing at what appears to be a hilltop since all terrain immediately around us now slopes down. We could still be standing on something like a foothill on the side of some taller geography. Visibility is extremely limited. So we’re still unsure. Till I feel a strong gentle breeze sweep across my face. I smile and look around. We may be lost, but at least we found a comfortable hilltop to inhabit. Then I see it.

Dead center of the clearing. A juggernaut of this green mass. A denizen seen a thousand plus years of time flowing through this jungle, seen time done and gone now. Her trunk rises straight up through the canopy, rises above it. No branches adorn her, which is a sure sign of death. The world biggest and oldest dead tree? Maybe, I think to myself. And am suddenly saddened at the thought of this tree.

I look upon the world’s oldest corpse. And this clearing the world’s oldest graveyard. A sacred grove amidst the jungle. I look on in awe and silent reverie. Feeling like I should take a knee or assume a half lotus and meditate. Offer energy and prayer to this ancient sister.

Right then, says Tennessee. Who’s gonna climb the bitch.

Listen fucknut, I say, spinning on my comrade. Have some respect. You stand on the gravesite of the oldest living thing on Gaia!
Who the fuck is Gaia?

Tennessee stands in the clearing with a slack-jaw stupid look on his face. It comes to me that my comrade is not well read or familiar with things not concerning our mutual employer. He doesn’t know what he really serves. Accepting his limitations and our need for cooperation, I lower my voice and sigh in frustration.

Never mind, I say. Look there is absolutely no way I’m climbing that tree. I’ve a real problem with heights.

Relax man, he says. I’ve been scurrying up trees since I can remember. No problemo amigo. Damn! She is a big one though, ain’t she?

Fucking huge. Maybe we should just find a safer tree to climb. Navigate to a different hill. This isn’t the only tree in Panama that pierces the canopy.

Fuck it man! I want to be home tonight, pounding some beers.

All right then. I’ll be on belay.

Roger.

Up the tree goes Tennessee. Like a Howler monkey on speed and blow and yellowjackets. He keeps climbing till I can’t make out details. Just a mass of camouflage moving towards the peak of the tree. The jungle inhales and exhales around me and normal jungle chatter fills my ears. Birds and insects. Distant packs of howler monkey. Sometimes the screech of big cats on the prowl. In many a sense, I think, this place is a wonderland. Too bad my job sucks too much to enjoy it.

A leaf cutter ant drifts directly before my eyes, like a crazy gentle six-legged paratrooper. I go cross-eyed trying to make out the details of his face and antennae. Gently he lands on my
exposed fingers. I pull up my hand to observe the little fellow. He sits on my hand holding a big piece of severed leaf. I walk to the edge of the clearing and gently push him off on a branch.

   Good luck friend, I say.

   Who you talking to, says a voice from behind.

   XLIII

   An Indian boy in shorts and tank top stands at the edge of the clearing, looking curiously at me. On his back rests a backpack. Bursting out the top of his ragged gear protrudes and metal Coca-Cola cooler. Cold vapor pours off the metallic surface and beads of condensations adorn it. The boy dark with piercing black eyes and a round indigenous face.

   Hi little boy, I say.

   I’m not so little anymore, he says. I turned twelve this year. At least I’m big enough not to get lost.

   Easy now. Mayhap we’re a bit disoriented, but “lost” seems a bit harsh.

   L-o-s-t. You two grunts are lost like chicken pills in a storm of wind.

   That’s pretty good. Write poetry?

   No. But I read Spiderman.

   Maybe I contradict myself. Like this place. So can you tell me where we are?

   Yes.

   Will you tell me in which direction might we travel to find a restaurant? Hotel? Bodega with a fresh batch of cevitche?

   I could lead you home like a Sherpa taking home two little lost green lambs.
Well, might you be willing to function as our guide? You seem like a really smart big kid.

Now you trying to flatter. How much dollars you got?

Here or at the bank.

With you here.

I reach into my wallet and produce a twenty, one five and three ones. Hand it to the Indian boy. I have seen him before at training sites, selling sodas and empanadas. But his presence this far out perplexes me.

Where do you live?

In my skin by an old tree by the river. It’s safer there. The big tree keeps the owl and the owl helps me hunt at night. Gives me his eyes and silence. I can’t take you there. It’s my hiding place. But I can take you to the village of my people.

That’d make me eternally grateful.

From the sky fall several large branches from the dead juggernaut. Maybe even a cosmonaut, her branches reaching so far into the heavens. The Indian boy jumps back to avoid falling debris. Scowls and looks angrily up the trunk of the behemoth. Puts down his backpack and wags an angry finger at me.

Why big stupid American climbing tree! This special tree! You never touch Marganai Ampokamala! Never, ever!

Hey, Leadfeather, yells Tennessee from above the canopy. All I see is trees for as far as an eye can see. Is somebody down there with you?

Yap, I’m yelling back. We got us an Indian guide out of here. So come back down without busting your ass. They don’t allow cervezas in the hospital.
Whats a veza?
A beer! How long you been in Panama?
My novia always translates!

The Indian boy looks frustrated. Re-dons his backpack. Then stops. Looks at the cooler and up at me and shrugs his shoulders inquisitively.

So you and big stupid friend want a soda?
Yes! Man I thought you’d never ask.
Cool. I’m cool with lost as fuck GI. Two sodas, two dollars.
Hold on now! I just gave you all my cash, little Sherpa.

You got more MRE?
Yes.

One MRE, one soda.
Deal!

From my rucksack I pull out an Omelet With Ham and extract a Chicken Chow Mein from Tennessee’s ruck. Toss them at the young entrepreneur. He sits Indian style and pulls his cooler across the dirt. Looks up at me, seeming to enjoy the anticipation. From above booms Tennessee coming down the tree at amazing speeds.

Hey man, he says. What the fuck! You about to score soda without me!

The boy looks annoyed and says, your friend already buy for you.

He turns back to the cooler and brushed beads of sweat from the lid. Cold air swirls around the dark skin of his hands. He looks like a magician summoning cold beneath a magic tree. A conjuring of cold and carbonation and the magic formula of coke. Maybe this magus will conjure up an eight ball alongside the coke. Something to keep us going the long haul home.
Whats your name, I query?

Chaitanya.

That don’t sound Kuna, says Tennessee in a moment of clarity.

Shut up stupid big green guy, says Chaitanya. You don’t need to know. Not if you wanna coke and a smile and your ass back home!

All right little…, says Tennessee – I cut him off – big kid, I say – all right, big guy, says Tennessee.

Chaitanya looks pissy but returns his attention to the sacred cold vapor-enshrined cooler. Throws up four latches, huffs a bit separating the weather-strip laced lid from the main cooler chassis. His biceps flex and glisten in sweat as he raises the lid to reveal the contents within. A dozen hour-glass-shaped glass bottles of Coca-Cola, the classic formula, shrouded in cold vapor rising up and around the old school Coke images painted artistically over the cooler surface. Chaitanya’s dark hand enters the vapor zone, seems to vanish inside the cooler’s interior space. And when he resurfaces from below, a bottle with small ice crystals floating around the top, just below the pop-top, glisten in what I realize to be the dwindling light of day. On side of the cooler sits a bottle opener, battleship gray and flat in the light, but with a twist of the wrist of Chaitanya, a pop-top spins and flips through jungle air like Tarzan himself – in fact I swear I hear the thing yodel for a second before landing next to a curious Praying Mantis – boxer type fellow. And with a smirk across his face, the boy offers me a bottle of Coca-Cola.

Frosted glass slides across my palm replacing the weight of M-16. A whirlwind funnel of cold spirals up from the bottle opening. A Texas twister from the desert ranch stables of Coca-Cola. The bottle breathes like a fifth of Tequila surfacing from a five-year slumber. Fizzles,
bubbles coming up from the carbonated bottom. I’m going inside, I think. My lovely and my precious. Been long days out in this field dreaming your fuzzily goodness.

I love, I say to a bubble floating beside me, as I backstroke around the bottle, waving out at Tennessee. The fool can’t even see me. My mouth open, I swim pirouettes and scoop up little coke bubbles and feel them popping inside my mouth. Then by my side swims a beautiful little coke bottle with sexy legs and I’m swimming over to join her, when of a sudden I realize she has the face of Tennessee.

You gonna drink that bottle, or jack it off, says Tennessee?

I’m caught off guard in my moment of reverie by Tennessee and the boy, both looking at me like I’m crazy, which I’m not very much of very often. So I go on and put the bottle up to my lips, allow the bottle to sit there a moment.

Goddamn Leadfeather, you are so gay, says Tennessee. You giving that thing a blow job or…

Shut up stupid fat guy, interjects the boy.

Look now, I’ve had about enough of your smart little ass, says T. I’m about to shove my size fourteen boot so far up your spit fuck ass…

I leap to my feet, now on the verge of a berserker rage.

A goddamn moment alone, you little spitfucks – both of you – little spitfucks – I been eight days in the field – even Yahweh took a fucking break after day seven – and all I wanted at the training site was ONE GODDAMN soda – which of course they was all out of when they got to me – you understand! I’m fucking serious! This is fucking serious! Not bullets or dirt or holes – but this moment, this Goddamn soda-in-the-jungle! So both of you – shut the fuck up! For just
ONE GODDAMN moment! Shut the fuck up and let me drink my Goddamn overpriced Coca-Cola! Just one minute! Shut the fuck up!

Tennessee and the boy sit quite like, waiting for my next move.

Damn, Leadfeather you just had to say the word, says T. You know…

– ahhhh, I say, holding up my hand, demanding silence.

All becomes quiet and so I take a seat and look deeply into my bottle. Raise it again to my lips, which now receive the blessing of an army of corporate logistic experts, marketeers, comptrollers and over paid prima-donna CEOs. I don’t care at the moment as the cool cool glass spins over my lips and down the esophagus goes carbonated heaven. Over the taste buds and down the back of my throat. I bring the bottle down to my lap. Let the cold glass refrigerate my knee.

Now, what where we talking about, I say.

How much more money you got in the bank cause I work overtime after sundown, says Chaitanya.

You know, if you get any lipier, we might pull out some rounds, I say. Accidents do happen in the jungle.

Yeah, and then we’ll just take our chances getting home, says Tennessee.

You got nothing but blank adaptor, says the boy laughing.

I smile, reach into my backpack and display three rounds full metal jacket on my palm. The don’t sparkle or anything in the light. Just sit like dull gray rattle snakes on my palm.

You think I’d come out here unarmed, I ask? Not this Indian.

What tribe you from, he asks.

It’s just a saying, you know, I’m not really Indian, I say.
You look like you got the people’s blood, he says. Not Cuna, but some people’s blood. Wandering people’s blood in your veins maybe.

Yeah, Irish and Saxon.

I smell something else in your blood, he says. You’re a crazy half-breed.

Can we go, I ask? Or you want to make this trek in pitch black and dodge snakes and jaguars and maybe Kaman.

He gets up, shaking the dust off his legs and butt. Maneuvers the cooler onto his back. Wraps a piece of Kaman hide around his scalp. Looks all Apocalypse Now. And I wonder how I mistook this kid for just a little Indian boy selling cokes and empanadas to troops at a training site. How I’d missed all the mystery. Looking around, I soft focus, suck the jungle into my iris and spin it like a fucking centrifuge till some mote in center of conscious integrates it all, like a mason stacking bricks to build up some sacrificial pyre; mystery permeates the leaves and the breeze and even the smell of fecal matter and animal pheromones adrift in the moistening evening air. Electric blue butterflies swarming around the blank adapter on the tip of my rifle barrel. This boy is no longer a boy, but some type of medicine man, curer of poisoned souls. Bearer of herbs and buffalo tendons that can morph machinery back to bone and vascular tissue. A spiritual reverse engineer. I want to follow this boy. See where he lives. How he lives. With what rituals he makes life coherent. And what pieces of the world he has deconstructed and hidden beneath the branches of that sacred tree where he sleeps and pulls out to make poetry, novel meaning, reconnection. I want to go further.

Ok then, he says. You ladies feel safe walking in boots in moon jungle or maybe need lady slippers?
You talk way too much shit, I say. Let’s rock. Catch a good groove along moon lit trails.
Lead the way ranger.

Airborne, he says with a salute.

I’m not an officer, I say. I work for a living. All the way!

Chaitanya heads into the bush. Not on a trail, but where he slides through, trails seem to open up around him. Trees move an inch or so either way. Vines part ways and slide around me. Never a climb or crawl, walking behind this Indian boy. Even wide-bodied Tennessee following in my tracks doesn’t appear to struggle. Maybe this is magic, but I’m a skeptic and chalk it up to muscle memory and extreme harmony with the elements. Natives in the South Pacific can navigate a nocturnal course straighter than a fishing trawler guided by tweaky whirling satellites in orbit. So why can’t this Indian-boy guide take us through dense growth without chopping or hacking at vines? I look behind me and the jungle seems to close up around my path. I’m not so sure where I walk. Or my point of origin on this surreal and magical Cartesian grid. Maybe I’m sliding down the Z-axis.

The moon comes soon to play, peering envious like through triple canopy, her all spinning alone in space. Under light gravity and in a vacuum. Heavy gravity at least poses a challenge. Something to rail and get pissed off about. A reason to fight.

The ocean’s lover is kind tonight, guides our footsteps, makes me feel safer despite the mating call of a jaguar somewhere amidst the life well. Maybe sipping water from a river at this moment, then looking up, catching a scent of gruntburger.

I’ve pulled down ten black beads five times and lost track of time. I just know the moon hangs high and five thousand meters lie behind us. I stop counting and look up at a blue star that winks at me. Looking like the eye of a certain blue dragon I once met while surfing off-planet.
We come out on the precipice of a huge rock mound jutting away from the canopy. It sits majestically high on the side of what might pass for a low mountain – the peak I estimate at over one thousand feet. The rock mound acts as a pier in this sea of green, a mooring for sojourners to rest upon and take bearings, chart new vectors. A watchtower overlooking miles of its domain. We stand on its shoulder and look out in awe at valley below and the campfires glowing beneath the canopy.

Holy shit, says Tennessee. Must be hundreds of Indians down there. Says Chaitanya, your buddies down there are all friendly. Ain’t they?

Sure they are, he says. But like the Sioux hunted buffalo, we hunt buffoons. So you might be in big problem Tanto.

Whatever man. I just want some food, water and eight hours with the Z-monster.

Tennessee is spinning some non-bullshit this time, I say. We shouldn’t push out till the morn. Time to recover and reassess. Redistribute water and rounds.

We only got three bullets and no more water, says Tennessee.

I know. Just always wanted to say that.

Listen up, soldier boys, says Chaitanya. I take you down there and you gonna be my guests so behave and no stupid acting bullshit. Understand?

Roger that, I say, looking steely eyed at the Indian boy.

Hooah, says Tennessee.

Chaitanya drops alongside a river stream winding gently down a slope. We follow it till the terrain flattens and now we stand within the jungle valley. Like slipping into the vaginal opening of the wilderness. In the near distance a glow from campfires around which I imagine food and some type jungle wine flowing from bamboo carafes. We walk a bit further and pick up
a trail of solar lights stuck in the ground, looking like a runway through vegetative mass, leading us into a clearing ahead.

The vegetation thins as we move on down the runway of lawn markers. This area now shows all the signs of inhabitants beating constant paths across the terrain. We break from behind a line of trees and enter a big clearing through which the stream runs dead center. Before leaving the solar trail, I bend down to examine one of the plastic lights. It contains a small solar panel and battery and is manufactured by Siemens. A partner company of Wal Mart. I look up to study this strange Darien village.

A dozen geodesic stone houses covered quilt-like in solar panels, three stories tall, line the stream on either side. Three bamboo bridges traffic dry-footed women and children from bank to bank, maybe five feet across. Lined up in a corral sit six dirt bikes. Dugout canoes line the shores of the stream. Up ahead in the glow of moonlight the stream opens up, widens, the uteral stream giving birth to baby river. Alongside one of the canoes sits a Jet Ski, a type of makeshift barge hitched to the rear.

It seems a quite night in this village. We approach a fire around which sit three women, some children and an important looking and elder sitting in a canvas, foldable chair with cup holders on either side. Two flags stick out on top. One representing the Seattle Sea Hawk and the other representing the Dallas Cowboys. They all wear simple shorts and tank tops. The elder’s soles are covered up by a pair of Doc Martin’s. The classic boot in burgundy.

The women use flip-flops while serving up some type stew onto the old guy’s cobalt-blue ceramic plate. A grill sits near the fire, the Char-Broil label glowing silver in campfire light. The burners turned up full blast fry strips of meat in a pan. Soup boils in a stockpot. Chunks of yucca root rolling around among the bubbles and bits of spice.
How come nobody here wears those little dick covers I see Indians wearing on Discovery Channel, Tennessee asks Chaitanya? And how come the women aren’t all naked and shit?

Shut your pie hole and don’t say nothing till I tell you, says our guide. The old guy listening to the radio is the boss. He don’t like foreigners to know his name. Says gives them power. So you call him Eminem. Got it?

Roger, I say. Wait… what? Like the singer?

Yeah, he listen all the time to that cat on his boombox, says Chaitanya.

Whose Eminem, pipes up Tennessee.

Moron, says the guide. Bet you heard of Elvis though.

I love Elvis!

Idiot.

XLVII

We approach Boss Eminem slurping down hot stew and a plate of fried meat. It smells good and looks like steak. He scratches his balls and hums to his Sony Boombox in badly pronounced English no I’m not the first King of controversy I am the worst thing since Elvis Presley to do black music so selfishly and used it to get myself wealthy he pauses to ladle more food down his gullet you don’t know your too old let go its over nobody listens to techno now let’s go just gimme the signal he pauses to reach down and take a long slug off a two liter of Diet Pepsi despite a tank of fresh juice sitting on a nearby table now this looks like a job for me so everybody just follow me ‘cause we need a little controversy ‘cause it feels so empty without me… he stops and looks up in surprise. Meal interrupted.
Chaitanya rattles off Dorasque like an M-249 with a runaway barrel. I can’t make out a word, but the boy does have rhythm and even sounds a bit soulful. I enjoy the sounds, pure and untainted. A language grown from Banyan trees and Mangrove orchards, butterflies and snakes, flowers and a million integrated fecal scents. A feeling of coming home floods my head.

The old chief seems to be answering Chaitanya, who subsequently shakes his head in frustration and seems to offer back a quip to which the old man responds sternly.

Eminem say he pissed, says the guide. He say I need come first and tell him outsider gonna come so he can make the village look more Cuna. He apologizes for his son be so brain scattered to wind and says sit down and have some nourishment.

Tennessee, practically salivating on his rifle, shakes his head in eager acknowledgement. I too nod acceptance, my stomach in shreds and rumbling like a volcano. The chief smiles and points to three canvas chairs being carried out by young and attractive girls in denim skirts and bikini tops. Dark skin and jet black eyes, deeper than the jungle night. The chairs set up, the girls gesture us to take seats.

I settle into my chair and admire the campfire. Watch Tennessee’s rifle, propped against his chair, slide and fall into the dirt as he distractedly follows the ass of one of the young ladies sashaying back into a building.

You clumsy like big fat old woman, blurts out Chaitanya with a burst of laughter erupting from the pit of his belly.

Tennessee blushes, dusts off rifle and props it in a stabile position. Drums his fingers against his knees.

Them ladies sure are pretty, he says.

Totally out of your league of minor kindergarten, says Chaitanya.
How about me, I query?

We talk about hook up when you wanna talk about bank money, says Chaitanya. And they’re no internet escorts. So if you don’t got play then you get the blue balls quick. You got play? Soul power?

I got more soul than Dusty Springfield and more funk than George Clinton. Bring on the challenge and take along a pencil and notepad. You gonna get schooled.

Whatever you say big shot.

Three girls emerge with plates and spear meat out the frying pan, ladle up soup into bowls, capturing chunks of root and vegetables from the broth. Everything they prepare is placed on large wooden serving trays and carried to myself, Tennessee and Chaitanya. Everyone lunges into his plate, the many kliks up and down hills and across valleys, all having taken a toll on body and mind.

The soup I taste first. Submerge my spoon into the liquid. Spoon emerges from the broth, smelling like life and whole vegetables and roots and crawdads. A sliver of fish and a piece of yucca root, looking like a rock jutting out of the water on a beachfront, in a tide pool of broth. I raise the spoon with reverence and blow breath of life across the tiny sea of life simmering upon my spoon. Watch the heat waves roll over spoon and dissipate. I place the spoon in my mouth and allow the contents to rest on my tongue and slowly move down my throat. The complexity of the soup overwhelms me and my eyes tear up.

What’s wrong with you, says Tennessee?

The spice is making my eyes water, I say.

Chaitanya looks at me with those piercing eyes and keeps watching as I reverently sip down two more spoons.
You been a long time away from life, he says.

What do intend you by that?

I say you been down trails too long and away from life source. You know my Grandfather taught that you start wither and die if you stay too long away from the life source. All the good stuff in that soup that comes from soil and the river and the trees. Life source. How all it goes together and feeds your… I don’t know how to say it… So I maybe say soul feeder… Source of river to your head and heart… Aquifer under swamp…

The Chief interrupts Chaitanya. Seems to ask a question, glancing and gesturing to me as he speaks.

Boss want to know why you out so far from home, says Chaitanya?

Who’s to say I’m not home here in the jungle? Mayhap this is my point of origin. In more concrete terms, I guess I’d have to admit I misread the map. Found myself in strange terrain. A bit disoriented. So we wandered around hoping to find some point of reference that never emerged. Till we found that big tree and then you appeared.

Chaitanya shift focus back to the chief and relays my code, reframing the words into banyan talk. I determine I must learn a bit of this language.

Boss says why you come into the jungle, says Chaitanya.

We were out on a land navigation course and got lost.

The chief pauses to watch two old ladies approach with a cooler full of bottles of beer bearing no label. Looks to me like homemade hooch from the belly of Earth. The ladies drop the cooler on the dirt next to Chief Eminem. He grabs a beer and holds it up questioningly. I nod and he tosses it to me with a flick of wrist. Almost flipping my soup bowl in the effort, I snap the bottle from the air. Chief does the same for Tennessee and Chaitanya.
Aren’t you a bit young for that, I say to Chaitanya.

Mind your own matters, he says.

The boss kicks back and pops the top of his brewha, tossing the top into the flames of Char-Broil Inc. The lady beer bearers scuttle over to turn off the flames, beginning cleaning plates and spoons and forks. Chief talks more words to Chaitanya, who nods with I-was-wondering-the-same-thing kind of way.

Boss want to know why you not use the stars to find your way home, says Chaitanya.

Honestly, I’m not too familiar with the heavens in this hemisphere. Don’t know how to read them from this jungle. I got a question. How the hell do you get Soda this far out in the jungle?

