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Creative Writing, MFA Thesis

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

in

Writing

by

Nikolai Augustine Beope

Committee in charge:

Professor Anna Joy Springer, Chair
Professor Michael Davidson
Professor Cristina Rivera-Garza
Professor Lesley Stern

2012

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University of California, San Diego

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Creative Writing, MFA Thesis

by

Nikolai Augustine Beope

Master of Fine Arts in Writing

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Anna Joy Springer, Chair

My stories revolve around my experience with street gangs. I situate my readers in cities where you can't leave toys in your front yard, the yellow jackets of police is what you remember on a rainy day, blocks go dark without streetlamps for what seems like blocks, graffiti makes you aware of your existence. Youth are already tattooed, and possess the same masculine attributes that stem from young boys being raised by a single parent, involved with street violence, or began having sex at too early of an age.

Occasionally Scott would fuck a fee-fee before going

to bed, something that he learned on the plastic mats on steel beds in Juvenile Hall. Get a latex glove, put some cheap hair grease in it or lotion. Get a towel and fold it back in half. Place the glove on it. Roll the towel around the glove up tight, leaving the part of the glove where you stick your hand in sticking out. Fold that part back over the towel roll. Get a sock and slide it up the back to make sure it's tight. Then he put his penis in it and fucked it. You could lay on your back, sliding it up and down like someone was riding you. Go on your side and move it back and forth. Get on your knees and imagine doing it doggystyle. Hang it off the side of the bed and stand up and fuck it like you were in between someone's legs. But usually, Scott would masturbate normally, almost every night though, with lotion or spit and some type of napkin: fast food napkins, paper towels, toilet paper, inside his underwear if those items made too much noise to get.

Immature with magazine pornography that was a few years old, Scott still had VCR pornos, and smart enough to avoid any pornography with two or more dicks in it. The

only time he didn't masturbate was when his cousin came down to stay over and work the two days he didn't.

Wind blew through his bedroom window and it smelt like cat spray. Scott and his cousin Steve were drinking 40's of King Cobra late at night.

Steve rolls his own cigarettes. "Don't get that shit on my floor," Scott said.

"I'm trying not to."

"You read about that new law they're trying to pass in California? If you get caught smoking in a car with kids, they can pull you over and fine you for a thousand bucks."

"Jesus. What a bunch of bullshit."

"It's like all those truth dot com commercials. We're not even the highest smoking country. It's Asia, Middle Eastern, Somalia. They smoke like 10 times more than Americans. You know why they don't have a high percentage of lung cancer?"

"No." He lit his cigarette.

"It's their diet. Why don't they talk about how fat Americans are?"

"I see more fat people walking around then smoking."

"Exactly."

"It's just some bunch of rich assholes in some secret society."

"Some rich fat assholes."

He blew out cigarette smoke— "You know, they're on some bullshit where they have enough money for everything. They're all at some church and there's a TV there."

"Exactly."

"I mean, what the fuck? No one knows who they are except them. But they're rich, so they say yes, no on things and it happens. The government is full of them."

Steve was saying that, sitting in Scott's only chair, a big brown leather one. Noticing the dust that was on the computer screen. Noticing the dust that was on everything. Scott was online tanking for a group.

Scott said, "Of course, think about what you have to do to be in government. You need years of college in some expensive ass school. No way a poor person is finishing six years of political science or some lawyer shit in Princeton, becoming some White House official? It's set up like that." Holding agro on a monster that he thought looked like a big piece of crap, pushing macros that read messages like: Banshee, I am going to use your skull as my next helmet. Banshee, I'm going to kill you with my

favorite 2hand weapon: my penis. Banshee is trying to do a line of coke off my penis. Provoking Banshee!

Scott's buddy list was full.

Steve said, "All the poor stores got ketchup. Who else eats at McDonald's or Jack in the Box but poor people. They all have Heinz. But no one knows who they are and how much power they have."

"Exactly. It's like that dude who bought Archimedes' book."

"Archimedes."

"How you say his name? They said it in that movie Pi."

"Weight over ratio. Archimedes."

"Archimedes?"

"Archimedes."

Scott swatted a bug dead that was flying around his computer screen.

"Man, you got a lot of bugs in your room."

"Damn it!" Special Agent Barney said, then threw down his headphones. A wino that was lying in the grass smiled his bad teeth, laughed at the van, then went back to reading the obituaries from whatever light the night gave

him, while filling up his urine bag lying on the grass beside him.

"Calm down, Frank," his partner said, special agent Betty Johnson for the C.I.A. They were in a surveillance van monitoring Scott, parked across the street from his house.

"I would be calm, Betty! If you would tell your boyfriend to stop killing our bugs!"

She blushed. "Don't say that."

"Well it's true! I see how you look at him! But what I don't get? After all this time! Is why him!? Why haven't you warmed up to me yet, Betty!?"

"You have a wife and kids, Frank."

"Damn it!" He kicked the cabinet twice. "Look Betty, I'm sorry. This operation has me stressed out! We've been at this guy's house, for what? Months!? Why can't he just clean his fucking room!?"

Scott was being monitored by the C.I.A., after they intercepted one of his homework assignments. Scott was also a chronic procrastinator, so the majority of his homework he turned in late. He had to email his assignment to his professor. Which once received triggered Google's Adspecs

for the specific words: 9/11 commercial; September 11th commercials; September 11th news footage of Iraq; U.S. flag burning in Iraq 9/11; 9/11 live feed of Iraq on 9/11/01. HD definition footage of Iraq 911, 9-11 HD Definition Footage of Iraq. Which in turn alerted the C.I.A.

Scott logged off the game, took a long hit of the 40. He opened up a word document containing a rough draft of his newest project. For him and his cousin to critique.

Dear Congressional Person/ Senator/ To Whom It May Concern:

Recently I did not get a job because of my background check turned out a ten year old felony. "Hmm..." *then you could hear the sound of the keyboard clicking.* I do not want to justify how why when I was young I happened to fall victim as being associated with a crime like this, "Hmm..." *the sound of the keyboard clicking,* but I would like to ask that we involve some other criminal acts that well surpass mine in devastation to society. "Hmm..." I suggest that we also include men and women who commit adultery in background checks. "Hmm..." When a man or woman commits adultery 85% of the time it results in a divorce. It is a proven fact that divorce greatly negatively affects the

majority of children that come from a divorced home. "Hmmm." Not only do adulterers commit crimes against their partners that in the eyes of God is a cardinal sin that they could go to hell for, but they also commit crimes against children by forcing them to go through emotional stresses at their young age, "Hmmm..." and the lack of parental guidance that causes some of them to be damaged. It also forces them in their young teens to take delinquent paths and go with the wrong crowds resulting in criminal activity that could've been avoided "Hmmm...". It also causes depression and forces some kids to start medications too young in life, sometimes in extreme examples resulting in suicide, "Hmmm..." and even worse is that it may lead a child when they become an adult to unconsciously become like their parents and become an adulterer later in life themselves, thus causing a vicious cycle that ruins families, kids, and further deteriorates American life. I would like to point out that all people I have interviewed would rather work with someone who committed a robbery 10 years ago than an adulterer who is responsible for ruining their kids' lives. Also they said they would rather work with someone who got caught selling crack cocaine than have to worry at work about some promiscuous coworker trying to

have sex with everyone in the office. To be fair, "Hmm..." I suggest like all crimes after some time they be forgiven and the adultery crime be expunged from their record. I also suggest that there be an educational program for those who have committed adultery similar to those who commit DUIs. I also suggest that adultery offenders submit their DNA once they are found guilty in case they have fathered or mothered any illegitimate children and have avoided the responsibility of caring for them mentally or financially. I understand that a lot of teachers and people in government would no longer be able to get jobs, but it is only greatly to improve our way of life in America, because we must think about the psychological thinking of people who commit adultery, and should not tolerate them teaching our youth or leading our country in our offices. I'm willing to discuss this law and its effects fully through my email or my phone. I also ask that the law bear part of my name as being one of the founders.

A bug caught a visual of Scott's face as he turned to his cousin, half illuminated in light by the computer screen, with a gentle smile that showed some of his teeth. Betty could feel her heartbeat inside her moistening

vaginal canal. Her face flushed. Sitting in her chair she knew exactly what she was going to do when she got home: lay back on her bed half naked, imagining the fee-fee was her genitalia and Scott's warm body and weight was on top of her. Mashing on her clit with a flesh colored dildo the size of a hair dryer.

Agent Barney threw down his headphones, "Un-belIEVABLE!" Then kicked the cabinet twice.

Steve chuckled. "Man, what do people in your class say when they read that?"

"I don't know. That I'm crazy?"

Steve was inhaling his cigarette but started laughing. "Dude, Scott. Do you get to sleep with any hot chicks from your class?"

"No not really. But man, some of them are so fine I come home and beat off."

"Dude," he started laughing. "I bet they all got dirty panties on their floor. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, like the kind that make you sneak through a window or a backdoor."

He started laughing again. "No! Dude! Like you know that girl who sang, *Well he's just a skater boy, I said to*

him later boy? I bet when you walk into her room," and he stood up and opened his arms wide, (with the 40 in one hand and the cigarette in the other) "I bet there's a whole bunch of dirty panties everywhere on their floor!"

The next day when Steve got back from work, him and Scott went out to get some weed for Scott's father. Before they left Scott's dad gave Steve a cement molding of a devil's face about the size of a small television. They hooked up with Scott's weed connect, a dude named Rat, at the local city park.

Rat was smoking pot with a group of young cholos and cholas. No one had any pipe or zig-zags, so they were smoking pot out of an aluminum can. They pointed at Scott, who was walking up wearing a red Che Guevara t-shirt, and asked him: "Yo, yo, you got any pipe we could use?" In a park with no trees, just a lot of grass, with murals on the walls of people of all colors drinking 40's.

Rat went off on a tirade:

"Fucking S.S. Storm Troopers man... They gave me a ticket for selling cigarettes to a Narc! He was over 18 but

they busted me for not asking for his ID! USA get off my back!!"

Rat worked at the local 7/11:

"Working at that fucked up corporate job. Corporate America sucks, man... Fuck Suburbia!"

"Orale."

"Fuck man... Now I'm going to have to ask you guys for your ID's now. Hey- Any of you guys want a line?"

After hooking up with the weed, Scott and Steve went down the boulevard looking for places to grab drinks. They came on a newly opened Cuban restaurant. Steve dumped the devil's face into some bushes out front. The inside had a bunch of bright blue neon lights, tan hardwood floors, music in Cubano that was overly loud for no customers being there. Framed paintings on the walls of dark-skinned figures, with musical instruments of all kinds in their hands. They walked up to the bar. Yellow fish swam in the tank behind it. A tall bartender greeted them, where she immediately pointed to Scott's shirt with an open mouth smile and said, "I love that guy's music!"

Scott said, "Huh?"

Steve said, "Oh no, dude, she must have him mixed-up!"

She said, "No, I love that guy's music. My parents used to listen to him all the time! *Oye Como Va!*"

Steve slapped the bar and laughed. "Hilarious! That's Carlos Santana!"

"Oh," she shrugged her shoulders. And while looking at Scott who's head was behind the drink menu, she said: "What would you guys like?"

They ordered strong, west coast, minty-leave drinks. While she was making them they were checking out her backside. They got up and decided to sit at the corner of the bar.

She noticed, smiled and said, "You guys want to stare at my tits, huh?" And squeezed them together. And gave them a big seductive feel through her black shirt.

Steve started to mumble, laughed and color rose in his face.

Scott felt the skin on his scrotum minutely stretch.

When she brought them their second round of drinks, she smiled and said, "I bet you guys are into philosophy, huh?"

Steve laughed. He said, "Scott keeps it real."

And (even)though Scott saw what she said as an attempt to insult, he broke out with a happy speech that in the end left him there beaming. Steve thought about what he would do with the bartender alone: lay her on the rooftop, and suck her breasts while fingering her and she tugged him off because they had no condom.

"There's this disturbing thing going on right now. It's this thing—I'm not sure if anyone has talked about it—if they have I haven't heard it—this thing called reality; what is real. But it goes beyond that because it becomes what *is* real; what happens; what *has* to happen. But then it goes beyond that; people start to say things like, 'that's the way it is,' that, 'that's unchangeable,' 'oh it's like that?' or 'has to be.' But then it goes beyond that when academic people start to talk about things as being what's rational, then as being what is logic. And now even worse, it becomes things unsaid, maybe thought about first—groups of people don't mention it anymore. But the worst is when it becomes just kept unsaid, not even thought about because that's 'reality,' that, 'that's the way it is.' So things become justifiable and there's now reasons for them; fake wars or unjust ones, these *huge* crimes against humanity! Then there's people who say America's a superpower, and so

this or that *huge extremely* unjust thing *has* to happen; it's reality, so it's kind of justified. There's people who support the thinking by any means necessary, or start to say words like by all means necessary. Then now there's people first say-but then believe-that rich people deserve to be rich, middle-middle, and poor, poor. They think that's the way it is-or even worse-should be-has to be. When these very fucked up things come into question and get seen as wrong, the people who get questioned about what actions they take say things like, 'that's the way it is,' 'it's like that' 'the reality of the situation,' 'that's reality,' 'I'm following orders,' 'this is what happens,' 'this has to be done.' It now becomes *unrational* to think of what they do as committing crimes, and even worse-unrealistic. They almost laugh when they justify the things they do behind microphones."

She said, "Whoa," like a psychiatrist. Then, "That's deep," like a college student.

Steve started laughing. "I got to go to the bathroom. Make sure no one puts any Viagra in my drink!"

At their forth round of drinks, Scott said, "No Fidel?"

"It's not their fault, dude, they want money."

He said to the bartender, "How come no paintings of Fidel Castro, enjoying a cigar?"

She said, "I don't know, we have two stores on the east coast too."

"White trash wouldn't like it."

Scott said, "Every country has people who complain about it, look at us. When you compare things and places someone always looks bad."

"Yeah we got a lot of TVs."

"They got the highest literacy rate and mathematics in the world! If United States was Cuba we'd all know Latin and Differential Geometry!"

"Dude, you see that Huell Howser episode when he was in Cuba?"

"That guy's a herb."

"Yeah," Steve laughed, "but he went to Cuba."

"For what?"

"His show."

"What'd he do?"

"He was cocky. Every shot he said a smartass American comment about Cuba."

"Too bad he didn't get shot."

Steve laughed. "He went to a farmer's market and showed that and said something about capitalism. Then a government fruit vendor and said something about capitalism. Then a house across the street that was a parking lot for bikes and capitalism. Then a pizza shop and something about capitalism, and then a fat American on a boat."

"Fuck PBS. Alex said that 85% of people who work there are telemarketers and marketing execs."

"Dude, what do I know? I watch Sesame Street with my morning bowl of cereal."

After their sixth round of drinks, Steve got up he said, "Make sure no one puts any Viagra in my drink!"

While he was gone the bartender dropped two more drinks down. She leaned over the bar, and just to make talk conversation, told Scott, "You're the one with all the money, huh?"

Scott did a chuckle that moved his shoulders and chest. He took a drink, and with very wide and glossy eyes, said with a smile, "Yeah," while charmed staring deep into her titty cleavage.

She frowned. Taken aback she turned around and went away, with her hand covering up some of her butt, open palm facing out.

When they walked out the front doors, into a warm evening. Scott stretched and said, "Ahh, the great outdoors!" A small amount of traffic drove by with their lights on. Steve got the devil's face out from the bushes. He handed it to Scott and said: "Hold up, dude! I'm going to get her number!" With a big smile on his face and rosy color.

Scott put the devil's face in front of his own. Then stepped close to the curb as a car was passing by, startling the male driver that was inside his dark cockpit, making him swerve into another lane.

Two blocks away they tried to grab some more drinks from a bar on a street corner. It claimed to be a sport's bar—with a red-neoned martini caricature on the front window. One that you could no longer see through now that it was dark enough outside. Steve dumped the devil's face into some bushes. They walked across the street.

Inside was a college crowd playing pool. Standing around and occupying all the long row of stools at the bar. A young white male, with a tribal tattoo on his bicep, and small, spiky hair gelled, took a gulp from his brown beer while looking side-eyed at Scott and Steve as they walked in. Then, before planting his beer back down on the bar, he said, "Che Guevara's a faggit."

"So is your father." Immediately replied Scott.

Dark smiles and smirks lit up throughout the bar, along with some tough guy faces, or faces that felt offended.

The dude at the bar's face went pink. "DUDE I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU!" His stool crashed to the floor.

Some woman screamed, "Fuck him up Tom!"

Someone else cheered, "Kick his ass, Thomas!"

Some of the pool players held him back. They said, "Calm down, DUDE! Chill!"

Steve frowned.

Scott shrugged his shoulders.

"DUDE! I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU!" He looked like an ugly five year old; just take off his shirt, put a diaper on him and sit him on a floor.

Some bitch screamed, "Kick his ass Thomas!"

Another white boy yelled, "Fuck em up! Thomas!"

Other people were telling Scott and Steve: "Get out GUYS!" "Leave!" "DUDES!" "LEAVE DUDES!"

Scott and Steve walked out.

Across the street while they were retrieving the devil's face, they saw the front door of the bar burst open, a crowd come out.

"DUDE I'LL FUCKING KILL THAT BEANER!" The dude with the pink face yelled.

One of his peers told him, "Calm down, DUDE! DAMN!"

He turned on his peer. "WHAT!? I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU NIGGER!" Then started punching him in the face.

Across the street, Steve put the devil's face up to his own. He said, "Scott, check them out, some good citizens right there."

"Fucking white people. Probably watch UFC. Hopefully they get in fatal car accidents before they have children." Then they turned around and walked away. The headlights of the occasional car lighting up their backs.

Eventually the fighting made it out into the middle of the street. One of the cars at the stop light was a black jeep. Inside was a beautiful mixed couple, young and in

community college, with enough belief that they could change the world if there was more people like them. The only light in their cockpit was the green from the electric do-dads on the radio. It was warm inside because of their youthful love had not yet extinguished. It was her vehicle but he was driving.

(They had just pulled out from the taco shop drive thru. The hollow smack of a back being thrown up against their passenger door disturbed everything. She was startled. Her smile went away. As she turned to her boyfriend he looked at her in the face. He could imagine that this is what she would look like in a life or death situation. A startled, silent cry for help. Then he saw out the window, and he could only see the face of the guy who was throwing punches against the guy on his car door. What a stupid, ugly fuckin looking face he thought. He slammed on the gas, half hoping someone outside would die as he peeled off. Looking back through the rearview mirror he saw them on the ground in the headlights of a car stuck behind him. He could see shoes on the ground, a hat, a wallet. He turned to his girlfriend and asked: "Are you Ok baby?")

They walked into another bar, one that was between a small car dealership and a hair salon. Steve dumped the devil's face into a hedge of bushes out front. They stepped inside. There was nothing to do besides stand up and play an older Street Fighter cabinet, dance to someone's karaoke, eat chips and salsa from a set up on a table. It was dim and cozy, with a lot of red on the seats and dark brown on the walls. It was friendly enough to where old school alcoholics showed up no matter what night brought in who. Scott and Steve both dashed to get the only available bar stool, shouldering each other on the way, wrestling a bit at the seat. Pulling on each other's shirts with big toothy smiles. Until Scott got his ass up on it and won. Their little contest brought no violent vibes; the bar was full of laughing, someone clapping. One of the old school alcoholics, said to his old school alcoholic wife, "I know those guys."

Scott heard him and looked, and one day would remember that couple, sending a sadness right behind his face.

They ordered drinks and started a tab. Steve rolled a cigarette on the bar. Someone was karaokeing "Two Lovers" by Mary Wells. She had a silver wig on, purple pants that were stretchy, fake eyelashes and a long t-shirt.

Interesting Scott thought, then clapped loudly during the conclusion. Steve was as comfortable as ever. His face smiled like he was wearing jammies, about to hop onto bed. Under a light above him, his face gleamed and shadows from his thin cheeks, as he began to talk then nonsensical things:

"Excuse me, Ma'am? Need drink here. Nurse. Nurse? I need a shot! Mmm, smells like pine tree. Just keep em comin! It's like a revolving door around here. We're just like state employees! Fire us from the unemployment office, then we jump over the counter! Walk out the door, then stand in line!"

Scott didn't laugh. Other people did. Especially one middle-aged guy sitting across from him. He was wearing a backwards cap over his long knotty orange hair. With the same kind of orange beard, with a smudge of fingerprints on the lenses of his glasses. People who lead strange lives. He laughed louder than anyone else at the bar, because he was looking at the bewilderment in Scott's face, while Scott was looking at his cousin.

The trumpets went hard. After a few drinks more, Scott helped Steve do a karaoke of Rodney O and DJ Cooley's

"Everlasting Base." As soon as they did a few people went to the speakers and began to bust a move. Steve was the main lyricist; Scott repeated all the end words of the rhyme that *rhymed*.

"The bass that's in your face,
sho' nuff shrugs *your face*,
Just like you got sprayed by a *can of maaace*.
You see your speaker is *movin*!
everybody is groovinn!
My song moves along as it *starts improvinnn*!
The highs will get *no higher*!
the bass will go *no lowerrr*!
Cuz everlasting bass,
Sho' nuff moves a flow-err!
Some people can't *take it*!
they try to *plead the case*!
But you can't get enough of *Everlastin Baaasssee*!"

The trumpets went hard again. Under the few lights they broke a sweat. Scott hopped off the platform. Steve thanked the small crowd. He then did a karaoke of a Steely Dan song. During the lengthy gaps between lyrics he freestyled.

"Yo it's Steve One and Scott-Too, and you can't fade us; dodge, parry, mitigate our damage or evade us. We're on some angle dust, I'm hearing crickets and trains, there's a painting in my head it's a wedge in my brain. A coat of arms, in the water under moss, the first time you and your guild killed the boss. A dark room with only a ceiling bulb in it, the outside the color of the walls painted in it.