The boss chugs down a beer in one long draw, his nostrils flaring out as he simultaneously sucks in oxygen and carbonated goodness. I look to Tennessee to find him asleep, dead to the sounds and smells of the village. The sweat and pungency of life in this womb. The heat of fire and the moisture of the air. Like the sea never retreated from this land. Boss pops open a new brew and addresses Chaitanya anew.

Boss says you found your way home anyway, says Chaitanya. He says all tribes running soda bottles up the river. Like superhighway for dugouts and some people now get the Jet Ski. Now Boss want to know how long you gonna stay.

Got to leave soon, I say. The Army will come soon to find us. I’m sure they’re already swarming around the land nav course. We’ll roll out in the morning.

Boss say to grab another beer when you want.

A six pack later, the chief leads me by several beers and shows no sign of slowing down. He reaches over to turn up his boombox and hums that’s how it happens living life by the drop
tapping his foot like an old bluesman drinking whiskey shots on the deck of a tramp steam boat on the Mississippi. The stars spin above me and the night intoxicates, punctures the vein and injects itself into the blood flow, as the chief switches cassettes. Jacob Niles sings into the wilderness then Johnny Cash spreads a ring of fire around me and chief and runs to the sea still not having found what he’s looking for and Aretha still demands respect and Odetta Holmes smacks magic lips – pop goes the jungle. I’m buzzed nicely when chief returns to feels so empty without me and we both sing la la la la la/ la la la la and wave our bottles in defiance of the universe’s nasty stubby little pointing digit. The chief lights up a joint. But it doesn’t smell exactly like what I toked back in Dallas. He takes two puffs and passes it to me. I inhale deeply and hold it till my lungs rebel. Decide to take a walk along the river bank. Feel my mind spread out into the jungle and into the water and thick air. My body dis-attaches. Now in tow of mind. We walk in tandem. Communion.

The trees slide by as my feet take me through the village. People not asleep yet. Pipes fill the air with sweet sound and sometimes a cassette player interjecting music industry. A man changing the oil in a jet ski. His girlfriend standing nearby tweezing eye brows. A boy paddles away in a dugout. The chief dances somewhere behind me. Chaitanya steps in front of me as I approach a trailhead.

You too fucked up to go walking about the jungle, he says. Come on and I’ll take you to a spot you can clear your head. The tree that spoke to my father and told him to stop here when we all moved.

We move parallel to the river a couple hundred meters. The moon shines bright above and baths the forest in fairyland light. A tree trunk rises by the riverbank. Rises up and above the canopy. I’m looking around wondering how we traveled back to this dead tree.
This tree is sister tree of the one your idiot friend climbed, says Chaitanya. Father says his grandfather found the tree on the hill, then found this one and took it as a sign to make new village. So here we built the village.

My vocal chords being disconnected from my brain, I nod but say nothing.

Man, you really fucked up.

I nod again and send the trees spinning around me and look up to see the stars shifting around till they start making letters then words and finally a sentence: welcome home Johnny.

Hawdi dyu duuu…

Just take a seat and open up your eyes and breath.

I assume a full Lotus, concentrate on deep and complete breathes, imagine my lungs a great big billows pulling and pushing around atmospheres, moving weather systems. The landscape as a whole floods in, not just discrete points. A star hanging low on the horizon, a tree on peripheral vision and the tip of my boot – all comes into simultaneous focus – crisp and crystal clear in the moonlight. In non-connectivity with past or future I hover in this moment in the jungle.

Johnny, says Chaitanya bringing me back to the narrative flow.

I open my eyes to see him digging up a shallowly buried box from the dirt by the river bank. A metal key box. With a small key he unlocks it, turns on a tiny flashlight to illuminate the contents and with the grin of a child shines his light into the box to reveal a stack of comic books. Spiderman swinging over New York City.

I show you this because you can be my guide in the Big Apple, he says. I help you and now you help me. Father don’t want me to go yet. But tomorrow I sneak out with you.
My head feels synchronized to my surroundings and I find myself capable of linear thought and problem solving. I consider Chaitanya’s request, imagining him walking through a military chow hall. He would be a dynamo of color, drained daily by drab white drywall, canned vegetables, unsalted baked chickens, biscuits awash in un-spiced white gravy.

I don’t think you’d want to live where I live, I say. And I can’t take you to New York because I work for Mama-mind-fuck.

Who?
I signed a contract with the Army. I’m stuck.

Why don’t you walk away?
It would come find me.

Stay here till it forgets about you then we go New York.

It doesn’t forget or rest or ever sleep and keeps up everyone else with its paranoia and constant bitching.

Disappointment spreads across the Indian boy’s face. Its palpable and hanging in the air between us. A tear wells up, but he brushes it away quickly to save face.

It’s ok, he says. I get it. You too busy to help. Don’t want no Kuna boy following you around your big army place.

Hold on now, I say. That’s not it. I take care to leave my shame in the closet before stepping out the front door. That’s not it at all. Tell you what.

What.

Let’s make a deal. I promise to return as soon as my army time ends. I’ll come back here and we’ll convince your father to let you visit New York. My tour ends soon in about six months. About one hundred and eighty moonrises.
I spit into my palm and extend it.

Spit shake?

He spits and we clasp hands. He closes up his box and surprises me with a hug. Moves back and smiles at me through the moonlight.

And while you’re gone you find out who your people are, he says.

Key box back in its hiding place, we make way back to the village. A midnight fish jumps from below the river surface and spins in a moonbeam. Splashes back down under.

Approaching the village clearing I hear a sound like surf in the distance. Automatic machine guns spitting lead. Lasers out somewhere among the trees. Scanning over leaves. To see what warm blooded thing might be hiding among the foliage. Some unit must be out on training exercises. Poor bastards came out this far to fire blanks.

Chaitanya breaks into a full sprint, heading for his father’s house. Old Chief Eminem gave up the booze for the night. His chair sits empty next to the river. What few house lights remain on, begin shutting down one by one and generators are powering down.

From the woodline a flare, a star cluster, shoots up and upon gaining the proper altitude, floats across the sky, casting an eerie glow over the village and the adjoining forest.

The Chief emerges from his geodesic house with Chaitanya and a dozen or more Indians. They all bear army of some type. Spears and rifles and shotguns. Pistols and crossbows and knives. The rest of the tribe emerges from their respective homes like bees ready to sting a bear paw.

Tennessee comes bounding up to me like a bulldog pup wanting to play fetch. He is back in full battle rattle, prepared to expedite our exit.
Hey bro, he says. Let’s go link up with whatever unit is out there training. Maybe we can catch a HUMVEE back to the rear.

Sounds good, I say. Let’s just follow the star cluster.

Chief Eminem and Chaitanya approach us. Behind them I see women and children boarding dugouts, carrying as many personal items as possible. Even furniture pieces and tools are strapped onto little barges. Jet Skis fire up their engines. The village dogs run about in circles in front of loaded dugouts. A six-year-old girl bolts from a dugout to leash and guide her dog on board, but most of the mutts receive no invitation.

You think somethings wrong or something, says Tennessee?

Not at all pal, I say. This is probably vacation season and there all just packing up for Disney Land or Vegas.

You don’t need to be a smart ass, he says. It was a rhetorical type question.

Chaitanya, I say. Who comes unfriendly like from the forest?

Guerillas, he says. They come from way down South. My father don’t want to run guns or blow for them so they pissed off like fuck. We gotta go greengo.

The sound of a distant Blackhawk comes. I look up at the night sky, attempting to discern from what direction it comes. A flood light blinks into existence in the night sky, like the Star of David come to lead us home.

They got helicopters this time, says the Chief.

You do speak English, I say.

Little bit, he says.

He just don’t like stranger to know, says Chaitanya. But now you no stranger.

I think we’ve got a ride coming, I say.
How you know, he says. Could be flying guerillas got a bird. Come to drop Napalm.

I don’t think the United States Air Force would let anything off the ground that they don’t like, says Tennessee.

The Blackhawk comes quicker now. And behind the lead bird follow two more. A treacherous trio in flight across the jungle. Angels of mercy come to rescue. I can make out the pitch and yaw and roll of the lead craft, bobbing through the night sky like a golden retriever’s head bobbing across a lake coming to fetch a stick.

We’re not that close to the border, I say.

Border on other side of mountain, says Chaitanya. Quick ride down river in dugout.

That’s not possible, I say.

The helicopters are bearing down on us, the lead craft coming to earth in the middle of the village as Indians shove off in their dugouts, unsure if the birds carry friend or foe and preferring to play it safe.

Leadfeather, says Chaitanya! Remember the spit shake? You remember right?

I never break a spit-shake-deal, I say. I’ll be back, I shout above the wind and whir of turbo prop propeller in spin. I know the pilot will not shut down the engine if he feels the element in the woodline to pose a threat. Out from the chopper comes running two troopers in full battle rattle, rifles locked and loaded looking. One takes a knee and watches the woodline while the other comes up and gets right in my face.

I don’t know how in the fuck you guys got her or why, but expedite your fifth points of contact into that craft if you ever want to drink a beer again, he yells above the wash of chopper blade.
I look around in a bit of a daze. Tennessee is already stepping into the craft. Chaitanya watches me. His eyes revealing some emotion for the first time.

This kid saved my life, I say. I gotta return the favor. You comprende?

No can do PFC, yells back the officer. We can’t take civilians on this craft. Don’t worry about it. Those fuckers out in the jungle are about to get bombed into the pre-Cambrian period. Your boy’s safe.

I’m gonna see you soon, I say to Chaitanya. Meantime, get your ass on one of those dugouts, or preferably a Jet Ski, a move on down that river! Got it?

I got it, he says. But you not gonna come back.

I un-sling my rifle and hand it to him. Slip out of my body armor and hand him my Flak Vest.

You’ll be safer with some gear, I say. Take care my little Sherpa.

PFC Leadfeather, yells the officer. Immediately re-secure your gear and rifle, and get your ass on the bird! Otherwise, I’m going to make sure you spend the next several decades in a federal prison! Not even Jesus on rapture day will be able to un-jail your ass!

Somewhere between disappointment and kid-getting-new-toy, Chaitanya scurries away, jumping from the riverbank onto a launching Jet Ski. Kicks up water, tearing down the river.

I move expeditiously to the helicopter entrance and step foot onto bird. Take a seat and strap in. The immediate vertical lift of a helicopter never fails to shoot knots through my stomach. Its unnatural. A jet liner or turboprop gives a little push back in the seat and the runway at least gives spatial-motion logic to that moment when the plane disconnects from tarmac and earth. A helicopter moves straight up vertical. No warning. This feeling hits my stomach as the
officer mounts the bird, not saying a word to me. I expect an MP escort waiting for me on the LZ.

XLIX

The roll and yaw of the chopper, a million parts moving in synchronicity, any failure of a part meaning an emergency landing, which is fairly impossible in this machine. The only emergency crash procedure practiced by whirly bird pilots is the auto-rotate: the pilot reverses the direction of the propeller, which sometimes slows down the machine. Enough to make the difference between completely mutilated bodies versus most major bone structures broken but live bodies on liters. Not appealing either way. Of these things I dream as the chopper rocks me back to civilization.

Wake the fuck up, Leadfeather, says Tennessee!

We are back in Fort Kobbe, walking away from a landing pad marked with a big cross and onto a street lined by tropical military houses. Facsimiles of something I left behind this night in the jungle. On each military block sits six houses, three on each side. Red Spanish tile covering the roofs. Toy soldiers for every house. Wives given a book of proper military-wife etiquette upon arriving at unit.

Want to go slam a beer, says Tennessee?

Sure, I say.

Clean and sprayed down with Polo cologne, I make way to the on post watering hole, ran by the Air Force so customer service is not entirely absent. We walk to the bar and enter to see the furnished with the same furniture the military might employs in our barracks and office halls.
Very government and revealing as little personality as possible. Probably purchased by the lowest bidder. Just like my rifle. Idiots.

A girl passes me in the bathroom and hands me her phone number. A pretty petite Panamanian.

I’m righting lyrics in front of her house out in the city of Panama. Close to the main traffic artery. She comes out of the house in which her two brothers and sisters watch television. Her father works the land out back. A half-acre maybe. He wields a machete to push back the jungle; event though we’re in view of cocaine built towers of luxury apartments, when you give the jungle some dirt and sunlight, it starts to reclaim the soil.

Puedes ir a la tienda a comprar una soda, carne y pan, she asks?

Esta bien. Y voy a comprar una cerveza, I say.

I spend a few more minutes finishing off some lyrics about dark river crossings and winged bottles flying supersonic sorties over the apartment complex where I lived and from which my brother and I were evicted and his x-lover in the living room with Beamer-driving sugar Daddy refusing to pay they’re part of the rent and me refusing to return his stuff which was now all well hidden and my girlfriend screaming at them all – he’s only seventeen! He’s only seventeen! He’s only seventeen! – and then snug in the cab of a Geo Metro and sleeping in a tin box and lullabied to sleep by the voice of a star. I’m reminded that dinner comes soon so down the hill I walk to the local Chinese owned store. I make these trips every evening over the next year before Mama-mind-fuck gives the canal to the Panamanian government. Students from La Universidad de Panama celebrate in the streets where once they protested. A trip for a small portion of carne to be served over rice with patacones on the side. Sometimes salty patacon and sometimes sweet ripe plantain fried in a pan.
I’m staring at my plate, down at a patacon.

LX

America steps in front of the window, blocking the light.

How about a grilled cheese sandwich and some steak fries, she asks?

Now that’s some classic Americana, I say.

I’ve even got homemade ketchup.

Yet more awesome. Pardon once more.

Me: Pardon all the delays, I’m leaving now.

You were saying?

That I’ve homemade ketchup made from Mida’s tomatoes.

DumbsaintMindtrain: Whatever. Are you out on Safari or something?

Me: Stop scanning my brain!

DumbsaintMindtrain: There shall be no escape for you my pretty! Your X dropped off Senay. Asked you to watch her while she goes for a Doctor’s appointment. I said OK.

Me: Cool! I’ve great news to bring her.

Actually, I’d better skedaddle. I’m neglecting my fiancé and daughter who will want to make preparations for the carnival.

Come back soon with a sample of your neighborhood-famous potion. I hear it cures all ills.

It does indeed. I look forward to our next rendezvous.
You should take down my number in case you need something. If its urgent, I’ll come and unlock the store after hours to let you in.

Send out your digits.

And she does.

Out into the light and down the sidewalk I go, rushing up the alleyway, coming home by trails and alleyways. Senay plays in the backyard, alongside my beast of war, the six-nippled one, and pushes a Dunlop tire suspended from a Mesquite tree limb high above the soil. Watches the pendulum like movement of vulcanized rubber on a rope.

She takes no notice of my stealthy backyard entrance. As I approach my Bugster, the deep sonic bone-numbing drone of a bee swarm rattles my eardrums. This swarm comes every year to harvest pollen from my massive backyard Mesquite. I instructed Senay to avoid the tree when the bees begin swarming.

Sunshine, I say.

She jumps, startled at my sudden appearance.

Listen carefully and tell me what you hear, I say, pointing up to the tree’s green foliage?

Ahhhhhh, Dadiée, I hear da bee, she says proudly!

Righter than rain and a blueberry smoothie, I say. And when the bees come together and swarm the tree in search of sweet pollen, where should you not be standing?

Ahhhhhh, Dadiée, I think under da tree.

And where do you now stand?

Under da tree?

It would appear so.

Ohhhhhh. OK, OK. I go play by da house.
Better yet, come with me. I’ve a tale to tell you and Esperanza.

We make quick time to the interior of our home. No Esperanza on the sofa or in the kitchen so we bolt up the stairwell, to find her plucking eyebrows in the foyer.

Love, I say. I come bearing good tidings of beer and peanuts!

Sure, she says. Hours after you’ve been texting “blah blah blah, my name is CPT Leadfeather, and I promise, I’ll be home really, really super soon! Blah, blah, blah!” Been off finding the hero of the day?

Fuckers ain’t ever gonna break me or Remy Hellsinki. When the enemy comes like naval guns, we shrink like Alice and get too small to find and turn the tables around – cause I know where you live and can always stalk you at the witching hour. Cause’ I’m Johnny Leadfeather falling to Earth.

You’re a freakin weirdie.

And eternally yours.

I’m stuck like a fat happy rat under a big storm front named Johnny. Damn, the barometer snapped and broke.

I wrap my love in a warm embrace, realizing I truly did screw the pooch this time. So to speak. But not in reality. Senay rolls her eyes and crosses her arms, leaning back in a cheerleader pose. Luna barks down below and the bees humming in my mind. Wandering about on this fine weekend day.

I bring most bodacious tidings. More like riptides it’s so good. Wanna listen to my story? I’m on pins and needles.

Now is not the time for the kinky stuff.

I’m shocked to hear that flying out your pie hole.
Damn it!

Fine. Please, proceed with your tall telling.

So I’m talking to America –

– Tirado?

Yeap, that America. When Mida walks in – correction Mida was talking to America – when I approach him all steally eyed to ask him what he’s up to taking brewhas into the chamber of commerce – out comes America to hear my spiel about my beer, my non-product – you know, steady chemical state as artifact of human emotive pulsation into void turns reality in mind –

– halt, stop, weapons tight like you say, we’ve been over this a time or twelve. It’s fascinating, but where is the story here?

Right, so it comes to a dual of the brewskis and soda pops. A showdown at the O.K. Corral. America agrees to name the winner and measure the metrics. Whoever accrues the highest count of beer units by bottle sold plus consumer surveys filled and signed wins the market.

So whoever wins gets exclusive rights to sell beverages at the grocer?

What in the name of Holy Banging Cow Balls do you take me for… A capitalist? A merchant ship come-ashore-a-raiding? Corporate man looking to buy the penthouse level? I’ve too much faith in the human spirit. So Mida thinks he brews up widgets... Someday – GIVEN A ROLL OF YE OLDEN DICE – he might evolve.

I’m pacing the floor like a caged jaguar looking for a girl in heat, burning and bathed in poetic fire. A dark empress, who shoots lightning from her fingertips and moonshine beams from her ocean eyes, where sail I, adrift on howling waves, frozen ropes taut and hauling hard and running lights blinded.
He might – GIVEN A CHANCE, I say. Come to an enlightened state in which he realizes that he actually sits within a tiny circle of light surrounded by infinite night – the unknown – and that the speck of light in which he lives illuminates from artifacts that people make – artifacts that tell tales of who and what they are and what they profess we to be. Comprende?

Esperanza gives me one of those crooked smiles I’d swim a mile upstream to receive.

You’re a mad man.

Comes with the territory. I have to adapt to fucked up circumstances till Star Fleet Academy opens the doors. By which time I’ll probably need an age waiver.

Does a narrative loom somewhere on the horizon?

Right. In response to your query: negative. This competition is just a friendly game. Nothing serious or anything. Anyways, America tells me that she can offer the perfect gameboard on which to set queens and kings. I say to her, don’t hold back America, what is the nature of this game? And she says, a carnival. A carnival she says!

That really is cool. Senay will trip when she sees the carney folk.

Telling you. Gypsy wagons, the strong man, magi, hustlers, freaky clowns, cotton candy, insanely huge smoked turkey legs likely raised on growth hormones but then again we raised a whole generation on growth hormones, carousel wheel spinning against the stars, bumper cars, bums wondering down the midway and zombies in the wings waiting to munch ‘um cause’ they don’t belong to a coordinate zoned and zipcoded place, tricksters in booths filled with stuffed creatures that sometimes don’t really exist in zoo or jungle, funnel cakes frying in deep fryer, and an endless night sky above to stand witness to life on a midway.

This is way cool! Oh my God! I can’t wait! When does the carnival arrive?
Tomorrow night comes the carney gypsy caravan down I-10. Rushing down the old blood vessel, baby, like red blood cell truckers, oversized loads laden with oxygen. Gonna burst the lungs of old El Paso.

Holy shit! We have to get ready! Where will the carnival set up?

Here in the heights.

How the fuck is that going to happen?

A very rational question. The carnival will set up at the university parking lots adjacent to the heights. The midway will stretch from there and end in front of the grocer, where America promises the emplacement of some major attraction. This event will be positively surreal.

Wow. It’s a wonder they obtained permission from the city to close down those streets.

Mrs. Tirado does have political connections.

Connections in high places.

Let’s go in costume tomorrow. Pretend like we’re characters in some dark comedy. And while Senay is with us, let’s put together some theme for her.

A young vampire named Claudia?

Perfect! And I her surrogate mother. You must bite me, of course, to turn me into a creature of the night.

Then my name must be Louis.

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LXI

We load up in the Honda. Drive down the Interstate and exit Mesa. A moment later the engine idles before a sign that says Vintage Mode. A store known to few. But those who do
know of its existence return frequently to browse rare treasures. This place does not cater to the male gender. Nonetheless, rare objects do I find from time to time.

Esperanza greets the proprietor who sits by the register as we enter. The lady is well dressed and an aura of nobility surrounds her. Her expertise in the history of clothing astound and amaze. She can identify the origins and date of a blouse by the material and cut of the cloth or skin. Sometimes point of origin reveals itself to her by way of a button. The material, color and fashion. Her passion for the smallest detail is remarkable to say the minimum possible.

Hola Magda, says Esperanza!

Hola! Tiempo sin verte, she responds. Como estan tu y tu novio y la pequena angel?

We want to put together some costumes for a carnival coming to town tomorrow night. The first and only shop that came to mind is your parlor of magic objects.

Artifacts, I interject. What gives your shop the soul of a gypsy wagon selling wares and woolen capes hooded in black is the aura of historicity surrounding each item on your shelves. Every item is an original. No mass production.

A steely look from Esperanza and I opt to keep to myself the remainder of my thoughts. Though they spin about in my head, I check them in stasis.

Thank you so much for your words of kindness and flattery, says Magda the brilliant forager of arcane clothing.

We begin to search among the tombstones. Senay discovers six wigs stacked atop an antique child’s toy fire truck sitting a foot high in a corner beneath a rack of Navy pea coats. The pedals still turn. The red paint no longer glistens and a couple specks of rust eat at a rear panel. Probably left out by a barn and rained on. Beware white Ravens over red-barn farmlands, I always say.
One of the jackets I observe to be a vintage bridge coat. Worn by a submariner I imagine and take the artifact to Magda for confirmation. I’m willing to pay top dollar if this item turns out authentic.

This item came from a naval officer circa nineteen eighty-two, she says.

How she comes to this knowledge I’ve no notion, but I thank her non the less and turn my attention to Senay calling me from the side of the toy fire engine. I find her sifting through wigs and raising up a curly blond artifact. While she puts on the pretext of finding something she thinks Esperanza and I might approve of, I see how her eyes flash constantly to the red toy.

I think we’ve found an article for young Claudia, I say to Esperanza who eyeballs the bridge coat draped over my arm.

That blond wig is so perfect, she says. You have to buy it. And that’s a really cool jacket you’re holding. Very Loui-es.

It will be mine. And Senay can wear the wig.

Esperanza returns to racks of coats and skirts and pulls out a black vintage cape from some foggy street in London.

This is perfect. You agree.