"Drinking coffee inside the cockpits of a Mech, parked outside the walls up against a city wreck. New videogame releases overseas in Japan, chillin, outside getting faded with the city gang."

Back at the bar Steve quietly laughed and smiled. As he turned around to grab his drink, the smell of a perfume, flower petals being pulled straight from the vine, and the musk of under neck hair weaved into his smell and breath.

A grown woman sat down next to him. She said, "Hi."

So pale and lively (was this woman), that every other attribute on her face seemed to be intensified. Her hair and what she put in it was the same kind of black from train smoke. Her mark on the left cheek looked like a dab of ink. Her brief spray of freckles looked like the

material of the gold flakes at the bottom in bottles of alcohol. Deep in her eyes and the small amount of makeup around them, looked like something that had awakened from the cool or cold depths of outer space.

There was an awkward pause, before finally Scott forced out a hi.

"Hi."

From crossed legs and a fidgeting foot, she bumped one of his and said, "Well?" with a smile on her face like she was about to burst out laughing out of sheer joy.

Scott cleared his throat. "What's up with you?"

She bumped his foot again. "Aren't you going to buy me a drink!?"

He smiled, on his face and glossy eyes as if she just opened an orifice, that let loose a playful breeze behind it. "Sorry." He cleared his throat. "Miss. Let me order a drink for her."

"Sure," the bartender said.

He smiled, looked down into his drink then took a sip from it. Both women were staring at him; the one with the smile on her face, and the fidgeting foot that tapped his again. The other with her arms folded behind the bar, under a hanging ceiling lamp bulb above her.

Scott cleared his throat again, "Oh." Everybody close by was listening. There were gums stuck under the bar counter, dust was in the bar counter's small ledges. Before he could ask she ordered the drink herself. And asked for an ashtray.

At first it was small talk. A joke was smiled and laughed at. The bartender set down the drink, but flopped down in front of her an unclean ashtray, which wobbled making ashes fall out. Agent Betty mad-dogged the bartender as she walked away.

Aretha Franklin's "Chain of Fools" came on. Scott looked out to see his cousin near the karaoke stage dancing. He was jumping in place. The young lady he was with had her arms in the air.

Scott smiled. He said, "I remember when I was getting transferred from downtown county. The bus was packed. Every seat was full and we all had shackles on. Well on the freeway, this song came on. I thought it was kind of funny. Then to the beat... like that right here—we all started banging our shackles on the ground to it. All at the same time. Everyone was smiling and shit. It was a beautiful display of humanity."

Agent Barney would stop masturbating every time he heard Scott's voice. But would begin again when he heard Agent Betty's. She said, "That's funny. I always thought it was "*Train of Fools*". But I remember one year there was an alarming amount of deaths at the train station. I investigated the station to figure out why so many people were getting hit by trains. What my research found, was that at some locations on the track, the train passed by foot traffic closer and faster than at other parts. People weren't getting hit by trains; what a train does as it passes close to you; at certain speeds it literally *sucks* you under it. So people were getting *sucked* under the train, not getting *hit* head on."

"Wow. For real? One time I remember I almost got hit by the trolley. You know the wooden things that come down to halt traffic? Well there's only one on each side on the side going with traffic, right? I saw the things come down and heard the trolley buzzer, but I thought it was coming from the other side so I kept walking. While I was looking down the other track, I stopped and turned and the trolley was like an inch away from my nose."

"Aren't all trolley stops next to stop lights?"

"I think so."

"Well then, that means it must've been going slow. Imagine if that was a train!? You'd be—whooped—sucked under. And I'd be sad, because you're such a beautiful boy."

Scott blushed, "For real?" Then laughed. He asked her, "Hey, wanna go smoke some weed?"

She laughed. "I haven't even finished my first drink!"

"It's cool, we can come back in after."

"How bout I just watch."

He laughed again. "Ok," then got up.

"Honey I'll be right behind you."

He squeezed past some alcohol faced patrons on the way, bumping into one looking back then apologizing for it, before making it out the back door.

She threw back her drink in a gulp. Reached into her purse and pulled out her compact. Looking at her face, when she looked back into her own eyes she thought: *You go girl. You look fiiine.* With her fingers she messed with her hair. She took out a bottle of perfume and sprayed it on her neck. She took off the mic and threw it to the bottom of her purse. Agent Barney threw off his headphones and began kicking equipment. Betty hopped off the bar stool, grabbing her purse. Her gat fell out on the counter. The bartender

snatched up the empty drink, and ashtray and said: "Girlfriend, you gotta leave." Standing back behind the bar, the same ceiling hanging lamp bulb above her.

Scott had been out there for a couple minutes smoking weed. Steve pushed open the door with a big smile on his face.

"Dude. What's up?" He laughed.

"You see that girl I was talking to at the bar?"

"No. I thought you didn't smoke weed anymore?"

"I trained myself."

"You what?"

"Yep. Only a pack of matches though. I'd buy the weed and just a pack of matches, so I'd limit how much I smoke when the matches are gone."

"Huh?"

"Look, dude, when the matches are gone I couldn't smoke anymore. I found out a lot of stuff though. Like look it, you'd take one match out for emergency. When it's your last match, after you take it to the stove to try and light the rest of the match, there's just a little part where you can only put your fingers. Look, so what I did—because you'd only have what's in your fingers so you might get

burned, I turned it around so I got an extra match light! I held it by the burnt part."

"Wait, huh!?"

"Yeah, I also found out about this part. So no more matches, right? So you gotta burn the match book up. You can get two by splitting it by the center. But then I thought: if I roll it too tight it might not burn, but if I roll it too general it might not be too tight. But loose burns faster. But as a science project: what if I rolled the end up tight and a cone loose on that other end? Would the smoke get trapped up there and cause it to burn big but slower? So I tried it but it stunk real bad. But I still hit the weed but only once."

"Oh my God. Dude! You are so high!"

"Damn. For real? Let's bounce out the back."

Scott and Steve squeezed through a gap between fences. Under the moon, with a few stars and street lamps, they walked through a construction site of a torn down supermarket. The details of the devil's face under Steve's arm were bright and easy to see. The debris in places looked like giant's arms and legs. Laying about as they walked by them, with large pink fabric that was frayed,

jutting out from the undersides of broken down metal columns like sinew. There were corners of the structure still standing. With the walls and everything else around them destroyed. Piles of loose bricks and cement leading up to them. The perfect place in a future apocalyptic war, where with three of your friends, comrades in trench coats, you could lob explosives over, then come off from a wall to crouch down and turn the corner to fire a semi-automatic pistol.

There was a small plastic, American flag posted up in the dirt. About the size of a boot. Steve kicked it; it flew up in front of him, then over his head, then behind his back in a complete 360°.

"Oh my God!" Steve said, "Scott, dude! You see that!?"

The night light made Scott's smile bright. "Yeah."

"Dude! That could never happen again! We should've videotaped it!" As Steve said that to Scott, who was now walking off to the side ahead of him, the inside toe of Scott's boot kicked a rock, that ricocheted off the inside of his left heel as he stepped forward.

Scott could only feel it happen, but Steve saw it. "Oh my God! Dude!"

They walked up to a lone trolley stop. Scott stood by while Steve sat at the dark bench where he smoked a cigarette, enjoying it exhaling with the whole of his mouth instead of through his lips. The trolley alerted its oncoming with an electric horn. Scott watched to see it coming down the tracks from a distance. It seemed to be the only sources of light at this time of night. The closer it got, the bigger and brighter its light became. *Beautiful* Scott thought, like a beacon or a tunnel, something you would want to walk into. As the driver pulled into the stop, the light illuminated the two lone figures. With one hand Scott put a hand to his eyes to shield them. The sight made the driver aware of her place in the dark cockpit.

They said their goodbyes, Steve stepped up into a car. At a window seat he put the devil's face in front of his own, then against the window. Something that looked very satanic Scott thought, and he could hear some minor damage from off the cement molding happen as he did. Then the trolley took off, with one male passenger sitting at the back of the car, wearing sunglasses looking Steve's way.

Scott walked towards home on the boulevard. Across the street going with traffic, under big shaggy trees and white

stucco apartments. The night dark enough to be blue, as he felt the night air and his crepuscular eyes looked around.

A car full of high school or college students drove by and threw something orange at him. That hit him in his leg then exploded on the ground like a bad tangerine. The culprit was hanging out the window laughing, his mouth a big hole enough to see the roof of his mouth and the outline of his tonsils, from an all black car with its red back lights on.

Scott roared, "WHAT, MOTHERFUCKER!" and scrambled to pick up a rock from off the side of the sidewalk. As the car sped off, he launched it like a baseball pitcher, staying in its final animation as he watched it hit the street by the back tire, bounce off the street and miss.

He roared, "What motherfucker!" And started running down the sidewalk, chasing the car.

About three blocks up the car had to stop for a red light, its red brake lights bright. Scott folded over two blocks back, gasping for air. With his hands on his knees he broke out laughing and gasping for air at the same time. *Too bad I didn't follow the older homies' advice he thought. Always walk against traffic. So no one can pull up*

from behind you and jump you, or stab you, even police cars have to make u-turns.

Then he thought, recovering from laughing and gasping for air, too bad this shit isn't '94, where if those white boys tried that shit, I could've sailed a bullet down the street while they were at the stop light, spinning in its own velocity into their back window, then breaking the windows as it goes through the front. I leave it up to fate if it kills one of them. You should see their faces, when you're walking down the street by yourself, and someone from a group of five bangs their shoulder into yours as they pass. As they begin to talk shit, pull out a black .45 and slide the slide back: clack-clack. And then start blasting. Everyone who was all smiles and jokes now their faces become petrified. All those who thought they were hard have the widest and biggest eyes and open mouth. Their lives have been changed permanently. What valuable lessons people must learn to stop them from harassing other people. Like behind my middle school when I blasted; I aimed at their heads but at the last second shot into the engine. Or like those 4 dudes running across the street from Milk Land trying to kill me; I aimed at them but at the last second tried to blast between their group to stop them. Like that

cop who gunned a U-turn, I aimed where his head was behind the window but then really shot at the car. Thank you God for guiding my bullets all those times, and saving me from completely ruining my life, from those who were trying to completely ruin my young life.

There was a noticeable decline in the neighborhood as Scott walked down the street. The same street, at the same time of night, where a year before him and his girlfriend drove down it. Music on the radio, and her crappy seatbelt uncomfortably lodged into the side of his stomach. While shifting gears after the stoplight she said, "If you can't find it, grind it." They exchanged warm smiles. He playfully said her name and put his hand on her thigh. He was soulfully happy that she was with him. The most beautiful woman I've ever been with he thought. A long dark-haired beauty, with skin the color of people of wet sands. With youthful breasts so large you could squeeze them from any direction, put your mouth on them from almost any position. Upon entry there could be a squirt-squirt. Only to be happily back minutes later to pound part of the night away, resulting in a tight attachment to her back, too tight sometimes he thought, as they shared each

other's sleep. Like a man she too was fascinated with big dicks. And like Scott from an education and cultural background college tries their hardest to weed out. Too bad they were fated to share the same birth signs, when after two years he was afraid that he was incapable of love, and she in regards to everything in her life felt that she could always get better. A bus flew past them that startled them briefly, made their hearts stop. Huge blue flames were shooting out of its mufflers and rooftop exhaust pipe. Followed by a light gray smoke visible in headlights and streetlamps, rising in the air above the quiet dark street, as if something tragic or enormous had suddenly collapsed. Scott said: "Wow. I can't even do anything. Imagine me reporting it and them asking my name? Find out I got a 500 dollar arrest warrant? Even if I saw someone getting killed, I couldn't even report it without worrying about going to jail myself for not being able to pay off my fines. That's crazy!"

"I could think of a lot worse."

Walking down the streets, went from supermarkets and restaurants, to business fronts then condos. A neighborhood where the yellow glow of streetlamps at first seemed to be

mere paces away from each other, all the way until there were virtually none. 7/11s and houses, houses and small apartment complexes that turn into large apartment complexes, where liquor stores or dollar stores begin to act as supermarkets. To dilapidated or abandoned properties behind chain linked fences, where rundown bus stops and weeds grow out of the sidewalk. To eventually where the streets get so bare, that when it starts to rain midday, and large rivers run along curbs, and big rain pelts the empty sidewalks, such a lonely and desolate sight, you begin to feel that magic exists, you start to think that there exists different worlds.

Scott finally made it to the taco shop two blocks away from his home, it was on the corner of the main street with no trees around it and no cars in the bright drive thru. Sometimes through the walkup window Scott caught one of the workers inside asleep on the floor. They changed management every six to seven months. Somehow it had something to do with getting access to the United States. Scott thought about these things as he crossed the dead street.

He used his college Spanish on them. "Buenos noches, compas. Dame un burrito de califas, mas grande, cardinal."

And Scott made a length with both of his hands to illustrate what mas grande looked like, a big burrito or maybe a large penis.

The red-eyed, paper-hat-wearing worker, who was as amused by Scott and his Spanish as Scott was. He told his co-worker, "Un burrito de califas, mas grande," and did the mas grande sign too, but a little bigger and more dickish, making his co-worker say, "Ay guey!" A small chuckle for everyone, sheltered or finding shelter in the dark of night.

As usual, police calls and the jargon that includes them, the sound of numerals filled the glowy insides of the dark cockpit, as two cops wearing short-sleeved blue uniformed shirts, drove the police car down the boulevard. They passed by the taco shop and craned their necks, mad-dogging, exactly like how gang members do. They saw Scott on his forearms talking into the window, under its light, bringing his head back outside out of it— laughing, a big, full hearty, cheek-blushing open-mouthed natural kind of laugh. They made a U-turn after the stop light.

"Como se dice: 'He side-eyed my Hamlet hat'?" He laughed.

"No mames guey," and he smiled his pleasure at this visit.

One cop with his arms folded over his chest, the other with a flashlight in his hand, said from behind Scott: "How are you doing this evening sir."

And even before Scott had turned fully around, he felt it in his being; he knew there were cops behind him and something terrible was about to occur. They had disturbed everything in the night air.

When his face turned around he said, "Fine," but muscles in his face moved involuntary making him look weird. Along with a quick flash in his eyes reassuring the cops that sometime in his life he had done something wrong.

"Can we see your ID sir?"

Scott paled, "For what?"

The cop repeated himself.

"Man... I haven't done nothing wrong."

The cop extended his hand. "Sir. ID please."

"Man..." Scott reluctantly gave it up.

The other cop with the flashlight watched these actions closely; the abrupt exchange of the ID, and how Scott's face looked: it looked too child-like, and aware, something he completely felt the urge to punch, like a

little fucking baby boy the cop thought. He leaned back a bit to look through the alternate walkup window at (for) the taco shop employees. They looked away once they caught him peeping. The cashier one walked to the back out of sight.

Inside the cop car the Pilipino cop told him, "What do you take? Criminal Justice?" And smiled at his partner.

Then in turn his partner said, "I hope you study peneology," turned around to smile at Scott, then gave his partner a head nod.

Scott had bad breath. He said, "Ok, I see what's up, you guys tryin to clown me. That's cool, say what you want. I'm no criminal, and I *don't* ruin people's lives. *You ruin* people's lives. Aren't you worried that while your eating with you're family at that Italian restaurant in Lemon Grove, someone normal whose life you ruined sees you come in, leaves, goes home and gets his gat, then comes back blastin on you?"

The two cops' heads immediately turned to look at each other.

Scott said: "I mean, what kind of women even fuck you in the first place to have kids? The kind with a lot of make up on, huh? The same kind that would fuck gang members probably in the opposite situation."

The white cop banged his flashlight on the steel grate, shouted, "HEY! SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

The other cop said in a voice that had caring in it, "Hey, Danny, cool it!" The cop Danny turned around red in the face, looked forward and didn't say a word.

Scott said, "Haha, yeah Danny, cool it bro. We don't want any cops walking around with anger issues. You might murder someone who pulls out his wallet! Fucking piece of shit cops. My friend told me he got fired from PBS because some stupid bitch married to a Sheriff reported him for when she walked into the conference room sleeping. He was on his fuckin break! It was 4:40 in the morning! You even fuckin up bitches! No normal person would've reported that. He is fucking working graveyards! Cleaning their offices! You even fuckin poisoning PBS. They know you know PBS even hates fuckin cops, blasting on young blacks 52 plus times, then some piece of shit captain comes out and says: 'How do I spell relief? N,O,T,G,U,I,L,T,Y!' I mean what the fuck? How sick is that shit? And only because she was married to

a cop. He'd still have a job! He was paying his way through college with that job! You guys are cysts! A normal person would've said: 'Man, I know that custodian has a hard job.' I mean what kind of person even becomes a cop? When you know you're going to have to touch people's nuts. Put you're finger up assholes? You guys are closeted fags."

The other cop quickly turned around; fast enough if there was no grate he could've started choking Scott out. "SHUT YOUR FUCKING MOUTH!" Spit flew out of his mouth, and he banged his flashlight against the grate. His face turned the violent of all reds. Initially this made Scott flinch. But then this type of violence made him smile. His whiter teeth became very visible, back there in the dark back seat, while lights of the city went around them as they drove.

His partner sternly said, "Danny cool it!"

Scott started laughing. "Haha, I bet you would kill me man, 'teach this boy a lesson.' See, that's the difference between me and you; I'm not a killer or a murderer. I never have been nor will I ever. That's what you guys do. You murder people. I hesitate to even kill bugs. Maybe I'm a Jainist at heart, just currently affected by America. What do you guys even have to take to become cops? You don't

have to go to college, huh? No morals or ethics philosophy; no study of other cultures; no semi circles in classrooms discussing literature and past injustices in our world. No! That might make you think twice! Just give motherfuckers guns; preferably people who've been in wars overseas, because they need to stay 'in the shit' to be normal. Ladies and gentlemen, we want people who've killed poor motherfuckers in other places, to kill poor motherfuckers here in our country; who pull out wallets, steal, run, talk shit about our country, say fuck cops, drive drunk, have weed. We want our people to think when a cops behind them: 'What have I done wrong?' Or even worse: 'What haven't I done right!' Man, you guys better hope I never get rich. I'll put 50,000 dollar head shots out on cops who shoot people 52 times, stun gun kids, punch people in handcuffs, beat people's faces on side roads, then go to court and be found not guilty.

"Haha," Scott laughed then sighed, "I guess we're kind of alike, guys. What is this world coming to? I guess I have to become a cop myself; it's the only solution."

Scott put his face close to the grate behind cop Danny and whispered, "What you think about that? Danny. Would you like to ride with me?"

Danny clanged a can of Mace up to the grate and sprayed it point blank into Scott's mouth and eyes.

Scott flew back to the seat screaming.

The other cop yelled: "What the fuck, Danny!?"

Between shrieking, Scott started vomiting as much as he could; first on the floor—shooting out of his mouth like a dragon—then through the grate, forcing the cops to pull over. In the dark back there and in the car, the vomit looked like an iridescent form of Albondigas soup, absorbing all the light the street light and night gave.

Scott's screaming turned into a form of adolescent-like sobbing. Warm tears found their way down his face and stung him. With his hands handcuffed behind his back, he put his chin to his chest. But no sooner his crying changed into a form of laughter, where he raised his head up high, to look around and show his face he said:

"Haha haha! I once was told of a mutant who could twist space around him! And now it seems that I met him!"

Parked on the shoulder of an on-ramp, red lights flashing in the night as an expression of something gone wrong. Two cops in the head lights coughing. Dust in the air from the sudden stop. Making all the passersby

rubbernecking, able to see the color of Scott's head, then his silhouette as they drove by. Thinking, as if this police vehicle was midway on a path to hell.

He woke up because of the cold. With no shoes or socks on, his back against the wall, his knees to his chest, in a suicide cell that was unclean. With someone else's dried up shit remnants on the floor; a floor that had been painted a dark red many times; next to a grate that covers the hole in the center of the floor that you shit and piss down. The air smelled warm and seemed to be getting trapped in the middle of his throat. Under a piss yellow light that shown through a small plastic square from the ceiling.

He fell back asleep on top of his arms and knees.

There was a knock on the window. "Want lunch?" a deputy asked. Then said, "Nice wife-beater," and smiled something that could've been a laugh.

Scott sprung up, put his face to it, the only thing not separating them visually, a small rectangle that only showed the face up close. "Yeah."

The cop put his keys to the lock. "Step away from the door."

"Clean that shit up off my floor."

"Step away from the door or no lunch."

"I'm not stepping near that shit. How bout you have the decency of cleanin the cell before throwin someone in it?"

The cop quickly nodded, an almost middle-aged man with a graying mustache under a distinguishable nose, and the same haircut that used the same hair gel for the past twenty-five years. "How bout no lunch?"

"How about I talk to the ACLU and a grievance?"

He laughed pleasantly, because Scott's face and the words he used revealed that not only had he'd been an inmate before, but he was the delusional type, ones who don't know where they're at, and think they should be treated humanely. "Sure buddy. I'll bring the grievance down in a few hours right before I go home to my wife and kids." He winked through the window, then began to walk away.

"Yeah, the ones you're teaching to be racist, play football and hate homosexuals I bet. I hope they didn't see you hit your wife. I said, you! Are raising children!?"

He questioned what he heard in his head. Then the dep turned around and went back up close to the window. "What was that?"

"Ah. I said you're probably teaching your kids to play football and hate homosexuals, right? You say racist shit at home in front of them, because your whole life you've never been able to have close friends from other races because of how your parents raised you. I hope they never saw you beat your wife during that rough ten years you worked night shift."

He stared through the window at Scott's warm face and the freckles that aligned it. Without blinking an eye, and with a face that contained the beginning last remnants of youth in it, he said less loudly and almost like a sigh, "Looks like someone's going to get their ass kicked," then began to walk away. Scott put his ass to the crack of the door and blew a huge fart through it.

The dep stopped dead in his tracks and began to turn around. Someone started banging and screaming behind a cell door near the end of the corridor. The heavy planting of

boots and keys jingling could be heard running from all directions.

A group of Mexicans played UNO; close to a corner, close by on a bottom bunk. Scott laid on his bottom bunk studying all the graffiti carved, penciled and penned on the top rack above him. A hype was withdrawing curled up in a ball on a bunk facing the wall. People who had been tweeking four days straight were sleeping for two days straight. Other people were on their bunks staring at walls, or staring at walls talking to someone on bunks above them, below or nearby; low conversations about what they did, who they know, what they've done, and what ever happened to him. Slow hands touching their own face.

Everyone was clothed in county blues, where if you were lucky you'd get a pair of underwear without old shit stains in them. Some people were covering their face with a shirt trying to sleep or pretend to under the bay lights.

Scott didn't see anything funny tagged on the bottom of the rack. No questions like *Do you have stairs in your house?* No crude rhymes like *Beans, beans the magical fruit,*

the more you eat the more you toot, the more you toot the better it feels... No who fucked who or someone, or who sucks cock at what time. No relaying of philosophy or prophetic visions. No racist remarks like in most college toilet stalls. These things at least not blatantly.

All there was were gang writings and a block lettered pencil drawing of a cross with a family name above it. Most of the gang writing had been carved in and looked like years of it. History of Gang Writing he thought. What a bad ass class that would be. Imagine how fast that would fill? But what would it satisfy, Art History? Nah, what the fuck is that? What would the degree be in? First things first: Why the use of Old English? I mean, how did that become incorporated? Is there any others? Well block letter and cursive variations. But what else is there really? The English language only has Old English and block letters to work with and still be legible. Old English is also threatening looking. But why threatening? Because classic documents are written in Old English also? Nah, that's stupid. What about the E's people use? It's just a variation of the upper case cursive E. I'd have to talk about tagging, too. But when I think of gang writing I think about this shit, cholo and black gang shit. Cholos

use more Old English and black gangs blocks, but they both use the variant of the cursive E's predominantly. Yeah, but there is tagging gangs too. Yeah but I'm thinking about Teen Angel shit. Ahh then it might have to be in a time period then too. The History of Gang Writing; Hispanic and Black Gang Writing 1970's - Present Time United States. Nah because New York gangs were doing that graffiti shit then too. Maybe Hispanic and Black California. Haha, what a shitty thing titles are. But for a PhD academics would demand if I use the word gang writing then I got to go back to the early 1900's or some origin shit. They were probably some Irish gangs. Man what a pain in the ass that would be. But man, imagine, the History of Gang Writing class, discussing the art form of lower case Old English in class, how nice that would be. For extra credit everyone dress up like a gang member in class for Halloween. Nah, that's stupid. Tests would be the ability and attempt of deciphering and mimicking the alphabet. But we would also have to talk about the art as how it is applied to what surfaces. We would also have to talk about how it is used to communicate, what, and to who: 'Hey, I know you're alive!' Man, we would eventually have to go into jail bullshit for numerical codes, tattoos and shit. But the

main thing: how does this help academics? It don't; I just like it. I bet there would be white people who favor cops and trying to get criminal justice degrees in the class. People trying to get forensic degrees in hope to use the study to arrest people. People who wear Converse and purple hats and shit. Hmmm; got to treat them equal for art's sake! I'd probably get to fuck a lot of white girls with big titties. Damn, man... I'm becoming just like them..

Scott stuck his finger between his teeth to feign some of his own gang writing with a moist smudge. As soon as his finger reached close to the bottom of the rack, an electric buzz came over the bay speakers, and a deputy said: "Head count, gentlemen. Then lights out. Get on your racks."

A side door popped open on the upper tier. Two Caucasian cops, with gelled haircuts slicked-back, with green fee-fee gloves on and shiny black boots with tan uniforms, stepped out into the balcony, and began to count with pointing fingers—on one hand with two together—not looking at anyone's eyes on the racks, just people on the racks. Then from that far they told bunk mates in the back to wake up bunk mates, people to take off covers or t-shirts from their heads. Inmates started saying Dep this,

and Dep that. The other answered questions while the other counted with his green gloved fingers. Answers were answered all the same: Dep, can we get some stamps? When is sick call gonna be? I've been here 72 hours, man, and I still haven't seen tha judge. Dep can I get some sandals that fit? All answered the same way at the same time, a few times: "You'll have to wait until the morning."

The deps went out the tier through a closed door on the opposite end, that popped open the way same as the first. Once closed the lights dimmed by 40%. Immediately someone blasted a huge fart. People started snickering. A Mexican said, "UNO!" Scott started busting up inside, holding his stomach, beginning to get teary-eyed. Other people started yelling, UNO! from the top to the bottom bays. A dude close to Scott's bunk said, "*Egyptian Lover*," just like the robot voice from the chorus of the song. A black dude and an ese on bunks parallel from his started laughing. Someone at the far end of the top tier yelled: "Deps suck dick!" Someone downstairs sing-sanged, "Girl you know it's true!" People were busting up. Then someone else sing-sang, "Oooh, oooh, ooh, I wanna fuck yooou..." Scott was tearing up pretty good. Someone yelled, "Shut the fuck up!"

Then someone said, "Hey, anyone want to suck my dick?" People started yelling, UNO! They were busting up. Scott waited for a couple seconds. Then while laying on his back, he yelled, "Hadoken!" People were busting up—he didn't look around to see who was laughing by him. Then someone from downstairs started yelling, "Haden! Haden!" Someone yelled, "Tiger uppercut! Nigga what!" Someone screamed, "SHUT THE FUCK UP!" People started laughing and saying UNO! A dep came over the loud speaker and said, "That's enough. Quiet down." For a couple seconds it was completely silent. Then someone blew their ass again big time. People started saying UNO! Others were busting up. The guy who blew his ass said, "I think I just shit myself," and it sounded like he said it while laying on his stomach. The guy downstairs said, "Girl you know it's true!" Someone yelled, "UNO!" Someone then yelled, "Jesus Christ!" Scott had tears of laughter in his eyes running down warm on his face.

It seemed as if it had only been a second—after he closed his eyes—the door popped open downstairs and so did his eyes. A long breath from the dark black spaces in the back of his mouth escaped. They called his name as well as a few others. He put on his sandals and became aware of his

heart and the blood in his veins inside his faint body of nerves. Downstairs they handed them a small zip-lock bag containing a cardboard-sized bar of soap, a thumb-sized deodorant stick, a black comb and a cheap shaving razor. No one could leave for court until all razors were turned in. At an aluminum sink he brushed his teeth next to an ese. The vato told him: "Hey ese, you should shave, homes, the judges like it." Scott looked at the ese's face and laughed inside at the comment. Then he thought: someone in his late 20's with in his face the intelligence of a mid-teen. Foaming at the mouth Scott told the vato, "It's Ok." The vato didn't even shrug his shoulders or shake his head, he just completely ignored Scott.

After brushing his teeth Scott sat on a metal toilet. Before his ass touched the metal, two violent squirts of burning diarrhea penetrated the still water at the bottom of the bowl. A black dude walked up into the area, looking at Scott over the dividers with a near sweat on his face and red veins in his big-open eyes. Scott looked at him while leaning forward on his elbows and knees, with his hands folded and a wrinkle of concern on his forehead. The dude turned around and walked away. Scott thought: haha, big salamander looking motherfucker, probably had to take a

bad shit he'd been holding like me. Then he started surveying all the gang writing written on the walls of the doorless stall.

Rumor has it, that for each inmate moved in the presence of deputies inside San Diego county jail, tax payers pay 156 dollars even if they are only moved one foot.

They packed them inside of an elevator, no controls inside a steel box. In three rows of four they went down six floors. There was a camera in the upper corner. Scott stared at the neck in front of him; the age of the creviced wrinkles on the neck, and a few bumps that looked like ripe spider bites. Behind Scott someone looked at his neck; behind his left ear there were the remains of a butchered sebaceous cyst from a State sponsored doctor medical technique, leaving a bright white skin bulb the size of a fingertip. Behind that guy someone looked at the back of his head; a one clip shaved with a bright white patch of skin spot near the top, as if the clip had fallen off, looking similar to a cobra's head design, or the twists of a metal fence from childhood. From a dark tower inside a

fluorescent bulb lit room, the deputies watched the faces of all the criminals, with some thoughts to security reasons, but also to see who was ugly and who was attractive.

They handcuffed one of Scott's arms to a blue seat where he sat. His attorney stood in front of him. Looking at his file, he said nothing and leafed through a couple pages.

His first word: "Hmm."

His second, "Interesting."

Standing there bold in stature or important looking, he looked down at Scott a couple times then said: "I don't know. They are giving you time served for the warrant. But are asking you stay out the week for the possession."

Scott said, almost pleadingly: "I don't understand. I'm in college now—I'm in the middle of my finals! I can't be in jail!"

The lawyer replied: "They let you go to college with warrants?" Then his face went from a lawyerly stern face, to a smile, at the quick ridiculousness of even his own comment.

Scott was dumbfounded. Then he wasn't. His feelings and thoughts were like a Ferris wheel inside his head. He scooted up in the chair, looked around and audibly enough told his lawyer: "Look, dude. I don't drive around campus with a shotgun. I don't clothesline kids off bikes, I don't stun gun skateboarders. I don't walk around with drug sniffing dogs, nor do I stage take downs in lunch quads in front of foreign students. I don't get 12% raise increases off top of 200 dollar grand salaries and fire all the temporaries. I don't teach and fuck my students. I had a 200 dollar arrest warrant for not paying off a fucking DUI. Because I can't get a job like you motherfuckers. Trying to get rich off ruining the lives of minorities. Because I got a 10 year old felony!?"

The lawyer scoffed. "Excuse me?"

"What did I stutter? Did I speak lawyer fuckin talk you fucking sap?"

Taken aback, and while looking down at Scott who never strayed his gaze. He couldn't believe in his head what he'd just heard. "Well good luck to you sir, I think you're going to need a new lawyer."

"Make sure it's not one with a slicked back haircut like you. I don't want anyone representing me who when in

grad school they made their Hispanic girlfriends get abortions because you thought it would hamper your career."

Scott was left completely alone, sitting in the chair staring down at the floor. Only to be visited from the curious eyes of deputies as they walked by, and inmates inside holding tanks, behind wired glass.

When Scott saw the Judge, he was a blind Judge, with blind blue eyes, thin and pale face, with an Abraham Lincoln haircut. He looked as if he should have a crow on his shoulder. Instead of a crow he had his wife. The public audience was silent. The bailiff had given them a speech; about not having hats on, no infants in the court room, not having cell phones on, no talking, and definitely no sleeping—that was the most disrespectful thing of all. Behind the border that separated the audience from the inmates before they went up in front of the Judge to be judged, Scott saw the bailiff keep bending at the knees while delivering his speech. *Ahh, he thought, poor guy; probably only a couple years from retirement and he has to keep working. Tragic. Maybe he's only held the job for a*

couple years and had the knee problem before, and is waiting til he feels he can blame it on the job to get surgery and don't get fired. Maybe he's just one of those men that can't stop working because they're scared they would be seen as useless by their wife's and family like their fathers. What a sad way to go. White men of retirement age that own handguns and drink have the highest suicide rate in the world.

There were all types of people in the audience. There were G's, there were Vietnamese, there were Mexicans, some who didn't know English very well at all. There were young women who recently had children. There was a young black woman who made a loud flat tire sound when the deputy stepped up to her seat and gave her the ultimatum to stay awake or leave the court. There was a fat dude, pancakes under arms fat, who sat at the end of an aisle and sighed every time he had to get up to let someone by. There were people who had some of the driest mouths of their lifetime; some so nervous they would agree that it felt like they had chalk in their veins. People who had voluntarily showed up to take care of their petty warrants. There were those ready to make excuses, even become argumentative. People with jobs, people without jobs. There were those who had

forged A.A. or N.A. attendance slips. Yet sometimes they got away with it because of the amazement of the clerks that looked at the ignorance on their face or sheer stupidity that what they did they thought they would get away with. But mostly it was all poor people, who had been involved with the law at least a couple times throughout their life, who had never had enough money to eradicate their legal problems promptly, who had never had privilege.

Agent Betty was there too; she was dressed real nice but in the face it looked like she had a bad hangover even though she didn't.

There was gang writing written on back of the chairs. The one in front of Agent Betty's said:

KILLAHOE

BK

PK all day

West COAST

CR1P

ROLL1N 30z CUZZ

Scott was escorted to the podium. He stood there with his back to the public and they quietly and egizzically made as many assertions as they could in the back of

their minds. Agent Betty felt a mask of sadness sitting behind her face.

With big blue eyes behind big glasses, with both hands on her husband's shoulder, the blind Judge's wife whispered into the side of his face:

"Young white male; unshaven; long hair no haircut."

Scott bewildered, knowing he was already being judged without hearing her, with his mouth open ajar, he looked at the judge's middle-aged wife and shook his head twice.

The Judge spoke, looking into Scott's direction, with a faint smile on his face:

"Well young man, looks like you've dug yourself into a problem. Your council feels I'm being too harsh with my intentions, that I should release you time served. Even the prosecutors brought forth a lesser penalty. What do you have to say?"

"Nothing. That I shouldn't be here. I'm in the middle of finals. I've done nothing wrong. I am no criminal."

His thin old lips went into a smirk. He said, "Ahh, looks like this is a case between the crow in the black robe and the black hat."

"I don't understand."

"The black robe versus the black hat? Well, you will, think about it. I'm giving you two weeks to do so, for your own good." His thin old lips delivered a lip swallowing smile, his eyelids fluttered over his dead blue eyes, staring in Scott's direction like he could see him.

The crowd was puzzled at this exchange. Agent Betty had many big butterflies in her stomach.

"I'm not a criminal. I'm in the middle of my finals about to graduate. One of the only positive paths I'm forced to take because I can not get a job because of a ten year old background check. I'm not here for rape, for domestic violence. I'm not killing kids in the middle of our streets. I'm not going overseas and killing babies and soiling the land of generations for generations. I am a nice person, a poor person, who deserves to be treated the same way I treat people who act humane towards others."

The audience started looking around at each other. The Judge's smile showed his old teeth.

"Young man, you are a tad delusional. You committed a crime and you have a *record* of committing crimes. You have disobeyed the law, and in your attempts seem to have threatened hard working police officers."

"Did they tell you what they did to me? They stopped me for no reason! They made fun of me! They maced me! I'm not delusional! A ten year old burglary felony and a DUI!? Let's look at your record? How many blacks and minorities have you sent to prison than whites!? In the past ten years how many more years have you handed down to Mexicans and minorities more than whites!? Let's look at your records! See who's the criminal! And not just yours, but these defense lawyers, too, who pop pills in the hallways then run for DA!"

The crowd was puzzled. People next to each other looked into the faces of people next to each other. There was a terrible lump inside Betty's throat as she swallowed. The defense looked at the prosecution. A bubble of sweat was on the brow of the bailiff as he smally bounced on his knees. The black clerk's mouth was shut tight and she let out a long breath as she typed.

The Judge's eyes went dim. His wife's eyebrows went high. He put on a straight face, as if one displeased. Scott's body exuded heat.

With the gavel in his hand, the Judge said:

"You're a sad, mixed-up individual. You need help. No other Judge would have tolerated your remarks. Young man, you're lucky you live in a country like this."

Scott released a noise a mixture of a sigh and a gargle. "Country like this!? You're lucky you live in a country like this! Any other one and you'd be assassinated already!"

"Bailiff take him away." He pounded the gavel once.

"Fuck you! None shall pass you piece of shit!"

The crowd was aghast. Agent Betty had her hand over the bottom half of her face.

The bailiff stepped to him; Scott saw him then looked at the Judge: "YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT!" With his hands cuffed in front of him Scott started bouncing on his knees away from the bailiff like a boxer or fencer, ready with his hands to attempt to counter with a reverse wrist lock. A large, long, blue electric buzz was sounded over the speakers. You could hear heavy feet stomping and keys jingling everywhere. The bailiff shot mace at him. Scott saw the stream of mace go through the air and was mesmerized. It was so perfect, like a dolphin leaving the water, or Aqua Man something:

Scott yelled out.

Doors busted open from the back and the sides of the room and 12 big deputies rushed in. Scott made noises like Umph! and *Ughh!* and all the other noises you make when you get your ass kicked. Agent Betty shot up and screamed, "LEAVE HIM ALONE!" One of the last deputies from the back stopped in the aisle and put his hand on his gun and yelled, while pointing his finger at her, "SIT DOWN! MA'AM! MA'AM? SIT DOWN!"

Scott was screaming, they started tazing him: *Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick*. A sound that could resemble a rattlesnake or some type of dangerous insect. Yet if any of those did any harm to you, you would be inclined to forgive them as they are God's creatures and part of Nature. But when men or a man harms you it is unforgivable: *Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick*.

"STOP RESISTING!" *Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick*.

Scott was screaming. Betty started sobbing in her chair. Other people in the audience felt hallow. Some even felt disgusted, but would, could never do anything to intervene.

Scott was screaming, "OH GOD, JUDGE THEM! JUDGE THEM!"

"STOP RESISTING!" *Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick.*

Scott felt air in his shoulder. At the same time it felt as if a sun had burst inside his brain, right behind his eyes.

"AHHAH! GOD JUDGE THEM! JUDGE THEM GOD! PLEASE!"

There was knees deep in and all over his body, and hard against the side of his head. *Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick.*

He was screaming. Three of them lifted him up like a rolled carpet or a psychiatric patient, and took him out the side door, through a corridor into a bridge between buildings turned into a tunnel with no daylight.

Scott screamed, "GOD, I'VE ADMITTED MY SINS! AHH! THEY NEVER DO! THEY NEVER ADMIT THEIRS! AHHHH! PLEASE STOP THEM GOD! STOP THEM! KILL THEM AND ALL THEIR CHILDREN!"

Scott squirmed and kicked, screaming. The bailiff with the bad knees was one of them, holding onto Scott's legs he felt disturbed by the youth, a genuine display of concern was in his face. The cop that was holding onto Scott's head, slapped his hand over Scott's mouth and said: "Shut the fuck up." Then he looked back at his colleagues with a big toothy smile, while tears poured wild out of Scott's eyes, looking up at the deputy in terror.

Agent Betty ran out of the courthouse crying. There was a group of reporters outside circling the defendants of another trial. One of the reporters turned around and took a picture of Agent Betty running out the courthouse, even though he didn't know who she was. Against a wall she broke down and started crying her heart out. She threw up the yoke of eggs. She fell to the ground sobbing, falling into a crumpled heap.

Got To Get Back

Bill was in his room playing videogames when his mom called out for him.

"Bill~ill!" It was sing-song. She was in a good mood.

"What!?"

"Hey Bill!"

"What's up!?"

"Are you going to the store?"

"No!"

"Someone's at the front door for you!"

"I'll be right there."

He picked up a blunt from the ashtray, lit it, then hit it a couple of times.

When he opened his bedroom door the hallway door opened and David came through it.

"What's up, homie?"

"What's up," David said, closing the door behind him.

The hallway was dark in the middle of the day, the only light was up ahead, how the sun was hitting the hardwood floor of Bill's room.

Bill disappeared from his bedroom doorway. He went back to his computer, sat down in his chair, then from over his shoulder said, "What's up, man?"

For some reason there was a calendar nailed up on the bathroom door. David stepped into his doorway and said, "What's up?"

"Go ahead and sit down. What you up to?"

The room was small and clean. Every wall had something against it: a bed, a desk and a chair, a bookshelf, the computer unit desk with a chair. The only open space was left in the middle.

The sun was out at that kind of day where it's breezy but makes everything shine. The blinds over the corner windows looked peacock designed. David could see smoke floating in the air through the slits that let sun in.

The walls were painted light blue and the furniture against them were all brown. The room made David think about the beach.

"Nothing," he had sat down in the chair, looked down at his pant legs and tugged on the creases. "What game is that?"

"Vanguard."

"What do you do? Kill shit?" He shrugged smally.

"Mostly, but I can make people kill shit for me. I mind control'em, or have them fight clones of themselves while everyone kills them. It's the same shit, quests and stuff." He turned to him and told him in a voice with face very uncharacteristic: "It's extremely entertaining." That was the first time they looked at each other. They smiled.

Bill picked up the blunt, leaned back in his chair to show it to him. "You wanna hit this?"

He laughed, and breathed at the same time. "No, sir. What's up with that other shit?"

"Yeah." He logged his character out, while putting on some music. "How much you want?"

"40."

Bill pulled out a bottom drawer, stuck his arm in elbow deep, then brought out a small brown box with a wad of tinfoil the shape of a knife sharpener. David leaned forward in the chair looking. The music started to give him goose bumps around the hair stems around the crown of his forehead.

He asked him, "What CD is this?"

Bill stuck a fat piece of heroin on the tinfoil. He told him, "It's Vikta!" He smirked, and started to make a tooter around a pen.

"Can your computer burn it?"

"Yeah, here: I'll smoke some of this with you. Happy bonvoyage, or homecoming or some shit."

Bill took a hit standing up. David stared at all three levels of it: the flame hitting the tinfoil, the tinfoil in Bill's hand, the smoke going into the tinfoil straw. It made him feel nervous everywhere inside his chest and around his lungs. Bill exhaled a gush of smoke, then asked him, "Your dad pick you up?"

"No."

"That's fucked up. I haven't seen that fool in awhile." He smiled.

"It's alright."

Bill took another hit. While he was holding it in, his big chest out, he rapped along with some of the verse:

*"And thanks before I blank into anaphylactic shock.
Rock the disco. Chocolate on a Crisco ho."*

Bill exhaled a steam of smoke. While repositioning the tinfoil in his hands he continued.

His bedroom door was closed—the hallway door was closed. His mom yelled out for him, “Hey Bill!”