Without a doubt. Grow some fangs and you’ll be a true vampires.

I look about for Senay. Find her sitting in the toy fire truck, her hobbit feet pushing against the pedals. Magda steps into this back area of the store, taking notice of Senay’s enthusiasm for the fire engine.

Porque no le llevas afuera? Para que se da una vuelta en el camión de bomberos. Es obvio que quiere ser un bombero. Apagando grandes fuegos, she says to Senay.
If you insist, I’d be most thankful to you for giving her a ride on the fire engine. It’s quite a beautiful piece. How much does it sell for?

Hay mijo, she says. No esta en venta. Fue el juegete de mi hijo que ya esta grande y estudiando in Nueva York. En Soho.

She must be a lovely young lady.

I’ve been to Soho, says Esperanza. My body left, but soul stayed behind. It’s an amazing place.

Want to take a ride outside, I ask Senay who shakes her head enthusiastically.

Senay stays mounted inside the fire engine and I push it across the carpeted floor and out the front door, onto the sidewalk. She steers dead into a light post so I help her steer the wheel on a straight azimuth down the cement walkway. Her feet pedal furiously, spinning vintage rubber. Tiny hubcap spokes glitter in the sun as we pedal past the Magic Pan restaurant. I throw a peace sign to a man in a suite who ignores me.

Dadiee, says Senay. We buy the car?

No can do. This beauty isn’t on the market.

Whaaat?

It’s not for sale?

What that mean?

Magda wants to keep it. She doesn’t want dollars for the fire engine.

Ahhhhh! Ok.

We circle around the block and back to the shop. To find Esperanza stacking our new threads in the trunk of Odetta.

So we’re all set to cruise on out of here, I ask?
As soon as we all say goodbye. We re-enter the store. Magda stands behind the counter happy to have sold artifacts to Esperanza. She knows my fiancé drops her business cards every time a passerby compliments a skirt or dress or blouse. The vintage cape is sure to turn heads on the Midway. I expect to hear neck bones cracking.

Odetta returns me to the interstate where I feel most at home.

LXII

The recruiter.

Recruiter?

Army recruiter. I believe you refer to them as the Mama-mind-fuck pimping regiment.

Oh yeah. Cock juggling con artists that they are. Bastards are all bound for Ptolomeacaville. Actually, it’s an Army career counselor with who I must speak.

So I steer my sled in the direction of Fort Bliss. Drive westbound through the artery. Keeping a stead sixty-nine to avoid the lawman. At the gate of Bliss the rent-a-cop says “one team, one fight”, incognizant of the war inside my head. His words rattle around my noggin, bothering me on some level I can’t define.

Inside the corridors of one of many administrative buildings at the sterile heart of Bliss, I find the transition center. A unit dedicated to moving troops from the active to the reserve component. A Master Sergeant Kowaski takes notice of our entry and approaches.

May I be of assistance?

Mayhaps. I signed a contract for a bonus when leaving active duty. Subsequently, I’ve lost said contract and seek to inquire as to how I might reclaim the bonus.
Come have a seat. What’s your name?

Captain Leadfeather. Air Defense.

The MSG leads us to a standard metal government desk on which a busy desktop hums. Locked, no doubt, into a busy database that details my every non-defining datum. Such as several military occupational skills and skill identifiers.

What’s your background, he says.

Infantry, Air Traffic Control, Air Defense, Airborne, Air Assault, Air Load Planner, Hazmat, a cornucopia of driving certifications, to include the venerable Dussenhalf before it got mothballed, six months on the job training with the Criminal Investigation Division, busted a bar in Panama for a shit load of cocaine, a lot of drinking after leaving active duty, child custody warfare specialist, domestic violence veteran – and no I didn’t go to jail, she did –

Wow sir, cease fire, he says. What is your current branch identifier.

14A, Air Defense.

Duck hunter. Just kidding sir. Don’t remand me to the Colonel, please.

No offense taken. AD are button pushing geeks wishing they knew how to react under direct fire.

Hoaa sir! I served in the 75th Ranger Regiment.

I was there too. So… I signed on for a ten thousand dollar bonus. I lost my paperwork and hope you might be able to pull up the contract. I’d like to reclass into logistics, get paid and them skate over to a Civil Affairs unit. Work in a five-man team in Romania, doing environmental and cultural and economic impact analysis of the civilian population. And branch qualify as 18 series special forces before becoming a total pogie bait addict.

First problem, he says. If you don’t have the paperwork, you can’t collect the bonus.
Does this mean I need no longer go to weekend battle assemblies? I mean, if they lost the paper work for my bonus, then they must not have any paperwork saying I ever transitioned to the reserve component.

No sir that paperwork is kept on file. We have your sworn oath into the reserve component. But paperwork concerning a bonus would not be kept on file.

How convenient.

I recommend you got through your archives and locate that document, sir. So when did you resign your commission?

I didn't make a promotion list, so they said resign it or transfer it to the reserve component. I say to them, I’d rather resign it. Then they ask me to sign a document declining about sixty grand in severance pay, so I reconsider. Then they tell me I may qualify for a ten thousand dollar bonus to boot. So I say, how bad can two days a month be? So I transfer my commission and now I want my bonus.

Sir, you have to find that paperwork in order to claim the bonus. And you have to stay the time agreed upon in your contract in the slot you chose.

Meaning no running amok around Romania or blowing shit up with an SF team?

Not for a while, sir. How long was your contract?

Six years, I believe.

In six years and one day you can have all the fun you want.

Esperanza looks at me from an adjacent chair and shakes her head. Senay is making way across the room to a desk on which sits a mug bursting with lollipops. Like a baby carpet shark she moves across the room. I hear the theme to Jaws playing through my brain.

Of course you can have some candy!
Phone vibrates and makes me jump. Me being tunnelvisioned on Senay.

Remy: *Mexico got canceled for the night. Can Johnnie come out to play tonight? Or is his balls too much in Esperanza’s back pocket?*

Me: *You just wish you got laid on a regular basis. Let me get back with you shortly.*

Remy: *Be quick cause we’re making plans.*

I slide the phone back in my pocket but not before Esperanza leans over to read the text and scowl at me.

Given the options, I say. I think I’ll take my Bible and gun and go out in search of experience.

Come again?

The army can keep the cash. I’m gonna go have some fun.

It’s your decision, sir. Have you ever considered branching Civil Affairs?

I don’t think I’ve the Evaluation Reports to consider that.

With your educational background, I’m sure they’d take you in.

How sweet. A new Moma to hold my hand and tell everything is gonna be Ok. Hang Mockingbirds above my cradle and stuff diamond rings beneath my pillow.

You could be tip of the spear again. These guys move alongside infantry maneuver units. They attempt to minimize civilian casualties.

I know what they do.

Then what do you say?

Proceed to process the paperwork, I say. How long you guys gonna stay open on Saturdays? Must be murder working the weekend.

It’s a pilot program but hopefully it doesn’t become SOP, he says with a wink.
I’ll be praying for you brother, I say.

LXIII

The afternoon sunlight on my skin and breeze across my scalp never feels so good as I escape the oppressive gravity crushing this building. I hold Senay’s hand on my right and Esperanza’s hand on my left and we skip our way across the asphalt, back to Odetta who soon will wail and howl down the freeway. I spin the tires and kick up rocks and dust, peeling out the parking lot. As pissed and relieved as the day I left the active component. We make quick time away from Bliss and Zombie track housing. Back to the disorder and mayhem of the heights.

Driving down Upson I see a thirty something hipster walking the sidewalk. Banjo strapped to his back. I think of Grandma Hill from Alabama. Get lost in revere of Black Dutch ancestors. Bandits and highwaymen said my father. Black-Dutch banjo strumming and picking strong men, standing bigger than the sky up in mountain cabins, feudal fucks across the hilltop waiting with double barrel shotguns or some other instrument of war. Uber-grandparental unit. I see you. I’m you on a sand dune, fighting for Mother-mind-fuck’s bureaucratic gears – greasing the bitches. Casting out an azimuth back to you. I long for the purity of physical warfare.

Odetta slides like a side-winding rattler past the old fuck’s black pit across the road. I’m easily distracted, but not so much as to remember my mission. De opresso liber. With Remy at my side Tonight, I feel sure comes a night of liberation.

We park in front of the house. Mida comes a-strolling down the sidewalk as we exit the vehicle.
Hello, hello, hello, he says to my family and myself. How are you Mrs. lovely Esperanza? Why haven’t you come to my establishment for fresh bread?

Hi Mr. Nuba, she says. I’m so sorry for having ignored you. I promise to come tomorrow morning. You will be, I hope, at the carnival?

Oh, why of course. Johnny and I have a cordial and friendly running bet.

I’ve heard. Best of luck to you.

Down the sidewalk goes Mida. The Persian merchant walking tall. Islam at the gates of the border sun city. Across the road I see the old fuck sitting on his porch reading a newspaper, the dog most likely hiding among broken Budweiser bottles in the basement. He looks over to take notice of my presence. Flips me the international middle finger.

Ignore the bastard, says Esperanza grabbing my arm.

I return the gesture to the old fuck.

What dis mean, asks Senay flipping proudly up her middle finger?

I’m telling that nice old man that he’s number one, I say.

Ohhhh, like one two three seven?

Right, I say. You mean one two three four?

That what I say.

I must have misheard.

What?

Come on now. Let’s go make food, brew tea and walk the Ba Kua circle. You need to practice.

LLL
We enter the house and I make way to the kitchen. The sky is darkening and clouds move in above the city. The air grows dense as I work magic in the kitchen. Senay and Esperanza working in the living room on home work and then I hear Happy Feet shuffling penguin toes in snow atop some floating ice cube.

The phone vibrates. I log into the nexus of collective thought.

*Remy:* What time can you come?

*Me:* After dinner.

*Remy:* Bring paintball gear. Meet us at Madmaxxx Paintball.

*Me:* Ok.

*Remy:* Dry run before live fire exercise.

Paintball, says Esperanza over my shoulder?

I jump an inch off the ground, startled at her stealthy-like approach.

Come on now, I say. It is a Saturday night and I won’t be gone long. Remy is deeply involved in a worthy cause. Animal rights and all.

Remy will land his ass in jail and you right beside him. I bet the FBI does constant satellite surveillance of his big paintball citadel.

Why should they bother? Remy podcasts tournaments and posts them on YouTube. He hides nothing.

Except off shore bank accounts?

I promise, the law will not be compromised. Or at least not the spirit of it.

She tilts her head, eyes widen: the look is given.
Fine, I say, throwing hands in air. Nothing illegal that might piss off Officer John Brown. I’m cooking black-eyed pea fritters! Your favorite. Just a couple hours and I’ll be back to polish off a bottle of Sotol. Reposado.

From the kitchen I come with fritters and a salad topped with grilled crawdad tails. We sit on the porch till the sky darkens a bit.

*Remy: I’m waiting at the apartment with Fat Indian. We’re ready to head out.*

*Me: ETA about an hour.*

Love, I say. I’m off for just a bit of time and will come back soon.

Whenever you’re planning on trouble you always ask me to watch Senay.

I could drop her off at her Mom’s house?

I’d rather you not. She already texted and said to bring her in the morning. Before dinner, how about you go buy a bottle? I’d rather drink a few shots before you go.

LLL

Shifting gears, I move swiftly through the neighborhood to the nearest liquor store. A Pepsi truck passes as I exit the car. Moves around back of the store. I see Eight Brazos Rancho sitting in the desert, climate-humidity-controlled circular-tube-greenhouses shimmering in dusklight, algae tanks rising vertical and semi-tractor trailers limping home thirsty from over the road trips. Drivers dismounting to take showers fed by an industrial sized Atmospheric Water Generator and heated by solar panels. Total independence from the grid. Total connectivity in the information super highway.
I come home to Esperanza waiting on the porch, reading a Heart of Darkness – oh great Mage of the Longline, rest in peace in celestial tankers moving across oceans. Walt would never want to stay too long in one place. Feral cats move about the front yard, within the vegetation, under and over vines. Waiting, watching the cars. I see Esperanza in sticky amber light, moving slow. I phase out of time, slow things down. Observe the way she raises an eyebrow or twists a smile at some memory that must be playing in her head as she enjoys the solace of solitude.

Stepping into her field of vision, I strike flint and create an ember at the end of my camel.

Love, I say. The warrior returns with gifts of sustenance: strong drink in the way of Sotol and a good merlot.

Esperanza looks up from her book. Looks meaningfully into the clock face bound to her wrist.

I’d love to eat dinner with an Indian chief that’s such an expert in the culinary arts, she says. Que vas a hacer? Aparte de los black eyed pea fritters?

Grilled venison steak, I say. Smothered in a ginger and wasabi sauce, accompanied by okra and lima beans. Of course, all over a nice bottle of Merlot and prefaced by a few shots.

What do you think?

I think we should go to the backyard and get food funky.

The greenhouse begins to glow, grow lights coming to life, as twilight gently squeezes the sun city, softening the sometimes harsher edges of the Juarez-El Paso border land and I set up the grill, conviction and passion in every knife slice that turns yam into yam spears guarding the bow of a mahi mahi boat platter and wrist turn that sends soup into spin and stock thickening and morphing into a gravy bowl. The coming night smells moist and cool.
So are your sodas brewed and bottles in formations, asks Esperanza while Luna comes rambling across the yard behind Senay, tectonic plates shifting slightly under heavy paws as she builds up speed and rhythm, bursts into a happy gallopy frolic, coming to demand ear scratches and inspect the dead deer flesh.

My bottles rest poised and ready to strike. To rain sugar cane, sassafras, blueberry, sweet flying honeybee, cocoa bean, tamarind, pineapple, pomegranate, guava, coconut, ginseng gotu kola fo ti ginger bomb goodness down on the patrons of the carnival as well as the carneys who run the show. Send out a message. They’re gonna never want to buy another Pepsi or Coke.

I agree with your conclusion, pero no con tus metodos. If you can brew beer, why not soda. Compete with them locally. You can work faster than they and y ofrecer lower precios. Sabes?

Ingenious, I say. We can turn every weakness into strength. Like the Vietcong fighting the US Army or Luke Skywalker fighting the Empire. Where they’re bigger, I’ll be too small to find, they’re stronger, I’ll steal from them and sap that energy.

Esperanza smiles. Now, she says, you’re thinking. When you gonna start?

Right now, I say, I’ll convert one of my beer tanks to soda. Then, I’ll take blue berries from the grow beds in the green house, some ginger, lime, honey for sweetener. This can work.

So I begin. The war begins. Luna comes and we brew, dog and I, till stars splatter the black canvassed solace of night, carrying all us dreamscape voyagers across the oceans blue of Europe, into the bright haze of dawn.
In a corner of my basement sits a couch. Here lies the den of Luna. She seems to love the smell of fresh brew in the catacombs beneath the house and frequently comes here to sleep. Esperanza and Senay sleep above. Lullabied into the eternal carnival of subconscious black swamp.


*Me:* I'm prepping some brew and waiting for Esperanza to drift into sleepyland. I can be there shortly.

*Remy:* Roger. We'll standby. Incidentally, I still think you're whipped like Sugar Cain plantation slave.

*Me:* You just wish you had someone as gorgeous, smart and cool as Esperanza.

Luna begins to snore as my hand sifts through piles of hops and yeast. Her snoring always soothes me. To know such a beautiful and loyal friend might exist on the planet. It restores my faith in life. That maybe humanity will someday be more Luna-dog-like. I think a people might best be judged by its treatment of those at its mercy. Often times the old fucks of the world take positions of power and decisions come about in the absence of emotive pulse. Then the whole system begins to pitch and yaw out of synch with mother Earth.

Time slides by and I come to notice the absence of Luna’s snoring. Taking steps I approach her to notice her great belly is swollen. Quick like, I check to see her breathing. They come shallow and forced. Her mouth drops open and her tongue lolls out.

The strong odor of yeast comes rolling out the great baritone canyon that is her throat.
Lock up your supplies when you finish, the voice of Esperanza past razes psychic flesh, tattoos across the old growth standing defiant in swampy moonlight gas night.

I scream out.

Esperanza!

I release the word like a rocket carrying-Sputnik into orbit. Then realize I must awake the inhabitants of this home. The parapets must be manned. Oil heated to boiling hot. The enemy is at the gate. Captain bad tricks come to take away the Moon Dog.

I race up the stairwell. Burst into the bedroom. Esperanza sits up in a fright.

What the fuck, she says.

Its Luna, I say. Something’s wrong with her. Her stomach swelled up and she barely breathes. I think she’s dying.

She leaps from bed, throwing on shorts and a tank top. Then we stumble down the stairwell. Tripping back all the way into the basement. Into my laboratory we step. Luna lies still in the same space. I approach. Her breathing looks completely absent. Esperanza examines closely. I see her face covered in tears as she turns.

Oh no, Esperanza whimper.

I’m getting the truck, I say.

I sprint through the basement and emerge above ground. It takes a minute to pull the truck up close to the back door. Luna weighs over one hundred and eighty pounds of muscle, bone and super-sized organs.

Between the two of us, we pick up Luna. Her body seems limp. Deadweight is always a heavier burden to carry. We muscle her into the back of our small blue pickup.

Red lights fade into rear view mirror. No squad cars appear despite five blown stoplights.
The door of the 24-hour animal clinic opens and three veterinarian assistants rush out the door, following my lead.

Luna rests on top a liter from which they transfer her onto the stainless steel examination table; the Vet and three assistants en mass. Silence spins the gravity in the room.

I can try to resuscitate her. But there’s only a small chance she’ll come back, says the Vet.

How much of a chance, I say?

Maybe one in a hundred.

Oh. I see.

I place my hand on Luna’s head, right above her glassy eye. Pull back an ear. Feel, for the last time, I know, what the fiber of her hairs feel like across the palm of my hand. How the brindle patterns flow in the fluorescent light.

Why? You can’t go now. We just got the house. With the big yard. Why do you have to go? Can’t you stay just a little while longer?

LLL

DumbsaintMindtrain: How is Luna? Are you OK?

Me: She just passed away. The Doc couldn’t bring her back. She’s flying free now. Somewhere out beyond. Maybe she’ll come communing in across a line break or in broken paragraphs. Maybe.

DumbsaintMindtrain: I know you’re gonna go crazier, but please come home soon.

Me: 010101010101
I release myself into the night and the arms of the interstate. Control may be an illusion. At least armed with 70-mile-hour steel under a turn of my wrist, under explosive palm, at least here I feel safer. The world spins by outside ballistic glass. I slam the accelerator.

*Remy:* Oh brother where art thou?
*Me:* Tripping down the interstate. I did three lines. I’m wired as fuck.

*Remy:* Let’s rock. Fat Indian wired up a device that tracks the GPS on the semi. He can run, but he can’t hide. Where using his “security” measures against him. Over emphasizing safety is the antithesis of “valor” and spontaneous motion emanating from a stilled mind. No form little brother.

*Me:* my gear got left at the house. don’t want to see Esperanza at the moment. need time alone.

*Remy:* Come run with the pack a while.

*Me:* enroute

*Remy:* And don’t get any more fucked up!

I guide pistons and rubber between glowing interstate lines. Aim for puddles of effluent on the asphalt. Exit Porfirio Diaz. Stare at the magic intersection at the end of the bridge, where meet the river and J-Town and the border lands. Everything comes to a point at the end of this bridge. It’s a riff in space and time. Unknown tongues spoken here. Dragons in wait beyond. I square up my shoulders against the strange gravity coming from this portal.

Remy’s door comes into focus through a thin curtain of rain and redlining revolutions of Adrenalin. I’m stoned immaculate.
The doorknob spins and the door opens and inside stands Remy the Priest-Warrior and behind him stands Fat Indian. Wizard of technological devices and chemical equation. Charmer of charmers.

Greetings little Brother, says Remy. Ready to play? Let’s go make the world a little cleaner.

LL

We speed down the interstate. Time moving fast motion around me. I stare at Fat Indian. His arms begin to change hue and glow as he sits in stillness, riding shotgun. Remy's arms tremor gently against the steering wheel. His wrists making quantum adjustments to the rotation of the steering wheel. Gentle corrections to azimuth. I see smoke coalescing around his arms and now half his arm and face metamorphosis, becoming smoke that spirals around the cockpit and I see a sickness in the smoke. A Buffalo taking shape among smoke rings.

Snap the fuck out of it, says Remy.

What?

Come on now. Where coming up to Smelter Town. Where taking the high ground from the hilltop. We’ll scroll out onto the bridge to nowhere. The one that dead-ends on the other side, opening into desert.

Remy parks the hotwired and stolen pick-up alongside the fence line designed to keep interlopers off this bridge designed for some abandoned purpose. If it ever had purpose. Probably open to heavy interpretation and perspectives.
The tailgate opens and Remy pulls down one of three small dirt bikes, saddlebags bulging with Paintball gear. Rifles and grenades. Pistols and rounds. Wicked toy barrels awash in the glow of Remy’s red-lensed flashlight. We’re the kids who used to sit in the back seat, trying to cope a feel off a pretty girl. Broke into school to steal the cash box from the Principal’s office. Decadent fucker.

Fat Indian effortlessly unloads his bike. His image is positively surreal. A contradiction in gravitational ground rules. His rotund belly should unbalance his body. Belly like a gas giant in the void of space. Planetary. The weight of dirt bike in his arms should send him toppling over. Yet he stands gracefully poised and hoists the bike onto terra firma. I can’t stop I’m seeing – his body immersed in a glow of Chi. His is truly a master of gravity. Understands how to move under a heavy spinning mass. And move things along with him. Effortlessly.

*Think about proper posture, says Shifu Painter. Keep your butt tucked in, spine straight. Especially your head. It’s a rotund object attached to a relatively small pole. To control under gravity, you must be centered. Keep your head level.*

I take a grip on my bike. Lift it up and off the truck bed. Rest it gently on the ground, pausing a second, suspending the wheels an inch above Earth. Checking my posture, alignment, whole body movement. Either everything should spin or everything should be at rest. So I let my mind spin.

We roll our bikes up to the fence line, drop down kickstands. Remy pulls out bolt cutters. Snips at the wire and cuts a circular opening, a portal to the bridge. It spins in my head in the semi-darkness. Remy signals to follow him. We crawl through, stage on the other side, then move in a file towards the edge of the bridge. I pull rear security. Glancing back every few steps.
Spinning in a Bagua turn to assess what demons may follow. Keeping sharp eye on Fat Indian’s back. No breaks in contact.

The glow of the interstate spills over the guardrails, cars speeding with the asphalt flow below. We sit in the dark, coiled in anticipation of the semi-tractor trailer traveling towards our position. The semi now positioned less than two kliks away.

Lock and load, whispers Remy.

He should be about two thousand meters away, whispers Fat Indian examining the glowing screen of his GPS localizing machine. I’ll count down and on my word…

Let fly the cannon balls, finishes Remy the thought.

Some men like to hear the cannon balls a roaring, I whisper.