He quickly handed over everything to David. Went up close to the door, put an ear close to it and listened. “What’s up??”

“Are you going to the store yet!?”

“Nah! Later!”

He stood there for a moment. He could see himself in the third person, standing close to the door with an ear to it. He listened some more. He was in his room smoking heroin with David. He felt the first faint waves in his body and brain telling him he was high. He smiled.

He looked back at David: “You’re hitting it wrong.”

David said, “Hold on.”

“You’re fuckin it up.”

He started coughing. “Here.”

He noticed how chalky black David’s hands and fingertips had got.

“It’s making my nose itch.”

“Seriously?” Bill sat down almost upright. With the tinfoil, lighter and tooter back in his hands, he asked David politely: “Want some water?”

“Ok.”

"Hold up."

He got up in a false start, so it took two times, turned down the music, handed everything back to David, then made his way out the room. When he opened his bedroom door he saw the bathroom light on. He shut his door and crept up to it. Wrapped his arm around the wall to reach in. Turned the fan on and the light off. When he opened the hallway door his mom's head snapped around, "You going to the store yet?" She noticed how dopey in the eyes he looked, red around them like an allergy.

"No." He stared straight ahead at the TV. It was a crafting show. They were smashing up egg shells on a table. One that was big at one end, skinny in the middle, then a little smaller at the other end like a swimming pool. "This some Feng Shui shit?" he laughed. Then stopped behind a chair.

His mom said, "Are you drinking before work?"

He noticed how big the woman's breasts were that was doing the crafting. "David's home; I'm not going to work today."

As he turned into the kitchen, his mom told him, "Hurry up and go to the store. I want a soda god damn it."

He rhymed, "A soda, yoda yoga flame off the membrane,
hurricane kick the gift, bustin raw script."

"Piece of shit."

"Fuck you."

The wind blew into Bill's room. David was resting the back of his neck on top of the chair. His shoulders were snug up inside it. He could feel pores in his face open up and chill. Then he noticed his mouth was open and his top teeth were showing. He felt thin, he couldn't keep his eyes open. He took a little mental trip down the hallway. Across the dusty rug bunched up at the foot of Bill's door; cobwebs were in the corners and he imagined outside going through all four seasons and them still being there. He saw the calendar on the bathroom door and it was on January. The hallway door opened for him but it was like a small alarm: tight with age and winters so when it opened it sounded like someone had budged a dresser. Bill's mom's head turned around (Hi, David) and she had a smile on her face that made him think about being outside under the sun, a piece of watermelon on a picnic table cut in two with a thin kitchen knife sticking out of it.

His body jumped in the seat. "What time is it?"

Bill was playing videogames on the computer. He turned around and told him, "You got black shit all over your face."

He wiped the back of his hands against it. "What time is it?"

"Six. You want some water?"

"Shit, I got to get home."

He put his neck back on the chair, his head on the wall making a sweaty circle. Something happened with the heroin and the ceiling light bulb, because David could see everything perfect with his eyes swimming underneath his eyelids. The color of the walls changed into a dirty, sandy white. He could see a lot of Bill's dirty clothes thrown underneath his bed.

His mind started to wave. The sun setting through the blinds was half black, half dull orange, like the southern Iraqi farmlands after three days of shelling. Dots of light were on the blinds in the plume of the peacock. He sat up, grabbed the trash can, threw up something into it that looked like the insides of a dirty aquarium.

Bill was in the kitchen popping ice cubes out from the tray. He put them in a tall plastic cup. Rubbing his nose

with one hand, he filled the cup up with tap water and smiled, enjoying the secret small steam and crack the ice cubes made. He smiled down half eye-lidded at the white of the faucet, the water running from the tap into the cup. Then laughed, something warm inside his chest.

On the way back to his room, his mom asked him if he was going to the store yet. "Nah," he said, "later!" then shut the door kind of hard.

He walked down the hallway heavy footed. The crawlspace under the house had enough room to thump throughout. David heard and felt him coming at the same time, but couldn't open his eyes like a blindfold of skin.

Bill opened the door. "You throw up inside that shit?"

"Yeah." David looked weak. Like he was too tired to take a shit.

"Don't get no shit on my floor. You still got black shit all over your face."

"Damn. This shit fucked me up."

"Drink that water!" He unrolled the tooter. "Nice."

"Hey Bill!" His mom yelled.

"What!?" He barked. But then didn't like what his face might've looked like. Looking over at David; he was still sitting there with his eyes closed.

His mom said, "Are you going to the store now!?"

"Yeah!! Jesus! Yo. I got to go to the store for my mom. Want anything?"

"A beer."

"Ok."

He shook his head, "No." He sat up and looked at Bill looking at him. They didn't like to do that. Sometimes you could see weaknesses: haircuts, jobs, living arrangements. "Damn," he said, "I got to get home."

"It's cool. Don't let my mom see you throwing up. I'll be right back."

He sat back and closed his eyelids, waiting to see Bill leave from underneath them. David was pouring sweat. By the front door Bill's mom tried to hand over a bunch of dimes and nickels.

"Come on now," he told her.

"What? Who cares?"

"Fuck that." He opened the front door and stood there staring out into the street. "Give me money, no one wants your change."

It's Vikta: (He) Told the streets What you starin at?

The sewer cap opened up and said, Why you wearin that?

"Who cares?" She told him.

"Give it to me then."

His mom used two hands to pour the change into his one.

When the front door shuts it makes the whole house shake. David stood up, twice barely; he had to get help from off the arms of the chair. He carried the bag of throw up under his sweater down the hallway like trying to sneak a beer in. The toe of one of his boots caught a waved up portion of the rug. He fell forward, his open palm landed hard against the doorway molding, making the whole house shake. Bill's mom snapped around, she said, "Jesus, David, you drank too much. I don't like people doing that in my house."

David stood there sweating, where his shoulder meets his arm in a dull pain. His arm stretched out like that hid half his face. He said, "I tripped on the rug, sorry." He let go and saw the blur of the TV. Bill's mom was staring at him; his mouth hung open, his eyes half open, how bad he was sweating, his shirt around the neck was drenched. She

had her hair up and was sitting on the couch wearing a red SDSU college sweater. He made his way to the door moving left to right instead of completely forward.

"I'm going to call the police."

"No!"

To open the front door he had to try twice. He turned, the knob, and pulled up on it. Getting outside he felt a relief: a warm wind. He left the door wide open.

II.

I walked into the liquor store to try and cash my check. *Boop-beep*, "Is it cool if I cash my check?"

My hand was in my back pocket covering it in case they said no.

Tom, the Middle Eastern store owner, who is more American than me, said what I say a lot: "Siick.."

"Small ass check," I said, then "weak ass job."

Tom had an assistant. A small, very skinny white guy named Jonathan. He was over at the pornography section looking like a gremlin.

I asked him, "Yo dude? Want to buy some porno mags off me? I got like three hundred, a buck a piece, no sticky pages."

He went bug-eyed, blushed, put the magazine he was looking at back on the rack. "Nah," then laughed something behind his hand.

Tom counted the money out to me in twenties. He asked, "You going to TJ?"

"Hell no."

"I know some hookers out here, siiick.."

"Nice. Seriously?"

"A hundred bucks."

I scoffed, or whatever I did made my head bounce like when gears catch. "Fuck that shit."

"Siiick.."

Boop-beep. Bill walked into the store.

"Besides, you don't want me fucking your hookers, they'll know my dick is bigger, siiick.."

Jonathan came up behind the counter with a laugh behind his hand, "Siiick.. Haha."

Tom didn't know how to respond to that, so he put a tight smile on his face and pretended that there was something to look at in the back of the store.

Bill came up to the counter, with a forty of King Cobra and a warm two liter of Coke.

"What's up, Bill?"

Tom said, "Siiick.." Jonathan said, "Siiick.."

Bill chuckled but didn't look at any of us. He said, "What's up?" And when he put his hand into his pocket to fish out the money, he closed his eyes.

He looked fucked up, like he had been huffing rubber cement. The skin around his eyes were beet red.

"You looked fucked up, Bill."

"I'm faded."

"*I wish I was on that shit*" I thought, like envying the guy nodding out in a county jail holding cell. "Thanks for letting me borrow that CD, man, it's pretty dope."

"You can have it."

Jonathan was putting his stuff in the bag: "What CD is it?"

"Usher."

Bill chuckled on top of his fist. "Nah, nah. It's Vikta!"

We started walking out. "Thanks, see you fags later."

Bill started busting up, "Haha, you called them fags!"

"They are."

"You need a ride?"

"Nah, I'm going to fuck with David—check him out." He nodded his head towards the payphones. David was lanky, and was moving back and forth like the wind was walking him.

He had on black boots. And his body was feeling hollow like the underneath of street. There was a panic in his body but the heroin lazyed it. He felt scared. He saw an orange and white cat run by. He thought, nice Kit-Cat, and after that he was aware of how the heroin changed the color of his face. If he was normal he would've followed the cat and tried to pet it. Not too far though, people would start to stare.

I asked Bill, "You guys been smoking PCP?"

"Nope—heroin." And he smiled and gave me a head nod what's up. The skin around his eyes look red as if sunglasses protected you from the sun opposite.

"You got any more?"

"How much you want?"

"Forty."

"Give me twenty minutes."

"I'll cruise by in an hour."

I got in my car and turned the key. The flywheel screamed. Walking in front of my car the noise made Bill jump back against the ice cooler. With my chest close to the steering wheel, my shoulders squared, I smiled my teeth at him through the window.

David was sitting on a bus bench. His mouth wide open, his back against a Mexican advertisement sign: a dude with big white teeth and the number 222-2222. I drove by holding down the horn. I acted with a mad face and he didn't move. He was able to see everything that was going on underneath his eyelids like an alien. Problem was, everything started to look like a long camera flash; the night falling, the upholstery shop across the street and the flash in the windows from the cars that sped by. He saw me and heard the honk; his soul tried to reach out to it as it was starting to get dark. I was looking at him, and leaning inside my car to the passenger window rolled down halfway. The white light was like inside of a nuclear explosion. A long flash after slamming two big rocks together.

Bill walked up to him and noticed he had thrown up again. He still had black ash all over his nose and face.

The ants at the bus stop had not started working on him yet.

Bill said, "You dead yet? Haha," his laugh trailed off.

The throw up looked like a bunch of dark water thrown on the street. It took more than 10 seconds for David to answer. I had already drove off, leaving them there like two bare tress in a light night summer rain.

David's Adam's apple moved, then he sighed out his nose. Bill asked him, "What did you do with that bag of throw up?"

He cleared his throat, then weakly said, "I threw it in the creek."

"As long as the kids don't get it," he made a smile that showed his gums, then looked away.

It was night. David with his eyes closed shrugged his shoulders and said, "I got to go home."

"You can chill at my pad until the shit wears off."

"No I can't."

"Your wife's gonna fuck you up."

"I'll just tell her I'm drunk, and sleep..."

Bill thought about that, then saw the bus coming with its worm like front windows.

"Here comes the 7!" he said, "Yo," it slowed down while opening its doors, "Get up, fool!"

David made a noise behind his teeth. "Alright," but before he failed at getting up, Bill reached down to help him up and say goodbye to him at the same time.

Bill walked him up into the door. The bus driver was almost young, in his mid-thirties and you could tell he got laid a lot because his light blue uniform shirt had the top two buttons unbuttoned. Looking at David put a wrinkle on his face. David was doing everything slowly and in a bad way: having to climb up the couple of stairs by putting himself over the handrail; taking out his money and shoving it in the driver's face. The driver looked over at Bill not pleased. Bill nodded at David and made two fingers like a joint then pretended to smoke it. The doors shut and the hiss of air that went with them. Bill saw the push of the takeoff make David fall face forward into a front seat. The lights inside the bus made all the air inside look yellow. He saw half the people on the bus stare at David. Then the back ones against the windows stare through and out at him. He spit, turned around then picked up his groceries and walked off. It was warm outside, you could smell it.

Two cholos were smoking a joint at the bus stop on the corner of 37th. Sir Vandal and Rambo the 2nd. Not at the bus stop exactly but close to it. Near the wall of the furniture store. With the big pink and green NO CREDIT NO PROBLEM paintings on the store windows. That had a whole bunch of ESBS tags scratched inside them.

Gang members like these like to stand near the bus stop. The people taking the bus liked to see them. Not just these two, but five, ten, fifteen, twenty. They get this awe in their heads, seeing a bunch of gang members hanging out on a street corner.

Normal people didn't like to use this bus stop, only elderly people, small groups of the mentally ill, handicapped and alcoholics. Vandal would wait for the bus to stop, people to get on and off, the bus driver to start checking passes, then get tags up on the windows and sides.

Young kids on city streets wearing tank tops and jeans, out on the streets for days some with shit stains in their underwear. A whole bunch of gang members lined up on the wall. You look out the window, at how shitty the neighborhood is, little boys and girls who look like the faces of missing children portraits, out there open-mouth

laughing with fellow gang members. People who sag their jeans. Hanging out with one foot on a wall. A gang member couple with their baby, laughing, tripping out on how big its penis is when it's really a hernia. At night you can see the cherries of whatever they're smoking brighten up their faces. Gang members with walking pneumonia cross the street wearing a scarf and smoking a joint.

Sometimes a fight would break out and you could catch a glimpse of different fighting styles. For the gang members close to the bus stop was smart. If it looked like the cops were going to swoop, someone could hop on the bus, get off a block or two later, then walk back. People liked to see the cops lining them up: throwing them up against the wall, slapping handcuffs on them like a saggy-shouldered picture of a stereotype, searching them down, patting on their nuts.

Little Rambo said, "Let me hit that."

Vandal passed him the joint and made a sound like something electric slowing.

Rambo took the joint, then said, "Ho Ho!" then hit it big-lipped.

Vandal told him, "I've been working on those new raps."

Between hits, Rambo said, "Oh yeah?"

Vandal threw his beer down on the sidewalk. "It's new shit; it goes like this." He took a B-boy stance, "Tru story:

I've seen brothers kill brothers,
my homie's pops beat on his mother
til we had to blast him down,
he wasn't fuckin around—
Cops searchin the sidewalks,
circling blood dots,
shit stashed on the rooftops,
stuck in the gutter tropes—
Chiks get trained on
tryin to get their gang on,
12 year olds with tattoos,
necks and arms—
Robbin houses for firearms,
backin trucks up in gun shops,
police duck from gun shots—
bullets flew through the window
while I was eatin a carne asada burrito.

People lost eyes and shit,
young kids start new cliks,
saw the first pubes on my dick,
in juvenile hall—
Moms bugged out on the phone call,
hadn't seen me in two years,
said the answer to her worst fears...
I was alive but a fuck up,
called her a bitch then hung up."

Towards the end of the rap, Young Rambo clasped his hands together and started beat-boxing. Disappointed, Vandal stopped his rhyme, and seeing the joint hanging out between Rambo's fingers like that said, "Don't fuck that shit up, fool!"

Rambo took a quick hit then passed it back. He busted out a rhyme of his own. He took an over exotic B-boy stance; something like a Robotech would do:

"Yo! It's Young Rambo and Vandal,
motherfuckers you can't handle,
you ran-up on me wearin shoes
I whooped your ass wearing sandals.

Bangin that big bad East Side Boy Scouts,
the one that whooped your ass after they called lights
out—

You came up short but see we heard that about you,
you that type of dude who can only maddog my shoe—
I keep the gat in a dark sock in case it gots to get
dumped, throw it at a tree stump—

Vandal interrupted him, "7's coming."

Young Rambo could see its moth windows on the rise.

David had pretty much just died; his whole brain
inside was a dark blank. When the bus came to a halt, he
fell into the aisle open-mouthed. An elderly woman, who had
been sitting across from him staring, startled, let out a
sharp shriek as he fell to the floor. Mechanically, like at
every bus stop the driver was already letting passengers
pile on and off. Bewildered by the scream, then seeing a
kid in the aisle, the bus driver shot up out of his seat,
forcing an elderly person who was trying to pay to fall
backwards down the steps like a potato, letting out a sharp
scream on the way down. The bus driver froze, then looked
down and saw half of her in the bus, half of her on the

street at people's shoes. Rambo 2 and Vandal were walking up, they heard the scream, looked back, then saw the lady's head fall out at the bottom of the steps. Young Rambo said, "Damn, homie!" and used a fist to cover the smile that was forming on his mouth. Things were firing off inside his little brain. People behind her started helping her up. Vandal went up to the window, this time with a yellow streaker. The driver, seeing people assist, went down the aisle towards David. The elderly woman who had screamed when he fell, let out another scream when she turned and saw Vandal tagging on the window she was sitting at. He had got up an ESBS VANDAL by the time the bus driver started banging hard against the window. Vandal flipped the window off from where the noise was coming from, the molded hand air force one kind. Young Rambo said, "Hit my name up too, homie!" A border brother wearing a baseball cap was getting off from the back of the bus. He saw Vandal tagging, then saw the window jump from the bus driver hitting it, something like how base does. He had just got off work and had a red and white cooler in his hand. He said, "Hey! Stop!" words in English that he knew how to use for sure. He made a stride towards Vandal, who now just stood there staring at him. Lil Rambo came up from the side

intercepting him. He said, "EastSideBoyScouts!" And from his boney arm, launched a punch that landed his sharp knuckles right on the side of the border brother's face, like a chalky rock hitting bone. He fell against the bus like a camera on a tripod. Everyone helping the lady up turned around at one same time and stared. Vandal kicked the cooler as hard as he could. People driving down the street saw it fly out from behind the bus and spin through the air red and white like a pokémon ball. Sirens could be heard. Vandal and Rambo broke out. They ran down the alleys fast. They looked at each other and started laughing. All this was so much for the street corner and street lamps that there was more dust in the air that night than usual. The ambulance pulled up behind the bus, its red and yellow, bright strobe lights bouncing off all the windows throughout the block. Making the scene look like some sort of bizarre funhouse. With help from the bus driver they put David in the back of the ambulance. One paramedic said, "Drug overdose." Then the other got the horse needle out.

The black that David saw in his brain went so white and bright so fast that he tried to close his eyes even though they still were. Inside of this light, he saw the

grey skeletal faces of four phantoms bearing down on him. The inside of their mouths and eye sockets, light behind them bled through. They had on army helmets, two of them the ones with the single spike sitting on top. The bus driver was outside watching; his arms folded across his chest and had to wobble his head he couldn't believe it. A surge of energy shot through his body that made him feel faint in the face. As they punched David with the needle he shot up off the stretcher more than a foot in the air. *I've never seen no shit like that in my life*, the bus driver thought. It took all the paramedics to hold David down. A couple of cars that passed by and chanced to see inside thought: what the fuck was that? And: Oh my God! As David shot up in the air from off the stretcher like the Incredible Hulk, having to get wrestled down by all the paramedics. David's wife was at home sitting on the couch watching National Geographic. She had one hand wrapped around the phone, the other moved around making stress marks on her skin similar to a hickey. The television program was about bats in Cuba. The narrator had a special British accent, and was talking about a man who studies bats on the island. "At sixty years old, Professor Garcia is one of the only men who can withstand the humidity of

the cave, and the deadly carbon dioxide levels found in caves like these..." etc. It showed the old man sitting down on a rock, the green of the night vision showed him staring back with big, unblinking black eyes like an alien. He waved his net up in the air, and caught one of the thousands of bats that flew over his bald head. David's son was asleep on the brown apartment carpet, wrapped up in a fluffy little kid blanket. *Where is this fucker at?* she thought. He woke up in a hospital with a tube tied to his tiny penis. The nurse asked him, "Sir? What's today's date?"

"Who's the president of the United States?"

Inside Jails, The Power of Two

Now. What I want us to do. Is close our eyes, and listen.

Just shut the fuck up and listen.

Let's keep our eyes closed, just for a little bit. Let's listen, just for a little while.

Let's listen to a sound that we can follow, something that can carry us up into the vents. Let's follow that sound up into the walls. Let's follow that sound, into and through the ceiling.

Now, what do we see? How do we *feel*? Maybe there are pipes. Maybe we have to climb on top of them, in order to travel through the building. Maybe there are some kind of cobwebs. Maybe we have to see them, to be able to travel through. Now, let's travel through the building. Let us see, if we can find a drain to escape out of.

Once outside we'll hit the blacktop of the street. And we'll have to climb, under and through the fences. But no one is out here. It's just you and me. And is it beginning to rain? Or is it just beginning to rain in the distance...

At the end of the street we'll get on a trolley. Look, there's not a single soul on the back car with us. Look at what the rain looks like on the windows. From the window of

the back car, we'll look into the front car where there are many people. Let's stand like this for a little while.

Then, I'll tell you something like, For most of my life, this is how I felt. And we'll stay looking like this for a little while. Then you'll tell me something, something really important that changed your life: One time I saw this older man who was eating alone. And when he finished, he got up and pushed in his chair.

We'll walk down the streets of downtown. There we'll see a man at a bus stop with a bright white mask on. Then we'll keep walking. A woman will pass us, who has a pale looking face. We'll spend some time at a tunnel. Looking at graffiti that is so huge a face of snakes. It's so big it feels like it's going to collapse on us! You get nervous and want to stop. But there's a group of spot lights in the distance. Let's keep walking until we get there.

Warm tears of a child start running down your face.

What's wrong? I ask.

A gnat flew into your sunglasses and died, and it's not supposed to happen that way.

We walk the rest of the way with my arm around your shoulders. And when we get to the spot lights, we find a loose brick in the sidewalk. So we lift it up and

investigate. What does it mean? Does it mean something magic? This the first time we can see in between things? We can do anything here. We can right our wrongs. God will listen to our prayers. We can become heroes.

You start to get tired, so we sit down on the steps in the alcove of a store front. You ask to lead a prayer before we go to sleep. Dear God, by the time you receive this prayer, I hope you and your loved ones are in the best of health. Please, watch over us, Lord... Please, forgive us for our sins.