Seven… six… five… four… three… two…

We move like rattle snakes gone a year through the deserts outside the walls of Jericho with no chow to swallow down, not even a micro sink hole of camel piss to drink.

My sights taking me over the wall, my red laser target finder sketching a path across the words of a sentence that reads: “victims aren’t we all”. How ironic, I think in the split second before the panorama of roaring freeway fills my vision, dried oil spills baked into asphalt and engine exhaust filling my nostrils and bleeding straight through my lungs, and the wind ripping across my scalp, ruffling my hair like canyon winds ripping across the feathers of an owl in a steep dive, prey an inch beyond talon grasp.

The semi rides towards us at about three hundred meters away. I pull the rifle barrel in close to my chest and push my chin against the charging handle. And at about a hundred meters away, I take aim center mass at the windshield. Listening to the engine break squeal and the windshield wipers marking time.
My abdomen expands. Suck in air to the pits of lung chamber. Release the air. And at the end of the exhalation, at the point of stillness before the lungs will take in fresh air, I allow my finger to drop into the trigger well and squeeze. And now comes the eternal stillness. The finger continues to apply pressure. Smooth even pressure, no anticipation, no discontinuity. The snap and metallic clunk like thunder through my brain comes spontaneously. And I breath in and at the bottom of my breath release a second round. Then flies loose the third. Not steel beasties, just balls of color in flight.

My rounds fly true and splatter: one, two, three; across the semi windshield they connect in a tight pattern around the point through which I imagined the driver might look. Remy’s rounds land an inch or so right and high of mine, Fat Indian’s landing dead left of my shot group.

The truck swerves right. Smacks the guardrail below, sending a shower of sparks. The driver attempts to compensate: the semi swerves hard right, the driver overcompensating, the big rig slips and is now caught in a slide, the rear end coming around on the semi cab.

It’s gonna jack-knife, I say.

Maintain noise discipline, whispers Remy.

Fuck off, I say. We maybe just killed a trailer full of puppies and dogs.

I rush to the opposite side of the bridge. The semi seeming to slide under my feet, a few meters below reinforced concrete. The semi shoots out from under the bridge, turning, the whole beast rolling over on its side. Its sends sparks into the air as it scrapes against the asphalt.

Ain’t friction a motherfucker, I say. A car following the semi breaks hard. The SUV following is unable to stop. Rear window ballistic glass shatters, flies in a cloud for a moment, then drops onto the interstate. The driver loses control and the car spins into gravel. The SUV
pulls onto the shoulder. Driver exits the vehicle to render assistance to the car now at rest alongside the interstate. The rear section badly crushed.

The semi almost comes to rest when the rear doors bursts open and a series of cages fall out the back of the refrigerated trailer container.

That’s fucking it, I say. I’m going down there.

LL

In a dead sprint for the fence portal through which we slipped, my sole hits a slippery wet rock. It spins out from under my heel. Gravity takes me down. I roll into the fall. Combat roll forward. Disperse force across my shoulders and hands. Spin back up to see Remy crawling through the fence break. Fat Indian comes alongside me as I regain momentum.

What the fuck are we doing, yells Fat Indian over the growing pandemonium on the interstate below.

I’m gonna mount up and save a baby canine, I say.

And get arrested?

What?

We’re the ones made the thing crash! What? You just going to say sorry to the men in front of the red and blue strobes?

I don’t know what’s coming next! I just know I gotta keep going!

Fat Indian looks like a whale calf squeezing through a doggie door at the bottom of the sea. Once again, he moves his weight with astounding poise, grace and skill. Ninja hoodoo trickery, I think. And follow his lead to the other side.
Remy sits on his bike, engine idling.

Let’s break contact, he says.

No way Pancho, I say. I’m going down to help.

On a bike loaded with paint ball equipment?

LL

The terrain before me zigs and zags erratically. I catch air and hang time a split second in the air. Before the spin of Earth brings me slamming down. Shocks absorbing the impact.

Through an arroyo I twist and turn, making way to the interstate.

The desert fades and I emerge on the interstate shoulder. State police are on the scene. Alongside El Paso PD and a border patrol jeep. Two agents standing in front smoking menthols.

The sound of train breaks through the interstate noise – cuts clear through like a Katana splitting a ripe red watermelon. Black sound seeds scattering in the wind and skittering across the asphalt.

Alongside the interstate comes a train. The engine car does not belong to any train company I’ve ever seen. Its jet black with Egyptian symbols painted alongside the bottom edge. The boxcars that follow look custom designed for some unusual purpose. Through distorted and wired vision, I make out words. *Dakota Bueller’s Circus of Synchronicity*. The carnival comes, I think.

The train begins to brake alongside the downtown station. Cargo doors open all alongside the train. I observe the crew begin to unload.

A police car squawks a load three-toned signal.
I break vision from the dromedary disembarking the train below.

I walk through a mist of rain and coolant steaming piping hot from a cracked radiator. About fourteen cars lie wrecked on the asphalt. Tow trucks make slow way towards the scene. They are crawling along the shoulder behind a state trooper guiding them in.

I approach the border patrol agents smoking alongside a government jeep.

Nobody is aware of how, says the agent, or why the driver of this particular semi-tractor trailer lost control of the vehicle controls. It’s a damned transvesty of justice though. I can tell you that for sure.

May we render assistance, I query?

No sir, I don’t believe the officers on the scene want anyone on the scene other than those particular individuals on the scene licensed as peace officers.

That why you not helping?

At the moment, Sir, we’re smoking.

Peace. Thanks bro.

I scan the landscape. Remy walks away from his bike. Saddlebags slung over his hulking shoulders. Fat Indian looks astoundingly serene on his bike, surveying the mayhem and destruction we’ve weaved this fateful night. I feel my brain start to crash. Now a bit of concern over the potential legal ramifications of my actions crosses my brain. I wave to Remy. He raises his middle finger and scowls. The semi lays broken about fifty meters to my front. So I make way towards the wreckage, weaving around static traffic. People sitting in cars conversing on
I approach the edge.

Pardon, I say to a trooper standing guard. I need to get my dog.

Your dog?

My dog.

What does your dog look like, says the trooper with a chuckle?

Four paws and a missing tooth. Look man, those dogs are injured. I’ve got food and water and I used to be a veterinarian assistant.

The officer smiles and seems to be seriously evaluating my proposal.

All right, Sir, go get your dog, he says.

I make way across the debris field towards a row of portable kennels lined up behind the broken behemoth. I pass three cages in which sleep dead canines. In the fourth whimpers a Blue Healer. I gently open the door and encourage her to exit. She sticks her snout out, then steps paws onto the interstate and follows me as I circle the semi.

The nose of the downed semi rises before me. Grill like gaping maw exhaling one last breath of endless freeway. It moans to me in hydraulic gasps and engine brake rhythm. The released arrows of color washed away by the persistent ever-present raindrops. Still the pitter-patter washes my senses.

The driver lies on a stretcher behind an ambulance. I’m taken aback, realizing this to be the same prick-fuck who delivers to Jolly Jose’s doggie. This denizen of the puppy mill industry came walking from the backdoor store entrance once upon a time, failing to acknowledge the
presence of Senay, who wanted to see the puppies locked within the trailer hull, and shoo-flied us away.

Sir, says the state trooper now in my face. You need to get moving with your dog. You must be relieved to recover the animal.

I note the sarcasm. Quickly I shuffle off. Making way back to the bikes and Remy and Fat Indian. Dog in tow, we make quick time down the interstate.

Say bro, says a girl in jean-skirt and a tank top, sitting on the hood of her truck. Cute dog. I love dogs. I’ve a wiener dog a home. You know, a Datsun.

Right, I say.

Can I pet it?

You can pet anything you want.

Ahhh, cool!

She jumps down, her skirt riding up to the crease below her butt, and struts up to my dog.

He’s adorable!

Right on, I say. Stroke away. Fondle…

I cut off my own language, observing Remy signaling from across the freeway. The rally signal goes up.

Hey, you’re interesting, I say. Maybe we’ll meet again.

Tomorrow if you’d like, she says, extending a business card to my palm.

On the move, dog and I reach the edge of the asphalt.

Could taking any more time, says Remy?

Three guys on dirt bikes might look suspicious, says Fat Indian.

I was just gonna say goodbye to the nice girl on the pickup hood and then…
I’ll make sure to tell Esperanza that you made a friend tonight, says Fat Indian.

Disregard, I say.

LL

Sand dune silhouettes slide by in the moonlight. Lost boxcars. Busted axles. Dog drool on my neck. Sweet saliva wash me like John the Baptist wading across a river deep. Ear buds jacked into my IPOD. Sweet music rock me a lullaby and roll me like a kamikaze jet fighter pilot, turning and burning forever.

I step through a Johari windowpane. I must, I think, look a sight, a wraith on back a dirt bike, dog 5-50 corded to his back, Bruce, the Boss, singing Gypsy Biker across the circuits, pouring those riffs into my ocean of noggin.

The desert gives reluctant way to pavement and neighborhood street lamps in rows across the Heights.

I pass the subway entrance to downtown. Construction workers surround the neon ENTER sign. I stop.

Say buddy, says a tile laying artisan worker.

What’s up, I say?

We been down in tunnels all day man, he says. Writing all over the walls and stuff. But we’re not professionals. You know man, we need a professional to interpret the words of all the prophets hanging around the new Starbuck’s. Why don’t you come on staff?

I’m not yet a professional, I say. Honestly, I don’t think they exist.

For reals?
That don’t either.

The subway blinks away and I follow the taillights of Remy as Fat Indian breaks right, heading towards his own castle.

LL

I dream a nuclear submarine on a six-month mission into polar frozen waters. This big Russian sub and everybody eats caviar and drinks Vodka. I like Vodka. At least forty days and forty nights without sight of sun or moon. Right before the Captain gives orders to head back to our underwater sub base, we surface and conduct a reconnoiter of the surface of the icecap under which we currently sail. The sub breaks through the ice. I’m standing in the bell tower with the Captain. On the ice, I see the dog, the one in the old fuck’s yard. He’s standing there wagging his tail. Then some penguins waddle up behind him, they start talking – they’re very polite, very serious, well spoken. Don’t just stop and proselytize at the five mile marker to Ptolomea, oh my brother, verily and not-so-merrily, you may find yourself scrubbing the Devil’s left nut-sack, standing in the city limits by the all-you-can-eat hotdog stand a block from that bar named Heaven near the airport. Truck back up the Interstate, oh my brother, the nations blue, got a flu, we’ve gone to the levee, my brother, been broke cause Jack wanted to make a buck and now we’re all fucked, since 1949 the Golden Arches been cranking out burgers. And that’s about all I remember.

I’m only half awake, thinking about those penguins. I squirm, scratch my scrotum, turn onto my other side, force one eyelid open, and allow the softly simmering sunlight to slip inside. The light soaks into my neural network, skips across chasms and dried-out riverbeds. I’m
dragged, slowly, into full consciousness. Or maybe out. Or maybe somewhere in between. Or maybe onto a flatbed boxcar heading down Portobello Road towards Naboombu. My coffee machine – a silver Cuisinart – chimes. Begins brewing coffee. I step into the kitchen, pour a cup of Starbuck’s Winter Blend, place the ceramic to my lips and let the liquid slide down. Silly belly, would say the muse, so I think.

Rain gently taps my windowpane. The clouds crept into my sleep.

A kiss on the forehead. I slip the swamp in which I swam. Surface to see the bright eyes of Esperanza gleaming.

You remember anything about last night, she questions?

Have you seen my head, I say? I seem to have misplaced the fucker.

You slammed almost a full bottle of Tequila, broke several glasses and told me what a bitch I am.

I don’t remember anything, my love.

I’m not going to ask where you went. I just hope you didn’t get yourself in to any trouble again.

I think to myself, how the only thing I remember is the one thing I can’t discuss with her lest she storm out the door and never return. So I stay quit.

I’m so sorry if I was mean or said anything stupid.

You said plenty stupid. I’m not going to discuss it right now. I’m so sorry about Luna.

LL
The mailbox in front of the house mimics the form of a snake. I like trying to intimidate the mailman. I’ve decided this one of those rare days when I shall check the mail. The convention of imprinting octopus pus on to dead process paper seems an almost dead tradition to me. Not that I don’t appreciate books. Every room of my home brims and spills over with books, many worth a considerable sum of money and some signed by fellow warrior poets already conversing with the moon dog. Simply that for every-day bah hum bug passing of conventional data in whatever code, I feel paper a waste of a limited resource.

I hum “Oh When The Saints come Marchin’ Home”, to the rhythm of the raindrops. Tap my foot. Smile. Walk outside. Walk towards the mailbox forty feet from the front door. A drop of rain falls into my forehead, runs down the side of my nose, onto my lips. I wipe it clean with my tongue. Suck the sky in.

The rain begins to fall in crocodile tear buckets, comes down in a torrent. The wind blows open my red nightgown, exposing my white boxer briefs with the decorative green monster faces. The briefs most beloved by my Esperanza, who corrects me when I don’t know the lyrics of a song or the names of all five Beatles. I hum, instead of sing, a line of “last kiss”.

The wind blows hard, sweeping sideways across the neighborhood, across the lawn, over the house, wraps around the smoke stacks and snaking blue pipes of a petroleum processing plant by the interstate. The rain sweeps across El Paso, Anthony, Canutillo, onto Dallas, Denver, Seattle, and out to the Pacific Ocean where a dolphin leaps out of the sea and snaps up rain drops. I squint my eyes, tilt my head into the downpour, and walk to the mailbox.

The wind pushes against my spine, mama nature mocking me I suppose, as I walk back into the house, turn on CNN, and smoke a cigarette, wondering what the fuck is a mocking bird
and why the numbers game of nature ever configured such a code and why mama likes to play mind games.

I’m googling Mockingbirds when Esperanza comes, dark skinned, great breasts and a small waist and in a bad mood this morning. Walks into the living room with a scowl on her face and stands in front of the sofa with hands on hips.

Estas mojado. And you’re sitting on my sofa. Can you at least dry off before you soak the sofa?

Speaking of ‘mojada’, how’s your morning been sunshine, I say.

I smile, take a drag off my smoke.

No estoy dispuesto aguantar tus pendejadas. You said you were going out with Remy for a short game of paint ball. And then…

I guess your really didn’t sleep last night?

No. Estaba bien dispierto. But I was pissed the fuck off and didn’t want to deal with an enormous fight and ruin the whole next day when the carnival comes.

She looks really pissed off. I know this because she code switches to her ancestral tongue. I’m feeling mischievous and since she can’t control her temper, I decide to take advantage of the situation. I call her by her mother’s first name, she gets really pissed – she hates her mother.

Call me that one more time and I’m going to cut your balls off with a pair of bolt cutters, she says, spins around in a twister of Latina fury, walks out of the living room saying, estupido indio, mal parido, hijo de puta criado con salvajes…”

Esperanza, Baby, I shout out. I don’t know what you’re saying, but I think you might be angry?
A door slams shut.

Hey, baby, we got to work on this communication thing, I shout out. I pull a cell phone out my nightgown pocket, type in a text message.

_I am not a savage, but can’t say about ‘mal parido’ because I’m not sure what that means. I’m a modern Apache half-breed in love with a whitewashed Chicana. Let’s make love in the rain._

I contemplate, pontificate, my finger hovers over the green send button, I caress the button with my index finger. These lovin’ digits are for you Esperanza, I say, I’m your modern Geronimo of love.

I press the button.

A stream of digitized words shoot out my phone, into the atmosphere, travel in a split second to the nearest Verizon repeater tower, get processed by a server, shoot back into the atmosphere, travel another split second, find Esperanza’a cell phone on the dresser next to the bed, vibrate her phone. I know my Chicana, know she’s probably curled up in bed, cursing me in several languages. I expect a reply within thirty seconds. At the stroke of the twenty-seventh second, my phone vibrates.

_Mal parido means you are a miscarriaged son of a bitch! I want to communicate with you, but I don’t know how to make smoke signals. Go back to your reservation!_

I light another cigarette, inhale, exhale, stroke the send button on my phone, stare out the window at falling sheets of rain, up the alleyway winding through a hill. The houses look to me
like part of a toy city that came with my Matchbox cars when I turned seven. Looks positively surreal no matter how many times I see it. The rain falls straight down now. No more sideways rain. I meander to the refrigerator, pour a glass of milk while looking at Esperanza’s painting. An abandoned car in a field, maybe about a 1976 Buick Wildcat, American muscle, flexed and clinched before the gas crisis really hit home, before Americans starting caring about how fast you can break as well as how fast you can accelerate from 0-1960. It sits, rusting in a field of green, the trunk painted with genuine Navajo graffiti copied off a tribal High School wall, up in Northern New Mexico, near the Hopi. And then some very decorated spears sit propped on the side windows, tips pointing out in a defensive posture. And an old man pulling out a snake, a sidewinding rattle snake, out the bottom of an old oil drum. Gray, the sky above the whole scene, cumulus clouds stacked high enough to graze the bottoms of passing airliners squawking IFF signals to distant towers. Then she put a big radio tower on the horizon. But it also resembles an oilrig on a Texas plain. Instead of oil, a steady trickle of blood escapes the cap on top the tower. I love her mind at work.

I step up to the back door, looking out at the trees: Mesquite, Palo Verde, Pine, and two others of an unknown nomenclature. Puddles dot the green lawn, puddles filling in holes dug by the dog. She’s easily bored. The trees sway with the wind and drop droplets of sweetness and seem to grow fatter as they soak up the moisture. The whole lawn seems to expand and grow heavier.

The weight of my phone returns to my hand, where my finger still strokes the send button. I begin typing a message. My phone is a bottle, an SOS soon to be placed inside, and the bottle hurled into a maelstrom of digits, where it will sail, until some ethereal surf washes it onto the shore of Esperanza’s handset.
I love my cows. Don’t make me send them off to slaughter. This is dumb. Why are we fighting? Want to make love with big Indian Chief? U luv luvin under big sky crying rain. Ugh. I’ll feed you tequila shots cried from desert clouds, made love to by lonely cactus. Ugh. I’m opening a bottle of Sotol. Come out and play in the rain.

I press the button.

The signal fires out from my cell phone, into a different repeater tower, vibrates Esperanza’s phone. This time, the repeater tower sends out a duplicate signal that gets lost somewhere over the North Atlantic, bounces into the water, and strikes a passing whale who fails to understand the exact meaning, but does perceive it as an amorous gesture and in a fit of passion makes love to another passing whale. A baby calf will be conceived in a crib of waves. How do I know this? I’m a Native American. We’re a very spiritual people. And we love Johnnie Walker. So I’m entitled my visions. I go to the pantry and open up a bottle of Hacienda de Chihuahua’s Sotol. The label reads: Aged Two Years.

LL

The bedroom door opens and out steps Esperanza, dressed in this long furry night-gown, a crooked smile on her face.

You talk about as sweet as one of your Grandfather’s cows, Johnnie. And about as smart. But you’re a poet, Johnnie. You can be my Indian Chief if you serve up a shot. Guess you know the foot trails and back roads to my garden. And I thought I’d covered my tracks. Give me a shot before your war party comes a calling.
I pour two shots. Esperanza and I, we down the liquid desert. Then she takes my hand, leads me outside, into the backyard, lays down a blanket, pulls me down on top of her under the enormous, dripping branches of the Mesquite. Wet grass oozes between my fingers, the pungent-sweet aroma of flowering leaves fills my nostrils. Then my hand runs up the back of her thigh, pulling up her skirt, sweet Esperanza, a finger brushing the border of the garden. I’m inside her, feel the rain pelt my back, kiss raindrops off her lips, brace my arms against the tree and push harder.

We orgasm together. Then we’re nowhere, just there under the tree together, locked in each other’s. I light drizzle sprinkles the lawn. We lay under the tree, my body draped over hers. Till she spins and I’m on my back and she covers me completely. We kiss.

I think I felt a lightning bolt, Johnnie, she says.

My people are very in tune with Mother Earth, I say, you know, we can shape shift, call spirits, rain dance, and even summon lightning while fucking.

Pendejo.

Cierto, pero soy tu pendejo.

I pull my pants up as she rests on her knees, the warrior position and so she is. In my mind, she wields a camera like the eye of God and melds in audio to make the Devil blush. Wickedly sensual and always on the edge of the abyss. The chords want to break into discord. She pulls back at the precise moment of no return, like a Samurai drawing back a bow string with a long, deep breath.

We stand up together, her eyes shiny and bright. And slowly we make our way across the grass, my arm around her waist, feeling the sway of her hips and shift of her weight, under the seemingly lightened gravity. A sheet of rain sweeps the lawn, sprinkling Esperanza’s spine. A
A raindrop just hit my eyeball right dead center.

Esperanza’s laughter cracks across the lawn, right before the sky crackles with thunder, in seeming response to her voice. I know, of course, the connection to be random, a throw of quantum dice.

Laugh it up, I say.

Let’s go inside and take a nap, she says.

Past a sleeping cat, who wakes peels open a lazy eye and glares, curls into a ball and looks annoyed. Up the stairwell. We peak into Senay’s room. She lays curled up in a ball, not too dissimilar to the cat downstairs. Then we step into our room. The rain gently pelts the windowpane.

Esperanza drifts away into slumber as I watch. She sleeps under stars. Plastic stars on the ceiling. Her naval normally rests somewhere under Venus and her head near Mars. She’s a crazy sleeper so I usually end up under Pluto.

LL

The monster on Senay’s bed smiles as we pack her bag for a week with Mom. An artist’s interpretation of childhood seahorses. A smile the size of ocean freighters. It was purchased as a flotation device for young Senay’s first swimming pool encounter. Being so damned adorable and cute, it remains inflated and lurks about her bed all night. When Senay awakes, she gives the seahorse her turn on the mattress seas.
I stare hard at the seahorse. It winks. I believe this to be a hallucination resulting from last night’s activities. But one can never be too sure. So I cautiously approach the creature and scratch its big plastic head. No movement. Good.

Senay stirs from her late morning slumber. Sits up and looks my way. I give her a big and sincere smile from the bottom of my soul, telling the little black spot to give me a moment because I’m doing my paternal thing. She is my month of May.

Good morning, I say.

Hi Dadiee, she says.

Did you sleep well?

Yes.

I wish I could say the same.

You have bad dream?

A very long, fast and furious dream about legions zombies thirty meters off my six.

Her eyes expand, big hazel orbs absorbing my story, distilling my language and making it her own. As soon she will do with Ba Kua and Hsing I. She will release form and become spontaneous in prose and poetry, movement of the mind and movement of the body in spontaneous union with nature – human and surf and pin forest and the twist of a wrist and shift of weight to open a door with the least expenditure of energy.

You gonna tell me the story.

Of course, I say, blinking back into the moment.

Esperanza enters the room.

Are you feeling better, she says? Migraine gone away?

Whatever it was.
What time do you want to go to the Carnival?

Damn! That’s right! In my grieving and political activism…

Your what?

Political ac-tiv-ism.

So, that’s what you call it in Injun’ country?

Senay, I say. Pack some clothes, whatever you wanna wear, cause’ you gotta go home to your Mom after the carnival.

I go with my Mom?

Yes.

Esperanza looks annoyed and I’m sure my face betrays my true emotions. I lock sights with Esperanza.

I’ve a present for you, I say to Senay. Let me go retrieve it.

And so I do, entering my room and approaching my sock drawer. I slide it open. The space within contains objects I prefer to keep close to my body. Up against flesh. A credit card reserved for emergencies, such as a potential flight to China in the event of some adverse altercation with government authorities. My FAA commercial flight certifications. Two small boxes of ammo for my GLOK. My American passport. My Canadian passport. My fake Mexican passport. Luna’s oversized leather collar.

I remove it and breath in the scent of Luna. Still preserved in the grains of the leather. Maybe even in abrasions on the metal buckle.

LL
Close your eyes, I say to Senay.

Standing in the light of her bedroom window, dressed in a purple plaid skirt, black leather boots and her Misfits t-shirt, she extends her tiny baby dragon palm. Esperanza sees the gift.

Ohhh, Senay, you’re going to love what Daddy bought for you, she says.

I rest gently her new Nintendo DSI and three games on top of her open palms. She tests the weight of the gifts, shifting her palms up and down a time or two. Then she opens her eyes. Having requested the game on various occasions, she squeals and bursts into laughter. Then jumps on her bed, opens game and pulls out stylus.

Esperanza goes to Senay and whispers in here ear.

Thank you Dadieee, says Senay.

No problem, I say.

You’re a great father. She now has an alternative to Univision when she visits Mom.

Hearts and minds campaign. She’ll soon be armed with so many interests and skills that she won’t stay more than a day with Mom without suffering an anxiety attack.

LL

In the basement I assemble a case of soda and beer bottles. A small batch that reveals the range I possess as a crafter of liquid bliss. Esperanza meets me at the door. We three make way across the yard and stop before the sidewalk, standing in awe at the sights filling the neighborhood.
Carneys move everywhere along the street. A girl clown in a skirt comes walking by, eating cotton candy. A conquistador boat, designed to swing like a pendulum on a rusty looking frame, rests directly in front of our house. The crew dressed in full plate armored costumes.

We make way down the street. Passing a cluster of empty corral’s and cages. The sign above says Petting Zoo.

Look, says Senay.

Zooooo, she says.

Very impressive, I say. But all the animals are having lunch at the moment. We’ll return.

When?

Nightfall.

Mida comes crossing the street as we approach an intersection. Also carrying a case of beer.

The duel begins, old friend, says Mida. We shall find which product most appeals to the fickled public of America.

It not a product, I say. Why do you insist on insulting the prophets. Brewing is an art. These are artifacts.

You are truly such an idealist.

You’re an artist too! What about the light-show-aquaponic system. It is merely for economic gain. Also to help the environment. The lights are just some silly lights going off in a programmed sequence. No big deal, old friend.

You’re going to give Johnnie a heart stroke, says Esperanza to Mida.

I mean no harm, he says to me with a smile.
Neither did the U.S. Cavalry when relocating the Sioux tribe, wiping out the buffalo trail and dooming us all to the aisles of big supermarkets and registers of fast food, I say. Doesn’t console us lost troubadours tripping around tombstones and giant plastic Ronald McDonald figures.

They’ve come out with some healthy salad options now, he says.

Come now, says Esperanza. We should be moving along. Don’t want to keep America waiting. Right dear?

Whatever, I say.

We break discourse and head down the sidewalk, Mida staying back a distance, seeming to sense my angst.

LL

Beautiful America waits at the counter within the Sunset Heights grocer.

We come bearing gifts, I say.

Hi Johnnie, she says. And how are you little angel?

I see a big boat at my house, she says.

That boat belongs to Mrs. Dakota Bueller. She is a very nice, and very strong woman. If she meets you, I’ll bet she gives you a piece of her famous chocolate. The carnival has a chocolate shop?

They make chocolate?

They do. And how are you doing, Esperanza?
Enjoying the sights, she responds. I’ve not experienced a carnival in a very long time. Since I was about twelve. Hello Mida!

He arrives bathed in a sheen of sweat, his hair strands swimming in sweat like strands of seaweed in the Sargasso Sea. Walks clumsily up to the counter. He picks up his feet and drops them on the ground, not knowing how to center and roll his weight heel to toe. He places a case of beer on the counter. Now sit our two cases side by side.

You both come prepared, says America. Looking positively like two UFC fighters about to bash some bottles across your opponent’s head.

I’m not violent, I say. My people were. Sometimes.

People, she says.

Yes. The Nez Perz, I say. We used to live up on the west coast near Seattle.

You don’t look Native American.

Anyway, says Esperanza. Johnny, why don’t you show America the qualitative ballet you’ve designed for the competition?

Yes, as I too would like to see, says Mida.

Ballot of The Luna Dog Bruja

Pleases rate this artifact, after you’ve consumed it to the fullest desire of your thirst, in descriptive, and constructive, words. Do not simply state, “I like it”. State why. You might describe the major chords of flavors you perceive, or the texture, or how the liquid language changes as you digest it fully; for instance, is it too bold from the start, or at the finish?
Please describe on a scale of 0.0 to 4.0, how likely you are to continue consuming artifacts constructed by this brewery?

Positively strange, says America. I’m not sure how I’d react to this. Let’s see what the public says.

Yes, but how do we evaluate the descriptions of his beer in comparison to mine in any kind of meaningful way?

We need a judge, says America. A supreme court of the land.

From the curtained doorway far behind the counter steps a woman in a suite of black pin stripes. Her face composed of strong and pronounced cheekbone and a high forehead. Her arms look strong, as does her body center. Her stomach looking neither defined nor soft of paunchy. She carries herself with great confidence and poise. Looking to be a natural leader. Very comfortable in her own skin and command of those around her.

Gentleman and ladies, says America. Permit me to introduce my favorite lady in all the land. Dakota Bueller.

What is your name, says Dakota in a raspy but very female voice. You’re absolutely adorable.

My name Senay.

Do you like chocolate?

Sometimes, says Senay, look my way tentatively.

Go ahead, I say. Take some.
Dakota pulls out a whopping big bar of chocolate from an inner pocket of her suite coat. Hands it down to Senay.

I hope you enjoy this as much as I did the first time I partook of Carney Chocolate!

I bend down and whisper in Senay’s ear.

Thank you Dakota, says Senay.

You’re very welcome. Now gentleman. As I understand, we’ve a very serious conflict that requires my mitigation and extraordinary adaptation on your part, as your beverages must make the denizens of tonight’s carnival follow you like a pied piper down the runway. Correct?

I merely want to sell more bottles than Mr. Leadfeather in order to prove my product superior, says Mida.

Now where lies the mystery in that, she retorts? I’ll speak for the visitors of America’s shop possessed of superior taste. Those who are self-aware and experienced in comparatively analyzing fine beers and micro sodas. You may set your wares on the counter spaces provided by your host.

America gestures to two tables set side by side at near the room’s entrance.

I’m even providing one of my prettiest girls, and one of my prettiest boys, to provide service at the tables. They pour the nectar and collect the cash. In this manner, you four may be out among the midway rides and games. Now ladies and gentleman, go get dressed and ready to enjoy the experience of my carnival. Return at midnight.

Luna stops by to play…
Looking around the kitchen, I notice missing the clipboard filled with photos of my deceased Mastiff, Luna, the mighty Lunar Dog. I remember, her fading away, losing gravity, slipping past the thin blue line, even as her body lay cold on a metal table, and even as she burned up in a crematory furnace, ashes rising to the Heavens, to the stars, to be reconstituted. I can hear her, sometimes, in the background radiation static of the universe, coming through the hisses. Sometimes when a glass tips over, I know she wants to remind me of the night she tripped over a wire and dropped my laptop. She wants to remind me she’ll always be around, reminding me to slow down and take time to play. I think, I’d have it no other way.

Following my gaze, Esperanza says, I’ve a surprise for you. While you brewed last night, I designed a label for your soda bottles.

She pulls out the missing clipboard. Beneath Luna’s photo she pulls a freshly imprinted label, ready to affix to a bottle of brew; Luna’s face grins at me from the bottle label. I smile. This, I think, unlike those fucking Coca-Cola polar bears, is real.

I sob gently in remembrance of Luna.

Let’s go have a few drinks of Sotol, she says, taking my hand and guiding me out and away.

Esperanza and I sit on the porch, sipping liquid bread, awaiting dusk and the subsequent hour of bewitching. We hear the familiar thu-thump of Senay making way down the stairwell, movie in hand, DVD player at the ready.

Remy is fucking crazy, says Esperanza.

Yeah, I say, but what’s really crazy, a slaughterhouse that feeds millions of people chicken and cow pumped full of hormones and drenched in shit? Or people willing to take violent action against those companies.
Remy: How goes your recovery.

Me: Like shit.

Remy: We made the new last night.

Me: Did they say the vandals stole the handles?

Remy: What?

Me: Disregard. I’m with Esperanza, taking Senay to the carnival. Gonna be busy tonight.

I’m getting the look. Out here.

Who’s really crazy? People willing to act with violence to defend animals against a systematic torturing happening on behalf of shit heads too lazy to buy free range and eat tofu on occasion or people willing to sit on ass and watch the whole planet burn? You tell me.

Johnnie, she says, I love. Now go let’s go take a nap. You’re not Che Guevara. What you are is still exhausted. Come take a cat nap.

Che Guevara wasn’t Che Guevara when he started, I say.

She rolls her eyes.

And if that was Remy, you best just say its family night and you’re overwhelmingly busy.

Roger that.

LL

We navigate the alleyways passing Carneys at every turn. Two men pass close, one carries a five-pound mallet the other a box full of nails and a hammer. They head across the road towards small Shakespearian stage setting up adjacent to our neighborhood Catholic Church.
The carnival begins slowly to pulse, alive and ripe with cotton candy. A cheerleaders passes by, droning OMG, her boyfriend’s hand under the back of her skirt. She giggles and smiles at me. My name is Johnnie Leadfeather, I think, nice to meet you. I’m not really saying it, just thinking, sub vocalizing. She can’t hear my words, doesn’t have the capacity.

We step in front of the gate of the walled sanctuary. The structure looms large, the walls made of heavy load bearing cut rock.

She’s late, I say.

She’s old and sick with Alzheimer’s, says Esperanza. I’m sure she’s just running late.

Nanita coming, says Senay.

Eventually, I say.

We pass by a wooden picnic table. Three clowns and a mime seat smoking Camels, Marlboro Menthol Lights and cloves. The pungent sweet smell hits my nostrils. I suck it in, loving that smell. Esperanza once confessed she stopped smoking them after coughing up blood for three days. A clown winks at her. These clowns, I know to be evil. Call it intuition.

A vendor in a booth, yellow toothed and cursed with a hygiene problem related to smelly armpits, smirks.

How may I be of service, he says.

Three Root Beers, I say.

Well, pardon me Sir, he says, but all we have is Coca-Cola and Sprite.

You don’t have Pepsi or RC Cola or Dr. Pepper or anything else? Because I’m really not into Coke or white sodas, says Esperanza.

The vendor laughs, the sound rising from beneath a flannel shirt three buttons open, the sound bubbles up and pops in the air. His, chest hairier than a werewolf’s backside, resonates a
million years of Scottish moors, a million years of cold, seaside programming acting on primitive DNA.

    Well, I guess the Doctor must be out of the office, he says, rearing back his head and laughing hysterically. I’m wondering if the drugs once again give me visions. I swear, as he cackles a billow of smoke rises from his throat and a buffalo takes vague form within the swirls.

    Senay moves behind me, wide-eyed with fear or wonder, peeks out from behind my leg. Maybe, I think, she sees.

    But seriously, he continues, Coca-Cola sponsors the carnival. We have to be loyal to our sponsor. It’s just good business. Pardon the inconvenience.

    I pull out my flask, opening it up, taking in a smooth shot of Johnny Walker.

    I we proceed forth in the good company of Mr. Walker, I say, handing the flask to Esperanza, who takes a nip and hands it back.

    Hey man, says a kid standing behind me. You can’t drink alcohol at the carnival man, that’s so uncool man. The cops are going to bust your ass. I hope you get a ticket.

    Whatever, says Esperanza, rolling those big beautiful eyes that came straight out the plains of ancient Mongolia, dark black centers of gravity. I have to brace myself against the vending booth in order to not succumb to the power of her waves. I’m reeling, then I realign, focus, regain my center.

    I’m going to complain and suggest your boss, Mrs. Bueller, fire the automatons and purchase my brews.

    She didn’t make the call on this one, says the vendor. The Comptroller did. But it’s your lucky day. He happens to be here today. You can’t miss him. He’s the only guy out here wearing a three-piece suit and a top hat, walking with three well-armed clowns for security reasons. You
understand. Dangerous times and all. My pastor says maybe end of times. You can’t be too careful anymore.

Tell me about it, I say. Damn zombies running amok on the daylight streets of Manhattan, CNN filming the shit and nobody says a word. But, relax, it’s all cynical. It comes then someday soon it fades away. Like walking away from this midway and down the olden interstate.

He looks suspiciously at me. We walk away. Lose ourselves in the hum of carnival midway sounds.

Let’s have some fun, says Esperanza, and tell this corporate monopolize what we think about him and his support of centralized production of consumable goods. It really annoys.

I know. Let the hunt begin, I say.

I switch my gray matter into military mode, tapping into my hunter-programmed instincts. We begin the Safari.

Rain clouds swarm above us in overdrive. At a booth stands an old hippie surrounded by crystals and a deck of cards moving swiftly in hands looking subtle and adept in skills such as legerdemain.

I approach, signaling the peace sign about ten meters from him.

Greetings, I say.

What’s up, he returns.

Just checking out the scene. What do you offer?

An open window into yourself and the elements most poised to act on you at the given moment.

Well then, unlock the portal.
I take Visa and MasterCard.

Senay chuckles, seeming to understand that I’ve been bamboozled into spending money on a magician.

Fine then, I say.

I pass my card to him and he swipes it. His body seems to be in total motion when he moves. Slight adjustments to the shoulders. A sinking and rising motion. Maybe a slight rotation in the waist. If anything moves, everything moves, said my Shifu’s Shifu and passing it onto me. He maybe a Shaolin Mage, I contemplate.

He deftly deals out cards. I’m unfamiliar with their significance.

What do they mean, I ask.

That you should understand that the heart of the warrior and the soul of the hippie are one. In the moment, you’re fractured. Like communist Germany. You need reunification. And to do that you will need a very strong woman.

He looks again at the cards and shakes his head.

Damn man, she going to have to be very, very strong.

Esperanza looks at me, shrugs her shoulders.

Baby, if it ain’t me, she says, you’re fucked. Guaranteed, nobody else would put up with the crazy situations you get into.

Thanks. What else Mr. magic man?

The other thing: the guy you look for now sits right behind your back at the table with that stupid clown.

I turn. There stands a tall, thin man with a gaunt face. His mouth and lips unnaturally large. Top hat in place.
Thank you, says Esperanza. You just made my life a little more insecure. Have a nice day!

One of the Comptroller’s three clowns intervenes as we approach. The others laugh and joke with him as a mime sits silent, watching attentively. He doesn’t appear engaged in their language; whatever tongue may be spoken between evil clowns and wizardly Comptrollers.

Holy cowbells, I say. It was practically divine intervention that brought us here so quick. Don’t you think?

Are all “your people” so superstitious?

No. Just me.

Esperanza and I approach the wizard, the Tsar of Soda: we go to seek an audience with this Comptroller, to seek response to the mass of fatness and hypertension to which this gentleman’s leadership contributed.

I lock eyes with the Comptroller as we approach. He waves the guard clown aside, to allow passage. He breaks right. I suppose we don’t look very threatening.

Hello, he says. It’s good to see you folks out here today. Thanks for coming out. I hope you’re enjoying the carnival. Can I ask you some questions?

More like we’ve got questions for you, I say.

I’ve got a lot of questions, says Esperanza. We’re looking for anything but a coke product and can’t find any other options. Have you considered carrying other product lines? We’re activist and support Microbrewers getting a shot at retail shelf space. And it’s your lucky day; my boyfriend is the best craftsman in the neighborhood.

Correct, I say. Why don’t you try my brew? I’ve got some over at the Heights Grocer.
The Comptroller looks at his timepiece stashed away under his coat. Nods at his three clowns.

It was really nice meeting you folks, he says. It’s not often I get to actually talk to our clients. If you ever want to talk again, feel free to make an appointment.

Hold a minute, I say. Dakota seems very open and supportive of our endeavors. At this very moment she sponsors a competition between a second local brewer and I. Seriously, go talk to her.

She is the proprietor, he says. She can do as she pleases. But I’m going to recommend she stay with Coca-Cola.

Is it the polar bear campaign? I mean they’ve run two extensive marketing campaigns: one for Coca-Cola and the other to bring attention to the immediate need to address Global Warming. They’re tapped out. Done.

It’s the bottom line, he says.

What about mystery and spontaneity, says Esperanza?

I leave that up to artists and musicians, he says.

That which we consume should always be considered art, I say. It becomes part of us and dictates what our landscapes and cityscapes might look like. It determines the texture of our physical environment.

I know what the physical texture of my environment will be: I get home in my BMW, I play with my girlfriend’s breasts that I paid for, I sip on twenty year old scotch in my theatre room. How is that for texture?

He hands me his business card. Me being all speechless, I take it, staring at him like I’m mute and dumb. He walks nearby to a cleared out area where sits a red and white hot air balloon.
They prep, spark fire, disappearing into the rain clouds, up and away to join the rising hum of midway chatter.

LL

An Indian stands in the park, spinning a wooden pole, both ends afire, in tight circles. He stops spinning, sinks into a deep horse stance and bends his back backwards till parallel with the Earth. He moves the burning pole in one swift and smooth motion an inch above his nose, pauses for dramatic effect. Lowers it onto his nose, lets his arms drop to his side. The burning pole balances on his nose. In perfect stillness. No motion visible.

Look, says Senay! The Indian, him do magic and… and… the thing with fire!

I nod wisely and we three stop to admire the Shaman.

He understands internal power, I say. By sitting still in meditation, you become aware of your own blood flow, temperature and posture. Then you begin standing meditation and visualization that builds a stronger link between muscle action and mind intent.

You’re lucky to learn this stuff, says Esperanza to Senay.

The Indian brings his spine up, sends the burning pole spinning away, reaches out with lightning speed and snatches it in midair.

Esperanza looks at her cell phone.

My Nanita is waiting in front of the church doors.

Aren’t we all, I say.

I’m not wanting to go any more than you, but I promised her. I’m not going to disappoint her.
Right then, I say. Let’s away to the church. But if I spontaneously combust, I’ll never forgive you.

LL

Nanita stands beneath the brick archway of the Jesus and Mary Roman Catholic entrance, dressed in a black dress and a snappy red shawl. I approach the archway at an angle, fearful of the imposition of some divine sanction. An infinity of hail Mary’s. Hard time in Purgatory for my transgressions. If their god is a Republican, I’m sure to be damned for the many things I’ve stolen from corporate America. The IRS would garnish my wages to recoup the value of the many loaves of bread sleight-of-handed from decadents.

Pense que te secuestre un demonio, says Nanita. She glances at her watch and gestures to a group of teenage girls leaving a face-painting booth, cheeks swirling in shades of red, black and fluorescent green, long locks of hair spiked randomly, defying gravity by the aide of some exotic molecules, chain-step engineered at Dow Pharmaceuticals.

No Nanita, is que Senay inistio que paramos para ver el Indio con los palos de fuego, says Esperanza.

Did you say that the Indian chavo jugaba con su palo de fuego, I say?

Callate marrano sucio, says Esperanza.

Falta que hace un juego malabar con sus juevos en llamas, says Nanita.

Esperanza smiles and takes her grandmother by the arm, leading her gently to the doors of the sanctuary. They seem modest compared to those found on larger, more elaborate cathedrals. Monserrate, perched on a mountain, overlooking Bogotá, boasts far more complexity.
Hola muneca, says Nanita to Senay.

Hi Nita!

We step through. Into the brick lined interior. The high ceiling helps the space within feel open, larger than its true geometry, a building that understands emotional truth’s value over statistics. Stained glass panels rest in iron frames, softening the bright white walls. The saints preserved by craftswomen and men. The priest stands before the congregation. A million suns at midnight spinning in his breast pocket.

Parishioners fill the pews, kneeling before the Saints. We step out from beneath a balcony on which sit mostly older Hispanics from the Heights and nearby neighborhoods. Somewhere in halls behind the alter, I hear a man spilling Gregorian chants into the air. His voice precise and refined. Esperanza, I note, to be absorbed in conversation with her Grandmother. So I tap her shoulders gently.

I’m taking the Albino Monkey with me, I say. Where off to find the Holy Man belting out those chants. I love incantation.

Don’t go off and graffiti the bathroom, she says. Leave any markers, pens or pencils on the pew.

Fine, I say. I empty my pockets of the several pens and markers they possess. Let’s nos vamos, I say. My arm motions Senay to follow my lead. We make way to a hallway opening to the right of the entrance. Curtains line the wall, swaying in currents of carnival air penetrating...
the liquid corridor through open windows. This passageway wraps me in its liquidity. It pulsates and vibrates around me as Senay and I navigate through.

On the other end we stand at a junction. A corridor left opens up but quickly ends. We peek in. Observe the backside of the alter. A priest in flow-e black robes walks by, toting a very large Bible. Like a Rockstar going on stage to perform The Sound of Silence. I imagine my favorite, and most misunderstood and misquoted freedom fighter walking weary and strung out from the road behind the priest. A double head electric Fender clenched in hands. This church is made of sound and light wave frequencies, decoded somewhere in my head.

We withdraw, Senay and I. Back to the junction. Make way to the left. The passage passes a stairwell leading up to a cloister and snaps right, heading down a long and open and narrow space. The voice of incantation drifts to us down. Seeping down along the geometry of bricks and mortar.

Advancing, we pass closed doors, so we peer through the windows to ascertain the contents. Desks. Chairs. Chalk boards. Pulpits. Hard wood floors of last century trees. We pass open door. Glance in to see teenagers in attendance of cataclysm 101. The priest slaps code onto chalkboard. Bold white lines against hazy black. To the left an open doorway. A suited man sits inside, amid stacks of composition books. He breathes in and out from his chest pours sweet sound. Clear baritone notes, grainy hints of cigarettes from a long gone past seeping in like effluent from a factory. No more. This citizen now embraces the spiritual path, I say to Senay. He nods his head in acknowledgement of our presence. I return the gesture.

We drift back down the corridor. Find an open passage winding along the opposite side of the church. We follow it. Quickly we come up to a smaller room lined with pews and an alter dedicated to Michael the Defender. A warrior Saint, I say to Senay.
Who daaaat?

Michael the Defender.

He dead?