Marcos hopped off the cell's metal desk. He was big and brown, like a giant bat extinguishing a room's candle flame. He walked up to the racks.

He put his nose and eyes to the top rack. He said, What, ese, you fuckin up my celly's back?

Then he put one of his fingers to it. What the fuck you doin, ese? You fuckin up my celly's back?

With an uppercut, he punched the bottom of the top rack.

His roommate told him, Come on, man, calm down.

I told you, what the fuck you doin, ese? You fuckin up my celly's back? And he punched it again.

Calm down, dude, damn!

He went on the bottom rack, lying down with both fists at his side. He told the bottom of the top rack, I told you, what the fuck you doin, ese? You fuckin up my celly's back?

Calm down, man.

What the fuck you doin, ese? You think you can fuck up my celly's back?

With two fingers he stabbed at the top rack.

Calm down, dude, damn!

What the fuck you doin, ese? And he did it again, harder.

Calm down, man!

What the fuck you doin, ese? And he did it again, harder, shaking cocoons of dust out in the corners.

Calm down! Jesus Christ, man!

What the fuck, ese? And this time he did it, he shook out more dust.

Calm down, man! Come on!

And the next time he did it he almost dented it.

Calm down, dude, damn!

And he did it again. And the next time he did it, he almost dented it. And the next time he did it, paint chips fell.

What the hell, man?!

I told him, you ain't fuckin up my celly's back. And he did it again.

Jesus Christ, SHUT THE FUCK UP!

While Vince was walking his laps around the dayroom, he decided to start practicing his parry 5 to riposte. He had only been there for a couple weeks, but still he felt it the more sane thing to do. So he did a parry 5 to riposte, then a parry 6 to riposte lunge, then a parry 4 on the march. His cellmate Marcos was watching him, sitting on top of a table in the middle of the dayroom. He started laughing. Trip out, ese, you're becoming one of them.

Vince told him, Nah, I've made it to the nationals twice before. I'm just practicing.

Haha. Ok, homes...

The dayroom is bright. If only from the lights in the ceiling. Underneath the only stairwell does it get darker.

Now. Pretend that arms a sword. Pretend you have a sword.

Haha. Ok, homes...

Now, here I am. With a hand on my sword. And say you are a robber. You are a robber. And I have loot. Where would you attack me first?

Haha. Break yourself!

Now. See? I pull out my sword from my waist here. And that's why it's called a parry 1. Now. Where would you attack me next?

Haha. Trip out.

See? That's why it's called a parry 2. Ok. Now, I can pretty much predict where you'll attack me next. Because of how much of my body I've left open. Attack me next! See? That's why it's called a parry 3.

Marcos started laughing. Trip out.

The cells are bright too. You can run a finger in the groove around the cement bricks in the wall. When you wake up in the morning facing one, put your fingertips to the wall like an antenna, and imagine you feel the sun climbing the sky.

A deputy knocked a knuckle on their cell door window. What are you 2 doing? Playing swords?

Marcos put his face in the window, he said Nah, while the deputy was walking away.

The deputy had walked away. Marcos still had his face in the window. You hear that motherfucker?

Yeah. Did your friend help you get the nutmeg?

Everything in the kitchen is silver and metal. The floor is made out of red tiles. There is a hole in the middle of the floor, with a white plastic top on it that's a drain. There is a hole in the wall in the restroom behind the roll of toilet paper. Inside it sat a large bag of nutmeg.

So check this out. While the group was coming out the KP, right? Deputy Flores stopped us. She lines us up on the wall. She tells us, Untuck your shirts, gentlemen, pull down your pants. Right then, it smelt like someone just shit themselves. The Deps are coughin, and laughin. One of them says, Jesus Christ! Everyone is putting their shirts over their nose and shit. Then they waved us by.

Vince stood against the cell wall staring at him. Then shook his head and sighed out of his nose. Then he started laughing.

Days no longer start to matter. The paint on the walls is always the same temperature. All day they pump jail air in. Deputies go home while others of them come.

Vince asked. What's this going to taste like?

Like my *dick*, ese.

Haha. For real...

Like straight up sand going down your throat.

What's it going to *feel* like?

Like my *dick*, homie!

For real...

I don't know. Last time I did this, I felt like a spider.

A spider?

Yeah, a spider with human legs and arms and shit, who can still sit up on the side of your bed.

Nighttimes no longer start to matter. The air they pump through the vents feels like fake air. In the nighttime it can hurt worse. When you look out your cell

door window, and the dayroom is completely empty. You feel a warm hum behind the window and in front of your face. It feels like you've been left behind on a nuclear island.

All day they pump fake jail air in. The dayroom is completely empty. Vince was lying back on the top bunk with a towel around his head. Marcos had sunglasses on, with a towel around his head, wearing black tennis shoes, sitting on top of the cell's metal desk. He was tugging at the bottom of his pant legs, laughing.

Haha! You're crazy, homes!

What if I told you, I wanted to teach you how to fence, but without using swords. That I could teach you how to fence using your two fingers. To go through people's necks and pull out their cords.

Haha! You're crazy, homie!

Vince sat up on his bunk. His eyes looked like flashing a camera light on a captivated cat.

Haha! You look crazy, homes! Marcos' eyes, looked like passing a camera light on a large maned lion in the Sahara.

What if I told you. That we were going to lay on our bunks, and listen to sounds. Until we found one that we

could follow, follow it up into the walls and out through the vents.

Haha! You're crazy, homie!

Then we could find a way to get out into the streets. There would be a trolley, and we would get on it. On the back car where it's empty.

Haha! You are crazy! That's why I like you!

It would be raining outside. Imagine what the rain would look like on the windows while we were moving?

He laughed. You are crazy, homie!

And we would look through the back window, into the window of the front car, where there would be a lot of people. And we could stand there looking like that for a little while. Until I told you something, like, All my life I've felt like this. Then you would tell me something that changed your life.

Haha! You're crazy, homie! *That's* why I like you!

The trolley could be on a bridge. A bridge that's only a couple feet tall. The beach is right there. The sun is almost at sunset. Cars are at stop lights or parked. Waves can go underneath the bridge.

Haha! You're crazy!

It could be at night. Imagine a freeway full of red lights? Why is that important? Why does it go on for so long? Because it's moving? Because it's so faraway? Close enough though to see lights that make the shapes of cars? But the fact is that you might own a car, and you're going somewhere. Into the city. The downtown of a city. Maybe to get laid. You got money, and it's at night, but close enough for the lights to make the shapes of buildings. That could be the only way to see superheroes battle on rooftops.

Haha! *That's* why I like you, *homiee*! You are crazy!

Each one of Marcos' laugh, sounded like he was going through stages of being lobotomized.

Vince sat up fully on his bed. A slug of something moved in the muscles underneath his face.

Haha! You look crazy, homie!

He said "Oh," like an expressive sigh from underneath a collared shirt.

Vince cleared his throat. Man, this bed is starting to make my back hurt.

Marcos started laughing. Haha. For real?

"If you see a big dick on the side of the road suck it."

-The Juice Man

"How about I just mail it back to you..."

Street Fighter saved my life. I had just gotten out of jail after doing two years and was still relatively dangerous. First thing I did when I got home: hugged my mom, "Good to have you home, son. I pretended you never left." "Good to be out, mom." Went to my room and put a small cardboard box, black garbage bag with all my belongings in it under my bed. Then hopped on the roof to see what happened to my weed plants. Nothing—the white buckets were gone. Mom had smoked them.

I still slept with something on my head at night training my hair back. Though instead of a kneecap stretched sock, I had the at home luxury of wearing a piece of panty hose on my head. My hair, short and black, nice, could make any normal person think slick. Dangerous though for proof, is that I still used two fingers full of Three Flowers, walking around with my hair smelling like that crap. Walking around with my chin up. With my eyes open like when you walk past someone and you know they're there.

Giving a head nod what's up to random people—almost everyone. My hair slicked back with a pair of blue Levi's, only wash, no dry, with little white 501 hairs on them, and a collared shirt. I was swoll, with attractive smooth tight-skinned forearms, wearing the clothes I got dressed out in. Dangerous though for proof: I got out and was still listening to old gangster rap music.

My room was clean. Penitentiary clean, clothes folded, things squared away no dust. Looked at myself in the mirror a lot—bathroom, bedroom. Looked at my face and moved it to the left, right. Stepped in close to where only one eye could really see. Looked and squeezed the blackheads on top of the tip of my nose white. Finger nailed in the crease. Palm combed my hair. First with a palm comb, then with my palms, then with my palm comb again. Looked around with my chin up. Put my chin up and rubbed it with the crest of my thumb and forefinger, kind of pulled down and squeezed the O of my hand smaller on it. Said something in my mind like, Yeah. Backing up, looking at my face in the mirror. Then profile then pretending that I'm not looking. Shut the light off, walked out. Looked in the mirror from that faraway—the doorway. I was still that dangerous.

Laying on top of my covers. Arms folded behind my head, under the white ceiling, my Mom's red rooftop, a blue sky maybe. Rapping along to an E-40 tape: *I'm a little Manish motherfucker. I'll take out the older brotha. Started out sellin marijuana. But now I'm sellin yola. Shit-was-getting-hella-funky-at-first-when-a-nigga-was-out-snatchin-a-bitch's-purse, got kicked-up-out-of-every-school-in San Diego (I used my own city of course) they clownd me like a circus(like a circus). I was the little Manish motherfucker showin out in the back of the church. My mom was quick, to hit me with a switch, and I said that hurts...(that hurts...) I wondered, Man, I wonder what everyone's listening to now. I remember when I first got out, and brought all that shit down with me from up north. They jocked it. And I be down to stash. Beat up the pizza man, and I straight dash(straight dash). Disobedient sports, cut my daaays short. My mom got tired of takin my ass back and forth to court. I said, Mom-i'm-gonna-straighten-up-on-you-and-i-promise-that-i-wont-front. Got me a job as a paperboy 21-dollars-a-month. 5 o'clock in the morning man-i'm-slavin-for-the-motherfuckin-white-man, 21 dollars might buy me some porridge-call me chicken George.*

Don't ask me why sometimes I go to church and testify.

I started reading old gang letters. Nicely gang written. Either all in caps or all in lower case. Straight block letters or rounded ones. All consistent with each other. It was a *big thing*, to learn letters off of other people locked up. Don't get caught writing back to them in the same script though. One of my greatest accomplishments: that Old English graffiti in silver, and outlined and dimensioned in black under the Azalea Park bridge. Everyone I knew who saw it, said I saw that throw up you did, "I was driving on the freeway..." I prayed every normal person who drove down the freeway saw it. In the day, that big bad E S B S; at night, they lighted it up with their headlights, and couldn't stop looking-rubbernecking. The first night it was up we drove by it five times. Big and silver, "Look at that shit, homie!" Laughing and yelling out the windows. We threw gang signs up at it. Someone said, "That shits motherfuckin beautiful." And it was. From that far away each letter had the presence of a house. So high and drunk, we skipped the loop; made u-turns in the middle of the freeway and went against traffic. Honking and laughing,

busting up, high and drunk, one of the best times of my life. I think Termite was sitting bitch that night.

I started reading old homeboy letters:

What's up lil homie

Hows it going Well I hope your kicking back staying out of trouble and getting your opie on because I don't want to get out and your locked up

Anyways as for me im just kicking it here with lil huero and blinky getting my mother fucken swoll on again you know how we do it. That's fucked up what happen to spiderman you gotta be on your toes these days so you becareful out there homie

So whats been going on at the little Gloria shot is everybody still going there all the time getting their tweek on

Well I went to board today its like court they ended up giving me a year with no half time so I have to do twelve months straight so Ill be out about this time next year just in time for the summer shot on swole and the first thing im gonna do I get foot ball head Barbara and tear up her nappy -----no but serious if I get out and theres no hinas let me get my little freckle face on okay

Anyways whats up with my little brother is he a-wall right now if he is tell him I said don't be stupid go finish his little time and get it over with and tell him I said all he's doing is making my mom worry more about him And he knows she's sick so tell him he better get right and take care of that shit so he can be out to take care of mom

Anyways it was good to hear from you homie so take of your freckle face howdy dutie opie taylor looking ass quit selling your nappy just to smoke a buttie butt naked

There was a picture drawn like a circle on the bottom right corner, and circly big ears and afro kind of hair with a smiley face and a bunch of freckles with a bubble saying: IM HOWDY DUTIE FROM ESBS. Below the drawing, on the left side was: Remember this side burns.

So I thought, Man, I miss these fools. I wonder what they're doing right now?

Maybe jail. Jesus.

A few kids maybe.

I looked at my face in the mirror: profile, chin up, north eastern, west. Profiled again, and checked out my clothes with a dust and a couple quick loosening and pulls. I saw the V"XIX"II"XIX laser tattoo scar on the

inside of my left hand's middle finger. I remembered how blue and bold it looked: "So when you threw up the E you could see it!" Clever I thought. I threw up a gang sign in the mirror: the E on the right, and the b on the left. To me it was d 3.

In the mirror, each hand level to the sides of my face, and about six or seven inches away from it. Thinking of a grainy mug shot in black and white with my chin up. And in this mirror right now, Sick. I wanted to walk around just to go to the store; just to go outside and look around. I asked my mom, "Mom, is the ringer on?" She was asleep.

I had a walk. Maybe a kind of strut. You see most people who just got out do it. Mine was very shoulder and chest healthy. A strut, but kind of a march, where those two bones in the back where wings could be pegged, stuck out as there's a hunch, but my chest up cuz all the air I was used to holding there from walking around doing time. My legs bent, and a stiff neck holding a chin up, and a nice slick hair cut shoulders dipped. I was going to buy a soda. A can of Coke with three quarters and a dime exactly.

A can of Coke I thought, with three quarters and a dime exactly, how G is that?

I walked up, looking around at cars and people, knowing, thinking, everyone knew I had just gotten out. Saw a few new cars driving down University Avenue. And I thought I should be seeing more. My chest felt bored. Things also didn't look as bright as I thought they should. Kind of dull colored day under the sun. Clouds were pushing by to the right fast, making you feel like the day is almost gone. Brown walls, and white buildings, and red curbs.

What if I just take the bus out to East Side and see what's up? Stop by 38th street and see who's out there. Say hi to Enda and Lupe; maybe see what's up with Able and Cracks. Show these fools how swoll I got. Need more money though. I'll ask Mom for ten more bucks. She'll pull broke. I'll tell her not to worry, that I'm going to say hi to Roman's mom for him and that's it.

Boop-Beep: I went into the store. Alex was there, wearing black slacks and a white t-shirt with a big red and yellow Denny's logo on the back. I heard him say, "I'll take one of these too. Looks like my dick."

He said, "What's up dude? Where's your brother?" I had my Coke on the counter next to his two 40's of King Cobra. His hair looked like Alex P. Keaton's from Family Ties. He was one of my brother's best friends when I was young. I remember him sitting in the corner of my brother's room, and he was saying something about how long his TurnTec shoes were lasting him at work.

"Don't know, haven't seen him since I've been out." My face felt very clean. There wasn't an awkwardness after I said that, just a pause, or a recognition.

"You wanna play some Street Fighter, dude?"

"Street Fighter?"

"You know—? Video Game. Street Fighter: Ryu, Ken, Sagat—Cornel Guile. Captain Chun-li." He did a Karate Kid crane kick. I smirked at the foot's closeness. Though it might have been heightened by me, from the fact I've just gotten out.

"I know."

"What's up, dude, you down?"

"Ok, but chill on that Karate Kid shit."

"Haha," he started laughing.

We got into his car: a little Nissan red pick-up. The King Cobra got throw in. The doors slammed shut. The key turned and the Van Halen song Jump came on. And I would've too but my body was close against the door. My elbow was on the windowsill, and my fingers stretched to make the gap. "Van Halen, dude!" He left it loud. We drove, he ended up living 6 houses away from me.

I hadn't drank a 40 in about two years, and it was still the same thing,

"Man, these taste like shit."

"I love these—(Burp!) Siick."

So I drank it fast—lightheaded. I felt places in my body fill: arms, chest, head but more like brain; as I emptied the 40 in me. Soon I got some silly ass grin. The kind that shows your teeth. I tried to hold it back every time for some reason I made eye contact with him, but then my breath wouldn't hold out, and I burst into a laughter the kind that bends you forward. Man, I can't stop laughing I thought to myself.

"Man, I can't stop laughing."

"King Cobra. Good shit. Watch out for the snake bite, G."

He said G. I couldn't stop laughing.

He started kicking my ass.

He walked up and threw me—constantly swept my legs out. It's like I couldn't block. He jumped in on me non-stop. After a few punches I fell in stars. "How you like my Muay Thai?" Some rounds he threw fireballs the whole round. Every time I jumped in he countered it with a dragon punch. It hit me kidish at first; I acted kidish at first: kind of pounding on the buttons. I said "Hiyah!" And when I got hit, I would let out a long, "Nooooo!" I would repeat what I read on the screen, in order: Fight! Combo! K.O.! "Nooooo." Even though I was sitting in a chair, it felt like constantly I was trying to stand up. Every time our characters got close, and a move was thrown, I lifted one side of my butt cheeks up with my left toes and my back in the chair. The round would be close—close to me of course, and I would jolt up out of the chair, Nooooo! My character would be falling to the ground slowly, because that's what they do on the final hit. And I would be on my feet, Nooooo! Busting up laughing—like a little kid.

Ewok

Last time I saw Ewok was a week before the FBI got him. My mother yelled that someone was at the front door. I looked through the peephole which I've been told is a French peephole, because it's like a miniature window with no glass, spider webs and always open, big enough to smell alcohol on someone's breath through. The haircut on the back of Ewok's neck was cut so clean I thought it was my father. I opened the door and could feel it heavy in my chest, could see him seeing me, my eyes new now and aware, my body breathing I've been to different places. My hair all fucked up and oily, and parted in the middle from only using conditioner then sleeping. He looked away nervous laughing. A laugh loud that sounded like it would end with the word shit.

I said "Hey, what's up, dude?" like a sincere how have you been. The kind that reaches out and gently touches the piece of arm below the person's shoulder maybe. He was laughing with the side of his face to me, shuffling his feet like he was about to turn around. I told him to come on in.

My mom said hi, sitting up now on her couch/ bed. Friendly in the eyes and face like she was shy and young

again or could easily be seduced. He followed me to the back of my room. He must have been looking at my body walk, how my shoulders moved in and out, how those two bones in my back look underneath my white T-shirt. How my legs looked in the cut-off Ben Davis I had been sleeping in. My white legs moving in blue fluffy house slippers, a boot stomping in the middle of my back leaving a dusty colored footprint—what bullets could do—knives jutting and stabbing, muscles red and heaving and in between them black. What a hand might look like with its fingertips running down my back, making my skin underneath show up white. I could see that like a shower curtain. All these things that could propel me through my bedroom doorway, leaving me face down on my rug. He already knew, but checked the back of my arms and legs and saw all my tattoos gone. Even though the walk to my room takes seconds, it must've seemed a little bit longer: the house dark in the middle of the day like that not normal, a calendar on the bathroom door, walking over three different hallway rugs that overlapped each other. Photos all going down one side of the wall which to me look crazy: me and my brothers and my mom, all smiling so unaware, we had on nice clothes.

With an over-sized bed in it that doesn't belong there; there was a bowl on top of the TV in my room that had been there for a month. With a leftover crust of beans in it that looked like the surface of mars. A plastic cup was next to it, with a fungus growing on the inside and around the bottom that looked like rabbit shits. I liked the way they looked and was lazy enough to keep them there. The only carpeted room in the house with a carpet so bad I placed a rug over it. Piles of clothes and cigarette ashes, open drawers, a blue hue of dust. My college packet stapled writings of mine everywhere on the floor, which to me look crazy: New Courier font, 12. That's what really makes me nervous. And my room really isn't that dirty.

Ironically I guess, I was playing Final Fantasy 11 and my character was named Ewok. I had been playing the game for the past two months, everyday all day. I was breathing through my nose and could hear it noisily.

"You'll have to excuse my room. I've been playing video games for the past three days. 8 hours straight." He just stared at my TV. His eyes behind those stupid sunglasses, but his eyebrows pushed in a little together, and his lips tight. I should've turned the power off right

when I walked in the room. Instead I picked up the controller, and manually logged my character off.

"What game is this?" I noticed we were both standing there with our chests out. Breathing deep inside my lung gray or black. My room so small put us both standing up like that, close enough to each other for me to drop the controller and start punching him in his face. He could shoot me in mine at pointblank range, my head inside could swallow up the bullets. With our chests out and the polite tone in our voices between those few words we exchanged, that's the way the sun through my window made it feel. My character logged out, "Final Fantasy 11." I got a cigarette out the pack and made it like I smoked outside.

Inside my house still, close to the front door, I asked him, "So how many kids you got now?" He was walking out ahead of me, with a tattoo on his neck thick and a blue like he got it tweeking. He said, "9," and looked back over his shoulder then smiled. I laughed, or chuckled. "Nice..." One for each year we hadn't seen each other.

Outside on the front porch, he pointed at the car: "There it is: the Volvo. That motherfucker had me stressin. Seein a motherfucker with a hat all low drivin by my pad 6 or 7 times a day."

"What do you mean?" My smile had my teeth showing.

"You, ese! I got cameras hooked up at the pad. I can see everything that happens on the whole block. I'm just waiting, homie, they got me fucked, up." And maybe he was. His hair was dyed blonde and nicely cut short and slicked back. He had on earrings. And although they weren't diamonds, they were small enough to where they could've been. He had on sunglasses that were wraps, but the lenses were both dark enough and light enough not to really see his eyes. His Nike's were white, and his were new. His shorts were blue and ironed, the same as his shirt though, it had one faint crease running down the middle of his chest. He had two gold necklaces on, gold on his wrist. His teeth were yellow like a bad T-shirt. His gums were a bright pink, I could imagine small veins in them white like tree fossils. The bags underneath his eyes I could see looked big enough to be 3-day-old wasp stings. I noticed I didn't smell him wearing any of that cologne shit, or Three Flowers hair grease that reminded me of prepubescent body odor. He had been on the run for five months. His haircut though, was nice and slick. It was cold outside, inside my chest and legs shook, my arms were folded across my chest,

and while smoking a cigarette I really wasn't nervous, outside I started to feel normal.