I don’t think so. Because I don’t think he ever lived. Which means, technically, he, or she, was not capable of experiencing death.

Ohhhh.

My phone vibrates but the signal drops before I can answer. The digits bounce off the ceiling, they go nowhere, fail to escape. This tin roof above weighs heavier than October clouds.

What this, says Senay?

She holds a golden goblet. Within it ripples Holy Water. It might, I think, bring luck, should this night bring further conflict, angry excommunicated Shaolin monks floating off rooftops with double edged swords folded a hundred times in some celestial forge.

Its Holy Water, I say.

What that?

Water made Holy. We’ll consult Fat Indian for the exact equation.

We drink from the fonts of Saint Michael. Defend us in italicized multi-hued laser-printed heavens, I say.

I take a swig with a shaky hand and pass the water down to Senay. She takes a long swig and smiles angelic in the chapel light.

LL
—Platón!—

—Platón!—

—the intercom system in my cell crackles at 0300, a signal that breakfast soon comes in form of stale bologna sandwiches beginning to sour—

—Platón!—

—Platón!—

—they ask me to say grace, knowing me to be a missionary’s son—are the television wails incessantly, mindless games, mechanisms of mass pacification, political opiates, so I play card games, mostly Spades—

—why are you here?—

—he plays opposite side of the table, carries a notebook around and makes constant lists of disconnected things—I pace in front of a long tall window looking onto the downtown streets below—place a seventh tick mark on the last page of the romance novel someone left beside my bunk—scratch out more words, trying to make line breaks or build a narrative from the crumbled rubble that is the language of this romance novel about a girl in an Alaskan airbase circa 1955—

—they took away Senay and brought me here—

—you have a beautiful home—did you buy it or do you rent, asks the female officer in front who cuffed me and asked the District Attorney to leave Senay with me, said she belongs home with me—I’m renting and the owner refuses to sell—

—the alley way flies by, Senay tight in my arms, me having just rescued Senay from a ride with a multiple DUI charged gangster slut who I yelled at in the past for blasting gangster rap in her SUV while a one year old Senay whimpered in the backseat—the Civic door slams shut—
—fuck it bro—you should be in Juarez y no sentado aqui—

—four bodies seat atop the hood of my mighty Civic Odetta—I ease off the clutch, let the car move slowly back—three people slide off, step back—the fourth refuses to let go the grill, trips and falls, stands up and brushes off her knees—the natives grow smaller in my headlights—the car swings left, giving a wide berth to the crowd standing on the street—

—where do we go now—Esperanza holds Senay in her arms—we glide past the Juarez exit, navigating back towards Porfirio Diaz—there isn’t a custody order from the court, we’re safe—

—fuck, bro you got charged with Aggravated Assault With a Deadly Weapon—ehhh, I know someone who can take care of that bitch before you even get out—

—fuck it, arrest me, just leave Senay with Esperanza—we can’t do that says the officer—she carries Senay, wrapped in sheets and comforters bearing stars and moons, from her home—we can’t leave the child with a non-custodial individual—

—Senay fades down the road, red and blue strobes blinking out at the end of the block—

—my next door neighbor hugs Esperanza, who watches as I’m taken prisoner, far, far away from my Molly’s chambers—

—the television waves roll on inside my cell, image after image—two men dressed in huge rooster costumes engage in a cock fight—a ring of girls in bikinis dancing like strippers—the audience dressed in Ranchero clothing—the audio feeds belches out sound like a Piñata vomiting up rancid ceviche spread over stale tostadas—a Mexican rendition of I Want You to Want Me blaring over the mock fight—
—I don’t know if anybody can or will post bond at about two thousand dollars—my friend Victor sits on the other side of heavy ballistic glass—talking through a microphone says that things are in the works—

—no kind soul got the cash—

—Esperanza is working, says she wants her stars back—

—Platón!—

—Platón!—

—the intercom system in my cell crackles, again, at 0300, a signal that breakfast soon comes in form of stale bologna sandwiches beginning to sour—

—Platón!—

—Platón!—

—God, I’ve not spoken to you in a great while…—I keep screaming down the empty well but nobody hears a word—on the rooftop I stand under acid sky and no port or portal on the horizon—

—A guard calls out my name, tells me I’m on orders for transfer to the Annex in El Paso, far out Montana Street where, I hear, the across the street bar offers a free drink to the recently liberated—I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down, Livin’ in the, Hopeless, hungry side of town, I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime, But is there because he’s a victim of the times—my roll of prison gear I lay down in a corridor, listen to outlier talk—I was doing blow, bought it from a friend, said everythings was fine, then the fucking cops shows up with my girlfriend’s cousin, flashes a fucking badge—mi senora tiene el dinera, me va a liberar antes que llega el sol—

—not that one—he’s leaving tonight—the line of prisoners before me fade down the
corridor, one by one, misguided soldiers eaten by concrete walls, teeth marks decorate the mortar between the cinder blocks—

—shouldn’t you be doing some Perry Mason kind of stuff?—I usually don’t see my clients till the day of trial—No priors?—let’s see—oh—arrested for a traffic ticket—cases rotate around the office—can you come back Friday morning?—

down the labyrinthine hallways I go—my personal effects intact and back in my pockets—I wrap my jacket tighter around my body—the sky will never look the same, I think—the plots thicken like roux in stock in a saucepan—a foreign passport—credit cards in reserve—a exit strategy for Senay and myself—I will never trust this government again—

—sitting on the curb a white car approaches, Esperanza jumps on me and wraps her legs around my waist, Victor and Arlen smile from the front seat, like minions of Saint Michael whose image dangles, sways gently under the rearview mirror, Arlen took the money out of her college fund savings…

Arlen speaks

want to go home now?

LL

The skyscrapers peer down at me in this narrow canyon. I spy my shadow and the gait of my walk – leading slightly with the left leg – my inner groin muscle pulled on a run, never time to heal. The sun throws arrows of light – they strike glass walls a mile high and splatter into memory. Someone must be fucking in an office above me – mathematically, this is a certainty. The laws of probability never fail – we live in, we are, probability waves crashing into one
another – each life, each breath, each tear and each laughter that slips into the cacophony of the city merge and diverge and this is the substance of the swamp of sunlight and memory and re-memory in which I walk.

My ice cream Sundae – the one I shared with her – the one in my hand, melts quick, faster than the sun, slipping, falling down towards the horizon – a black and gray point in the distance – a merging point where the end of the asphalt and the infinity of sky touch – a limit like in Calculus – I eternally approach closer to the point, but will never get there. There is no there. I’ve been walking aimlessly all day.

Walking under glass and concrete giants – watching the sun now – slip down – watching this crazy flat rushing sea of clouds, of condensed sky, flow over the skyline – just a mile above and the jet stream that pushes those clouds could snap us up and blow everyone away to Naboombu. These clouds move fast – like time-lapse cinematography.

I look up, the impenetrable river of sky yields, breaks at random points, permits passage of light beams and blue splotches. Two beams close together – look like eyes peeping through the gray – move quickly across city streets, lick the tops of the towers, light up the girl in the short denim skirt, the one in front of me. Those twin beams of light pan across the city, searching, telling me, they want to come home with me. They are the girl, my girl, slurping up ice cream – she is the sun, the sky, and the moon once the planet turns and the sun bestows darkness to sun-weary eyes, once the factories of cars and frying pans and IPods and memory fade away – and I’m stepping into a beam now – stepping into the eye of light – sundae ice cream eyes dripping down, softening, moistening, the ice cream cone skyline, till all the towers crumble.
Then the light, the sunbeam moves on; I sigh, stop, throw my Sundae into a gutter, watch a quick current of water carry it away.

I just came out a bar, it’s past five PM and I’ve not worked all day; this is irresponsible, but fuck everyone, I don’t care. I’m passing the time away, waiting in a gravity well, for the towers to crumble, waiting till Senay finds her way home.

LL

I’m watching Esperanza’s legs beneath the black skirt she wears. And her blue blouse, revealing just enough cleavage to confirm the symmetry of her beautiful breasts. But nothing’s enough to induce me to forget Jesus – I’ve a hard on for Jesus and his Green Beret spirit. He’s Rambo as far as I’m concerned. Wielding a spiritual M-60 canon of faith. Christians got it all wrong. They’re an insult to my hero. I watch the Anti-Christ pastor speak – bastard wants my money more than my soul. He’s got a car payment to make. My vision returns to Esperanza’s legs. Jesus can wait.

Nanita looks bored, like a time traveler at a train station. The demon Alzheimer takes her through portals that she never intended to travel. They take her away from Esperanza at any moment without consideration or remorse. Mean little bastards.

The priest burns incense at the altar. The smell spreads through chapel, which is now at full capacity, I reckon. The congregation sits shoulder to shoulder. Every pew full.

Senay’sMom: Hola Johnny! Siempre vas a traer Senay al rato? Me dijiste q ibamos compartir el tiempo con Senay. Tambien, yo queiro llevar a jugar un juegos de Carnival.

Me: Yes. I’ll take her to your house in a bit.
Senay’sMom: No te olvidas los zapatos q le compró su Tia.

Me: OK.

Esperanza looks at me suspiciously.

Was that your Monkey bar buddy Remy, says Esperanza?

Smartass.

Senay wonders the center aisle between the pew. She points up at the balcony.

No. Senay’s mother texted.

She already wants her back. It’s our week with the Monkey.

Yeap. You are, my love, of course as right as rain on the ocean. But I agreed to split the night. Unless you want us all to hang out in one big group.

I’d rather make that sacrifice than let Senay go with her Mom and loose time with us. So fine. Make the call.

Broken arrow.

Big time.

Fine then. Senay wants to go topside. I will return shortly with a confirmation of the night’s planned events.

Don’t take forever.

Never. The only forever I ever want to take is with you.

I receive a kiss for my compliment, stroll over to Senay, take her hand and we make way up a narrow stairwell leading to the balcony overlooking the sermon. A procession enters the chapel, crosses leading the line of robed ritual weavers. The priest prepares for the liturgy of the Eucharist. I recognize the wine and the bread, coming from a heavy Baptist background. I know an act of cannibalism is about to take place. Roman centurions would be sure to punish this event
with fire and sharp steel. I wonder if next they might turn on Senay and I. Quickly the notion vanishes from my head, me remembering that these are Catholic folk and not Evangelicals.

Senay look wide eyed at the spectacle below. In my peripheral vision appears a woman in uniform. She comes into sharp focus wearing Army digital camouflage, a Captain’s rank and a Civil Affairs unit patch. The other shoulder bearing a combat patch from the 101st Screaming Eagles. Infantry being an exclusively male fraternity, I know she must have worked in an office at Battalion level or higher. She pulls up along the balcony rail beside Senay and I. Esperanza and Nanita waive at Senay.

Look, it’s my Momie, says Senay. She points down, and to my surprise, there sit Mom and Tia and boyfriends.

Holy Monkey balls, I say.

What?

Disregard, I say. And yes we’ll go say hi and hang out a bit.

The priest speaks out, Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of power and might, Heaven and Earth are full of your glory, Hosanna in the Highest, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the Highest.

The congregation kneels. I turn my attention to the Captain by my side.

Hello, I say. I am Captain Leadfeather. Formerly, Private First Class Leadfeather, first of the hundred and eighty-second Battalion, Rakkasans. I believe I will soon be a part of your unit.

Starting this coming weekend.

What?

You’re on my books.

Wonderful. How quickly and efficiently work army career counselors.
We’re standing up the unit. I need forty-four officers. Preferably 03 and above.

Well then, I’m certainly qualified.

I looked at your resume. You’re exactly what we need.

That certainly wasn’t what the army said a few years ago.

Will you be at drill this weekend?

I’ll be out of town.

Next weekend?

You got it.

Senay has gained the attention of her mother. I am now committed to initiating contact.

Esperanza waives to me. I blow her a kiss. We turn to make way below. I pause before the stairwell, Senay pulling on my hand.

Remy: This sucks. I meet this drop-dead gorgeous woman who wants to go the carnival.

Then she says she has to meet her grandpa for mass. Now I’m here at the Jesus and Mary, eating crackers and drinking vino.

Me: Stop! Listen up you poor bastard! That’s blood and flesh you’re consuming!

Ceasefire!

Remy: Its notional blood and flesh.

Me: How the fuck you know what technology the Vatican invents in secrecy? They’ve got their own country for Christ’s sake. How you know they don’t have a body of Christ- clones farm somewhere?

Remy: How would they switch it out for the cracker and the wine.

Me: Teleportation shit like on Star Trek.

Remy: You got a point. I’ll just act like I dropped the shit.
Me: Where are you?

Remy: A pew behind your former spouse.

Me: No shit. I’m upstairs in the balcony.

Remy: They got us all under a Vatican roof. Sounds like an ambush.

Standing over the balcony again Senay and I spot Remy. On one side of him sits a woman and on the other side sits the unmistakable hulking frame of flab that everyone calls Fat Indian. In the pew before them sits Senay’s mother. Behind the menagerie sits Esperanza and her Nanita. I realize the gravity of this situation. Divine plots and interventions are afoot.

We, Senay and I, make haste down the stairwell.

We resurface on the main floor of the cathedral. The crowd grows dense. We make way through a sea of bodies. Three priests come shoving through the crowd, looking like bouncers at a high-end bar in New York. All three sport earbuds attached to some type communication device. Something cellular that can penetrate this dead zone. I fear the worst. As they pass I pull Senay close to me. The crowd presses us against a wall on which sits a bulletin board. Divine messages, I think. And so look closely at the announcements.

The old fuck stares back at me from a black and white page. The Cyclops dead eye pulls me in. I crawl an instant over the black blank fibers of his iris. Blink back into the sanctuary. He stands in the picture on his front porch. I read on.

The community of Sunset Heights invites all to pay respects to

Mr. Cornelius Jeddah Strong, who recently passed away. He was

a valued member of our community.
My hand strikes out like the mouth of a hungry Boa, snaps down tight on printed parchment. I snatch the poster in one hand and Senay with the other, pushing my way through the mob of parishioners. Esperanza and her Nanita seat at the end of a pew. I take a knee beside her. The priest takes bread in his mouth. I hear the snap of bone and rending of flesh.

Baby, I say to Esperanza. Look. I’ve got to tell Remy about this. And Fat Indian.

I shove the paper before her. Her eyes open wide, gold speckles swirling in pools of hot chocolate.

How the hell? I saw him today.

Necromancers in the Heights? Remy is in the cathedral. I’m going to show him. Then I’ve got to go say hello to Senay’s mother.

What!??!

Yeah, I know. Senay spotted her in the crowd and waved hello.

Hola, como estas, says Senay’s mother from behind my back.

I rise to my feet and spin to face her. Hello, I say.

No me ibas saludar.

Pues ya te estoy saludando.

Si, pero por obligacion no porque se nacio de tu Corazon.

Es que no me diste la opertunidad.

Bueno. Y ese milagro que estas aqui?

We all came to keep Nanita company.
Her eyes swim away a second or so, I know her to be lost in remembrance of her deceased mother, to whose loss she justifies her violent behavior. Remy peers curiously at me from across the waves of the faithful, wondering how I will weather the situation, sink or surf.

LL

I’m missing time, out of time, like Billy Pilgrim, I’m unstuck in time and don’t remember what the fuck happened the night before or how I got home or why my Honda has a gash in the right front quarter panel. I called the bar last night and my favorite bartendress said she and my girlfriend paddled each other on the ass and made a scene and she gave us free shots and I called from home at three, looking for Esperanza who was passed out in the back seat and, when I pulled the car into the garage, I laid waste to a washing machine waiting to be installed in the wash room. The fucker cost five hundred dollars. Maytag.

I look out from the second floor, up an alley, over brick houses built at the turn of last century. This neighborhood blasted into a desert mountain. I study a house sprouting four smoke stacks. It’s no more than about three thousand square feet. Those folks burn wood all winter and stay warm and cozy.

Esperanza sleeps next to me. I turn over and toss a leg and my right arm over her sleeping curves. She forms my galactic center – constitutes those gold speckles in a shot of Goldschlager. Her eyes, the dark caramel topping on a Sundae, spin with gold flecks and they spin me, in gravity, in oceanic pull at the behest of her orbital geometry. She is curvature and I’m a beam of light following her contours.
I stumble down my creaky stairwell, miss-timing every crevice, every crack of carpentry, waking up Esperanza.

The bar in the house bristles with bottles of booze, the sunlight spills across every label, I got everything, got Skol vodka, Gilbey’s gin, Johnnie Walker whiskey, Jim Beam Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey, Bacardi Gold, Pepe Lopez tequila for mixing Margaritas, Hacienda de Chihuahua Sotol for shooting, Southern Comfort in honor of Janis Joplin and her minion of Blackhearts, Grey Goose vodka for vodka Martinis, Red Stripes in the refrigerator that I only drink while wearing my multi-colored tie-dyed Bob Marley t-shirt, Goldschlager reserved for Esperanza, Jagermeister that I drink in honor of my old guitar-playing Hippie friend from drunken Army days. Each bottle a blue-winged Shaman come take me away every night. Carry me across those dark rivers faster than Beelzebub flies with afterburners blazing at full throttle.

LL

The priest of animal liberation and I and Fat Indian make way through the crowd, up to the restroom on the second floor. Push open the door. A line of shower stalls to the right and a concrete wall plastered with peeling institutional white paint close on my left shoulder. Remy secures the door behind us, latching it shut.

Fat Indian pulls out a long pipe, a line of Raven feathers lining the spine. He blazes up a blend of Cannabis and earthy tobacco and it fills the small space.

This stuff comes from Indian ground, he says.

I swear, I say. I can taste the mineral composition and hear spirits speaking.
Actually, it was grown in a growbed and the mineral compositions were carefully orchestrated by me, he says.

Guess nobody grows in dirt anymore, I say. Now that we’ve mapped out how the evolutionary gears spin, it becomes subject to our will. Let’s hope it’s composed of compassion and tolerance. Not the imagination of a controlling psychopath with sexual angsts. Or a businessman who thinks the ultimate metric of success is the efficiency of a finely tuned cash flowing system.

In my corporate charter I integrated linked prosperity as a rule. I can never make more than seven times that of the lowest paid employee.

How much does the bottom guy make?

About 15,000 a year.

That still puts you at 126,000.

I assume all the risk. Stand or fall. So I take the lion’s share.

Sounds fair. I incorporated non-profit S form and wrote in a 5,000 a month salary for myself.

A non-profit Sushi Bar?

Yeap.

How the hell is that a non-profit?

We hire kids from the orphanage. Kids getting ready to leave the orphanage. Collectively we call ourselves the shelter dogs. My self and a local Shifu teach them Kung Fu. They need every possible edge.

That’s why all I see are teenagers working there.

Except for my head waitress.
You might have a problem when potential donors see how much revenue goes to overhead. Especially when they see how much goes to your salary.

Which is why I don’t take out that much. Yet. But if the bar starts cash flowing 100,000 a month, I won’t feel guilty.

It’s good work you do, say Remy. We can recruit kids into our ranks.

Even I’m not that cynical, I say. I’d rather have them rescue a dog or cat from the local shelter. Let them decide later if they want to follow the path of the bolt cutter and rifle.

You’re starting to sound like a pacifist.

Not long as people like the old fuck still roam to and fro upon the Earth.

At least there’s one less.

The dog, I say. He probably still roams around the basement, in a haze of PTSD, lost in the smoke with no NVGs. How about we go check it out?

It’s about time little brother, says Remy. We’ll go take a look-see tonight.

Fat Indian takes a long draw of smoke into his lungs. He exhales and smoke fills the room. It blows over me in choppy waves. I see black ravens taking flight from tree limbs that twist and spin into my skull. I wonder if the toilets are filled and cleaned with Holy Water.

We slip through the chapel, my head swelled up like a helium balloon, drifting through scenes.

LL

Johnny Leadfeather!
Esperanza’s voice brings me drifting back to the carnival and the church doors directly behind me. I turn to see her radiant face. Nanita stands inside the chapel, waiting. Esperanza stands like a dark-morph Jaguar. She is cappuccino voluptuous – melanistic, smooth skin in the candy cotton air curled around the Vatican temple.

Hey Sweetheart, I say. We were making way to the old fuck’s house.

Since he passed away, you probably want to call him by his name. Sabes? Mostrar respeto para los muertos?

Oh of course, I say. Cuando llega el Dia de Los Muertos, I’ll lay out a bottle of arsenic laden whiskey for the bastard. Direct like on his porch.

Bottles… bottles… Doesn’t that remind you of something, she says with a toss of her hair and a snap of her fingers?

That I need one tonight?

That you’ve an appointment with Mrs. America Tirado?

Fuck me, I say. And I’m kinda high at this moment.

Don’t you got a running bet with Mida, says Remy?

Fuck yes and I got no intentions of losing. You want to see the action?

Let’s rock.

Fat Indian?

I got nothing but time on my hands.

Johnny, says Senay’s mother, once again from behind my back.

Daaahhhh! I say, stop doing that. What?

Tu dijiste que ibamos pasar un rato juntos con Senay?

Bueno pues. Acompananos. Que vengan todos! Pero que compran una cerveza mio.
We are all in motion, moving through the sight and sound wonderland of the Carnival. I become a bit unnerved at the number of clowns walking about. As we a corner, I see the house where lives the pack of werewolves, nestled somewhere within the condemned structure, licking on fresh bloody shin bones, snacking on dried ear jerky dipped in Rancher’s blood sauce. Unreasonable fuckers those werewolves. I stop mid-stride. My spine overloads, a lightning grade tingle running up and down. On the front porch sits a pack of eight werewolves all drinking Lunar Dog brews. I think it must be my obligation to thank them for supporting the cause, but the little fear, the little death, grabs me by the Adam’s Apple. Senay’s hand wraps around mine. She stands wide-eyed beside me.

Dadiieee, she whispers. Look. The wolfies. Them a family?

I shake my head slowly. A werewolf, sitting in a foldable tie-die colored game chair, places his brew in the chair’s cupholder, wipes a bead of condensation off the beer tab, waves hello to me and Senay, gestures us come sit at his side.

Senay, I say. That is definitely not a family. Families are much more vicious. And they bite and claw more often.

We approach with caution, everyone else I notice to be playing or watching people at play at a booth close by; bottles rotate on a big round Mongolian-buffet-looking grill. The object is to toss a ring around a bottle top. I notice them all to be Coca-Cola bottles and remind myself to lodge a complaint with America. So I approach with extreme caution, not knowing these werewolves to be friend or foe. Being typically very irrational, this type data is difficult to ascertain without close inspection. Of course, that’s the catch-22. She smiles as we step onto the remnants of a dusty lawn. Large, sharp teeth catch light.
Hello there sexy, she says in a Russian accent. I’ve got six nipples and nobody to play with. Got plans tonight?

For once, I’m at a loss for words. My mouth opens, but no words coalesce in my noggin. I shrug my shoulders. Through the front porch window, in the dim living room light within, I see a doorway across the 70’s green carpet and, I swear, two pairs of boots disappear in the portal. I only catch a glimpse. Squint my eyes and tilt my head, trying to make clear the image.

Now that’s not a nice attitude to have with a lonely little wolfie like me, she says with a wink and licks her lips. Why don’t you come inside a while? I promise you’ll have a great time. You want to come inside?

Dadiiiee?

I realize that my body refuses to obey the lightning storms jumping gaps in my brain. I am magiked by the beautiful beast girl. Mesmerized. Hypnotized. Her mind and claws dig somewhere inside the swamp, impeding movement. She steps closer. I feel her breath ripple across my jugular vein. She smells like sweet lime on a lost train in India.

Come on baby. Don’t be afraid. I’ll make you explode. I’ll blow your brain wide open. You’ll never feel the same again.

Senay stands mesmerized as well. Through peripheral vision I see her beside me. Big silly smile plastered on her face. She stares at the girl beast as if it were a giant puppy dog that she can’t resist petting. She’s sucked in. The claw comes around in a circle forward movement. Her open palm comes rotating towards my cheek. Inside I render a long scream, but my vocal chords only twitch sporadically. I gasp as the soft pelt of her palm brushes my cheek. She stops.

I could just eat you up, she says and licks her lips again.

Why are you touching my boyfriend?
Esperanza appears like Gabriel the archangel on the edge of my field of peripheral vision. Her voice a trumpet of war. She slips her right arm around my shoulder and she appears amused at what she must think to be a slightly buzzed girl in a wolf costume. No real danger. Esperanza and I both might end up soup bones.

I like to play with girls too, says the wolf girl. Why don’t you both come in and we can all play together.

You couldn’t handle me, says Esperanza.

I just need the right leash. You’re such a badass bitch! I think you need a spanking.

I’ll crack the whip. I’ve much more experience.

Senay’s is in movement. She is halfway to the house entrance.

My voice bubbles up from the swamp, breaks the surface, crashes through the smoke and mirrors emplaced by the girl wolf.

Stop, I bark out in my Sergeant voice. Hey! You! Senay! Stop!

Senay stops, her foot hovering over the threshold of the wolf den. The Pa Kua dragon protects her. She stands balanced on one foot.

Come back now, I say.

Senay comes slowly towards us. Her eyes look hazy. As if she can’t get the big wolf puppy she so desperately wanted to touch out of her head. She comes and takes Esperanza’s hand.

Seriously, we have to go, says Esperanza. But you’re a lot of fun. We’ll be at the Sunset Heights Grocer. You and your friends come over.

Ooooh, I love invitations.
Esperanza spins me around, her arm draped across my shoulder. Walks me and Senay away from the bottom of a waiting stockpot lined with carrots and celery. I kiss Esperanza’s cheek.

Thank you.

Seeing the residue of fear in my eyes, her face grows somber.

Baby, she says with a suppressed chuckle. I know how you feel about werewolves… but you can’t possible believe that slutty wolf was for real. Can you?

Do you believe?

Remy leads Fat Indian and the remainder of our group towards us and we resume the journey. I turn back to look at the house. The girl wolf jumps up and down, waving goodbye.

A Spanish galleon swings in mid street. Slows and comes to rest. A gangplank is extended to allow passage to the voyagers within. A Carney wearing a true to period seventeenth century dress stands at the head of the gangplank. She hands each person a paper Conquistador hat as they disembark. A bodice made of whalebone pushes her breasts up, revealing an oceanic trench of cleavage. I’d love to be her clown fish.

Dadiiieee, I want to ride that one, says Senay.

I realize the ride is not the real object of her attention. Her eyes fixate on the dress worn by the galleon stewardess. The dress shines an iridescent lime green.

You like the girl in the dress, I say.

Es muy bonito, says her Tia. Te voy a comprar uno igualito!

Tia grabs her cheeks and Senay slaps her hands away. Every day, Senay’s palm connects harder and with greater precision. It is in a state of slow metamorphosis. From baby to Dragon. She grasps my hand, pulling me towards the galleon.
Esperanza, I say. Do we have time to board the ship before the strike of midnight? America awaits.

You have about twenty minutes, she responds.

Shall we away my lady, I say and bow to Senay. Your ship awaits.

Silly Dadiieee, she says and shakes her head, spinning her finger around her ear, breaking down to Esperanza the depths of my craziness.

We walk towards the ship. There is no line leading to the platform on which rests the gangplank. A sharp metal stairwell leads up. Senay takes the lead, me trailing so I can catch her if she falls or slips. My hand grasps the rail of the stairs. The cold, course texture of the metal sends chills up my spine. The metal perspires, a sheet of condensation covering it. It smells like the ocean. Like an ancient peer.

Come on Dadiiieee, says Senay from the head of the stairs and then she steps onto the stage.

I scurry up, nervous for her to be alone on the stage. From here we look into open windows and busy porches. It seems many neighborhood citizens invited guests. Fold-up chairs cover most all the house porches.

You are so adorable, says the buxom stewardess.

Her breasts move slightly to the rhythm of her beating heart, to her breathing pattern. Senay strolls up with great confidence and enthusiasm. Her arms swing by her side and she skips twice before stopping to stare intently up into sea green eyes. She bends down to peer level into Senay’s eyes.

You want to sail away with me on a great big ship, she says? We’ll go anywhere you like. Anywhere in the world. Maybe even off-world.
Hello, I say. Does that offer extend to me as well.

She looks up, giving me a cold ocean stare. The North Sea rushes through my brain. Icebergs wreck my freighter ship thoughts. The stewardess stands straight again. At five foot ten she towers over Senay and I. We both stare in admiration. Senay turns to waive at Esperanza and companions. Two kids that work at the Sushi Bar pass by, take notice and waive as well. One in converse and the other on roller-skates and dressed in a roller derby costume. She is strong and courageous.

LL

The new girl stands over the register, trying to recall to memory the location of the +Wasabi button. Being so expensive, we charge extra to those patrons who consume a quarter pound of it. Her name is Cecilia. She came running, wounded and bleeding, across the border, escaping murder at the hands of the man who slit her parents throats while they watched Hector Sandarte hosting Vas o No Vas. I always warn people how dangerous stupid game shows can be. Stay alert, stay alive.

The Border Patrol Agents pulled drew weapons and almost shot her cold. Lucky for her they first notice a slice across her cheek, left thigh and an open wound beneath a rib. When she reached the officers on the US side of the border, she fell at their feet and fainted from blood loss. She was taken to the hospital. A day before her planned deportation to J-Town, she slipped out a hospital window. I saw her walking down an alleyway in a hospital gown. She didn’t tell me, at first, where she came from and I didn’t ask. I just took her to the orphanage. They took her in. Now she is pushing the +Wasabi button on my register.
Ya, she says? Asi se hace?

Correctamundo, I say. Aprendes bien rapido y tienes Buena memoria.

Thanks you Mr. Leadfeather.

Johnnie. It’s just Johnnie. Mr. Leadfeather is still living on the res.

What’s a res?

An Indian Reservation?

Your father lives on an Indian Reservation? De versa?

No. Not really. Your English is perfect.

I like to read and my Mom always took me to the library in downtown El Paso. I talked a lot to other kids that spoke good English.

I go to lock up the store and she sweeps while three other kids stack chairs and do dishes. It’s a small Sushi Bar, but known for great quality and the non-profit angle brings in people who don’t even like Sushi. They know we pay most of the rent at the orphanage.

Hey Johnnie, says Javier. Is Shifu Beto coming to teach us some moves tonight?

Any second now. Make sure the tables are moved away so we can practice.

Practice what, says Cecilia?

Gung Fu, I say. Beto teaches then we go over things I’ve learned from my Shifu in Arlington.

Are you a Shifu?

Negative. Just a study group leader.

Would you teach me?

Of course. To be a Shelter Dog, you have to learn the family system.

Why?
Because it protects you and helps you make decisions.

What if I’m not good at it?

You will be. No worries. Your will be because you have to. All Shelter Dog know Gung Fu. A Shelter Dog knows how to walk easy in heavy gravity, to speak easy in the face of thunder and angry words. Gravity affects emotion. Gravity is emotions when it really counts. The equation is an abstract.

I’m not sure exactly what you mean.

Keep listening. It’s an emergent property. The whole possesses qualities not perceivable by looking at the parts alone.

Oh. Is this why you opened the Sushi Bar? To teach Gung Fu?

No. I did it because my shelter used to be the back seat of an 89’ Geo Metro. I know what it’s like to have nowhere to turn and almost or absolutely nobody to count on. I don’t want you to suffer the same trauma I experienced. And if you must, I want you armed with nuclear warheads.

LL

Cecilia disappears around a street corner on the midway. Maybe heading for a tower shaped circus tent the next street over. The last thing I see is the back of her Jersey. Her name in the rink is DiaStroyer; her middle name being Diana. I never miss her games.

Who dat dadiiiee, says Senay?

That’s one of my shelter kids. So how much for a ride, I say to the stewardess?

She maintains her icy demeanor. At least with me. When she looks at Haley its instant South Pacific Sea. Warm as bath water.
For the little angel, don’t worry about it. So it’ll just be ten dollars for you.

Ouch, I say as I hand over ten bones.

We walk over the gangplank and grasp tight the chain railings. I peer down at the hull of the ship, barnacles stuck to the wood surface. Rivulets of seawater run up the side of the ship. I follow the path of a channel. It streams up and around a deck rail, clings a few seconds in the air, expands, and drips slow drops onto the Midway below. A crab, scurrying up the hull, peers back at me from an antennae mounted eye.

Did you see the thing, it red, and crawling, on the boat, says Senay?

I did indeed. This ship seems a bit too authentic.

We reach the end of the gangplank and peer into the ship. Rows of plastic seats line the wooden deck, a seatbelt affixed to each. Hoses run all over the deck, pin sized holes covering their surfaces. We take seats and buckle up.

Suddenly, fog rises, pouring out from hoses covering the deck. The boat begins to move. We see only a few feet distance; the deck now immersed in artificial fogbanks. In the fog images begin emerging. All around the ship appear waves. The Carnival below has vanished.

The ship begins to move. It feels as though it’s slipping off a solid surface and into a liquid media. The ship’s movements begin to synchronize with the visual motion of the waves. We gain speed as the ocean around us becomes choppy. The waves increase in size and speed. The ship careens down one wave, only to flounder at the bottom and struggle to climb up the next wave.

Dadiiee, Senay screams over the moaning of the ship and the crash of the waves. Is dis a fiction?
I think so, I shout back. Probably capture motion technology programs, holograms and fog machines, nothing extraterrestrial or anything. Get it?

Ok!

The ship continues careening and climbing till we climb one last humungous wave and come adrift in calm seas. The fog grows denser and the imagery begins to break apart and disappear into the fog that now begins to thin and the ship’s motion slows to a halt and the Carnival takes shape once again. A line of eager sailors mass on the platform, waiting for the next ride to begin.

I wanna go again Dadiiieee! You wanna go again?

Let’s see if the ship stills rests at anchor when we return from our competition with Mida. You never know, the Captain might be a pirate, come back to his ship and order anchors away, while Dona Anna County Sheriff’s Department giving chase.

Yes! And maybe there a big dragon. He help the pirate.

Sir, says the stewardess towering over our seats. Would you like to pay and stay for another ride?

Sorry, but we must away, I say. We’ll try and come back. What time do you shut down the ride?

Never, she says with a scowl. This ride never ends. The Carnival moves, but the ride never stops.

Very poetic, I say.

Senay and I disembark, waving goodbye to the strange shellfish crawling up and down, port and starboard of the wooden hull. The smell of ocean disappears as we approach Senay’s mother. She smiles at us and appears in good spirits.
Les gustaron el juego?

We see the water and big wave and a dolphin, says Senay.

You saw a dolphin, I say?

Yes. I tell you! Punk ass.

Come on fartknocker.

We rejoin Esperanza buying roasted peanuts and a melon flavored agua fresca. Teams of cheerleaders pass us by, short skirts fluttering in the breeze. Two Goethe looking guys with guitar cases across their back follow, staring at tan legs and swaying hips.

We should hurry, says Esperanza.

We move quickly through the carnival. Disregarding booths and clowns and costumed jugglers. A band plays Walking Through My Dreams, the singer bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Big Bopper, may he rest easy in clear blue skies. We approach the Sunset Heights Grocer. Behind the store a band summons lightning with heavy metal power chords. That's what I heard her say/ A son's heart's owed to mother/ But I must find my way/ Let my heart go/ Let your son grow/ Mama, let my heart go/ Or let this heart be still The singer head bangs with a fury, screams the words, serenading me to the threshold of America’s shop, which is packed full of beer connoisseurs tossing brews and filling out ballots.

I step in, followed closely by Remy. He always covers my back. Mida stands next to America who sits on the sales counter by the register. Long legs exposed to mid-thigh, a conservative blouse up to her neck, although the shape of her breasts reveal themselves in elegant symmetry through the thin fabric.

Hello America, I say. You look very nice today and in good humor. How goes the war?
That would depend on the criterion you choose. Mida is up on number of bottles sold, but his reviews pale in comparison to the praises your beers receive on the questionnaires you printed.

Baby, that’s great, shouts out Esperanza. That’s all you cared about. The people saying that your beer tastes the best.

Not so fast you two lovebirds, says America.

I’ve brought in a subject matter expert.

Mrs. Tirado gestures to the door and in steps a very white fellow in jeans, loafer and a white T-shirt. Looking very business casual, he approaches. I keep steady like gaze.

Let me introduce you gentlemen to Jim Koch, the founder of Samuel Adams, says America. Who better to judge your brews?

Maybe, Jeff Lebesch, I say?

Mr. Koch shoots me a look dirtier than piss warm beer. Esperanza steps hard on my right toe. America shrugs her shoulders.

I’ve never met Mr. Lebesch, although, I do enjoy a cold Sunshine Wheat on a hot summer day.

It’s so good to see you again, says Mr. Koch giving America a friendly hug.

The feeling is mutual, says America. I have before you the neighborhoods most ambitious home brewers. They would like you to rank their products or creations.

I would be happy to, says Mr. Koch.

He approaches the first table, where sits a keg of my Lunar Dog B-17 Fortress, its amber hues glowing in the bottles, the label showing the Luna with aviator goggles and helmet, piloting the craft through a barrage of anti-air craft gun fire. The girl behind the counter pops one open
and hands it to him. He grasps it tightly. Seeming to linger in the moment of anticipation. He swiftly places the bottle to his lips, moves the liquid around his mouth, lets it slide down his throat and closes his eyes in, I hope, ecstasy.

That’s a nicely brewed beer, he says. Although, the ginger-orange flavor might be somewhat intense for the average beer drinker. Ok. Let me go to candidate number two.

Sir, says Mida. How would you rate the beer numerically?

I don’t know. I’d give it, maybe, an eight. Like I said though, it has a very unique flavor the way the orange-ginger interacts with the deep nutty-almond undertone.

He goes to Mida’s table. The young waiter behind the counter pulls out a dark green bottle, a picture of Mida’s favorite pet bat on the label. He smiles at us, his audience and raises the bottle.

Cheers to the good people of Sunset Heights and all the hard working Carneys making this event possible.

We all give him a round of applause as the tosses back the beer, lets it soak on his tongue and then go down slow. He closes his eyes in, I hope, a fit of boredom. He exhales a long sigh.

That wasn’t anything bad either, he says. Nicely done. It’s very smooth with a very un-intimidating Vanilla finish. That’s an easy rider for sure.

Thank you so, so very much, says Mida.

No problem, he says. So, Mrs. Tirado, are you going to show me the carnival?

Mr. Koch, says Mida. May I impose upon you to ask what numerical score you might place on my product?
Ballpark figure, I’d round it off to about an eight. You boys need to understand. The real question isn’t which beer is better. The question is what defines your market. Budweiser sells much more beer than I do. To people with bad taste.

Mr. Koch lets loose a loud laugh. I chuckle along with him. Appreciating his dislike for popular culture. At least with respect to the almighty brewha. Mida and I look across at each other, unsure as to the outcome of the contest.

How about this, says America. You two can split the cooler space pick a shelf each.

I have an extra cooler to bring in, says Mida. Do you have the floor space?

I can move some things around, she says.

LL

Outside the market place, we all stand below a massive system of scaffolds assembled over the park across the road, tent panels cloaking the interior in secrecy. A banner two stories tall hangs from the structure. —Dakota’s House of Horror’s— I opine that this structure should be approached with great caution, but being so large, we decide to approach the front doors head on.

The gatekeeper spies our movement. Remy steps up to speak.

Greetings, he says. So what’s in this thing?

Ten dollars apiece and you’re welcome to see, says the man dressed in a black cloak, hair spiked up like a punk rocker and demon paint disguising his true features.

And the kid can’t come in. Got to be at least fifteen, he continues.

Yo no queiro entrar, says Senay’s mother. Podemos esperar afuera.
Bueno pues, I say. So anyone curious?

Let’s Blitzkrieg the fucker, says Remy.

I’m going with you, says Esperanza.

You might need a Shaman, says Fat Indian. I’ve got to watch after you children.

Fat Indian wears three massive prayer beads around his thick neck. Rubs them one by one. Takes off the center strand of beads. Takes a knee before Senay and places it around her neck.

In case we get separated, this will protect the little one, he says. Many a magic woman roams the streets tonight.

We four pay our dues and enter the structure. Walk up a stairwell that opens into a long corridor. Dim lighting and smoke machines limit visibility. My instincts reach out. The place seems to suck in emotion. Like a macrocosm of the old fuck’s skull. I check my phone. No signal. We are isolated within this island of horrors.

I step forward, pushing through a twister of smoke swirling in mid corridor. I come out the other side. Look behind me. I’ve lost sight of my companions. Without Esperanza, warrior priest or Shaman, I push further on.

A hand suddenly grips my index finger and pulls down on my hand.

Senay stands beside me, wearing her favorite pair of baby Raybans.

She signs to me. Standard ASL.

I tried to follow you. I got lost somewhere.

How did you come to this place?

I don’t remember.

Let’s find a way out.
I love you Dad. Did you lose Esperanza and your friends?

They must me somewhere close. This place can’t be so labyrinthine.

What’s that?

Like a system of tunnels or passages designed to confuse and disorient. Keeps you from finding a way out.

OK.

Where are we?

I’m working on that.

I begin to walk. Senay extends her hands, feeling her way forward. Trying to follow me. She stumbles, almost falling.

What’s up with you? Take off the shades.

She removes then. Allowing them to rest on her chest. They dangle from the bright green eyeglass cord she picked out at the Sunglass Hut. I can’t see her clearly. So I pull out my key LED flashlight. Shine it in her eyes. They have lost color and light. They stare back at me, dull and lackluster. Fear ripples through me like a killer wave in deep sea.

Can you see anything? Can you see my light?

I only see the shadows. I can’t see any colors. I miss yellow and purple. I liked yellow and purple.

We’re going to find a way out. We need Fat Indian.

I miss talking with you.

Keep a tight grip on my hand. Time to move out. Remember walking the circle with the blindfold?

Yes. I remember.
Walk the circle with me.

*OK.*

We move swiftly down the corridor. It opens into a room of plate glass mirrors and panels. Like the ones police use in interrogation rooms. Esperanza sits on the other side of a panel. She sits at a table. A mirror with white lines and a rolled up dollar bill. I pound on the glass to get her attention. She can’t see or hear me. I pound harder. Remy steps into the room and joins her at the table.

*I feel Esperanza. Is she here?*

I can see her through the fucking glass, but she can’t hear us.

Senay pulls out a yoyo Esperanza once bought her at an Indian arts festival. It’s crafted of a heavy hard wood. From a tree that lived a thousand years before feeling the cut of a chain saw. Senay lets it roll down to the floor. It vanishes in trails of smoke creeping around the floor. With a snap of her wrist it rolls back up the string. She pops back her arm up with finely tuned skills, lets fly the yoyo and it hits center mass of the glass panel. I shield Senay with my body as shards of glass fill the room. Tiny slivers fall to the floor all around us.

I rise to my feet, letting go of Senay. There stands Esperanza and Remy. Looking at me perplexed.

Hey sweetie, says Esperanza! You got lost?

You might say that, I say. Something is wrong with Senay’s eyes.

Little brother, says Remy. Little sister waits outside.

I reach out for Senay. She no longer stands beside me. My companions look at me with curious faces.
She was here a second ago, I say. Senay! Where are you! She can’t talk. Maybe she stumbled into some other corridor. We got to find her!

Why don’t we first go outside, says Esperanza? If she isn’t there, we can ask for help. They’ll lock up the whole place and send all the Carneys out to find her.

That’s what I’m afraid of.

Man, says Remy. This place really fucked with your noggin. Look ahead, the exit sign is right there.

It could be a trick.

Fat Indian walked through the door two seconds ago. Let’s see if he vanished or now stands outside waiting for us.

Alright. Fine. Nothing to lose. Right?

My companions and I step through the door and back into the outside air, heavy with giant roasted turkey legs. A street vendor tosses all beef dogs between buns. Drowns them in sauerkraut, mustard, ketchup and mayonnaise. Steam rises up from the open drawer where swim hotlinks and Bratwurst. The vendor hands down a loaded hotdog to bright eyed Senay bouncing up and down in excitement. Fat Indian stands guard behind her.

Look baby, says Esperanza. Senay is fine. She can see and talk better than you.

Hoye, says her mother. Ya nos vamos a casa. La vas a traer manana?

Si pues. Esta bien.

We part ways. Walk towards the house. My mind in disarray. Remy and Fat Indian chatting about past paint ball games. Esperanza holding my hand and Senay skipping ahead of us. The Carnival shows no sign of packing up soon and convoying up the road. Patrons from other neighborhoods roam the streets, alongside neighbors and students with whom I’m familiar.
A Colombian flag billows in the breeze atop a food cart parked on the sidewalk, the smell of street roasted meat seeps into the air. The vendor gestures at the food, noticing where my gaze falls. On a flat open warmer rest three rows of Arepas. The smell sends my senses reeling through the streets and mountainsides of Bogotá. The vendor is young, maybe twenty-four, tall and skinny. A book lies open and face down on his stool behind the cart. A book titled Escolios de Un Texto Implicito. I can’t make out the author.

Buenas noches Senior, que bella nina, says the vendor in perfect Rolo accent. Que le puedo ofrecer?

Senay, I say. You want something?

No. I still full, she says.

Dos Arepas por favor, I say.

Hablas Espanol?

Vivia en Colombia para varios anos, I say. Es como mi segunda patria. A veces el primero dependiendo como me esta tratado el corte federal.

He laughs and hands me my Arepas. I turn to admire the lights surrounding the kiosk selling flowers in the street. Strange blooms stick out from wooden bins at odd angles. One arrangement gives the feel of a bird in flight, banking left. A big round Sunflower looks like a face and two towering red plants take the shape of antennas. Listening devices. Like the plants make one entity, in flight towards me, picking up and anticipating my thoughts. Its Senay interpreted as a floral arrangement.