"The Volvo. That piece of shit. My tags are three months expired."

"You fuckin up," he said.

"No not really. You see Stepfather's truck? He tell you I saw him at Party House? He had a Fuck The Police sticker on the bumper."

"Yeah, I didn't even notice that shit. That's all I needed was to be in the car and the cops see that shit. Pull us over, 'Are you that nigga Ewok? Shoot to kill! Jail motherfucker!' They're about to see another O.J. Simpson on the news. I'll tell em, I'm Pickasso Go-Pee!" And he laughed. My name does sound funny like that when I hear it.

"Do that. You remember my birthday and all that right?"

"November. How old are you? 29 now?"

"31."

"Hmm, I always thought you were two years older than me."

"Maybe I was. Check it out." I took out my wallet and handed him my Driver's License. He took it and held it with both hands, like everyone likes to see the holograms wave.

His forehead wrinkled, like maybe it would work, when anything might. The police pull you over, not because you've done something wrong or they know who you are, but because you look suspicious, with a baseball cap on sitting back deep inside the driver's seat. It's at night and they've stopped flashing the red and blue lights. They've pulled you over on the side of a street where people can drive 40 miles per hour. And now they have their high beams on, and their driver spotlight shining bright through your back and rearview mirrors. The two cops get out, you can see their tan pant legs, everything else about them is dark. The one cop on your side has his hand on his gun. The other cop is at your passenger door with his arms folded and you can tell he's looking around left to right, towards traffic and at homes, even though you can only see him from chest down. The cop asks you for your Driver's License, you don't say nothing and you don't move to look. He walks back to his car, and through your rearview mirror you notice the small rocks and glass on the street making long sharp geometric shadows. The other cop on the passenger side, turns a knob on his radio and his other hand is a little behind his back now. You feel how comfortable your back fits in the seat like it was made for it. How the seat

holds the length of your thighs, cool underneath. Your face feels raised up from the roots. Your shoulders feel heavy, you're trying to breathe right, it feels like there's nothing inside your chest except the bones that make up the sternum and ribcage. The floor of the car is vacuumed clean. Your hands are open on your lap. The cop says to his partner, "He's clean," somewhere from behind your window. At the window he hands back your license, hands still on his gun. He says without you ever seeing his face in full: "Make sure you don't drive over the speed limit." You say: "Ok. Thanks." The cops walk back to their car. You start yours back up, put the blinker on, look out the driver side rearview mirror into their brights and see them blink off low. Look out to your left then slowly drive away. Sigh heavy out your nose or mouth a couple of blocks after, looking back through your mirrors and out the windows, and see the yellow streetlights stripe pass all around you.

"Fuckin, Pickassoo Go-Pee. Pickasso." Hands me back my license.

"Yeah, some weird shit. What are you driving now?"

Standing sideways he pointed through the monster of a pine tree in my front yard. Across the street at a brand

new Ford Tempest maybe. I had to hop down a step to see it. Brand new and white. Non-job having.

"Nice ride."

"Yeah."

"Who's that?"

"That's my girl: Brenda. HEY! BABE! LOOK! MY TWIN BROTHER!" I stood shoulder to shoulder with him; touched shoulder to shoulder. From that far away her face was small and brown, and her hair was long and brown. I waved and smiled for her. She smiled but didn't wave.

"How long have you been with her?"

"Few months."

"That's cool."

"Yeah," he said like a stretch. "But sometimes, I think she's just with me because that whole *thug* thing." He said that like a you know.

I smiled at him: "Totally."

"WHO YOU ON THE PHONE WITH!" It was overly loud and that was annoying, but it was from across the street.

"It's Stepfather!" She sounded fifteen years old. "He sais he's at the house with the Federallies!"

"WHAT?!"

"Stepdad's on the phone!"

He had his hands in his front pockets, shifting his weight back and forth on his feet. It was getting cold out for six o'clock.

"WHAT?!" He was staring right across the street at her. But if she was right there in front of him, it would've been one of those stares that would land right underneath the brown (or blue or whatever) of her eyes. And she's young, and that kind of woman or girl, involved with a man or whatever like Ewok, would've kept smiling, looking around, maybe even smile at me. Even with the first crack of a fist or an open hand and she still might be smiling. Out in the open of course. Indoors, holding onto her hair, and him banging Margaret's head against a headboard or a wall, and she might cry out right away. As serious as he looked out when he yelled it, it wasn't that serious, and that's what made it kind of sad. Maybe he used his being on the run like a constant excuse for anything, or talked about it too much like when someone has anxiety.

"WHAT'S HE WANT?!"

"To know what you guys are doing!"

"TELL HIM I'M AT PICKASSO'S!"

"I ALREADY DID!"

"AND?!"

"He said he's coming over!"

"Cool," I said; the last thing I wanted was a bunch of old gang members coming to my house. The whole eye contact and strong shoulder thing I couldn't hold anymore for more than a half an hour. The first five minutes would be a bunch of smiles and laughing at my hair, but when the change got noticed, people would start to remember. If it was just Stepfather that would be Ok.

"Well at least you get pussy," I said. "I haven't got laid for over 2 years. That's funny, the last girlfriend I had, when we had sex with the lights on—in the shower or whatever for the first time—she tripped on the tattoo." I lifted up my shirt to make the space. My skin was pale and I sucked in my stomach. My pubic hairs looked clean.

"Haha, I was just telling Pelican about that!" He looked happy. "Telling him, 'Pickasso was dedicated.' That's dedication right there, homie!" When I was thirteen, Ewok tattooed the title of an oldie below my belly button above the line of pubic hair I had at that age. I was laying back on the apartment carpet, when his grandma opened the door. She looked like she thought he was sucking my dick. Her face flushed a dark color. She froze in the doorway, the sun glaring in white behind her. When Ewok

turned around to laugh at her, she looked relieved when she saw that he was only giving me a tattoo. She breathed again, shut the door then walked right past us to the kitchen. She knew both Spanish and English, and was the kind of woman that wore a plastic and see-through hood over her short black curly hair when it rained.

"I scarred you, ese."

I made my face ignore that. "Yeah, that's the only one they wouldn't let me remove because they said it wasn't gang related enough. They laughed at it too. Funny shit, I told my girlfriend how I got it, how I use to be a gang member—she didn't believe me until I got locked up again a couple years ago."

"Yeah, I was told about that. What happened with that shit?"

I told him, "After I went to jail for blasting on those lecheros, I signed some shit saying I couldn't be with, around, or have any fire arms for a certain amount of time. And one night, me and my cousin went to Lancer's."

"I know where that is."

"Yeah. Motherfucker got drunk—he was already drunk before we left his house. He started talking to these two white girls sitting next to us. Next thing you know, he's

using one of their purses as a pillow, petting it, saying: here kitty kitty, what a soft pussy. It was one of those leopard skin purses. The bartender asked if everything was Ok to the girls, they said yes. Actually they seemed cool with the whole thing, laughing and smiling about it. Then my cousin said, while his head was on their purse, 'Why don't one of you guys put your titties in my mouth,' and started making his mouth like a fish. I started busting up. They said eww, the bartender took our drinks and told us you jokers got to leave. My cousin got up and stretched. And right in his waistband, when his jacket lifted up, a black nine."

"You mean like this?" Ewok lifted up his shirt; he had a gun in his waistband and an extra clip on each side, a big toothy smile on his face.

"Yeah, what kind is that?"

"Black nine."

"Nice. Anyways..." I thought about it. How nice it looked there in his waistband. The black steel of it, and behind it a brand new nicely tucked in white tank top. A clip on each side of it, it looked like a 1 7 1. I wanted to ask him to let me check it out, feel its weight. It had that type of grey rubber for grip. I bet that felt nice.

"The security guard saw it, then tried to rush him. I got in between them but dude had his chest in my face. I was kind of hoping my cousin would've blasted him in the face right there. So anyways, we were walking up the street. And I was on my cousin's cell phone trying to call a cab. It was dark though, so I fell back behind him holding up the cell phone to get some sort of light so I could see the numbers. While my cousin was about a half a block ahead of me. A cop turned the corner, and its floodlight shined down the street towards my cousin. He threw the gat out to the side of him and it stuck in a pine tree. It was one of the most beautiful things I'd had ever seen. It looked black and white. My cousin was drunk and on valiums; walking with his elbows and shoulders with a top heavy forward momentum; like those crows from the cartoons who always had a cigar in their mouth. The cop slowly turned the corner, and the spotlight came up from the bottom of the street, starting out like a tunnel, then getting big like facing the moon if you were standing at where the sidewalk ends. When the cops swept the street with the light it made everything go black and white. My cousin pitched the gun hard out to the side of him; it flew in the light like a very small projectile, a miniature jet breaking the sound barrier in its own

scale. It hit a tall, thin, young pine tree and shook it. It was very nice. The cops searched the area but they couldn't find it. Then we said it might've been the cell phone I was using. They called the bar up; the people there said it could've been that too. The cops complained that the bar was always calling them with false alarms. The cops called someone a piece of shit, then they let us go. "Took my cousin home though, at that point he was way out of his mind."

"What do you mean?"

"The pills and alcohol kicked in. He started to fall over, and his face looked retarded. Last thing I ever saw of him was his face against the window in the back of the cop car, with his mouth all open like an older version of those fat kids you see, that breathe through their mouth and look mindless."

"What pills were they?"

"Valiums."

"You're lucky they didn't find the shit right there."

"They did, the next day I guess, I don't know. But a few days later they put out a warrant out for my arrest. Came inside my college classroom with guns out—it was sick. I felt like a hero; Che Guevara or some shit. My cousin got

six days, I ended up doing fifty-seven. After a week my girlfriend came to visit me. I was cool, but as soon as she sat down, then I sat down, it was like I had been holding my jaw tight for that whole week. I tried to talk, but I started crying like a motherfucker-hard, haha. That was a hard ass month or so." But at that moment I was laughing at it.

"Yeah, Walrus told me he saw you there and had problems. What was up with that shit?"

"Nothing. I was bugged-out, lonely and shit. And because of that probation hold, they sat me there in the county bay rooms for twenty-nine days, until the last day, before seeing a judge, making money off me, moving me from cell to cell, floor to floor, downtown and back. Fat-Lip from Lincoln Park recognized me right away, said, 'What's up East Sider!?' We were homies from Juvenile Hall and Camp. I started kicking it with the West Siders. I was crazy, man, I can't explain it, but everything I said was genius."

He laughed.

"But honestly, most of them looked scared of me, like they were timid in their face. The older ones though, were all smiles. They kept asking me about Flea and Ant. They

were nasty, dude. A bunch of middle-aged Mexican heroin addicts still hanging around with kids. There was this Saturday Night Live skit, where a guy had an overly strong Mexican accent and greasy hair. He says: 'Mom, how come my penis is bigger then all the other kids?' Then the reply went: 'Because, you're 27.' The crowd roared with laughter. But I wondered if they really knew what that meant. I hated them. I had a problem in the bays. I was playing spades with God Father Rod from Seedling, and these two Bloods from Piru. Some little wood-man I wish I could've beat his face in--told a West Sider from [REDACTED] that I was 'playing spades with the niggers.' Dude from [REDACTED] called me over and said I can't play spades with blacks. Then he goes on to say if I really want to play spades to play it with them. What a joke."

"That's real. That's the way it is."

"Fuck that shit. I told dude I'd bust heads, that I'd play spades with anyone who I wanted to. He said I can't, that that's the rules."

"That is, homie."

"That's some bullshit. Like Mexicans can play spades. What a fucking joke."

"That's the way it is though."

"So when I went to court, I saw some fat dude with a East Side tattoo on his neck. I told him who I was; he called Walrus over."

"Yeah, the homie Burglar. Walrus told me what happened."

"It was weak; all three of us looked stupid."

"He was just talking: 'let's get him, let's get him.' Walrus remembered you though."

"Haha, so they still talk shit?"

"Everyone talks shit about everybody."

"That sucks."

"I just tell em, 'Maaan, you can't fuck with Pickasso. That motherfucker kicked down crack house doors when he was 12! That mother fucker at 13?! He dun CLAPPED BACK AT THE...' Yellowed stuccoed apartment complexes. The .44 made dogs bark. Everyone in front of the laundromat window crouched down at one same time like it was some kind a dance, a low to the ground Twist.

"Yeah man, but that was a long time ago. I was so unaware." Kids with guns, metal in my palms I memorized cracks in the sidewalks down Chamoune, Thorn, Highland, and I didn't step on them: *Step on a crack, break your mother's back*. My pubic hairs started filling in when I did time in

Camp. My penis so small limp, that I had to fondle it before showers so it would look bigger, semi-erect. One of the greatest memories in my life, we were thirty deep at The Wall on Fairmount. It was around six at night but it was already pitch dark. I remember hair slicked back, shaved heads, bangs and hairdoos, faces glowing like the first effects of something that gets you high. There were so many people talking that all I could really make out was the sounds words make and laughing. Maybe we had all just got there. Matt showed up and had a dark blue sweater on. It had a big, white, regular number 13 on the back. Circling around it in normal white lettering, it had East Side Boy Scouts. Someone said, "Oh shit, homes, that's a nice sweater." Alex said, "That's sharp, ese." Matt was smiling so big; he looked to his left, then to his right, then on the ground. Everyone there seemed happy. I saw five homies walking out from the alley, turning the corner of 43rd. Shoulders were walking people. I don't know if you and Margaret were there, but if you were, you two were very close to each other holding hands. I was on the corner smoking a cigarette, scribing a East Side Picasso with a rock on the pay phone booth. Cars, white lights and red ones passed by. I imagined what they saw. Driving up or

down Fairmount both ways, no matter what direction, three, four blocks before the Wall on Fairmount had no lights. People in their cars holding their steering wheels all kinds of ways; lighted up behind their dashboard instruments or cigarettes; snug in their seats their own kind of way. Fairmount's liquor store light was like a beacon, an airport light from the freeway, a motel or gas station outside of Las Vegas where it is all brown and desert, a factory late at night in the back of downtown. People saw it coming, always had to look that way. Saw me on the corner under that dingy light from the liquor store, tagging up a Picasso on the phone booth. Then saw behind me, or off to the right of me, thirty to forty people hanging out on a wall. A little bit of light enough to make some of them look dark, sitting, standing with one foot on the Wall, hands in their pockets. Some of them in the back back there black, looking like Easter Island statues. I turned around to look inside cars that passed by, their heads turning towards us to rubberneck, witness, but never slowing down. Faces and eyes opened wide or maybe with a show of concern—it was 1994. This is East Side I thought; no cops and at the Wall on a Thursday night deep. I saw my mom and her boyfriend Jim drive by. My mom made a silly

face, like crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue. She's from a different world though, that was her fuck you 'you pieces of shits'. With her face like that, maybe that's why she didn't see me standing there.

I couldn't help but feel a little happy at what Ewok remembered about me, and the things he always thought were true. I noticed an ant trail on the steps going down the handrail.

"I miss that shit."

"I thought you were gonna ride with me til the chains fell off! That's what you used to say." He was smiling at it, had his fist in his palm, and his shoulders went broad.

"In theory I did."

"There ain't none of us no more like how we used to be." He was smiling at it, banging his fist in his palm.

"Things change. I can't do the same stuff I used to do anymore."

"Nah, I know homie. I knew when I first started. It was a straight dead-end road."

"That's bullshit. We had a lot of fun! Anything was possible." We always said we'd be dead by the age of twenty-five. I imagined myself big from jail time, tattoos all over and in special places like behind my ears and on

top of my hands. Legs crossed sitting outside on the wall, while the little homies still drank 40's, asking us questions about jail time and telling stories. I could use one of those perverted lines on them that my older homies used on me: 'Hook me up with one of the little homegirls; I want a pussy that smells like butterscotch.'

"Life's a dead end," I said.

"Nah, not for everybody, not like mine. I'm meeting a motherfuckin brick wall."

I smiled. "Don't worry, me too."

"It's not the same."

"♫Do you believe in God? If so tell him to save you♫."

I made my eyes big and smiled at it.

"Fuck no." He spit. "I know that the only thing in life is myself."

"Oooh, nice. Where did you learn something like that from?"

"From life! Ain't no one doing shit in my life but me."

I laughed, gently. "Exactly."

"You?"

I sighed, then laughed again. I felt the folds in my stomach touching. Looking at the ground I told him: "I

don't know. But I do believe some people should believe in it though."

"Not me." He spit again. "Fuck that shit." It was the kind of spit that passes through closed teeth.

"No, it's not that. Think about it. Some people need to. Yo, when you get locked up, what do you think all those motherfuckers are going to be believing in, themselves? *Hell no*, that takes responsibility. They get locked up and start praying at meals. In the holding cells, they pray and pray, 'Please God, let me out, *sniff sniff*, I'll do good this time,' shit like that. 'I promise.' Some of them get out, start going to church, do good, it worked."

"Fuck that shit, I'm not like them."

"Yeah, but if you get locked up, you're going to have to be involved with motherfuckers like that. And most dudes who do that are West Siders."

"I know, and so do you, ese, but that's why we hit up 13."

"I know. I just didn't like people like that, and a bunch of nasty old dudes yelling out orders."

"While they're doing their hundred and thirteen push-ups," he started laughing, "You'll hear me yell the 13 from my cell, laying on my bunk! I'm a lazy motherfucker. Dudes

got healthy these days. Someone want some shit, I got 30 bullets for you. Go out like OBS: 'Buclou! Buclock!'" He made the gun signs sideways. His laugh made him red-faced. Mine accompanied his well. He said, "Yeah, ese, I don't like that jail shit. Motherfuckers are either too hard, or they just ain't. It's like they can't be themselves."

"Seriously. You get those motherfuckers in groups, they're dangerous though." He started really looking at me then; I said what other people say. I sounded like someone who hated gang members. "So, when they catch you, how much time are they going to give you?"

"A couple hundred years. Like I said, I'm going out like OBS. 'Buclou! Buclock motherfuckers!' Blastin."

"Man," that's dismal. "Why don't you move to a different city? Out of state? Out of the country?"

"Nah, I'd have to change my I.D. and shit like that."

"It's not like you can use it now here."

"True. Besides, where would I go? Mexico? I'm like you, homie, a Mexican that don't know Spanish."

"You could learn it quick though."

"Fuck it," he stretched.

"You could go to Chicago. Chicago is nice."

"Maaan... What the fuck would I do there?"

"Visit the free museums. Build a snowman."

"Fuck that shit."

"Seriously, Chicago's a nice city."

"I'm from East, Side, motherfuckin Boy Scouts. Do I look like a motherfucker that could be in Chicago?"

"Hey I did it."

"That's all you." It was getting cold outside.

"Don't knock it, Chicago is bad ass. I've seen dudes there walking around in ski masks it's so cold. How are they going to identify you then? Walking around like that?"

"Can't fuck with it."

"You sure? Beanies and hoodies, for about eight months out of the year."

"Nah, can't fuck with it."

"They call beanies skullcaps there."

He started to laugh. "Can't fuck with it."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Nothing, the same thing I'm doing right now."

"And that is?"

"Waiting."

"Fuck that shit."

"WHAAT!?" He yelled at his girlfriend, who made a cigarette sign. "I DON'T GOT ANY!"

"I WANT A CIGARETTE!" the little pip-squeak.

"WAIT!"

I asked him: "You don't smoke?"

"Oh yeah, I smoke, just not cigarettes."

"Want me to go inside and get her one?"

"Nah, it's cool. I know your moms doesn't like gang members here, we'll be out soon."

"Ah, she's Ok, if it's just you. When was the last time you've seen Grams?" He looked across the street distantly, like when you know you're looking across a street distantly: wide-eyed and forehead wrinkled. Maybe she was dead.

"A few months ago."

"What about Ronny?"

He smiled at me, still looking across the street. "You mean Ronny Jeremy?"

"Huh?"

"That boy's making films."

"What do you mean?"

"Pornos—he's blessed." He held out an open hand, putting his wrist in front of his crotch area.

"Have you seen any?"

"Nope, I'd be too embarrassed. He didn't get that shit from me."

"Hook me up with a couple."

"You ain't right," he put a smile on his face.

"What's up with Margaret? How is she?"

"She's good. She's a mom now."

I laughed, "What's that mean?"

"She's doin good now."

"Ronny's not a gang member then?"

"Fuck no. He got caught tagging South East up at his school. I handcuffed that motherfucker to my bed, me and Julian, 'What? You wanna be from South East?' Beat the shit out of him." Ewok hunched forward looking at me and reenacted his punches. They were slow and to the ribs. He gave me eye contact the whole time.

"The irony. Ronny wanting to be from there."

"Nah, that's just bullshit. He lives up there."

"How's he making pornos?"

"With a video camera, dummy."

"With who though?"

"All the little 12, 13 year olds he fucks."

"Nice..."

"Fucking at that age like we did!"

"Minus the big dick though. You at least. Rachael said I was big for a little kid, remember that?"

He started laughing. "You a fool."

"Truth is, I was so scared, she was like 10 years older than all of us. I didn't know where to put it. What's up with Julian?"

"Nothing, he'll be out in a year."

"That's fucked up, I didn't go to his mom's funeral."

"Yeah, the homeboys were pissed about that."

"I don't know why I didn't go. It's hard for me to explain why I do things like that."

"Fuck it now."

"That's fucked up about [REDACTED]."

He looked at me and smiled. "From [REDACTED]?"

"No. Brian: [REDACTED]. From East Side."

"Oh," he shrugged his shoulders, "I haven't heard his name in a long time."

"I remember I got a letter from him, wrote back, two weeks later he wrote me back a letter in fluent Spanish. I never wrote him back again."

"You know how that shit goes; he probably had someone write that shit for him."

"Yeah but still, I don't know, it pissed me off. His life is shot. I thought about everything different after that. I hated everyone from East Side."

"Fuck it," Ewok shrugged.

There are two smart ways to stop being a gang member and still live in the same neighborhood. One is to get your girlfriend pregnant and use that as an excuse. Another way is to find God, either right when you get in jail, but most definitely when you get out. The trick right there though is when you see someone or if any of the homies see you, you have start preaching the word right away. It might stop you from getting your ass kicked, but definitely people will no longer care about you or want to hang around with you.

The worse thing you can do: is stop coming out, start hanging around with new people, then get locked up for a new crime.

No one has ever told me the past is the past; it's all related to some kind of romantic idea we had as kids. The amount of work some of us put in, in serious comparison to people who just 'kicked it.' When you realize out of a couple hundred people that you only like a few, the rest

disgust you, the funerals become commonplace. Some homeboy died that you didn't like? When you first hear the news: good; at the funeral you almost smile, definitely afterwards when you take off your stupid face. When someone died that I had no real feelings for, and I had to go up and see them in the casket, even at the age of 13 there was only an empty feeling of indifference. If that feeling was audible it might've been a non-sarcastic Oh well. Ewok never said the past was the past, but he stretched and said fuck it.

Stepfather drove up, and had someone else with him. It made my body jump and go kind of nervous. He made a U-turn in his SUV, running over and on top of both curbs before parking across the street, some shit you would do after leaving in the middle of a funeral.

He got out with the other dude, and yelled, "Picassooo," like nothing had ever changed. He looked both ways while crossing the street, smiling and with a belly big enough that he could stand a book on top of it and still read it. On the way over he rotated his hat sideways. When they got to us, I shook his hand but I couldn't look at anyone. I shook the other dude's hand and since I use to be from East Side I thought about saying my name. I didn't

say anything. I could feel my nervousness fly through the air. Ewok knew, he said, "Man, his moms is going to bug out. All us gang members here," he was so normal.

"Nah," I said then cleared my throat. "She's already bugged out. What's going on?"

Stepfather smiled, and looked like a genuinely happy person. He said, "Not a damn thing. What's up homie?"

"Nothing, man. First I see you a couple weeks ago at the liquor store, then I'm playing video games for three days straight, there's a knock on my door, Ewok stops by to say hello."

"You playing video games with Barbara?"

"Shit I wish."

He laughed. I still wasn't really looking at anyone.

Ewok said, "Ok, let's cut back to the pad before neighbors start calling 911."

Stepfather said, "Ok. You rollin, Picasso?"

"Can't, I got work soon."

"Ahhh, you suck."

"So does my job."

He laughed again. "Alright then homie, I'll see you around."

"No doubt." I shook hands with him, then briefly with the other one. Ewok stayed behind as they walked back to the truck. He said he'd be right there.

There was a soft tone left in the air, something endearing and easy to breathe. Ewok picked up a piece of junk mail and said, "Here's my number, homie," and wrote it down. "Call that shit fool, and we'll chill."

"What about your roommate?"

"Don't worry about that shit. He's doin his own thing now with his wife and kids."

"Maybe I'll call you up and we can go check out a movie."

"Nah, I can't go out much."

"Don't worry, I'll drive."

"Fuck that, I don't know how many warrants you got. Cops pull us over, they'll probably shoot you first."

"Nope, no warrants. My head is a little bigger though, so I'm an easier target."

He laughed. "Bigger head? You lookin at Bonk right here!"

"Bonk's adventure. You ever play that game?"

"That's old 3DO shit."

"Turbo Grafix."

"Whatever. That's all I do is chill at the pad and play video games and get faded."

"Life is great."

"Haha, yeah... Alright man, I'm out. Serious, do that shit, homie! Stop by sometime!"

"I'll call you up, let you know what's up."

"Later." We shook hands. Things felt unresolved. He walked back to his car, his arms swaying left to right in front of him. He said something, to his girlfriend while walking back: "Trips..." or, "Trippin," a couple of times. I couldn't understand it. Maybe it was just something to say while walking back to his car in the middle of the street. The clouds and the color of the sky were that certain way making it to where it could've been early morning, or it could've been becoming night.

The day they raided Ewok's house, I remember I woke up twice that morning. Once when someone was trying to open my bedroom door, whispering, "Picasso, phone. Picasso, phone." I was sleeping with my mouth open and told them no. "Picasso, phone. Picasso, phone." Even though my door was chain locked they kept forcing on it. I yelled clearing sleep from my throat, "I'm fucking asleep, damn it!"

Second time I woke up I was overhearing my mom telling my cousin that she would scratch her face and tell the cops I beat her up to get me kicked out of the house. I held my urine and let my kidney burn.

The walls in my room are painted a green. When the sun's out and my blinds are left open, the color of my wall matches all the overgrown trees and bushes outside my bedroom window. Sometimes, when I would open my eyes and my head was still deep inside of my pillow, I would see part of the blue sky, the sun spilling light on top of bushes and into trees, my bedroom wall would be the same color. It made me think about things; sometimes about my nervousness, sometimes about Japan, New Zealand, or somewhere Nordic; somewhere where I hope to be with a beer in my hand, close to both a forest and a beach, when life as I know it ends or begins. The wind was tossing all the plants and trees gently back and forth. The sun shined down spots of light on top of them. In the sky a few clouds were being pulled apart. I heard my mom telling my cousin: "I should've gotten that car. That God damn spoiled brat. He can't even give his own mother a ride to the doctors. If I ask for a ride, then he has to give it to me. I'm going to put sugar in his gas tank, and he will never drive that car again.

You hear that, sonny boy?! If I want a ride, then God damn it, you give me one! Right then and now!" I felt like a piece of shit. I was still living with my mother.

I decided to go and register my car.

The Volvo drives nice. So nice I drive it one-handed. I push on the steering wheel with my left hand, with the part of my hand that would have calluses if I had ever had that kind of job or ever lifted weights again. My right hand would lie in a fist on my thigh. If a cop pulled me over, and that right hand had a gun, I could shoot one of those motherfuckers right in their face. That's just something I think about. No one ever really drives with me.

I got a hard-on at the DMV reading a Hemingway story.

The lady at the front desk was so big that in her neck it looked like she had swallowed two tricycle tires. When I told her why I was there, she gave me another ticket and moved her eyes to the left while never looking at me once. Everything about the DMV was DMV typical.

On the way back home, close to my house, two motorcycle cops had their lights flashing and were driving on the sidewalk. I thought about them crashing, somehow ending up pinned down by their motorcycles, yelling for help from underneath their helmets and sunglasses. Up

ahead, at the next intersection, cop cars were speeding through the stop lights. Mid way down the hill I could see that they had blocked off University: yellow tapes and cop cars were parked sideways in the middle of the street. I drove around to my house, thinking, that's got to be Ewok right there.

At home, my mom asked me what all the police were about.

"I don't know, but they blocked off University."

For a while I paced in my room. My heart started to beat phantom because it felt hollow there. My neck started to sweat. I decided to call him.

"Hello?" The background sounded hard.

"Garret?"

"Who's this?"

"Picasso."

"Ahh, what's up big dog?"

"I don't know if you know this, but the cops got my block and all of University blocked off."

"Yep, they for me, homie."

"Damn."

"Good looking out though, I didn't think you'd ever call me."

"There's nothing you can do?"

"Naah, they on the roof, in the backyard, the stairs. Underneath the windows."

I was trying. "Damn. You can't use my name?"

He didn't laugh. "Too late for that."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Hey! It was really good to hear from you, and see you again! I'm out, big dog!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm out!"

"Later."

It irritated me. He had a soft and unsure tone in his voice. It sounded like he was tweeking.

I got in my car and drove around through the backstreets to get as close as possible to his house. I remembered as a kid people saying that the University area had the lowest crime rate in all of the city. I started robbing houses when I was here at twelve. I found more guns and dildos in these houses than any out in East Side.

Up both sides of the street have tall trees. They grow up and over the electric lines, fat in some portions like something from Japan. They shade everything except close to the yellow dividing lines. Sometimes part of the year they

drop small purple flowers that blanket the whole street. Another part of the year they drop moist green leaves.

When I saw how many cops were there, it felt just as bad as me had having robbed these houses: cop cars and motorcycle cops, yellow tapes were blocking up the shaded back streets. Cops were leaning against their cars and motorcycles, standing with sunglasses on and their arms folded. They were in places of that area that were so untouched, that only people who live there drove on these streets. The area and under the trees made the cops' cars and motorcycles, uniforms and haircuts and sunglasses look cleaner. It was such a nice day, that I bet a lot of them were considering moving into this neighborhood. There was nothing I could do.

Me and Garret first met skateboarding, when we were eight; young enough to where we both could've been Ninjas for Halloween. We were chorus members that threw up gang signs in the yearbook. We could've lived together differently. We could've had more pictures than only two.

I stood on the rooftop of the tall blue building on University Avenue. It was dark up there, I could feel it on my face. Down below police lights were flashing red, white

and blue. The streets were blocked up with gelled hair Caucasian cops, older Black cops, a couple of older Filipino cops—but mostly a new group of young ones—young Korean cops, Mexican cops, two Samoan cops, yellow tapes and cop cars. It looked like a miniature plastered railroad setup: small plastic toys with guns in their hands and white lights beaming. Their flood lights all pointed at Ewok's windows and front door. A helicopter was up in the air looking lazy. I had my toes on the edge.

I called him.

"Yo." He answered.

I laughed. "All right, man, get the door ready, I'm coming through."

"All right, from where?"

"The tall blue building on University. I'm coming from the East."

He gave out a Ha Ha, then started yelling, "East! Side!"

"East side," I said in a low voice like late night radio.

"EaST! SIDE!" He was getting louder.

"Ok. Get ready."

"EaST! SIIDE!" I hung up on him. I placed the 40's tight inside the chest portion of my jacket. I saw the door crack black in all the spotlights pointed at it. I jumped off the roof, hang gliding on straws and bamboo, hard to capture.

They're coming out! cops said. "They're coming out!" I saw Ewok with a big goofy smile on his face. Cops were all over behind the bus benches, on top of rooftops across the street, pointing guns and rifles from squad cars, all aiming at his head, just ready to kill a motherfucker. Ewok had his hands in the air like a religious Mahulla, rotating them back and forth from the wrist, smiling, squinting in all that light he visored his eyes then stepped back. I was hang gliding in from the East.

"Come out with your hands up!" A cop yelled through a megaphone.

I was in a swoop. I would be there in less than three seconds. The wind was strong in the space between my back and hang gliding device. It went cool inside my mask and made my eyes water.

Ewok saw me, sprang back and fell on his elbows. No cops did yet, looking through their gun sights. I landed—

right through the doorway I came flying in, feet first. My hang gliding device went to pieces against the door frame.

"What the fuck was that!?" A few immature cops started shooting. None of the SWAT or FBI though, just the regular police.

"Hold your fire! Hold your fire!"

"Someone threw something outside!"

Inside now, (good thing there was no shit on the floor to interrupt my landing) Ewok greeted me. "Aww shit, homie! What's up, big dog!?"

"Chillin, man." We hugged, banging open palms flat on each other's back.

"Nice Ninja costume ese."

"♫I hang glide, holding on straws, hard to capture♫."

"♫Top notch Ghost thinks with logic, of flashbacks, how I attacked your whole projects♫."

"Yeah, you're lucky I introduced you to music like that, or you'd still be listening 2 Pac."

"Shit... I still listen to 2 Pac." He laughed, shot out the front doorway four times into the sky. He was wearing a bullet proof jacket over a brand new white tank top. Outside a couple of cops dropped car keys and things. The .44 Magnum made dogs bark. He kicked the door shut.

"What's up with that blonde hair, dude?" I told him. "You've been listening to that weak eminem shit. Police listen to that crap."

"Nah, this is just my disguise."

"Liar. You know you had it like that ever since we stopped kickin it."

"True..." He started laughing. "Look at your shit, ese! What the fuck you tryin to do? Grow a fro?"

"Nah, I couldn't have my head shaved for fifteen years straight." I knocked on my noggin. "Funny though—that's almost exactly what your roommate told me when he saw me in county. Where's dude at?"

He pointed with a open hand, more like a showman gesture.

"What's he doing?"

"Tweeking."

I went into the next room. His roommate was sitting on the floor, with his back against the foot of the bed. He had a gas mask on. He was wearing blue jeans, and had a bullet proof jacket over a gray long-sleeved shirt. He was wearing white sneakers. His arms were on his knees. Holding a fist inside of his other hand, he was moving his feet up and down like he was riding the brakes and clutch of a car.

Inside the mask his eyes didn't blink, but they were very thin and very red. He nodded to me what's up. I imagined the sound behind his mask and inside his mind must've been waves breaking or houses falling apart.

"What's up, man?" I said, and drank from my 40. My throat moving and swallowing while still looking at him. Ewok came in, he said: "What's up, ese?" laughing at him. His roommate shook his head, slowly.

"Man, you guys are in a fucked up situation," I said.

"Nah, fuck it. How do you like my room?"

It was small. "Well at least it's not mine."

He started laughing, and said, "Good!" I smiled and looked around and felt a little bit embarrassed.

He had a small bed in the middle of the room straight across from the door. It was a small enough to where you'd have to constantly touch your partner.

Above one side of the bed he had the poster of Scar Face shooting the gun with the grenade launcher. On the other side was a poster of Robert De Niro from Taxi Driver, with a Mohawk and a gun in each hand. The posters were framed in glass; somehow put red and white lights in the frames and they could've been straight out of theater lobbies.

He pointed and said, "Check this out." In the corner of his room he had five small surveillance screens stacked on top of each other: 2, 2, then 1. "The cops shot em out."

"Nice."

"Before I could see down both streets."

"What do you guys do? Jack off behind those things?"

"All the time."

"I probably would too."

"You wanna gas mask?"

"Nah, I doubt it. They probably figured out it's not fazing you."

"True..."

"I'll just stay away from the windows." They all had one or two holes in them, orange and rock sized.

Ewok said, "Damn, homie, too bad they cut off all the power, I could've whooped your ass at Street Fighter on the Playstation."

"Yeah right. I'm ranked number two in San Diego. Even on those fucked up pads I would destroy you."

"Who's number one?"

"The Juice."

"Who's that?"

"Some guy I know. He used to be one of my brother's best friends, now I hang out with him a lot."

"Which brother?"

"The white one; one who used to bone Rebecca. You ever play Final Fantasy 11, or Everquest on the Playstation?"

"Nah, what kind of games are those?"

"Role playing, on-line."

"Those are boring."

"Yeah right, you're missing out. You saw how my room looked. Can we smoke inside the house?"

"Fuck it."

"Want one?"

"Don't smoke cigarettes."

"Glass dick only huh?"

"You know it."

"Got anymore?"

"Nah, smoked the rest of it early this morning before anything happened."

"Well it's probably better you did it before any of this happened. This the only safe room in the house?"

"This, kitchen, bathroom."

"I'm going to kill this 40 here then."

"Ok, me too."

His face seemed happy and simple; child-like like he had never changed.

He sat down Indian style on the floor, with his roommate to the left of him, taking small gulps of the 40 then planting it down by his right knee. Afterwards he moved his knees up and down. I sat back against a dresser and stretched my legs out. Somehow sitting down took all the energy out of me to think bright of his situation. I felt like it was going to be hard to look him in the face. The spotlights through the windows, the only light in the house, making it easy for me to see the smoke from my cigarette curl up and wave out raising to the ceiling. It was the light like of a film projector and we were its only audience. His roommate was easy to ignore with that mask on. Quiet the whole time, sitting there like that; he must've been going over moments in his life, turning his whole area above his cheeks and below his forehead red. His mind about to pop inside that mask, the last wave crashing, houses from his childhood falling over.

"So when you gonna finish school?" Ewok asked me.

"Never!"

It was funny to him. "That's fucked up, why not?"

"I don't know, maybe I'm not supposed to."

"What are you goin for?"

"Master's."

"In what?"

"Literature. Sick..."

He was amused. "What the fuck you gonna to do with that?"

"That's not even what I want to do."

"What is?"

"Writing."

"You wanna write a book?"

"Yeah."

"About gangbangin?"

"Yeah."

"Who the fucks gonna wanna read that shit?"

"You will if I put your name in it."

"Ha Ha, I'll sue you ese!"

"Good luck with that; I work at a laundry mat."

"Just think, if you would've kept gangbangin, you could've had all this," he put his arms out, and his palms open facing up. In that light he looked very eastern statue looking.

Have what, I thought, and listed them quickly: ironing board, brown couches, nine kids, federal warrants, brown

dressers, clothes folded, hickies, tattoos, new shoes, marry a chola, police, FBI outside my house. Nice cars, guns, wet pussies, drug habits, a paranoid extreme, homeboys, hair grease.

I said, "Being a gang member has helped me out though. I got that job at Sunglass Store when I got out. Number one sales commission for six months."

"Yeah. Being a gang member helped me get that job at Wal-Mart and 7-11."

"Wal-Mart sucks dick!"

"Yep."

"No seriously."

"Yep. Fuck that job."

"They're ruining the world!"

He laughed. "I don't know about all that, but I do know that job sucked serious dick."

"Seriously, politically, that Ralphs and Albertsons strike shit, they were behind that. They're turning into grocery stores and shit!"

"I don't know about that political shit. I don't give a fuck about that."

"Yeah. Obviously I shouldn't either."

I hit the 40 long; Ewok too, trying to catch up. I wished the whole job and college conversation never came up. I should've never sat down. I could've stood up in the corner of the room, drink the 40 and smoked a few cigarettes. That whole conversation could've been a bunch of shit talking about old homeboys and clowning on each other, on his roommate too, right before the wave crashed or house fell, making something pop in the back behind his brain stem. He would've shot up out of nowhere and started running out with his arms pumping like a member of a 4x4 Olympic team, out the front door getting himself shot to death.

I didn't want to be there anymore.

I said: "Alright, dude. You wanna kill this?"

"Nah, I'm cool. What's up with you? You out?"

"Yeah, I got to go to work soon."

"Ahhh, you suck."

"Yep." I hit it again. A little less than half now.

"What about your roommate?"

"He doesn't drink."

I hit it again then burped. "Man, all you two do is smoke that shit all day?"

"You know it. But it's not that; he's on parole." We started busting up.

"Good luck with that." I put the 40 down on top of the dresser that had nothing else on it besides a boom box that looked like it was from the 80's.

"So what are you guys going to do now?"

"Nothing, chill."

"You guys got food and shit?"

"Yep."

"Toilet Paper?"

"Yep."

"Condoms?"

"Huh?"

"You never know how lonely you two might get up here."

"Ha Ha, you a fool. I think I got some though."

"Nice... Yo, if you guys are still here when I get off work, maybe I'll swing back through."

"Cool."

"Ok. Now, check this out." I held out my right hand in front of me and put my middle and index fingers together.

"You can't see me! Tonko; Ichi. I'm Ninja!" I cast the spell.

"I can still see you, homie..."

"I know, wait, it takes a couple of seconds to activate... Ok."

"Nice. But why didn't you go invisible before comin inside?"

"You know how expensive ninja tools are? I work at a laundry mat, man—I'm poor."

"Get a real job motherfucker!"

"Haha! Never! ...Peace!"

They're coming out! "They're coming out!" cops said.

I shut the door very slowly and politely. Even pushed on it to make sure it was shut all the way. And checked the door knob to see if it was locked.

I knew they had given themselves up, but I couldn't hear how from off the TV, because the Laundromat was noisy, and I'm always nervous there having to do janitorial work in front of people. When I got home my mom had the TV on so loud, and the curtains open wide enough in the living room, that even though it was night, the sound of helicopters and news from off the TV and light from outside, made me feel like I was there at Garret's house, surrounded by cops, waiting to be arrested or killed.

"So they gave up, huh?"

My cousin said, "Yeah," with a smile, and his face looked orange and wrinkled from always being drunk.

My mom said: "You know those little pieces of shits had bullet proof jackets on and gas masks when they came out."

"Cool," I said.

"Cool?"

My cousin said, "They were tweakers." He's genius about things like that.

I went into the kitchen to see if my mom had cooked any food. She only cooks when my cousin is over for the three days: the day before he has to work the two days I don't. She cooks good meals while he's here, under the assumption that when he goes back home, he'll tell my Aunt, who hates my mom, who my mom hates, that my mom makes good meals. It doesn't matter. There's never any food in the house while he's gone.

"So how did they get them to give themselves up?"

My cousin said, "Ahh, they had one of their wives talk over a speaker phone about their kids and how not to throw away your life." I was walking out of the kitchen with a bowl of soup.

"What a bunch of pussies!" I said that loud enough in the front room, like when you comment about something you find ridiculous on TV. My cousin and my mom laughed too. She looked happy and pretty for an instant.

"I would've came out blasting."

"Don't be ridiculous," my mom said.

"I'm not. Serious, if I would've known I was going to go to jail like that!"

My cousin said, "What you need to do, is know ninja techniques. Come outside and blend into your surroundings." He was drunk, and I didn't look back at him, but we both exchanged smiles.

"Sick..."

"God, to think that piece of shit was in this house a couple days ago."

"So?"

"So? That kids a murderer." And I wasn't looking at her either, but I know in her face she was looking very dramatic.

"Murderer, yeah right. Who'd he kill?"

"He tried to kill a police officer, Picasso. Come on, don't be so thick headed."

"So? So did I."

"Don't even remind me, it makes me sick. Those little assholes probably put you up to it. Besides, you changed, he didn't."

"Changed?"