As I admire the strange fauna imported into the Heights, I spot a man in snakeskin boots, denim jeans and a felt fedora, walking down the sidewalk on the other side of the street. My Arepas fall like broken child hood memories of stray dogs and rawhide belts and skyscraper
alleyways. He glides more than walks. Making quick time to the front gate of the old dead fuck’s yard. Gravel and dust left behind as a testament to the contents of his soul. He lifts a wrought iron latch. Pushes the gate in and steps onto the former battlefield of flying glass and broken spirit.

Remy, I shout out!

My companions all turn to stare at me and my fallen Arepas. Ants already swarming over the crushed corn and cheese. Remy comes beside me. I jab sharply into his rib cage and point across the road to the snakeskin clothed hypnotist.

Holy shit, says Remy. It’s a dead man walking.

Necromancers shacking up with the fucking werewolves, I say.

This is really bazaar, says Esperanza. But I’m sure there must be some explanation.

Such as the one I already offered, I say indignantly.

I meant, a rational explanation.

Rationality breaks down under deconstruction. Can’t bear the weight of suns and planets spinning and everything.

The old fuck walks to the basement window through which travels the dog. Whistles this high piercing whistle barely audible to human eardrums and canals. I wipe cornmeal from my mouth.

Baby, says Esperanza. You’ve got a nosebleed again.

I wipe the blood on my thigh. It stains my light colored jeans. Across the road the dog emerges from the basement, wagging his tail and yelping. I wonder how many days he wondered that dark space, walking over broken bottles and sniffing around random containers housing oil drained from the Chevelle always parked out front.
The dog looks fine to me, says Esperanza. Maybe the man is bipolar.

I’m bipolar, I say. That man is a psychopath. Remy, we’ve got to rescue the dog. I’m not letting this one go.

All right little brother, he says. If that’s what you want to do, I’m behind you.

No, says Esperanza. You’re not taking Johnnie on some trip that’s going to land his ass in jail.

No worries sister, says Remy. We’ll stalk the old fuck and take the dog without incidence of violence or breaking of the law. Trust me.

The old fuck leashes the dog, walks him down the sidewalk.

Esperanza, I say. It’s now or never. I love you more than life itself. Let me do this one last thing. I swear it to be the last time.

You’ve said this before, she says.

We’ll move away, I say. Somewhere where time moves slower. A house close to a beach on Hawaii. I’ll get a job teaching and publish some work.

If you don’t come back soon, if you get locked up or lost somewhere, I can’t promise you I’ll be waiting.

I look deep as I can into gold specks floating in her mocha skies. My feet grow roots and I’m unable to move. Steam from the food cart curls around her hair. I lose myself a moment in the symmetry of her lips and the curl of her ears, the locks of her hair I’ve ran my fingers through on countless nights. A string of words float and curl over her head. The last poem she wrote and read to me.

I’ll be back, I say.
The carnival flashes by as we jog to catch up with the old fuck. We pass the alleyway back side of the werewolf lair. A red light on the back porch shines bright. We press on. Up ahead sits the sign of the Circle K. We pass under it. Down the street we run till the parking lot of the University open up below the chain link fence enclosing it. Down below walks the old fuck. Open the door to a 66’ Thunderbird, motions the fog to mount the vehicle.

We got to move quick, says Remy.

All our cars are back on the street, which is closed till the morning, I say.

Since when did a lack of vehicular transportation ever stop us?

I think I’ve pushed my luck far enough with that, I say. I’ve got a baby girl and the significant other of my life to consider.

Have I ever let you down?

I start climbing the fence.

Stop, says Remy. There’s too many squad cars down there. Let’s just go around, all easy like, and find our ride.

We take off on a casual stroll around the fence, down the sidewalk and into the parking lot. Still possessing the high ground, we see the old fuck in the cab of the Thunderbird, engine idling, scratching the dog’s ears.

Fucking mind controller, I say. The dog is oblivious to what that old fuck really is.

Easy now, says Remy. We’ve got to stalk him down the interstate. This place is way too open.
The old fuck guns the engine of the Thunderbird. The exhaust comes out fairly clean. The bird’s engine runs strong, no white smoke, the head gaskets and O-rings recently replaced. The vehicle idles like it’s about to choke, but when the accelerator goes down, it roars into the night and moves away down the parking lot like a P-52 Mustang taxing on a wartime runway.

A 68’ Superbeetle sits on the tarmac. The owner turned it into a convertible. No obvious theft deterrents protect it.

Hello little lost girl, says Remy. Someone should be much more careful with you. We’re gonna take you on the ride of your life.

Without need for verbal communication we surround the car and pile in, one by one. Remy at the wheel. Fat Indian in the rear seat. Remy cracks the steering wheel column and with the melding of two wired the engine sputters to life, coughing out dust and oil residuals.

She looks nice, I say. But you think she’s fast enough?

All depends on how you drive her, says Remy.

We pull slow like across the parking lot. Pull up to the entrance of the lot, where a Special Events officer smiles and waves as we pull out onto the interstate ramp. We are waiting at a red light that turns green. Remy shifts up as we gain momentum and shoot out into the artery. Like cocaine on the interstate, we move fast and in a haze of adrenalin, time is encapsulated around the car, moving different.

This will not work, says Fat Indian. He has too much of a lead.

I’ll just drive faster, says Remy.

Too many state trooper, I say. We’ll get caught

Drive to Santa Teresa, says Fat Indian.

This is not the time to pray to Vatican saints, I say.
To the airport, he says. I’ll take an aerial corridor. He can’t outrun my Cessna.

Taillights on the interstate float ahead till we exit and make way across a brief stretch of New Mexico desert and onto Airport Rd, till the road gives way to landing strip. Remy stops the car in front of a moderately sized hanger. We enter through the side door. Fat Indian turns on the bright overhead lights and presses a button, opening the hanger door. The Cessna glows shiny black. A green Civic, not unlike my own, sits in a corner behind the plane.

You guys take my car and I’ll take the plane, says Fat Indian. I’ll be your spotter and you guys the Snipers.

Remy moves the Superbeetle off into the desert. The taillights blink out beside a sand dune and Remy comes running back. Fat Indian turns over the Cessna’s engine. It comes to life in an instant. Ready to take him into the clouds.

Leave the CB in the car on the freq its set to, yells Fat Indian from the cockpit. I’ll be talking to you guys soon.

Remy and I mount the Civic and drive out, leaving Fat Indian looking at a map in the cockpit.

LL

I-10 through New Mexico rolls out before us in an endless stream. No signal comes in from Fat Indian. We roll isolated down the interstate, nothing but the signal from a DJ piping out music from a lonely tower perched on a mountain peak. The radio crackles and voice comes through in translated digits. Binary be the source.

Saint 6 this is Raven 6 over.
Raven 6 this is Saint 6, read you Lima Charlie, over.

I’m over mile marker 10 over River Black. Tracking chariot Cyclops at about 100 mph heading west, over.

Roger Raven 6. We’re passing mile marker 3, over. We can’t catch up, over.

Fuckers got to stop eventually.

Roger. Out here.

Wait a sec.

What?

Got additional personnel aboard, over.

What?

Johnnie, this is Esperanza and Senay came with. She loves to fly with Fat Indian.

How the fuck?

She sent me a text. I was smoking out and saw a spirit. She’s supposed to be here boss.

It’s ok Johnnie. I couldn’t let you go alone. And Senay is safe because she’s in flight.

I think you need to lay off the goddamn Peyote motherfucker, when I see you I’m gonna...

Stand down, over, baby, it’s cool. I love you!

Baby, I love you too much!

I’ll link up with you at...

Dumbasses! That’s the point!

Stop being a psychotic shit stain! You got him into this shit!

Remy out.

Look bro, says Remy. This is not cool. Indian boy put your daughter and your woman in significant danger.
She’s not my woman, I say. She’s the woman who tries to keep me straight.

I ain’t goin there little brother. Regardless, she shouldn’t be up there with Mr. Eye in the Sky.

Fuck it. Let’s just roll with it.

LL

A sharp pain through my spine brings me back to the interior of the Civic in which I ride. I look about at a cactus landscape. A sign ahead says Lukeville city limits. Remy pushes the accelerator and we zoom past.

How the fuck long have I been out in Never Never Land, I say?

About twelve hours, says Remy. You were really fucked up.

Where the fuck are we?

Coming up fast on a border checkpoint.

Why the fuck are we at a border checkpoint?

You remember last night?

I remember buying an Arepe and that’s about it. What the fuck happened?

Remy pulls over and we switch positions. The wheel and the gears and the kick of acceleration puts me at ease as soon as the accelerator touches the floorboard. Memory seeps back in as I relax. The old fuck comes first, which pisses me off. Then comes the Superbeetle and an aero plane. Then many a road marker and the dreams after.
Ahead lies the checkpoint. A border crossing. The border agents take no notice as we cautiously move across this artificially drawn border. A jackrabbit on the other side smiles and flaps a friendly ear in salutation. Its ok he gesticulates. It’s all the same bio zone.

LL

The radio crackles again after a long silence.

_I his location, over._

_Roger. Where do we link up?_

_I’m coming down in el Mar de Cortes Airport. I need a nap._

Senay laughs hysterically in the background. Remembering her favorite album Dog Train.

LL

The black Cessna of Fat Indian rests easy on the tarmac. A bird at rest. Wings breathing a sye of relief after a long hunt. Our companions stand under her wings. Senay spies the arrival of our Civic and me at the wheel. I break and dismount.

Dadiiieee, says Senay! I fly and I see the lake and the mountain.

Awesome, I say. Did you play with Esperanza?

A little bit, and I sleep.
Esperanza captures me in a tight embrace. I linger in the moment of the squeeze of her arms. She possesses a natural musculature to which I’ve grown accustomed. Nothing could ever feel the same.

LL

The Civics’ headlights shine on the now darkened Hacienda where Fat Indian last spotted the old fuck park. I cut the headlights, knowing this to be a snatch and run mission. Mexican authorities frown on illegal operations by foreign operatives. And our cash is limited. We dismount.

Remy, I say. How about Esperanza and Senay knock at the front door and create a diversion, while we circle round back?

Without forewarning, a blood-rending howl shatters the semi-silence of our covert moment. The dog comes running out the front door, pushing aside a screen door. He stops a few feet in front of us, keeping us interlopers pinned in position. The Hacienda comes to life, lights coming on across the main house as well as the surrounding quarters. In pajamas and a felt Fedora comes the old fuck onto the porch.

Queines son y que queiren, says the old fuck bearing a shotgun in his left arm.

Listen you old fuck, I say. We’re her to take the dog back to the Heights. I’ve seen you throwing bottles and treating him like shit. Let us go in peace – fuck it, I’ll even pay you for the dog.
This dog belonged to my twin brother in El Paso, he says. The dog is not for sale. Its all I got left of my brother. Aunque era un bastardo malicioso. But I understand the confusion. You idiots really followed me all the way from El Paso for a dog?

Maybe, I say. We’ve got our reasons.

Bueno. Seguro que si. Since you’re here, and love dogs as much as I do, why don’t you come on in. I got extra room and there ain’t nothing around for a hundred miles. We can talk in the morning.

My companions and I turn to examine each other and the mutual state of exhaustion in which we find ourselves.

Muchas gracias Senior, says Esperanza. Te agredescemos el oferta. And all you idiots shut the fuck up, be grateful you don’t have buckshot in your asses and go find a bed!

LL

The breakfast table is well prepared and the old man sits surly and gruff across the table.

I remember you know, he says. Yes, I mean you Mr. Leadfeather. You’re the guy who sells beer in Sunset Heights. You make good stuff.

with her to Hawaii. So a promise is a promise. We’re leaving.

Hawaii? I got something maybe better. You interested?

LL
A small cargo vessel sits at end of a pier on the ocean side of the hacienda. The crew board the vehicle as I watch. The name on side of the ship reads Biomass Gypsy.

We make our own fuel here, says the old man. You know Senior Nuba?

Yes, I say. We know each other too well.

He introduced me to this aquaponic deal and I started a system up. Right here in my Hacienda.

*Senay’s Mom: Donde estan? Si no me llamas tener q llamar la policia.*

*Me: No te preocupas. Senay esta mas q bien.*

Jump on my ship, says the old man. Vaya a mirar un terreno q te puedo vender en cambio por tu ayuda profesional. Or maybe I’ll sell you some land in exchange for some cerveza. What do you say?

We’ll all take a look, I say.

LL

Senay and I stand on a long strand of white sand beach, Marooned on a Pacific atoll, lost amid the South Pacific. Lazy lagoon at the center like the island’s heartbeat. Ocean respiration. The waves wash up on the beach in systolic-diastolic symphony, motion driven by the moon’s gravity.

We left the desert for the sea. Hitchhiked cargo ships all across the same ocean upon which Senay waved her a last lost goodbye to Max and his little sail boat. We took all the good we could carry and some of the bad got blown into bags by a parting desert sigh – slipped right into all our bags in microscopic amounts. But always the Tao spins and morphs and someday
sooner or later that black dot will balloon and grow and what looks opaque and black will turn a shade of gray.

The dog walks beside my sunshine girl. She puts finger and palm over purple stoned prayer-bead necklace, looks down at the dog walking between us, lightly touches blue prayer-beads encircling his neck. The beads function like a Navajo war party sworn to track down mean spirited dreams, their painted horses faster than any nightmare. Her hand slips away from the dog and both hands squeeze tight around the prayer beads. She smiles.

Senay looks towards the jungle. Hey Dad, she says.

What’s up Sunshine?

Can we take a walk through the jungle?

I peer into the vegetative mass. Feel a bit dizzy and allow a convoy of memory to pass through me and not stick to my chest like it used to. Now the jungle seems to come together for me. Friendly plants take form and I notice birds in the trees and take notice of patterns and color and shade – count fronds on stems. It seems more like my childhood memories, or at least my subconscious mind doing a cut and paste for lack of such memories. Either way, it works for me.

What the fuck, I say.

Dad!?!?

Oh, I mean, sure. Let’s walk about.

We move under a luscious canopy. Under undulating shadows composed by a jealous sun above, orchestrated by trees sucking in water and sunlight.
Mama-mind-fuck will always be lurking about in darkened twilighted woodline. But at least the bitch doesn’t howl in the front yard anymore. Dress up like a scary clown and throw water balloons at my children. Launch pebbles at my cat when she goes on the prowl.

We pass through corridors of vegetation and emerge on the other side to see endless sea and beach.

Senay sits beside her backpack on the sand tossing seashells at the surf. Comes awash gentle, rolling up the beach and retrograding back to deep sea. An army of plankton, seaweed, snails, sponges, sea urchins and surf-tigers. Her back rests against a tall straight coconut tree. A nut drops from a branch and ricochets off a volcanic rock at rest by the ocean, rolls an inch and stops in the sand.

Dad, she shouts out! Look! We make coconut milk. Then you make red curry! I love you cook scallops and the spices and peppers and the plantains and everything.

Thanks, sunshine, I say. Always great to have a beautiful, tasteful and well-educated and well-informed fan base. If mostly idiots like your work, you become a slave to idiocracy.

I smart?

Sharp as a scalpel and quick as a super-sonic whip.

Whoaaa! That cool! I go to paint now.

Cool. Drive on.

Thank you daddy. Punk ass!

That’s right, you better be saying that from way far away. Else monkey butt slapping time will be in session. Fart knocker!

You fart knocker and an old sock. Stinky and dirty. All the time!

Didn’t you say you were going to paint? I’m gonna take a nap.
Ok. I love you!

Love you too.

She looks like a beached polar bear cub. Flown in off an ice shelf and air dropped into tropical island jungle. Certainly not a native species. Maybe not even native to Earth. An alien, purple Whirligig, an African daisy, blooming in time-lapse.

Her small head and arms all but disappear in her backpack as she rummages around the space within. Rifles through all the pockets. Till she finds a box of crayons, twelve bottles of tempura, magic markers, colored chalk, a spool of tape and a pad of paper. She detaches two sheets, unfolds them to create a working space of about two square feet per sheet. They look solar ovens unfolding and she looks like a baggy-pocketed little monster standing on the beach with a smile. Pens and markers and magic and tempura protruding from cargo pockets, shirt pockets and shoulder pockets.

She looks about and points critically at a spur of lava rock rising above the beachline a few meters away. Winks at me.

I go paint on the big black rock, she says.

Sounds awesome, I say.

It’s just like, I can see the ocean from the rock.

Atop the dead lava flow she meticulously arranges her instrumentation on the smooth black surface and unfurls a sheet of construction paper. Rubs her hands in anticipation of creation, shaping and giving form, breaking and reconstructing everything within the kingdom of the five senses and summoning flocks of neon blue ravens when enough just isn’t enough.
The human mind doesn’t go crazy in a sensory deprivation chamber. It simply detaches from physical reality. The same thing soldiers do on long guard shifts. A coping mechanism for the PTSD beastie.

A current lifts and detaches Senay’s unattended construction paper from the frozen lava flow. It spirals and circles above the rock, becoming smaller and smaller as it gains height. Till its lost from sight. Sucked up into the blue.

Senay scowls at her array of instruments like a mad scientist squinting through a looking glass at a microbial jungle filled with monkeys and little beasties on a Petri dish. The world at rest on the turtle's back. The snap and crackle of paper in the grasp of an updraft causes Senay to jump out of her meditation. She cringes away from the construction paper as it takes flight. Stands to watch it spiral up into the great blue sea. Stares in wonder as it crosses the exobase and floats out into a cloud of hydrogen and helium.

Senay point up and looks at me, her eyes open wider and she bursts into hysterical laughter. Belly laughter breaking rhythm of wind and surf. Simultaneously synchronic with everything. Electron traveling double paths. Her laughter rolls on and on till I can’t resist the spirit and I too burst out into laughter. The whole situation being so ridiculous and everything so arbitrary regardless of the lens covering the camera.

Laughter subsiding, Senay sits back down to reevaluate her cache of artistic artillery. Bracketing which shade of color to evoke or curvature of line, the precise eccentricity of an ellipse.

Dad, she says. That soooo funny. You see too?

Impossible to miss that one, I chuckle.

Ok, she says. I paint now. Which color you want? You like green?
She proudly holds up an olive green container of tempura. Smiles with twinkly eyes and displays the pigmented oil like a game show model, the price is right or wheel of fortune. Circles her palm around the container, haloing it in childhood Lite-Brite.

You like this one dad, she queries?
I was fucking born with the bastard, I say.
Dad!
Sorry.

Senay looks mischievously about and locks eyes on a tall coconut tree amidst a grove by the sea.

I think in my head, she says cunningly. And I know how to keep my paper blowing away, she says and gestures grandly with her hands summoning big windy blasts blowing holes through the sky.

Senay moves stealthy-like to coconut woodline. Approaches the coconut grove. Casts her gaze about sneakily. All soft focused and sucking in fronds and trunks, sand and scaevola fan-flowers and naupaka. Blossoming white petals. Crosses the objective into the coco grove. Crouches down like a snow leopard ready to pounce on prey. She stacks four coco milk nuts in her arms and makes way back to lava rock.

The bugster proudly unfurls a sheet of construction paper. Gives the sky a wicked look. Standing dead center of the construction, she methodically places a coconut on each corner, emplacing a barrier reef before each of the four cardinal directions, impeding the wind from doing any sneaky business or underhanded ploys. She sits down Indian style on her legs and clasps her palms together, eyes beaming like a pride of lions salivating over fresh kill.

Dad, she says. Look!
I see, I say. Great work. You kick ass!

Yes! Kick ass!

Olive green spreads over construction paper like jungle growth reclaiming Aztec temples. Things begin populating the field of green. Emotions run the gambit like broad spectrums of light waves. Other colors and little beasties sprout up in 3-D. Shake little fists at me. Wriggle their ears and tweak their noses, monster-mouse-like.

The epicenter of the muraled construction paper looks like a blue lagoon amid a lost atoll. Refuge on an angry sea. Rising center mass of the blue sheltered salt water, comes a long multi-trunked tree; massive trunks wider than a smelter stack, rising into the sky. Its branches centered on top and spreading out like the limbs of a water-giving Baobab tree. Haley’s tree moves in anime form across the paper, swims across the Indian Sea and around the Arctic Ocean to reach the South Pacific. Seed bulbs drop, free falling in our gravity well till they splash into the ocean. Entering the sea they morph into Tia and Daddy and Mom and Esperanza, Senay’s multi-verse. Across the protective coral reef barriers of the atoll fall safari thunderstorms and desert flash floods.

I paint everything, proclaims Senay!

Wow, I say. It’s amazing. Truly astounding work.

We lean back and stare at the imagery and color. Of a sudden the wind whips harsh across the lava rock and spins into a wicked updraft. The coconuts shake and rattle, then roll off the construction paper and into the ocean. The mural lifts into the sky and spirals gently away from Senay and I. Up and into the blue void. We grow smaller as the artifact seems to expand in the air and rain down tempura and Crayola across our atoll and the surrounding deep ocean.
In the backdrop comes the sounds of island life, in harmony with lapping waves and fronds rustling in the salty breeze.

The island is awash in sound. Bird nests populating most every tree. The surf doesn’t always sound like machine gun fire. Doesn’t always sound like a swarm of nasty little lead beasties in supersonic flight. Rhythm of bap bap bap. The sound is sometimes symphonic and often orchestral and the nests are filled with infant birds.

The End
Vita

Born in Winnepeg, Canada of missionary parents, Byron Cross moved to Bogota, Colombia with his parents at the age of about four. Shortly following, a move to Monterrey, Mexico ensued. So he learned Spanish at a very early age, then forgot it all after the family settled down in Fort Worth, Texas. Then at the age of sixteen, he was uprooted and returned to Bogota, taken far from his Kung Fu school and beloved 7-11 arcade games. He returned by himself to the USA at the age of seventeen, worked many odd jobs, eventually attended Tarrant County College’s Northeast Campus. Being constantly short of cash and broken hearted from a broken relationship, he joined the US Army, with an Airborne Ranger Contract on 14 FEB 96 and was subsequently stationed in Fort Campbell, 2-187th Rakkasans. Unhappy at that place, he transferred to Panama, Panama, where he met his first wife, then to Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. From that location he wrote The Big Green Mama-mind-fuck Machine.

Byron’s formal education: an Associate of Arts in Liberal Arts (Tarrant County College), the near completion of a Bachelors in Business Administration (Saint Martin’s University), a Bachelors in Creative Writing (University of Texas at El Paso), an Master of Fine Arts in Bilingual Creative Writing (UTEP) and, at the time of this writing, in process of acquiring a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and Engineering (UTEP).

Byron’s military schooling include Basic Training, Infantry Advanced Individual Training, Airborne School, Air Assault School, Air Traffic Control Advanced Individual Training, Officer Candidate School and the Air Defense Officer Basic Course, to name a few.

Byron also studied Internal Arts (Tai Chi, Pa Kua, Hshing I) for several years with Dr. John Painter at the GOMPA Center in Arlington, Texas.

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