"He's still a gang member, Picasso."

"And?"

"He tried to kill a cop, come on, stop being so thick headed."

"Because he tried to kill a cop? Cops and gang members are exactly alike. Yo! You ever seen a cop's funeral and a gang member's? They're exactly the same! The same fake friends who were friends because they had the same shit in common with you, all standing around, looking around, not sure how to act, so they got this concerned 'I got to take a shit look' on their face. The one who fake cried in front of everyone a couple days before because he was drunk or something and everyone else was there. Everyone in their uniforms. There's only a couple people who were even close to the person who died! And you see them looking ahead at the casket by themselves. Those stupid bitches that would be with men like them, all crying, but still looking pretty. It's identical. They might not be saying homie or

throwing up gang signs, but they're saying partner and saluting."

My cousin said, "That's sad about your friend's kids."

"What is?"

"Well, you know," he laughed. "They're going to have a fucked up life." He said that as he thrust his arms out in the air, making a shape with them and his hands, something that resembled a cloud.

"Why?"

"Well, you know." He made a loud noise letting his breath out then laughed. It was hard not to hate him right there. He shifted his weight on his hips and lifted his left foot then let it drop. You could hear his boot on the hardwood floor. With his 40 of King Cobra in his hand, and his yellow almost orange teeth, and how dirty he looked drunk like that. Then I felt sad for him.

"Dude, look how fucked up our family is!"

"Count your blessings," my mom said, "I never abandoned you. I went to all of your courts, I visited you, I wrote all those letters to the Judges. That kid's mother was a piece of shit. She didn't care how he turned out." Every part of that list, she put the back of her right hand into her left and banged it.

"I know, but we're talking about now though."

"What about now?"

I stood up and went to my room with my bowl of beans and rice.

I felt angry and lonely at the same time. I sat down in my chair and I could still hear the TV on. I sat on the edge of my bed and I could still hear my cousin's voice, the loud he uses, like he has an audience of ten people outside the front of a bar. In my own way I love them both. The kind of family that shouldn't ever live with each other. I started to think about it, and I wished that I was still a gang member. I could feel my face and shoulders relax. Then I thought about how stupid that was and laughed. I laid on my back and felt my breathing in my stomach and a hardening in the center of my chest. What an ass Ewok was. I started laughing. What was wrong with you? Homie. Why would you live with someone who was on parole and you had a federal indictment? What happened? No one else from East Side would help you out? What happened to the days where you could walk up on some fools in a park, commit a murder and hide out at someone's pad? Live in the basement part of the house, with two of those small windows that you have to slide open left to right. Looking out onto

a street where people drive 40 miles per hour, and there's a park with lots of shiny moist grass across the street. In the island between the two lanes there were paper trees, and when you looked out at them you could imagine punching them, how hard and good that would feel. I know you thought I was an ass for hitting up a Picasso on one of them, but at least I was smart enough not to hit up your name. Back then Moms would even let you live with them. In this day and age it would've been perfect. I could've hooked you up online. You could've got on Final Fantasy and played the shit out of it. You would've been one of those people that everyone hates because you level up so fast. You would've become a legend! We could've made our own Linkshell, called it: EastSideBoyScouts. I guess that part of East Side went down when they built a police station on Fairmount big enough to where they landed helicopters on top of it. Didn't the president visit it? After they put up a Denny's and a Starbucks and tore down all the old homes and apartments and built condominiums on University. Damn, man, you've become one of things I hate the most: a dedication on a Sunday night Art Laboe show. You ever hear some of those dummies that call up to give shoutouts to their hood? They sound like they've just finished jacking off. And the

chicks that call, after their dedication to you when you're locked up, they sound so happy about to be going to bed, like when you were a kid and your pillows felt so good you did some weird shit or a giggle before you jumped in on them. I thought that maybe I'll go visit you. I got this idea for a screenplay. I get your story of what happened to you after I went to Arizona. The movie would start with us skateboarding at Prime Time. Remember when that skateboard flew from off the basketball court and hit you in the ankle? You fell back on the grass and put your fists over your eyes and started crying like a baby. Jesus, man, that shit was too funny. You still look the same from back then too. We both do. It's actually kind of weird. Yeah, but I'll do the story from then; then to East Side; then to when I went to Arizona; then to what you were doing while I was there. But since we're both in the first parts, when Arizona comes up, I'll cut to scenes of us both doing shit in different places. Like parallel action you know? Like when I was doing time in Arizona, there's this part when I was in line, and I had a nervous break down. There was a noise in my temple like a pop, like I had been holding my jaw tight for two years. I started crying and the staff members started yelling at me. When I couldn't stop crying

they started fucking me up. It was some bugged out shit. Or when the first time I had ever been in snow in my life was up there. I'll show that, right? Then after that happens I cut to you and what you were doing. See what I'm sayin? Like show me do that there, then cut to you out in East Side, probably in some house tweeking or some shit. Yeah right. Or whatever you were doing, even if it was just you listening to music. With cameras I could make your character look sick. Show the small apartment, with whoever you were with, but slowly zoom up on you sitting on a couch, playing music out of a boom box on top of a dresser. Or we could change it up you know? At different periods in your life. I know what gang members' apartments look like once they got some money. I know your mannerisms too, so I can describe them to the actor or write them out in the book. Like when we were in social situations, or let's say out in the garage. You would listen to music and look down at your feet and bob your head, staring at the ground reciting the words. Shit like that. It'll be sick, ese. Haha, I can't believe I said ese! Then the next part will be when I got out and got that job at Sunglass Store—there's a bunch of comedy there. Still at the same time I show what you were doing. Then when I went to college,

because I did a lot of bugged out shit there. Embarrassing. But I had philosophies that I believed in. A lot there we can add philosophy, you know? And through dialogues or actions we add your philosophies too. Say how I'm in photo class explaining that taking pictures of trees ain't shit. Then we'll show you at Azalea Park talking some gangster shit with the homies surrounded by trees maybe. Know what I'm sayin? Something like that, but maybe not as weak. But we'll make our characters look the same. It'll be sick. Then Chicago, then to what you did, then we'll end it the last time you came to my house before the FBI got you. Actually, the whole conversation out in front of my house I want to put that in play form, like a dialogue. I was thinking on stage for that part where your girlfriend is across the street in the car, we would be looking forward, and I would have a little screen or somehow hook it up on scrim, showing her the whole time, doing nothing, bored sitting in the car, while me and you are facing the audience. The way I imagine it, it'll be bad, ass. Maybe. Seriously dude, I got good at that shit. Too bad you're not getting out, me and you could act really good in front of each other, it would look real. For real. But I want the acting to be like that dude from Who Am I This Time. I

can't think of the guy's name. He was in Pulp Fiction, and in that movie Deer Hunter and Pool Hall Junkies. Nah. Whatever, but if you ever see those movies again you'll know what I'm talking about. So then we'll end it, like that. Sick, huh? All I got to really do is write out the skateboarding part and some of your story. I got the Arizona and Sunglass Store part already down. Seriously, man, this movie will be bad, ass. It has all the elements in it: comedy, drama, gangbanging, skateboarding, jail time, all the fun shit we did. And also all the gangbanging, I'll write that out to where even normal people would laugh. I know enough about film and writing to make things look *hard*! I'll do the skateboarding part sick, and Arizona will be a little of both. When I'm up there it's fucked up, I'll make it militant, but show us watching Iron Will or Rudy and everyone crying at the end. Then have you out doing something that's so half ass and lazy, watching Menace to Society for the 100th time. See what I'm sayin? One thing I hate about film though is the over toning of music for psychological effects. So we'll have to work on that. Definitely put in some real Hip-Hop. But I know, dude, it'll affect the audience the things I have in mind. There's this part in Kill Bill, where first she wakes

up from a coma, then taps on the side of her head and it's a steel plate and it goes dink dink. The whole audience started busting up. Then immediately after that, she looks down and the camera pans down quickly, then she feels her stomach where she's supposed to have the baby. Uma Thurman starts crying-screaming-acting very good. The whole audience was quiet, it bugged them out. You could feel the whole vibe in the movie theatre like: Whoa, that's fucked up, and I was just laughing at that shit? See what I'm sayin? Shit like that in some places. We're all jokes and I'm eating a carne asada burrito, then blam blam, the window crashes on me and Brian loses an eye. Something like that. I'll make it work. It'll make money. I don't know what you want to do with the percent you get for your story, but I'm thinking, maybe give it to your kids. Set something up for them like college. Nah. You know at least they'll think you wanted something good for them. Pops tried, they'll say. Or since they're all kind of young, we can take this money we make and put it towards my production company, I'm thinking about: Blue Baby Books, or, Blue Baby Productions for film. Nah, people don't like gang stuff. Just tell me your story.

It's funny, but when I was gang member, I kind of admired cops. Now that I'm not, I mostly hate them. Sometimes, when there's a knock on my door, I think it's going to be his girlfriend. I get up quickly and move things around, try to clean things up.

No Death/ Liquid Swords

When I was little, my father was famous. He was the greatest samurai in the empire, and he was the Shogun's decapitator. He cut off the heads of 131 lords. It was a bad time for the empire. The Shogun just stayed inside his castle, and he never came out. People said his brain was infected by demons. My father would come home, he would forget about the killings. He wasn't scared of the Shogun but the Shogun was scared of him. Maybe that was the problem. Then, one day... the Shogun sent his ninja spies to our house...

That was the time everything changed...

Before his name was No Death it was Adon. He was working quietly inside the mill. He heard the sounds of swords clashing. He picked his up. From outside the mill he saw smoke; a big, bad, black pillar of it rising from the roof of his house, disappearing into the clouds above. He started running.

He could make out figures. He saw his father surrounded by Shogun ninja, some dead at his feet. The house burst into flames from behind and on both sides. He started running faster. His mother came out the front door with his kid sister in her arms. She opened her mouth then

let out a scream to the heavens that sounded like the complete emptying out of a soul. A ninja decapitated her. Young Adon's heart stopped, tears filled his eyes, he ran with the speed and strength of a horse. He saw his father kill two ninja, in two strokes. Many lay dead around him. There were only two left and the general. Adon lost sight of his father as he ran through the stable. When he emerged crow's cawed.

He saw his father take a dull hit to the stomach that dropped out all of his intestines. No Death's heart stopped again. This time more than forever. His eyes no longer blinked. Inside his head he heard the sound of a hundred horses running across the hard earth. His speed and strength multiplied by 10. Sword in hand he ran at the remaining ninja. The general had such a sinister smirk on his face that it showed some of his back teeth. The first ninja began his attack, but in mid-stroke No Death's attack hit him chest high. Blood exploded as the parts separated. The second ninja tried to block No Death's overhead attack, but the strength behind No Death's sword broke through his and continued, from head to groin. Blood spouted as one half fell forward, one half fell backward. Under his breath the general thought, Hmm... then launched a dagger that

buried itself into the center of No Death's forehead. No Death stood there. The general adjusted his cap, pulled his cape around his shoulders and began to walk away. No Death pulled the dagger out and flung it deep into the earth. The general's eyes widened, as No Death threw his sword that soon enough decapitated him.

As the last of the house fell into ashes and charred wood, No Death buried his family a few feet away. The lone pillar of smoke that could be seen from miles throughout the valley and hills was completely swallowed up by the bright day sky. He buried his sister first, who as she lay in her small grave staring blankly up at him, her other eye missing, just a black hole like a bad doll or another kid's favorite toy. He put the pieces of his mother and father close by, in hopes that they would all be reunited in the afterlife. As the sky darkened he stayed kneeling at the dirt mound, his heart began to warm, tears swam in his eyes, color ran through his skin and body. He released a wail that made all the ears on the animals nearby stand up on ends and worry. He stopped his heart again. With his sword in hand and new body, he set forth in search of the Shogun's castle to extract revenge.

He traveled for weeks on end—dead, not eating or sleeping; through valleys where life waits to greet, on top of hills where the sun makes you invisible, through desert sands, and finally into the forest before the Shogun's compound. During this time he brought peace to the animal kingdom. Being able to smell his scent they cast aside all their differences. Off to the sides below trees and throughout the brushes, they discreetly followed him. Maggots infested his left arm from elbow to hand. In his still life state part of him was still alive.

Under a cloak with hood he went to a neighboring town to seek help. Walking through the streets in the outskirts, he heard a very loud curse accompanied by the sound of glass breaking. Him and the few other pedestrians stopped and looked in the direction the noise came from. From over the thatched rooftops a thick blue plume of smoke appeared. Shrugging their shoulders or mumbling something under their breaths, the other passersby carried on.

The engineer was a small man well off into his middle age. He could always be found behind glasses; whether for reading, alcoholic drinks, or behind a beaker with a shiny instrument. His hands were molted over with pieces of plaster and discolored by strong acids. When the silent No

Death exposed his left arm to him, the maggots seemed near-like beautiful; a large colony of them from his elbow to the top of his wrist, so white they almost glowed, like the color of the brightest moon he could remember. From atop the table No Death brought down his sword. In one fell swoop part of his arm fell to the floor, the maggots immediately began to disburse from the ligament.

The engineer devised a metal arm for No Death. The fist itself was a launchable rocket propelled explosive. After that was shot there was a Gatling gun that blasted out large ball bearing bullets. The metal arm could also be used to shield attacks. During the weeks it took to meld the device, No Death sat in front of the fires in reflective contemplation. Half of the time he imagined his revenge: a bloody massacre that left bodies of men in pieces, strewn through hallways and against pillars, in the end a great fire consuming all. He saw his family's deaths, and sometimes they seemed to be in black and white: his mother standing in the doorway, then a big dark blood exploding from her neck. His father, and how he saw the hit he took as if he was inside of him; just a fat white slash, and the sound it made as if someone had hit a thick carpet. His little sister's arm and hand, opened and stretched out

on the ground; a small hand beautiful if snowflakes fell down on top of it and dissolved. During this time the engineer discovered the animal phenomenon. One night while working he saw in the fields a puma and mountain yak sharing berries from off the same vine. One bright morning he emerged from his backdoor smoking a cigarette, to be greeted by a group of rose breasted birds singing a nice tune—a bright colored serpent lazily resting in the sun on the same branch, her fat forked tongue flickering in the air. Some of these animals would become permanent residents and companions to the engineer.

No Death attempted to enter the castle midday. The archers from the main tower saw his approach, saw him running towards the gates, a great trail of dust kicked up behind him. They let loose a barrage of arrows. No Death, ill prepared for the flurry could only deflect half of the onslaught with his sword. He ended up taking one in his right eye. All the animals at the foot of the forest fled. He laid there staring up into the bright sun, hoping they would open the gates to inspect him, where he could then launch a surprise attack, or maybe they would drag him into the compound, getting him that much closer to the Shogun.

But because it was only one man, the archers left him there as a joke, or a token, or a warning to anyone who would try to do the same. When night fell he got up. Dislodged all the arrows and left.

With earth, metals, fire, water and gaseous airs, the engineer devised three new eyes for No Death. One eye could see from afar, another could see through walls, another could see at night. The one that could see from afar was completely sand colored with an insignia of a cloud for the pupil. The one that could see through walls was light blue with a blue-gray leaf designed. The one that could see at night was dark and had a bright green half-moon for the pupil. If No Death put two in front of one he could attain all the effects at the same time.

No Death studied the compound for days. He saw that the best time to begin his attack would be when the sun had starting moving to the back of the sky, and all the archers and guardsmen met at the base of the main tower to briefly eat and pray. The instant they lifted their heads to conclude their worship, No Death ran up to the base of the tower and launched a rocket into their congregation. The building shook and hundreds of white and gray birds shot up into the air. Animals watching from the foot of the forest;

one raccoon buried himself into his mother's side and asked if he was going to be Ok. She looked into his eyes and said yes, of course he is son. A great owl looked down upon them and shed a tear.

No Death entered the main halls through the hole in the wall he blew. He quickly killt the first few guards to arrive. Once inside he started blasting through walls men and women he could see on the other side. The fires from the explosion were spreading throughout the insides quickly; clinging to tapestries and jumping off onto people's clothing and scalps. No Death went down many corridors and hallways, in light now made only by the fires, his sword the brightest of all things as it flew, leaving a path of strewn men and some women behind him, screams and their bloods on the walls.

In an open foyer, surrounded by golden statues and pillars beginning to be consumed by the fire, No Death heard the sound of the Shogun's voice:

Ooohh, Mad One... We see your trap... You can never escape, your fate...

Submit with honor to a duel with my son. We have been expecting you...

Inside of a shadow cast down by one of the pillars, No Death noticed a figure sitting on his knees. He put in his other eye, the green moon submitted a glow that was complete florescent.

The attack from his enemy was brutal; sword attacks as if made by a six-armed devil. Very few of the greatest swordsmen could ever hope to defend themselves from such a torrent. But in all reality only one attack could prove to be fatal, and No Death parried it, then countered, feeding the mouth of his sword into his opponent's neck. His foe backed up into a pillar; dropped his sword and fell to his knees. His blonde hair was disheveled. He spoke in the softest of voices, almost as if in the comfort of a loved one at mid night:

Your, tech-nique...

Is...

Magnificent...

When cut across the neck... A sound like wailing wintered winds is heard, they say. I've always hoped to cut someone like that someday: to hear, that sound... But to have it happen to my own neck...

Is...

Ridiculous...

Blood filled his breath and he perished. No Death had a flashback of his mother.

No Death entered the Shogun's chambers. From the entryway he saw the Shogun leaned up against the foot of his bed. His eyes were glossy and white like the maddest of men, staring directly up at No Death. He had all his gold on. The front of his ceremonial garb was red with blood. He had slit his own throat. A jewel encrusted dagger laid in one hand, a note was in the other. No Death turned around and walked away.

A great fire consumed all.

A black scar was left on the earth. The wind blew over it and touched all its skeletal remains.

This Afghan Story

A clear stream of water cut into the middle of cement; like something you should see from a dream. In a brief angry gesture, the names of seeds:

Asparagus.

Dates.

Figs.

Olives.

Pomegranates.

Apricots.

Orange Trees.

Lying on your back, with your arms halfway in the air, waking up like you're about to go to sleep, with the inexplicable filmy taste of cheese in your mouth.

Inside these quarters, like how bodies should be: housing that's only beautiful on the inside. 10th century Islam, where sometimes it doesn't rain for years.

If one God's man made man out of mud, or the other made man by blowing into sand, nevertheless, you are people from the dirt. A desert nomadic culture.

Exiting your house, covering most of your face with a brown fabric the color of cartoons. Out into the other desert

with a harvester vase attached to your back. A body like your father's the people tell you, who had a body like his brother's. Custodian, caretaker, gardener; whatever you actively water or weed, or it all ends up dry and brown.

There's never anyone pointing: navigating across 16 miles of desert through the sight of a few shrubs. The sun is starting to rise. Water has to be moved. From dead volcanoes in places where it does rain. Or stacked water-lifting Shadufs, at low lying rivers into nearby fields, with big sticks and buckets off the sweat and forms of people who practice psalms.

This desert can be full of killers; outland tribal kings who raid small towns and plunder merchant caravans. People who herd goats, camels and sheep. There's never any lone woman waving in the distance. Never any small group of children scattering off in the foreground of the heat.

At the first job site you take your payment of grains and walk around chewing, before you open up a sluice gate to flood a northeastern section. The apricots this year taste bitter.

And that's important, because if certain crops don't grow you'll end up farming land near villages that could be uprooted. It may take underground canals to carry water, or existing Roman aqueducts, pitched back into use off the sweat and backs of animals, or captured slaves, or generations of families, then fed into the turning wheels of mills.

There's always this dream of water. Or gardens. Today while bathing in the ablutions, while no one was looking you squatted down and felt how heavy your sex had become, instead of searching out the pain in your abdomen. You are responsible for tending someone else's land past noon. Praised for methods that have long been forgotten. For example: how to sprout an olive tree from a seed so that its stem will be as thick as a finger in four years. Cutting a shoot ten to twelve palms long, and planting it where the olive tree is to grow permanently. Cutting off all branches of plants but ten, and supporting the stem with props of wood in order to harvest fruits so large, they become difficult for any one to carry. It was bazaar farming lore that worked, where at night, you would go into town and trade part of your pay.

Walking along the freckled paths, there's never any children running. Today's last job would be tending the gardens at the Mosque. The closer inland you get, the greater potential for rain.

Digging into the dirt has become like this infinite gesture. The harder you strike, the more heat rises, until the dirt's odor resembles something like the faint smell of onion skin.

The Mosque prayer hall roofs were built to drain rain waters into underground tanks. Waters then raised through ground level by animal powered wheels. There was the sound of trickling water and birdsongs. So you clapped twice as hard as you could, and waited until they disappeared.

As you begin to dig into a flower bed the handle of the trowel splinters. Crafting these devices, the responsibility of tending all these gardens has been torture. It's the reason for the sores on your gums, or the pain in your liver. Or the tumbling of your brain while

laying. This foreboding feeling that's been going on; the threat of the death of your last name.

It is forbidden that a Muslim eat fruit off the trees that you tend, because this is a place of prayer. But since you are not a Muslim, instead custodian, caretaker, you enjoy a warm orange under the shade of a tree, and fill up the remainder of your harvester vase, before setting off to the bazaar that evening.

Oil lamps burn under multicolored pavilions. At the trader, her child steps out from a back room to stare. You give it a mean scowl. Until she cracks a toothy smile, which in turn makes you smile. You trade a portion of today's work for wine, an almanac and text on garden design. You've felt the weakest you've been in years.

There's this humorous passage in one of the books. Where a young warrior named Rustam, is received at court by the ruler inside of his garden. Sitting underneath a large tree with a silver trunk, golden leaves and gems, the ruler pulls out from the tree's hollow trunk a bottle of musk and wine to share. Likewise, not being able to make it home,

you stop at a dune to rest. Here with your eyes closed, you could feel the back of your teeth, and imagine the outline of your continent.